CHAPTER TEN

BRITISH CEYLON AND THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE:
CONNECTING POLICIES

It has become clear that despite the similarities in the Dutch and British approaches regarding the interior, there were some structural differences. This counted in particular for the approaches towards the native headmen in the southwest, the organization of the judiciary department and the implementation of the law and the organization of the labour force and landownership. Local responses to British policies differed, but in many cases it was impossible to directly implement the intended policies; for example, the southwest never turned into the rich rice-producing area that Dundas wanted and North and Maitland strove for. Still, despite the accommodation to many of the local practices and the foundations of colonial power as developed under the Dutch, the British remained persistent in certain instances and for example they never resorted to the practice of forced cultivation as the Dutch did.

It has been pointed out in the previous chapters that historians tend to portray governor North as a radical and idealistic reformer and Maitland as a pragmatic and reactionary ruler. However, not much attention has been paid to the actual inspiration behind both their respective policies. In this chapter, I argue that both North and Maitland were ideologically inspired and tried to accommodate their policies to contemporary political trends in Britain and India. This places North’s radicalism in a different perspective, and calls into question Maitland’s conservatism and his proclaimed return to the Dutch system of government.

10.1 In search of a proper rule for India

Colonial policy was a hotly debated issue in late eighteenth-century Britain and was much influenced by contemporary ideas on progress and development. Discussions on colonialism arose in response to two drastic developments. First was the expansion of British power in India, which had begun in earnest midway through the eighteenth century with the conquests of Robert Clive in Bengal. The violence in India, complemented by a chaotic administrative organization, often through sinister alliances with local rulers, sparked criticism in England. Second was the loss of the thirteen colonies of North America after the War of American
Independence (1775-1784). The passionate demands of self-determination by European colonists in America and their victory in the subsequent revolt against their mother country, left a deep mark on British pride.

As a consequence, the 1780s and 1790s are distinguished by significant reflections among British policy-makers and intellectuals about the nature and purposes of colonial rule. In concurrence with the general intellectual tendencies sweeping Europe, people in Britain felt that colonies stimulated greed for luxury goods and corrupted the British mind. This found its expression first in the influential anti-slavery movement. Abolitionists managed to get a broad following in Britain from all sections of society, and Britain grew to be the leading European country in the anti-slavery debates of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This resulted in private experiments with the emancipation of slaves on the plantations in the West Indies and the establishment of the Sierra Leone Company, which offered voluntary black labour as a morally superior alternative to the slave trade in Africa. Despite the limited success of the Company, Sierra Leone, with its capital bearing the symbolic name Freetown, was to grow into a safe haven for former slaves in Africa. In 1807, the slave trade was abolished, and within a few years the British managed to pressure many other European countries to do the same. Many historians have sought to explain the success of the abolitionist movement, and for most of them it is difficult to believe that it was motivated only by true altruistic motives.

The British historian Linda Colley, for example, has suggested a causal connection between the development of the antislavery movement and the American War of Independence, by arguing that through the abolitionist cause the British could show off their moral superiority in comparison to the Americans. The sincere belief in the economic advantages of free labour, one of the propositions of Adam Smith, is another factor. In that context, the growth of capitalism and industrialization in Britain was a necessary condition for abolitionism to succeed. Recently, historians have turned to cultural and religious factors to explain the success of abolitionism in Britain, and its concomitant failure in countries like the Netherlands.

The impeachment of Warren Hastings was the other major political issue that stemmed from the general anti-colonial spirits of the 1780s that were described above. Hastings had been governor and governor-general of Bengal from 1772 to 1785 and was responsible for the expansion of British power in the subcontinent during that period. Parliamentarian Edmund Burke was the main advocate for his impeachment and in 1786 he laid before Parliament twenty-two charges of “high crimes and misdemeanours”. Although Parliament did not accept all charges, Hastings was accused of ruling the Indian properties arbitrarily and consequently of