

Resistance Movement of the Littorals against Portuguese Dominance

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Portuguese established friendly relations with the king of Kotte around 1505 -06 which matured into a defense alliance with the construction of a fort in Colombo in 1518 and later to the annexation of the kingdom through involvements in local politics.

Simultaneously, the introduction of Christianity under the padroada and an unsympathetic approach to local religions and the wave of unethical conversions created a separate local group marking a clear deviation of the existing relationships of state, religion and society. The newly converted indigenous Catholics did not also pay the same respect age-old traditions and customs. Then Sri Lanka coupled with Buddhist ideals, had attenuated its fighting propensities. It was only the cruelties enforced on the civilians and the willful destruction of religious institutions by the Portuguese that turned them to become an unbending resistance and indulge in deeds of daring to the rule of the Portuguese.

This resistance was not part of a concerted effort against the Portuguese, but remained mostly an uncoordinated spontaneous rising of masses. From Vijayaba Kollaya upto the death of Rajasinghe of Sitavaka and in the dynastic struggles for power there was no royalty left in the littorals by the Portuguese. There was thus no royal leader who could coordinate uprisings. A chief usually an army officer, who had become disgruntled with Portuguese rule, often on personal reasons volunteered to lead and raise both the fighting level and spirit. Only a very few of these uprisings lasted for more than a year. Each ran its course until the terror and guile of the Portuguese overcame it, with either the death of the leader or himself seeking political asylum in the Kandyan territories.

Subduing these main uprisings entailed much hard work on the Portuguese soldados that were paid irregularly and ill fed, and who often looted and plundered the civilians. The Generals it appeared were no better than the soldados brigands and one of their chief preoccupations was to enrich themselves. They deliberately adopted a scorched-earth policy as a means of terrorizing the inhabitants; into submission and according to da Couto and de Queyroz they "committed conspicuous cruelties on the inhabitants of the area and the rebels, as an example to the others. Portuguese, with death and plunder and fire and fury, left not a stone upon stone nor tree or fruit of use". Some villages suffered wholesale destruction and remained depopulated. Yet the will of the people could not be effaced till the Portuguese were driven out of the lowlands through the joint effort of Rajasinghe II and his Dutch supporters. The paper describes these events using Sinhala and Portuguese sources.

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