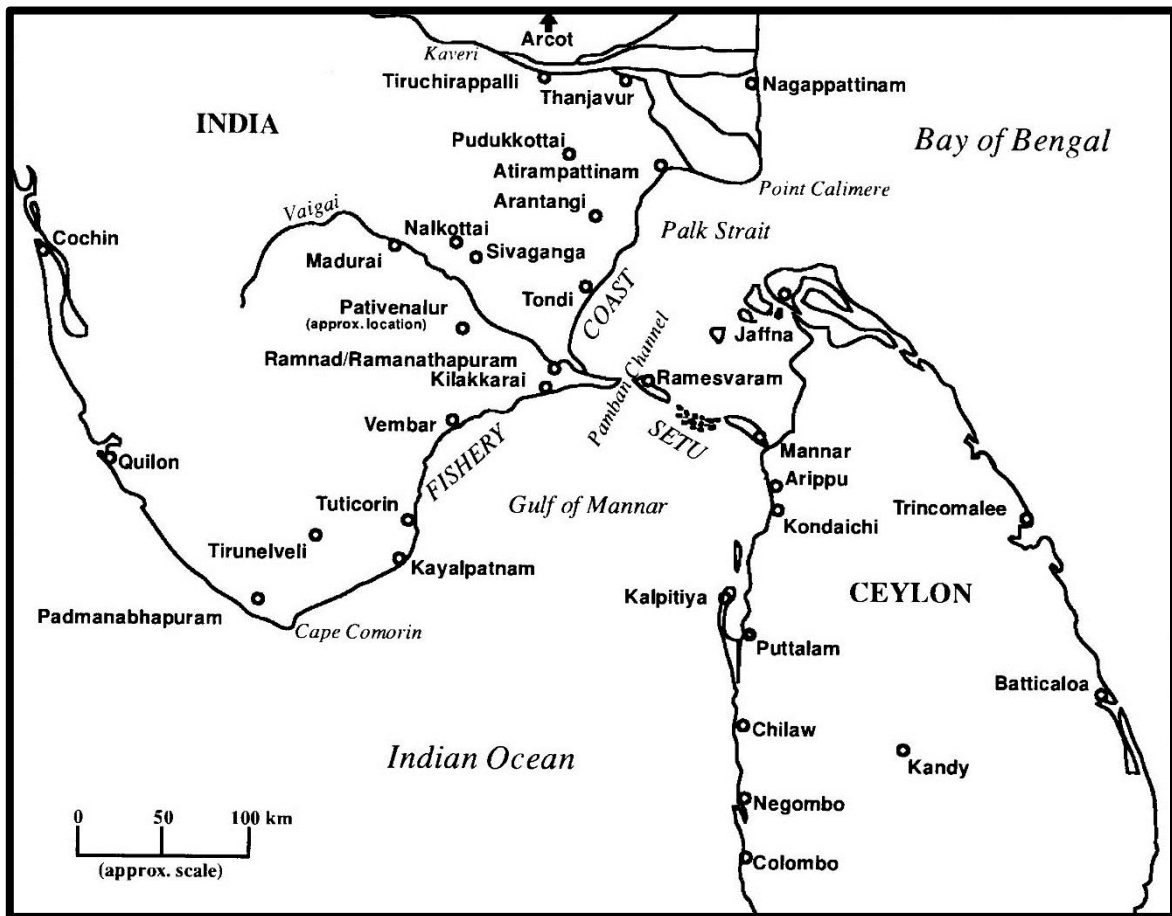


Table of contents

- Introduction		p. 3
- Chapter I:	The Merchant-Warrior and the Bandit-King	p. 6
- Chapter II:	The Business of Asymmetric War	p. 27
- Chapter III:	An Invasion of Insignificance and Incompetence	p. 39
- Conclusion		p. 57
- Bibliography		p. 60



Map: Rameshvaram Island and its neighbourhood showing the most important locations during the conflict of 1746 (Ramnad, Tuticorin, Colombo, Sivaganga and Kilakarai).¹

¹ L. Bes, 'The Setupatis, the Dutch, and other bandits in eighteenth-century Ramnad (South India)' in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44.4 (2001) 540-574, 543.

Introduction

On 4 September 1746, French troops attacked the British settlement of Madras on the coast of India. The assault brought the War of the Austrian Succession (1740-1748) to the Indian territories starting a series of conflicts between the trade companies of France and Great Britain operating there. The fighting resulted in the latter's control of Bengal and eventually the whole subcontinent.² In the same year, another European trade company launched their own, much lesser known military operation some five hundred kilometres south of Madras. The 27th Dutch governor of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) Julius Valentijn Stein van Gollenesse (1691–1755) ordered the soldiers of the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC or Dutch East India Company) under his command to seize Rameshvaram Island, a piece of land sized approximately sixty-seven square kilometres located between peninsular India and Ceylon. His instructions to captain Carel Andrieszoon from 11 June 1746 contain the remarkable order to the men not to disturb the priests or the temple on the island “op straffe des doods” – on the punishment of death.³

Despite these cautionary measures, the Company did not get the ownership over the coveted island in the end. A key factor in the failure was the stubborn resistance from a little, Indian kingdom, Ramanathapuram, or Ramnad in short; which lay on the opposite site of Rameshvaram, seen from Ceylon. Its ruler, the Setupati, whom the Dutch called the “Theuver heer”; vehemently opposed the attack, as it was his lineage's historic duty to protect the renowned Ramanathaswamy Temple on the island and the pilgrims visiting there.⁴ The VOC-archives in The Hague show that the organisation knew of the shrine's importance and the

² The War of the Austrian Succession was a major eighteenth century conflict over the issue of a woman's (Maria Theresa) succession to the Habsburg monarchy. The fighting involved most of the powers of Europe at the time.

³ Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), number entry 1.04.02, inventory number 2666, folio 2057.

⁴ Bes, ‘The Setupatis’, 565-566.

ramifications that an attack would have, but despite the knowledge, the urge to stop smuggling between the subcontinent and Ceylon proved stronger than the benefits of the uneasy alliance with Ramnad. The how's and why's surrounding the mission have remained clouded in mystery ever since nevertheless, even with the wealth of archival material present nowadays.⁵ Apart from one article by historian Lennart Bes 'The Setupatis, the Dutch, and other bandits in eighteenth-century Ramnad (South India)' no other works discuss or even mention the campaign. Although Bes's paper gives much insight into the kingdom's political culture and its perception of the VOC, it has little to say on the issues which the Company experienced at that sacred location.

The further lack of interest for the Rameshvaram operation comes as no surprise given that the expedition was no more than a minor event at a time of colossal changes elsewhere in India, changes that would erase both the presence of the Setupatis and the Dutch from the course of the region's history. In addition, the south-eastern coastal region of the Coromandel (now part of the Tamil Nadu state) was but one of the many theatres in which the Republic's trading firm operated at that time, and no longer a very important one. Even so, the campaign of 1746 has become the subject of this thesis, in spite of its relative insignificance, as I think it can serve as a good case study of contrast to illuminate the profound changes that would rock India after 1750 in the form of the British East India Company's (EIC) expansion. Moreover, I will use the conflict as an entry point into the wider military environment of South India and the role played therein by Ramnad and the Dutch merchants respectively.

The main question of my thesis is therefore: What does the military conflict between the VOC and Ramnad in 1746 reveal about India's balance of power at the dawn of British Raj? To answer this question, I have come up with the following three chapters. First of all, in 'The

⁵ The entry on the conflict called *Een bundel met translaat brieven en andere papieren onder een apart register alle spreekende van den Theuver heer en de expeditie tegens denzelven* filed under inventory number 2666, consists of 301 folios of letters, reports and instructions.

Merchant-Warrior and the Bandit-King' I will give a concise overview of the simultaneous rise, bloom and fall of the Company and the Setupatis intermingled with the contact between the two of them. The second chapter, 'The Business of Asymmetric War', will explore the existing works on the military history of India and the literature about the belligerent side of the former Dutch trading giant. Chapter 3, 'An Invasion of Insignificance and Incompetence', will then reveal my own reading of the archival texts concerning the event of 1746. The three chapters together will hopefully lift a little of the veil shrouding two of the minor players in 'The Great Game' for India played in the eighteenth century, telling the story of a forgotten mission to a mysterious and deadly temple-island in the process.

Chapter I: The Merchant-Warrior and the Bandit-King

Per experentie behoorden de Heeren wel bekend te wesen, dat in Indiën de handel gedreven en gemainteneert moet worden onder beschuttinge ende faveur van U eigen wapenen ende dat de wapenen gevoert moeten worden van de proffijten die met den handel sijn genietende, invoege dat de handel sonder d'oorloge noch d'oorloge sonder den handel nyet gemaintineert connen werden.⁶

Jan Pieterszoon Coen (1587-1629), a *gouverneur-generaal* of the VOC and the founding father of its Asian headquarters at Batavia, wrote the above to his directors back home in 1614, twelve years after the establishment of the Company. His opinion was clear, overseas trade could not go without exerting military force. Insofar the general public remembers the organisation nowadays though, it does not stand out for the military achievements, but for its role as the world's first transcontinental stock-market listed corporation, as the precursor of the Netherlands' colonial state in Indonesia and as an example of the Dutch Golden Age commercial spirit and ingenuity. Meanwhile, the statue of Coen in Hoorn has been an object of protest and criticism ever since its construction in 1893, because of his heinous conquest of the Banda Islands in 1621.⁷ Contemporary historians for their part publish more on the social and cultural aspects of the merchants' corporation, which prompted Gerrit Knaap, Henk den Heijer and Michiel de Jong to claim that the military perspective should not be forgotten, especially with regards to the Republic's role in the early modern European expansion.⁸

⁶ D. De Iongh, *Het krijgswezen onder de Oostindische compagnie* (The Hague 1950) 38; translation: By experience the Directors should be well aware that in the Indies trade has to be pursued and maintained under the protection and favour of one's own arms and that the weapons must be financed through the profits so earned by trade. In short, trade without war or war without trade cannot be maintained.

⁷ E. Van de Beek, "Iemand als Coen hoor je niet te eren" in *De Volkskrant* (12-7-2011); viewed at <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/-iemand-als-coen-hoor-je-niet-te-eren--b79f61fd/> on 7-3-2019.

⁸ G. Knaap, H. Den Heijer and M. De Jong, *Oorlog en overzee: militair optreden door compagnie en staat buiten Europa 1595-181* (Amsterdam 2015) 15.

Nonetheless, the militant side of the Company has at least gotten some attention in the ages after the Batavian Republic nationalised the corporation in 1796 and let its charter expire on 31 December 1799. The same cannot be said of their opponents during the conflict of 1746, the Setupati and his warriors. While a lot of authors have written on the Republic's East India enterprise, no books or articles exist specifically on the topic of Ramnad except for S. Thiruvengkatachari's *The Setupatis of Ramnad* from 1959. All later works that mention its rulers used them to illustrate their own claims about different subjects, which are only partially related to the kingdom. Overall, none of these authors wrote specifically about the military history of the kingdom or about its armed opposition against the Dutch and other entities in the vicinity.

The oversight is regretful because the developments of the VOC and Ramnad show a surprising amount of similarity between 1600 and 1800. In the rest of this chapter I will try to show this resemblance as well as the events leading up to the battle for Rameshvaram. In the context of India's timeline, both entities started out as small players at the fringes of the subcontinent from approximately the 1600s to around the 1650s. They then rose to prominence from 1650 onwards to the early 1700s. Subsequently, their development simultaneously stagnated and began to decline slowly till about 1750. Afterwards, both fell from grace losing their independence and their territory to the British EIC and its Indian cronies before the end of the 18th century. Before I go into greater detail however, I should mention the literature from which I have pieced the duo's narrative together.

Books and titles

The most relevant work concerning the VOC-Ramnad partnership is the aforementioned article by Bes about the eighteenth century. His exploratory paper aimed to delve into the kingdom's political culture and the perception of the Dutch traders therein.⁹ He portrayed the two as

⁹ Bes, 'The Setupatis', 542.

ambiguous associates (at best) as his archival research shows that across the decades, they saw each other as natural competitors and as useful allies alternatingly. It was a balance between coercion and compromise, which both parties grew familiar with.¹⁰ Bes described Ramnad as “mixed, open-ended society where power was shared among many competing parties”.¹¹ Unlike the other pieces on the kingdom, his article frames the dynasty as bandits who rose to kingship through cunningness and brutality; who had to deal with other bandits to rule their territory; and who likely perceived the Company as bandits too, because the Dutch had much in common with the region’s indigenous robbers and warrior chiefs.¹²

Another article that mentions both the VOC and the Setupatis is Markus Vink’s ‘Images and Ideologies of Dutch South Asian Contact. Cross- Cultural Encounters between the Nayaka State of Madurai and the Dutch East India Company in the Seventeenth Century’ published in 1997. The article however deals primarily with the Company in the seventeenth century and its relationship with another South Indian kingdom called Madurai. Vink positioned Ramnad’s rulers as the most prominent subordinates of the latter, an alliance characterised by symbolic submission and perpetual conflict.¹³ The Setupati’s own military power greatly depended on revenues from trade, which was the main reason for both collaboration and strife with the Dutch. The Republic’s merchant company was an important trading partner, but their exclusive claims to all commerce around Ceylon directly threatened the livelihood of their partners at the same time.¹⁴

The rest of the literature I used to write this chapter, is either about the Dutch in India or about the kingdom of Ramnad. For the merchants’ side of the story I looked at *The Merchant-*

¹⁰ Bes, ‘The Setupatis’, 556.

¹¹ Ibidem, 542.

¹² Ibidem, 570.

¹³ M. Vink, ‘Images and Ideologies of Dutch South Asian Contact. Cross- Cultural Encounters between the Nayaka State of Madurai and the Dutch East India Company in the Seventeenth Century’ in *Itinerario* 21.2 (1997) 82-123, 94-95.

¹⁴ Vink, ‘Images and Ideologies’, 96.

Warrior Pacified. The VOC (The Dutch East India Company) and its Changing Political Economy in India by George Winius and Markus Vink; *Oorlogen overzee: militair optreden door compagnie en staat buiten Europa 1595-181* by Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong; and *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld. De geschiedenis van Nederland Overzee 1600-1800* by Jos Gommans and Piet Emmer. Endorsed by the Heras Institute of Indian History and Culture, Winius and Vink tried to rectify the relative obscurity of the Dutch presence in India. Their book's underlying message is that the Company pursued an 'emporialist' strategy on the subcontinent, and not an imperialist one: it was after markets instead of territories. The two authors therefore concluded that the VOC was the best behaved and most beneficent of all the major European powers once present on the Indian soil.¹⁵

Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong had a slightly contrasting outlook on the merchants' operations. Their book, however, had a different purpose to *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified*. As it happens, *Oorlogen overzee* is the fifth part of the series *Militaire Geschiedenis van Nederland*, a six-part series about the military history of the Netherlands sponsored by the Netherlands Institute for Military History (NIMH). The series has as goal to present the historical backgrounds of contemporary problems as well as to provide understanding of the Dutch military past to a broader audience. Because of this the work is only partially about the activities of the Company in India seen from the bigger picture of the total military escapades of the Republic overseas between 1600 and 1800. On the subcontinent, the three authors came to the conclusion that from 1640 onwards the Dutch were the strongest European (naval) military power in Asia until the mid-eighteenth century. Thereafter, both the French and the British fleet became more advanced, while the VOC lost its technological lead versus the indigenous opponents throughout Asia.¹⁶

¹⁵ G. Winius and M. Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified. The VOC (The Dutch East India Company) and its Changing Political Economy in India* (Delhi 1991) 1, 5-6, 148-149.

¹⁶ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlogen overzee*, 243.

Just like *Oorlogen oversee*, Emmer and Gommans's *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld* looks at the whole of the overseas activities by the Republic's merchant companies. Be that as it may, the authors chose to emphasise the cultural and economic interaction between the Seven Provinces and the overseas territories, because in their eyes existing textbooks on the VOC and the *West-Indische Compagnie* (WIC) had already paid enough attention to the organisational and maritime aspects of the organisations.¹⁷ Concerning India, the book states that it was belligerence that gave the Company in practice control over most of Ceylon, the Coromandel and the coast of Malabar (south-west India); the former Portuguese possessions. The military approach did last beyond the 1680s as the pepper monopoly that the Dutch tried to install never truly resulted in the profits they had hoped for.¹⁸ Furthermore, unlike their British and French competitors, the Republic's merchants were not willing to invest financially or militarily in the subcontinent when in the 18th century the Mughal Empire (1526-1540, 1555-1857), the region's former superpower began to flounder.¹⁹

For the side of Ramnad I made use of the following works, apart from *The Setupatis of Ramnad*: Susan Bayly's *Saints, goddesses and kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian society 1700-1900*; Pamela Price's *Kingship and political practice in colonial India*; Jennifer Howes's book *The Courts of pre-colonial South India. Material culture and kingship*; and *Symbols of Substance. Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* by Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam. Bayly's goal in 1989 was to write a study on how religions (Islam and Christianity) functioned as a source of change and dynamism in the society of South India.²⁰ She started its first chapter with a description of the region's religious

¹⁷ P. Emmer and J. Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld. De geschiedenis van Nederland overzee 1600-1800* (Amsterdam 2012) 15.

¹⁸ Emmer and Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand*, 321, 336.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, 439.

²⁰ S. Bayly, *Saints, goddesses and kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian society 1700-1900* (Cambridge 1989) ix, 1.

and social order including the Setupati, but in the rest of her book the kingdom only featured because of the Muslim and Christian minorities that lived there.

Kingship and political practice in colonial India on the other hand, shows the political practice and values in South India over a period of three centuries. Employing Ramnad as a case study, Price claimed that the kingdom's ruling class continued to practice and pass on the precolonial political traditions during the colonial period, dulling the impact of British rule.²¹ Howes in turn looked at the seventeenth and eighteenth century palaces of the South, specifically Ramnad Palace, which archeologists had overlooked in the past. Her aim was "to establish how [South Indian] palaces were used and perceived during the pre-colonial period".²² Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam discussed the kingdom in one chapter of their book, but they focus mainly on the career of Citakkati, a Muslim trading entrepreneur who gained a lot of influence at the Setupatis' court. The rest of the work deals primarily with the Nayaka-states of Madurai and Thanjavur (another Hindu kingdom that had a lot of interaction with Ramnad), which controlled south-eastern India during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

One last issue I have to address before I start the dual-history is the difference in naming Indian rulers between the VOC archival material and the secondary literature. As mentioned in the introduction, the Dutch called their royal opponent "den Theuverheer" or "den Cata Theuver".²³ The word 'Theuver' is a degeneration of the title 'Tevar', meaning 'god'; which Ramnad's ruler owned as he belonged to the Marava caste.²⁴ A people who in the words of Thiruvengkatachari were "the warrior clan of the Tamil country", for whom fighting was a hereditary occupation over the centuries. Additionally, the historian wrote that here was a good deal of misinterpretation surrounding the group whose name means 'those who engage

²¹ P. Price, *Kingship and political practice in colonial India* (Cambridge 1996) 3.

²² J. Howes, *The Courts of pre-colonial South India. Material culture and kingship* (London 2003) 2, 5.

²³ NA VOC 2666, 2053.

²⁴ Vink, 'Images and Ideologies', 94; Bes, 'The Setupatis', 544.

themselves in acts of heroism' in the Tamil language, but whom others had represented as miscreants and marauders.²⁵

The 'modern' works do mention both the Marava origins and the military prowess of Ramnad's leaders, but all of them apply the title 'Setupati' to the rulers, whereas the Company's records do not contain this honorific. Setupati itself means 'Lord of the Setu' in which Setu relates to a series of small, partly submerged, sandbanks and islets. These shallows are now known as Adam's Bridge and they stretch from the Indian subcontinent to Sri Lanka at the site where the two shores lie closest to each other. Rameshvaram island is a part of the formation and in the *Ramayana*, an ancient Hindu epic, the hero Rama erected the temple on it after he rescued his wife Sita from the Sinhalese demon-king Ravana. Rama installed a local chief to guard the Setu and his monument as well. The chief, the first Setupati according to the legend, built the town of Ramnad on Rama's instructions. Based on the available epigraphical evidence however, the first Setupati actually ruling over the Ramnad region did so only from 1604 onwards.²⁶ Furthermore, the coronation took place at Pogalur and, granting the literature is a little vague on the topic, it is most likely that the new ruler got his title from the king of Madurai who installed him in the first place.²⁷ Overall; Theuverheer, Setupati, chief of Ramnad, Tevar king and Marava lord are all epithets for the same rulers, those ruling from Ramanathapuram.

Humble beginnings

When the States General of the Dutch Republic established the VOC in 1602, the area that would later become the domains of the rulers with many names, was in a state of anarchy.

²⁵ Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 1.

²⁶ Ibidem, XIII, 126-127; Howes, *The Courts*, 72.

²⁷ *The Setupatis* does not explain how the Setupatis got their title; *Saints, goddesses and kings* states the first Setupati proclaimed himself so, 52; *Symbols of Substance* is silent on the issue; *Kingship and political practice* claims the lineage received the title because of their connection to the Ramayana story, 26; 'Images and Ideologies' is also silent on the origin of the title; 'The Setupatis' says the Madurai ruler gave the title, but that the Setupatis themselves claimed Rama gave it to them, 547; and *The Courts* points to the Ramayana again, 72.

Bandits flourished in the jungles of the territory making the pilgrimage to the Ramanathaswamy temple a difficult one. Following one of the kingdom's origin stories, the spiritual leader of Madurai, which ruled over the region at that time, needed the protection of a certain Sadaika Tevar (or Devar) to make a journey to the sacred island in 1604. Thankful for the security offered, the king of Madurai gave this Sadaika some land in the Ramnad area and other honours. Subsequently, the new strongman subdued rebellious chiefs and levied taxes for his new lord, whose fondness of him only grew. The king was so pleased in fact, that he installed the former bandit as his subordinate ruler of Ramnad. Sadaika himself went to the Ramanathaswamy Temple in 1608 where he received a ritual sceptre of kingship from the priests there. Because of these developments, his lineage could start the long-lasting dynasty whose descendants still are the titular rulers of the estate to this day.²⁸

Meanwhile, three years after its establishment, the Company gained its first foothold in India at the city of Masulipatnam. The Dutch had learned of the high-quality cotton textiles produced in its neighbourhood, which prompted them to send several ships to the place. They petitioned the Sultan of Golconda, who ruled the place, for his permission to open a trading post there which he granted. Soon thereafter the merchants opened many more trade-factories along the coast as they could trade the cloth from Coromandel for the lucrative spices from the Moluccas. Hendrik Brouwer, one of the early *gouverneur-generaals*, said of the connection: "The Coromandel Coast is the left arm of the Moluccas, because we have noticed that without the textiles of Coromandel, commerce is dead in the Moluccas."²⁹

Their increased activity in the area resulted in conflicts with the local Portuguese who had been the strongest European power in Asia in the sixteenth century. In 1608, the VOC ousted its rivals from their outpost at Thiruppapuliur, while the Portuguese assaulted the new Dutch regional headquarters at Pulicat multiple times without success. During the period that

²⁸ Bes, 'The Setupatis', 547; Howes, *The Courts*, 3; Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 17-18.

²⁹ Winius and Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified*, 13.

the Company secured its position on the Coromandel Coast, it also expanded into different parts of India. At first, they did so through trade negotiations with the Mughal Empire. The merchants acquired trading rights and a factory at Surat on the Indian west coast from prince Khurram in 1618 from which they opened a string of trading posts in the western half of the Empire. After Khurram's ascendance to the throne (as Shah Jahan 1628-1658), the organisation got the approval to open up shop in Bengal, the eastern part of the Empire, as well. Here, it ran into the Portuguese again, but after the VOC showed its naval strength by blockading their ships, they quickly obtained more trading privileges.

The real confrontation with the European rival would only start in 1638 and centre around nearby Ceylon. Portugal had been ruling a large part of the island since 1597, which yielded them high profits, since cinnamon produced there was next in demand only to pepper and commanded almost the prices of the cloves, nutmeg and mace of the Moluccas. The production of gem-stones and trade in elephants with the Indian mainland made it even more desirable to gouverneur-generaal Anthony van Diemen (in office 1636-1645).³⁰ He allied the VOC with the rulers of the Kandy kingdom, who wanted to remove the Portuguese invaders from their land. In return for the valuable commodities, Van Diemen commanded his soldiers and East-Indiamen to attack several Portuguese strongholds along the coasts of Ceylon to accomplish Kandy's goal.

Around the same time, Ramnad had also grown stronger; so much so that its Madurese sovereign, Tirumala Nayaka, decided to declare Dalavai Setupati a usurper in order to place his own puppet on the throne. In the war that followed Dalavai had to leave his capital for Rameshvaram Island where he received the help of some European soldiers.³¹ Even with the support, he lost the war against the Madurai troops and ended up as a prisoner over there. His

³⁰ Emmer and Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand*, 28.

³¹ Thiruvengkatahari, *The Setupatis*, 22, 144; it is unclear to which country the soldiers belonged, though Thiruvengkatahari mentions the possibility that the Dutch assisted the Setupati, while the Portuguese aided Madurai.

replacement however proved so unpopular that Tirumala had to release the ‘usurper’ king to restore order in the region.

Rise to power

On the VOC’s side there was a ten-year truce between the Republic and Portugal in the East from 1644 to 1654. The respite proved only temporarily for the latter as in 1656 the Dutch conducted a large siege-operation to capture Colombo, the Portuguese capital on Ceylon. Two years later the island was liberated from the former conquerors. Nevertheless, the Sinhalese felt betrayed by the Company when it did not hand over all the conquered bases. Their decision not to do so led to decades of guerilla warfare from the Kandy inland and anti-Dutch uprisings in the territory now controlled by the merchants.

At the same time, the merchant-warriors turned their attention to the Portuguese holdings in the Coromandel and on the Malabar Coast, the south-western coastal region of India. The rationale behind their establishment on the latter was primarily procuring spices (pepper) in addition to scoring another blow against the European rival. Within five years they captured virtually all of the remaining Portuguese factories and forts. From 1663 onwards there would be peace with the kingdom, which had lost most of its Asian possessions to the Republic by that time. The VOC had become the *de facto* ruler of both Ceylon and Malabar as well as the strongest European power in the rest of India with factories in the Coromandel, Surat and Bengal.

By that time, the Dutch were not the only ones who flourished in South-India. After a difficult succession process, Ramnad’s new ruler Raghunatha Setupati (ruled 1647-1672) restored the kingdom and enlarged it by new territorial acquisitions so that Ramnad began to rival Madurai in territory and influence. Nevertheless, when soldiers from the kingdom of Mysore invaded the Madurese lands Raghunatha hurried to the defence of his overlord Tirumala

Nayaka at the head of 25,000 Marava warriors. This force was strong enough to oust the Mysore forces after which the king of Madurai showed his gratitude by granting his subordinate the title of ‘Tirumala Setupati’, permitting him to use the same royal paraphernalia as the Madurai rulers used and exempting him from paying any tribute. In a sense, Raghunatha became an independent king while he was still under the nominal sovereignty of Madurai, but the Setupati was content to remain loyal to his superior.³² His loyalty did not end the recurring assaults however, but Ramnad’s forces managed to check all advances under his leadership. A Jesuit

The Setupatis of Ramnad

1604 – 1621	Sadaika Tevar
1621 – 1637	Koothan Setupati
1637 – 1647	Dalavai Setupati
1647 – 1672	Tirumala Setupati
1674 – 1710	Kilavan Setupati
1710 – 1725?	Vijaya Raghunatha
1726 – 1729	Sundaresvara Raghunatha
1729 – 1735	Kattaya Tevar
1735 – 1748	Sivakumara Tevar
1748 – 1749	Rakka Tevar
1749 – 1762	Chella Tevar
1762 – 1795	Muthuramalinga Tevar

residing in the area, Antão de Proença, described the victorious ruler as “the chief of a warlike race which has been so emboldened by its successes that even now it is to be reckoned with by European powers”.³³

Under Raghunatha’s rule Ramnad came into its first contact with the East Indiamen of the VOC. From 1658, the merchants made a number of trading contracts with the little kingdom because of the commercial opportunities it presented (pearl fishing among others) as well as its strategic location. The Setupatis controlled the main passage between the Indian and Sinhalese coasts, which was crucial to the Dutch interests in the region.³⁴ Through the treaties the Marava

³² Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 24.

³³ V. Narayana Rao, D. Shulman and S. Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance. Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* (Oxford 1992), 239.

³⁴ Bes, ‘The Setupatis’, 550; Price, *Kingship and political practice*, 10-12. Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 284.

rulers were to close the waters to other European trading companies and local smuggling, as the Dutch claimed monopolies on various sea routes and commodities. From the very beginning, their partners did not honour the arrangements though. Initially, Raghunatha was eager to assist the new power ousting the Portuguese from their factories at Tuticorin and Jaffnapatnam to open up trading opportunities. The eagerness vanished in the 1660s when the ruler saw his kingdom getting strangled commercially due to Company's regulations. While the Setupati continued his official support of the Republic's merchants, he often tolerated smuggling and covertly aided Madurai in the so-called 'Tuticorin War' of 1669 against the merchants.³⁵

The 'secret' partnership would not last long as only a couple of years later the Madurese army would drive out the Setupati's troops from the latter's successful raid deep into Thanjavur lands. Interestingly, the intervention subsequently led to a war between the two neighbours in which Madurai defeated its colleague, capturing and beheading the last king. Unexpectedly, a different warlord, Venkoji Bhonsle, then captured Thanjavur which was the beginning of a Maratha dynasty ruling there.³⁶ Possibly due to the turmoil in the region, the VOC decided to go after Rameshvaram island. In July 1671, the Dutch had to terminate the plan however, as their possible ally, the ruler of Tiruvallur, refused to accept the proposal to form an alliance against Ramnad; which could have given the Company the possession of the temples.

Although the merchants had promised to preserve the privileges of the priests and pilgrims, Tiruvallur's ruler declined the offer on the ground that Ramesvaram 'was a holy place in which only his own nation was allowed to live. Indeed, it was a great sin merely to be forced to listen to such a proposal.' Twenty years later (August 1690), the ruler of Madurai, Muttu

³⁵ Vink, 'Images and Ideologies', 96; Bes, 'The Setupatis', 550.

³⁶ Marathas are a major people in India who speak the Marathi language (c. 80 – 90 million). They became important from the sixteenth century onwards as elusive raiders who played a large part in the downfall of the Mughal dynasty. Venkoji Bhonsle (1629-1686) was the younger half-brother of the famous Shivaji Bhonsle, the warrior-king who founded the Maratha Empire which would battle Great-Britain's East India Company for control of the whole Indian subcontinent in the eighteenth century.

Virappa Nayaka III also warned the Europeans not to attack the island, ‘the second most holy place in Hindustan next to Kasi [Benares]’, threatening to destroy all the Company settlements on the Madurai coast, including their fort at Tuticorin, ‘in order to extinguish the very name of Hollander in my lands’.³⁷

During the war between Madurai and Thanjavur, the former managed to capture Raghunatha’s heir, which led to the succession of Kilavan Setupati (ruled 1674-1710) as the next ruler of Ramnad. Several authors have described his reign as the defining years for the kingdom in which it shook off its (formal) bonds and became an independent principality.³⁸ New conflicts with both Madurai and the new Maratha kings of Thanjavur all resulted in victories for Kilavan, who could raise a force of 30,000 to 40,000 warriors at short notice. To further secure his position, he transferred his capital from Pogalur to Ramanathapuram where he constructed a new fortress with stone walls 8 meters high and 1,5 meters thick. His court became more elaborate as well with among others the creation of an Abyssinian bodyguard (from Ethiopia).

Kilavan also tried to incorporate the Muslim traders of the Maraikkayar clan residing at Kilakarai into his court, but this policy strained his relationship with the VOC. In 1690, the organisation had established a new trading factory in that town, which was one of the major port-towns of South India. The Maraikkayar merchants suffered under the excluding regulations of the Company, which they tried to get around through clandestine trading with help of Ramnad. By settling near the smugglers’ home-town, the Dutch hoped they could get a close watch on the contraband activities as well as on their dodgy ally.³⁹ In another treaty with the Setupati they specified the rival merchants as “the greatest cause of the division and

³⁷ Vink, ‘Images and Ideologies’, 86.

³⁸ Price, *Kingship and political practice*, 30; Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 31; Vink, ‘Images and Ideologies’, 96.

³⁹ Bes, ‘The Setupatis’, 551.

troubles, which have ever taken place between the Noble Company and the Teuver”.⁴⁰ In any case, the Company’s presence at Kilakarai generated a lot of disagreement over the years, which would sometimes escalate into fatal confrontations. Apart from the disputes over the Muslim trading community, Vink also mentioned that the Setupati triggered a brief punitive expedition under Major Philippus Pijl to Rameshvaram in 1690 ordered by Hendrik Adriaan van Rheede tot Drakenstein, whom the Gentlemen XVII had appointed to combat corruption in Asia. ‘Images and Ideologies’ states that it was Kilavan’s expulsion of a Company’s outpost which resulted in the first of the operations to the island – in contrast to the 1746 endeavour, this one did end in success.⁴¹

The slow decline

Alas, the glory days of the VOC and Ramnad would not last long into the 18th century. From the 1670’s onwards, there emerged an increasingly powerful opposition to the more expansionist-minded faction among Gentlemen XVII. These men protested against the enormous costs associated with the imperialist policies they considered inappropriate for a merchant association. The debate boiled down to the question whether the military branch should stay the same after beating the primary rivals or whether it should shrink. Eventually restraint became the new motto: the organisation tried to limit itself to the consolidation and exploitation of its existing trade empire, a policy based on neutrality and non-intervention.⁴²

Reality was far different as attacks of indigenous opponents on the Dutch status quo occurred regularly, which meant that the personnel in Asia often had to spend resources to

⁴⁰ Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 278.

⁴¹ Vink, ‘Images and Ideologies’, 97; Sadly, Vink’s article is the only source that briefly brings up this earlier VOC-assault on Rameshvaram. Furthermore, the text does not mention the name of the outpost which caused the expedition. It could be that the Setupati tried to smother the new factory of the Company at Kilakarai at an early stage. In an earlier draft of my thesis the plan was to compare the attack of 1690 with the attack of 1746. Due to the number of archival sources involved I decided against this in consultation with my supervisor. In any case, the source for the event is: NA VOC, inv. nr. 1469, f. 384-399.

⁴² Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlog en overzee*, 153; Vink, ‘Images and Ideologies’, 103-104.

defend the Company's interests (or their own). Notwithstanding the new policy, the merchants' troops had to take action regularly even though the conflict-zones almost never returned to their state ante bellum. Historians have viewed the development of the VOC military between ca. 1680 and the latter part of the eighteenth century mostly within this framework of consolidation, specifically in the Indian context. Winius and Vink coined the period "the competitive phase" of the Dutch presence in India in which the Republic's 'merchants' had to defend their trade dominance against both Asian and other European competitors instead of expanding it.⁴³ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong for their part refer to the period 1685-1780 as a phase of expansion for the VOC-empire overall, but as a time of loss on the coasts of the Indian subcontinent.⁴⁴

Whether the early 1800s was a period of fiercer competition or of outright recession, it was the time that Julius Valentijn Stein van Gollenesse appeared on the Indian stage. Born in Sweden, but into a family of German descent (Mecklenburg), Stein van Gollenesse joined the VOC in 1723. He impressed his superiors in Asia, who made him commander of Cochin, the Dutch headquarters on the coast of Malabar in 1734. Concurrently, Thanjavur became more important to the developments in Ramnad in the 18th century. The Maratha kings played an important role as powerbrokers after the death of Kilavan. The late Setupati had an illegitimate son, Bhavani Sankara, who usurped the throne with Maratha assistance in 1725. Upon Bhavani's ascendance, another contender, Kattaya Tevar, fled to Thanjavur as well. There he got the company of an additional refugee, Sasivarna Tevar, a local chief dislodged by Bhavani.⁴⁵

The two men proved valuable assets to the ruler of Thanjavur, who decided to now support them against his former ally Bhavani. In 1729 the next invasion of Ramnad took place and Kattaya Thevar became its next ruler. Thanjavur appropriated its neighbour's northern

⁴³ Winius and Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified*, 47.

⁴⁴ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlogen oversee*, 123.

⁴⁵ Bes, 'The Setupatis', 553.

lands and a new conflict between the new Setupati and Sasivarna developed with the latter allying himself to the other neighbour Madurai. At the time, the VOC saw these internal troubles from the side-line and believed Kattaya had become completely reliant on the clout of Marathas.⁴⁶ Eventually, the overthrowing of Bhavani resulted in the partition of the Setupatis' domains into two independent Marava kingdoms after 1729: Sivaganga to the north ruled by Sasivarna and a much smaller Ramnad, ruled by Kattaya until 1735 to the south.

When Kattaya died in 1735 his five-year old son Sivakumara succeeded him, but until 1745 the actual ruler was *dalavay* Muthu Vairavanatha (the kingdom's prime minister and commander-in-chief) whom the Dutch called the "fickle, cross-eyed field-lord".⁴⁷ Affairs went downhill in Madurai on the other hand, where in 1736 Chanda Sahib, a Mughal officer operating on his own, took over the kingdom. Two surviving members of the Madurai dynasty took refuge at the court of their former vassal state. Three years later, *dalavay* Vairavanatha repulsed Sahib's forces from Madurai in alliance with the Sivaganga kingdom, restored its dynasty to the throne and what is more, he removed Madurai's most sacred idols for safeguarding. The positions of Ramnad and Madurai had completely reversed.⁴⁸

Strangely, *The Setupatis* does not mention these developments (or the later invasion of Rameshvaram by the VOC). Quite the opposite, it states: "Nothing of importance took place during the thirteen years [Sivakumara] ruled over Ramnad".⁴⁹ It could be that there are no (longer) inscriptions which refer to the conflict in the kingdom or that Thiruvengkatachari did not find the conflict important enough to report on. In my opinion, he probably lacked the source material as the Company archives are completely absent from the footnotes, while Bes used them extensively to portray the Madurai-Ramnad relation. Anyway, the 'minister-in-chief' appeared in control of the kingdom although Sivakumara's mother openly sided with the Dutch

⁴⁶ Bes, 'The Setupatis', 555; Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 50.

⁴⁷ Bes, 'The Setupatis', 559.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*, 562.

⁴⁹ Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 50.

when they protested at the court in 1742 because of yet another dispute between the two ‘allies’. She probably hoped that the merchants could counterbalance the domination of Vairavanatha (which they could not). In the end, the old general died in a battle against Sivaganga in 1745, but the next dalavay, Vellaiyan Servaikkarar, did not concede any real power to the young ruler either.⁵⁰

Falling from grace

Whilst Ramnad seemed to do fine under the ‘rule’ of Sivakumara, the VOC experienced a couple of disastrous events, which dismantled their control of the South Indian coasts, especially Malabar. For many decades local kings had ruled the hinterland of this region with the Company as an uncomfortable power-broker above them. As mentioned above, the export of pepper was the primary objective of the merchants, who got into contracts with several of the kings. Through the agreements their partners had to exclusively deliver their crops to the Dutch who set the purchase price as low as possible to maximise their profits elsewhere. Because of the low rates, there were incentives for the kings to sell their produce to other parties (Indian or European) which led to smuggling. Stopping the clandestine trade proved difficult because of the long coast line of the south-west and the interior borders over which the Company had little control.⁵¹

Apart from the contraband complications, the Dutch had to deal with the kingdoms’ armies which consisted of *Nayars*, a caste of warriors similar to the Maravas. Just like Ramnad’s troops the warriors of Malabar did not fight in drilled formations, which meant that they had been no match for European armies in the field. The indigenous forces were quite big however; for instance, the kingdom of Travancore fielded an army of 50,000 men in 1730. Under king Marthanda Varma (1705-1758) Travancore began to increase its dominions in the

⁵⁰ Bes, ‘The Setupatis’, 560.

⁵¹ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlogen oversea*, 143-144.

1730s upsetting the shaky balance of power in the region. The VOC-governor of Ceylon at that time, Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff made a trip to intimidate Marthanda at his court in Trivandrum in 1739, but the administrator failed to impress the ambitious ruler. That same year fighting between Travancore and the Company began.

During the Travancore-Dutch War (1739-1743), the VOC ran into many issues. First of all, Marthanda's forces immediately defeated one of the Dutch allies, the Rani of Elayadathu (Kottarakkara), because of superior training and discipline. Secondly, there was large-scale desertion among the Company's troops. A 1741 report by Stein van Gollenesse states: "according to our calculations between 300 and 400 of our own people have entered the service of the enemy".⁵² Varma was very generous to these defectors, who served him by training his Indian soldiers and operating the European-built artillery. Another big problem for the operation was the counter requisition by Batavia in 1741 of reinforcements sent to Malabar earlier. Headquarters needed the troops back on Java to quell sudden uprisings among the Chinese sugar workers in the *Ommelanden* around the city – the so-called Chinese War (1741-1743). Marthanda learned of the Company's predicament, which he could use to his advantage.

The king of Travancore got in league with the French whom he promised the city of Colachel as a trading post if they delivered him more weapons. To counter the deal a Dutch expedition force landed near the city and conquered it before the French could take hold of the area. The engineers that came along, began constructing fortifications, but Marthanda sent an army of approximately 20,000 troops to assault the place starting on June 6th 1741, while the battlements were still under construction. Travancore's forces greatly outnumbered the three-hundred defenders, who had to surrender on the 12th of August after the opposing artillery accidentally hit the powder storage inside the stronghold. What sealed the fate of the defenders

⁵² Winius and Vink, 104.

had been the departure to of captain Johannes Hackert from Colachel to Tuticorin with soldiers and supplies prior to the attack.⁵³

The defeat was an important turning point for the fate of the VOC in South India as well as one of the first times that an Asian power overcame European military technology and tactics. After his victory at Colachel, Marthanda could strengthen his army with the help of Dutch defectors, who further organised the Indian troops in European fashion.⁵⁴ The Company's morale on the other hand collapsed completely. Faced with another war on Java it strived for peace, which the two concluded in 1743. Travancore had freed itself of the merchants' yoke and could easily influence their policy afterwards as they tried to avoid more military expenditure. The Company's pepper monopoly in Malabar was definitely over as well.⁵⁵

The VOC's attack on Rameshvaram took place against the background of the failed war with Marthanda Varma. Although the Malabar Council of War had dishonourably discharged captain Hackert for his misconduct during the war, Batavia had made Stein van Gollenesse the new governor of Ceylon starting in 1743.⁵⁶ Here the Swedish German in Dutch service would start his own military undertaking described in chapter III, perhaps to wash off the previous deficiencies. After the Company's assault, several succession struggles took place in Ramnad because of the death of Sivakumara in 1748. Additionally, the kingdom managed to repel several invasions by Thanjavur. Unbeknownst to the Setupati, South India had become entangled in a far larger conflict, the rivalry between Britain and France over their colonial empires, which would profoundly change the subcontinent.

⁵³ M. De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore. History and State Formation in Travancore from 1671 to 1758* (Leiden 1997) 93, 106.

⁵⁴ One former VOC-employee, captain Eustache de Lannoy proved such an able and loyal subordinate that Marthanda Varma eventually appointed him supreme commander of his entire army of 50,000 soldiers. His remains (and that of his family) lie buried in the Udayagiri Fort, now known as *De Lannoy Kotta* (De Lannoy's Fort) locally, which was the main barracks of Travancore.

⁵⁵ Winius and Vink, 107.

⁵⁶ M. De Lannoy, 'The Trials of Captain Hackert and engineer Andries Leslorant at the Malabar Council of War' in: J. Gommans and O. Prakash (eds.), *Circumambulations in South Asian History. Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff* (2003) 105-116, 109-111; Hackert died a convict, imprisoned in Batavia.

In India, the European powers fought out their rivalry between 1746 and 1763 over the course of three conflicts called the Carnatic Wars.⁵⁷ Numerous Indian kings and princes took part in the conflicts, which began after the French attack on British Madras mentioned in my Introduction. In the second war, both east India companies supported different Muslim princes for control of the Carnatic State and its capital Arcot. The *Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales* backed Madurai's conqueror Chanda Sahib, while the EIC's candidate was Muhammad Ali Khan Wallajah. During the war the Setupati switched sides from Sahib to Muhammad Ali, whereas the VOC remained neutral. The war ended with the Treaty of Pondicherry (1754) which recognised the British contender as the new ruler of the Carnatic and Madurai, giving the EIC more control in the area.

Ironically, in the decades thereafter, both Ramnad and the Dutch would lose their independence because of this outcome. As it happens, Muhammad Ali proclaimed himself overlord of his southern neighbours, after which he began demanding tribute and acknowledgement from the Setupati accordingly. Affronted by the demands, the little kingdom defied its new, self-declared sovereign for quite some time. The same tactics that had served so well against the Madurese invasions of the seventeenth century still worked against the armies of the Carnatic. Sadly, the Setupatis had the misfortune that their opponent had an ally at his disposal whose armies were too well-organised for them to beat. In 1773, the Nawab's son assisted by British troops defeated the Marava warriors, resulting in the kingdom consecutively becoming a part of the Carnatic state, of the EIC-state and of the Victorian Empire itself.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Historians apply the name Carnatic to a region, a state and a series of wars. The Carnatic region is the area of South India lying in between the Eastern Ghat mountains and the Coromandel Coast which is at the moment part of the modern Indian States Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh. The Carnatic state (also known as the Nawabdom of Arcot) was a creation of the Mughal Empire which installed one of its high-ranking officers as ruler of Arcot city in 1692 to check the Maratha activities in the area. Ramnad, Madurai and Thanjavur were all located in the Carnatic region, but they were independent from the Carnatic State for most of the eighteenth century.

⁵⁸ Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 54; Winus and Vink, 119-120.

Concluding

The VOC for its part realised too late how strong their European rivals had become. During the Third Carnatic War (1756-1763) the EIC took over Surat after which the merchants could only remain in the city with the organisation's approval. In the same year their troops easily dispatched a Dutch expeditionary force and its transport ships at the battle of Chinsurah. The Nawab of Bengal had invited the Company to eject the British from his lands, but its defeat meant there was little the Dutch could do when the British took over the region after their victories at Plassey (1757) and Buxar (1764). The Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) drove nail in the VOC's coffin that ended its control over India completely. The Dutch shifted their attention even more to South East Asia which developed itself to their core area (and later colony). Concerning the Setupatis, they regained their independence with the rest of India in 1947 as well as their throne, they never recovered the autonomy they enjoyed during the golden days of Kilavan.

Chapter II: The Business of Asymmetric War

... the guerrilla epithet is a generalisation that does not sit comfortably with the historic evidence. It fails to meet either (a) the historic model derived from the *guerrilla*'s nineteenth century evolution, meaning 'small war' as coined in the Peninsular War 1807-8, 1809-14; or (b) the contemporary model extolled by guerrilla warfare's greatest architects during the twentieth century.⁵⁹

Guerrilla is the diminutive form of *Guerra*, which is the Spanish word for war. It is impossible to imagine the modern world without the term, but the word came only into use during the time of the Peninsular War.⁶⁰ Afterwards, many conflicts throughout history received the epithet, even if their tactics were different from those used in the original 'little war'. An example of this are the Anglo-Maratha wars in the eyes of Randolph Cooper. Historians generalised the Maratha's devastating use of raiding in the 17th and 18th centuries into all they were capable of, whereas against the British their forces were just as experienced with 'western-style' infantry battalions, field guns and heavy artillery.⁶¹ Although the Rameshvaram conflict of 1746 was a lot smaller (and less important) than the massive battles between the British and Marathas, the same guerrilla connotations characterise Ramnad in the modern literature. The Dutch archives suggest that there was no pitched battle on the island, but they do not reveal whether this had anything to do with a military or technological inferiority on the side of the Marava warriors. In this chapter I will look into the fighting styles of the Company and its opponent to find out whichever might have been the case.

⁵⁹ R. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India* (Cambridge 2003) 28.

⁶⁰ The Peninsular War (1807-1814) was a conflict for the control of the Iberian Peninsula, in which a superior French Army fought against Spanish, Portuguese and British (irregular) forces who used tactics that have become the blueprint for all later (and earlier) guerrilla warfare.

⁶¹ Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns*, 25-27, 45, 48, 59-61.

Thorns and bullets

Any account of Ramnad's military should begin with the assertion that the Maravas were particularly terrifying fighters.⁶² The harsh living conditions of the unsettled semi-dry plains and wild forests they inhabited, provided them with physical strength, martial skills and a tradition of bloodthirst. These attributes made them useful soldiers, watchmen and village chieftains for other South Indian rulers.⁶³ The kingdoms of Madurai and Thanjavur fielded vast armies, largely manned by Marava warriors, in the seventeenth century, while Marthanda Varma made use of Marava horsemen during his war against the VOC.⁶⁴ As mentioned above, the two Hindu monarchies ruled over much of South East India between 1500 and 1700. After 1604 the Setupatis found themselves wedged in-between the two more powerful monarchies.

In any case, the relations between the three states were far from amicable to say the least with all three of them frequently invading each other. Ramnad's forces managed to repel most of these invasions without much difficulty because of the thick, thorny jungles native to the territory among other things. For this reason, *Symbols of substance's* authors labelled the smaller state as "a thorn in the flesh" of its two neighbours.⁶⁵ To elaborate on the metaphor, I would suggest that 'the thorn' became more and more painful over the decades as the Setupatis' strength grew relative to the other two Hindu kingdoms. The reasons for the military successfulness remain ill-defined however as Ramnad left very few sources describing its armed forces.

Fortunately, modern historians have written several overviews on the early-modern warfare in the rest of India, which give some insight into the armies and tactics used by the contemporaries of the Setupatis. In his book on 'The Military Revolution', well-known military historian Geoffrey Parker claimed that the Muslim and Hindu Indian rulers of the early-modern

⁶² Price, *Kingship and political practice*, 7.

⁶³ Bes, 'The Setupatis', 544; Thiruvengkatachari, *The Setupatis*, 3.

⁶⁴ Bayly, *Saints, goddesses and kings*, 23; De Lannoy, *The Kulasekhara Perumals*, 80.

⁶⁵ Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 239.

Indian subcontinent did not successfully adapt the same military innovations which European states did master. Even though many Asian kings employed European experts and mercenaries, their huge armies continued to fight in the traditional way, with warriors fighting heroically as individuals.⁶⁶ In Parker's opinion, expressed in both his own book and in an article he wrote together with Sanjay Subrahmanyam in 2008, infantry volley fire and field artillery just did not seem to fit with the South Asian traditions of warfare.⁶⁷

Historians like Marshall Hodgson and Burton Stein on the other hand saw gunpowder weapons as highly important in the region: they described the Mughals as one of the great Gunpowder Empires of the period.⁶⁸ Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam expressed their own thought on the matter in a chapter about South Indian warfare called 'The Art of War under the Nayakas'.⁶⁹ Considering firearms, they pointed out that courtly and other formal literature of the period suggests a deep fascination with the weapons, which turned up in romantic drama and poetry for instance.⁷⁰ Their use proliferated from 1500 onwards and by the early 1600s, the region had an abundant supply of matchlocks, harquebuses and all manner of cannons.⁷¹ South Indian soldiers utilised gunpowder weapons mainly for sieges and ambushes, firing at their opponents from the safety of the jungle. In addition, the *Nayaka* courts employed Muslim and European arquebusiers as mercenaries.

Regardless of the proliferation, there was a certain disdain for firearms and death by "some lousy bullet shot from a distance" among the military elites.⁷² Ramnad's warriors had less scruples about this 'disgraceful' way of fighting as they fought hit-and-run-style most of

⁶⁶ G. Parker, *The Military Revolution: military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge 1996) 129-132.

⁶⁷ Parker, *The Military Revolution*, 132; S. Subrahmanyam and G. Parker, 'Arms and the Asian. Revisiting European Firearms and their Place in Early Modern Asia' in *Revista de Cultura* 26 (2008) 12-42, 23, 37.

⁶⁸ Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 223.

⁶⁹ The Nayakas were the military officials of the Vijayanagara Empire (1336-1646), some of whom became independent during the sixteenth century. The ruling dynasties of Madurai and Thanjavur were originally Nayaka subordinates for instance.

⁷⁰ Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 226.

⁷¹ *Ibidem*, 229.

⁷² *Ibidem*, 236.

the times anyways. Their tactical use of terrain, forest cover and ambushes made fighting them a major problem for the Nayaka kingdoms. The three authors concluded that warfare in the 1600s and 1700s represented a transition phase as firearms and Europeans entered the fray, while massed infantry and cavalry charges still decided the outcome of conflicts. If sought, they stated that it is more appropriate to locate major military changes in the late eighteenth century when the EIC conquered the subcontinent by exploiting European tactics against their Indian opponents.⁷³

Several years after the publication of *Symbols and Substance*, Jos Gommans and Dirk H. Kolff included its specific chapter about Nayaka warfare in their 2001 bundle *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia: 1000-1800*. In the Introduction the two authors wondered whether, besides some British self-serving contributions, there has ever been a cultured school of South Asian military history at all.⁷⁴ Historians initially explained Muslim and European successes on the battlefields of India through baseless ideas about ‘the Hindu’s’ passive nature or the effects of moral decline brought about by the subcontinent’s hot climate. Only from the end of the 20th century onwards there arose a renewed interest in military history, particularly India’s enormous military labour market and the impact of new technology.⁷⁵ Although historical debate on the former mainly concentrates on the Mughal *mansabdari*-system, discussions on the latter were lacking altogether in the eyes of the two authors.⁷⁶

Gommans and Kolff’s own contribution to the technological debate gives a general analysis, which sadly lacks more detailed information on South India. For India on the whole they concluded that “Not gunpowder, but the horse and the fort remained the [essential ingredient] of Indian warfare and state formation”, at least until the second half of the eighteenth

⁷³ Narayana Rao, Shulman and Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance*, 239-41.

⁷⁴ J. Gommans and D. Kolff, ‘Introduction’, in: J. Gommans and D. Kolff (eds.), *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia: 1000-1800 AD* (New Delhi 2001) 1-42, 2.

⁷⁵ Gommans and Kolff, ‘Introduction’, 12-13.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*, 26.

century. Even so, they did note that the fringe areas, like Ramnad, developed their own military practices in which matchlock infantry and sharpshooters prevailed, owing to the inaccessibility of their geography to the large-scale cavalry armies that dominated the rest of the region.⁷⁷

Howes's examination of the mural paintings in the hall of audience of the Setupatis' palace, known as the *Ramalinga Vilasam*, reveals more about the specifics of the kingdom's military. A group of murals depict one of the many wars between Ramnad and Thanjavur. The painters depicted the Setupati's soldiers equipped with muskets and large cannons, while the king himself rides an elephant shooting arrows at his opponents. In Howes's eyes the representation of the ruler is a stylised depiction because Indian armies did no longer use elephants or war bows to settle their conflicts at the time of the painting (the 1720s).⁷⁸ In another painting both sides use cannons and horses, but the Marava troops look superior to the Maratha soldiers as they wield muskets instead of spears and they have an European mercenary (who could be a Dutchman) fighting on their side. Going by the illustrations, Ramnad possessed better weapons and assistance of a foreign power. The images of a large, well-equipped army would have impressed visitors to the royal court, whether they reflected the reality or were just propaganda; and they show the importance of gunpowder weapons, in any case for the depiction of warfare in the context of South India.⁷⁹

Apart from the firearms, the Setupatis' main military asset was the speed at which they could mobilise thousands of warriors as they were the rightful chiefs of all the different Marava clans.⁸⁰ During invasions and raids the troops would then launch lightning-swift attacks from Ramnad's impermeable jungles, which often played the decisive role in the military encounters. The forests also provided refuge for the warriors and villagers when enemies managed to reach

⁷⁷ Gommans and Kolff, 'Introduction', 39-42; 'Gunpowder' referred here to field artillery, siege guns and musket infantry; 'the horse' to the (semi)-nomadic, trained horse-archers and heavy shock-cavalry; and 'the fort' to the medieval strongholds often built on high hills and behind thick jungles.

⁷⁸ Howes, *The Courts*, 94.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*, 96.

⁸⁰ Price, *Kingship and political*, 26.

the urban centres. The VOC was familiar with these tactics as its documents regularly described the Setupati as “lord of the forest” (*bosheer*), “king of the woods” (*woudkoning*) or “monarch of thorns” (*doornvorst*) while the Company’s personnel sometimes called Ramnad’s men “thorn guards” (*doornwachters*) as well. Despite the familiarity, Bes stated that the unexpected, often nightly raids by the Setupati’s forces still managed to surprise and disrupt the Dutch troops during the campaign of 1746.⁸¹ In the next chapter I will explore whether the archives support his conclusion, but first I will continue the military story from the side of the merchants.

Explaining the expansion

Before 1950 Dutch historians had written very little on the military side of VOC. Missing an overarching textbook, D. de Iongh, a retired lieutenant-colonel of the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army (Koninklijk Nederlands Indisch Leger, KNIL), decided therefore to write his own account *Het krijgswezen onder de Oostindische Compagnie*. In the work he tried to answer his own question how the Company had managed to achieve its dominance in Asia with the little military resources it had comparatively. His explanation emphasised the national character of the Dutch people, “de stugge, onverzettelijke geuzenaar”, that gave the Company the ability to get results even against the most perilous of odds. De Iongh also stressed the importance of Jan Pieterszoon Coen for the successfulness of the enterprise. He described the gouverneur-generaal as one of greatest, if not the greatest Dutchman in history, who had served as the catalyst for both military expansion and commercial growth.⁸²

The conclusions of this self-proclaimed first military analysis do not really hold up in the 21st century, but later authors have reiterated much of the factual information it contains. Although De Iongh hardly paid any attention to the Dutch activities outside of Indonesia,

⁸¹ Bes, ‘The Setupatis’, 565-566.

⁸² De Iongh, *Het krijgswezen*, 7-9; *de stugge, onverzettelijke geuzenaar* translates as the rigid, unyielding nature as Geuzen. Geuzen, known as Beggars in English, was the name assumed by the group of Dutch nobles who opposed Spanish rule in the Netherlands before and during the Eighty Years’ War.

Winius and Vink for instance used Coen's famous quote about war and trade to illustrate the lack of awareness among the Gentlemen XVII, the directors of the VOC, about the importance of military matters not only in Indonesia, but also in India.⁸³ Another author who used Coen to make a point about war and trade was Parker in *The Military Revolution*. In the fourth chapter, he stressed that it is anachronistic to see the West as bent upon world domination before the 19th century. The European trade companies came to Asia to trade and not to conquer, though all of them needed troops either to browbeat reluctant buyers and annoying competitors or protect themselves against these activities. Nevertheless, the principal export product of pre-industrial Europe to the rest of the world was ultimately violence.⁸⁴

Parker's book is different from De Iongh's in its view on the importance of improved firearms and heavy ordnance for the companies. It portrayed western weaponry and military organisation as relatively or absolutely superior to its non-western counterparts, whereas *Het krijgswezen onder de Oostindische Compagnie* stated that indigenous opponents often had better artillery than the Dutch troops and employed more appropriate tactics for the terrain they fought on.⁸⁵ Moreover, the main difference between De Iongh and his successors is the absence of patriotic sentiments in the later works. This is also the case in the bundle of essays: *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tussen oorlog en diplomatie*, published by Gerrit Knaap and Ger Teitler more than fifty years after *De krijgswezen*'s debut.

One of the essays contained within the bundle is Remco Raben's contribution on the Asian soldiers employed by the Company. Similar to De Iongh, Raben called attention to the importance of indigenous auxiliaries for the Dutch military operations across Asia.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, the older work saw the European troops as the indispensable backbone of the army

⁸³ Winiaus and Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified*, 30-31.

⁸⁴ Parker, *The Military Revolution*, 115, 132.

⁸⁵ Ibidem, 115, 176; De Iongh, *Het krijgswezen*, 90, 94.

⁸⁶ De Iongh, *Het krijgswezen*, 61, 75; R. Raben, 'Het Aziatisch Legioen. Huurlingen, bondgenoten en reservisten in het geweer voor de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie' in: G. Knaap and G. Teitler (eds.), *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tussen oorlog en diplomatie* (2002) 181-207, 181

whose bravery saved many precarious moments, while in Raben's opinion it was only because of the support of the Asian mercenaries, allies and labourers that the military conquests were possible at all.⁸⁷ Another essay from the bundle, 'De militaire alliantie tussen de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie en de Buginezen' by Leonard Andaya, deals with the partnership between the Company and Buginese warriors from South Celebes. Andaya echoed De Iongh's remarks on the poor quality of equipment and weapons used by the European soldiers, but whereas these brought the older historian to lament the bad management by the Gentlemen XVII, Andaya saw them as one of the reasons why the merchants needed the Buginese (and other local auxiliaries) to win conflicts on land.⁸⁸

Combining all the points mentioned above is the most extensive work on the VOC's military to date: *Oorlogen oversee*. Next to a chronological overview of the most important military campaigns of the Company, the work features a specific chapter on soldiers and sailors as well as a chapter on the organisation's fleet, forts and firepower. According to the book, the fleet was the central element in the forces of the merchants, which ruled the waterways in between the fortresses.⁸⁹ As the Dutch started out their operations with both commerce and warfare in mind, their fleet consisted mainly of heavily armed multipurpose merchant ships or East Indiamen (*Oostindiëvaarders*) in addition to smaller, 'real' warships. In the 17th century, these ships dominated the Asian waters against their Asian and European competitors (mainly the Portuguese) as they were faster, more flexible and better armed during coastal bombardments, blockades, landings and sea battles. In the next century, the company's ships were still strong enough to beat indigenous opponents, but the English and French had become stronger with their own specialised, state-sponsored war fleets.

⁸⁷ De Iongh, *Het krijgswezen*, 79; Raben, 'Het Aziatisch Legioen', 182.

⁸⁸ De Iongh, *Het krijgswezen*, 83, 91; L. Andaya, 'De militaire alliantie tussen de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie en de Buginezen' in: G. Knaap and G. Teitler (eds.), *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tussen oorlog en diplomatie* (2002) 283-307, 284, 289-292.

⁸⁹ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlogen oversee*, 213.

Next to their impressive ships, the VOC built its empire on fortresses built in the *trace italienne* style, also known as star forts or bastion forts; many of which they conquered on the Portuguese. In the 17th century the battle on land was predominantly a siege war waged to gain control of strongholds similar to the European wars at the time. These star forts were hard to capture, especially for indigenous opponents, because of their resilience to cannon fire as well as their own ability to attack besiegers.⁹⁰ All in all, the Company needed many artillery pieces: for the fleet, for the fortifications and for its own siege operations. They saw little use as field weapons, as the heavy barrels were hard to move in the jungle.

Furthermore, VOC-soldiers carried hand-to-hand-combat weapons like pikes, rapiers and sabers; as well as small-caliber weapons like pistols and muskets. Early on, the company's men were equipped with matchlock guns with a range of 50-100 meters, but from the second half of the 17th century soldiers also used flintlock guns and snaphances. Flintlocks weighed less, had a higher rate of fire, would less often dysfunction, but were much more expensive. For a long time, the two types existed next to each other.⁹¹ The Company had some cavalry as well, but that division was rather small. In 1760, the dragoons (soldiers who moved around on horseback, but fought on foot) had 300 horses that came from Arabia, Persia and the Indonesian island of Sumbawa.⁹²

As the directors were not the rulers of a nation or feudal overlords, their armies were neither levies, nor conscripts. They recruited all their soldiers either in Europe or in Asia, with a lot of them coming from outside the Dutch Republic: (adventurous) volunteers from the German states, Scandinavia, England, Scotland, France and even the Iberian Peninsula. Just like most European royal armies at the time, the VOC-troops consisted therefore mostly of mercenaries. The main challenge for the Company was often the supply of enough soldiers for

⁹⁰ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlogen oversee*, 229.

⁹¹ *Ibidem*, 235.

⁹² *Ibidem*, 239.

conflicts against both regular and irregular opposing forces. The organisation mostly lacked higher-quality veteran soldiers. The company compensated for the lack by hiring masses of Asian warriors from the Indonesian archipelago before every campaign. These recruits fought under the command of their own captains and got paid only for the duration of their employment.⁹³ Over time many of these groups settled around Batavia in ethnic *kampongs*.

Another advantage of the indigenous troops was their resilience against tropical diseases which crippled many of the European recruits (next to the perilous journey overseas). In 1733, the inhabitants of Batavia constructed large fishing ponds near the coast, which became hotbeds for malaria. This illness was even more deadly for the newly arrived European personnel of whom more than half died in its first year after the 1730s. It got so bad that in 1741 Gouverneur-generaal Van Imhoff came to the realisation that two soldiers had to come from Holland to replace one soldier in Asia. The high death toll caused a structural shortage of soldiers for the defence works and military expeditions.⁹⁴

Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the European and Asian troops remained separate divisions within the army, with different weapons and tactics. During battles, high command always used them in tandem however, with the Asian troops leading the charge as shock troops or doing hit-and-run attacks, while the Europeans provided covering fire. The Dutch commanders had learned that tactics which applied to the battlefields of Europe were not one-to-one transferable to their Asian opponents. During the Makassar War (1666-1669) admiral Cornelis Speelman decided to make use of the Buginese' expertise to fight the opposing Gowa Sultanate with its own tactics. Subsequently, the alliance was successful because both parties' strengths complemented each other. The merchants' East Indiamen could quickly

⁹³ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlog oversee*, 154; Raben, 'Het Aziatisch Legioen', 184, 197.

⁹⁴ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlog oversee*, 190; Emmer and Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand*, 296; Raben, 'Het Aziatisch Legioen', 198-199.

transport their new associates and provide fire support, while the Buginese warriors proved excellent 'boots on the ground'.⁹⁵

The costs of the military apparatus in its totality are hard to estimate. The budgets of the Company's branches in the Republic and in Asia remained separate from each other. Because of this, nobody working for the VOC at the time had a trustworthy indication of the financial situation.⁹⁶ When Knaap and consorts tried to make their own rough assessment of the expenses they landed on an amount of around 3.5 million guilders yearly in the 18th century. Of this, 2.5 million went to the personnel; 500,000 to ships; 300,000 to weaponry and equipment and 200,000 to the maintenance and construction of forts.⁹⁷ 3.5 million might seem much as the yearly average costs in the overseas areas were 6 to 7 million guilders. Compared to the yearly investments in the Company in Amsterdam, which were 16-17 million, the sum seems much less. Even so, Knaap concluded that it is not yet clear which expenses the merchants made in reality. He did point out that the military expenses were not to the detriment of the organisation and refunded themselves until the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War.

Concluding

All in all, based on the secondary literature the conflict of 1746 seems a battle between two very different armies. Calling Ramnad a guerrilla-state might be anachronistic, but the Setupati's forces excelled in using ambushes, hit-and-run attacks and the local terrain to win their battles. Next to them the VOC had far more conventional troops who mostly specialised in the European positional warfare around fortifications (if they specialised in anything at all). Whereas the Indian kingdom had the numerical, the financial, the physical and the topographical advantage as they could just rally their numerous clan members who were

⁹⁵ Andaya, 'De militaire alliantie', 303.

⁹⁶ Knaap, Den Heijer and De Jong, *Oorlogen oversea*, 240.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, 241.

familiar with the region's conditions; the Company had in theory the intellectual, the logistical, the naval and the operational advantage because of their superior warships and extensive archives. Concerning the military technology, both sides used (European-made) cannons and firearms as well as various melee weapons for hand-to-hand-combat. Given these factors, the side with better supplies would probably win the clash if it would end up as a long-term affair. After these theoretical contemplations, it is time however to see what the archives actually have to say on the matter.

Chapter III: An Invasion of Insignificance and Incompetence

Waar mede desen besluitende UE godes seegen, en een goed succes toewenschen ende voorsigtigheid gepaard met dapperheit, allesints ten hoogsten recommandeeren terwijl na groete en blijven onderstond UE goedes vrienden, was getekend J V Stein V. Gollonesse in margine Colombo den 11 juni 1746⁹⁸

Thus, ended governor Stein van Gollenesse the instructions to captain Carel Andrieszoon, the leader of the expedition to Rameshvaram. In it he and the rest of the council at Colombo confirmed the appointment of the captain as head of the expedition against Setupati Sivakumara Tevar. The rest of the document consist of their orders for the new campaign-leader together with the latest intelligence they had received about the state of affairs over there. In regards to the VOC-archives preserved on the conflict; the instructions are only one of the ninety-three texts that make up the total bundle on the invasion of 1746. Colombo's employees sent this package to the Gentlemen XVII and the Amsterdam Chamber where it would arrive the next year and become a part of the *Ingekomen stukken uit Indië* [In-coming pieces from East India]. Of the twenty-six books sent back to the Republic seven dealt with Ceylon and it is part five of these, or book ten of twenty-six, that has the bundled information about the conflict with the Setupati, divided over thirteen categories.

Most of the documents within the bundle are letters or written notices sent between Colombo, the VOC-headquarter in the region; Tuticorin (Thoothukudi nowadays), the nearest Dutch trade factory to Rameshvaram; and the officers on Rameshvaram itself. The personnel at the first two locations coordinated the operation to capture the island and its logistics. In

⁹⁸ NA VOC 2666, 2058; Translation: Concluding, I wish your honour God's blessing, and a good success and carefulness coupled with bravery, in every respect the highest recommendations for greetings and lasting sympathy your honour['s] good friends, was signed by J V Stein van Gollenesse in the margin Colombo June the 11th 1746.

addition to the communication between the Company's servants, the bundle also holds various messages sent between the Setupati, his generals and the Sivaganga kingdom on the one hand; and Colombo, Tuticorin and the Dutch commanders in the field on the other. Unfortunately, the mass of paperwork is not easy to go through chronologically. The clerks that put it together put the texts in different, arbitrarily chosen, sections. Even within these sections the editors did not arrange all the texts time wise.

For example, the bundle starts with the instructions for the expedition's leading officer, signed by Stein van Gollenesse on the 11th of June 1746 at Colombo. The next document is a letter by Albertus Domburg, the VOC's chief merchant at Tuticorin, sent to his superior on Ceylon around May the 26th, two weeks before Andrieszoon got his instructions.⁹⁹ In the letter Domburg mentioned classified communication he received from the headquarters with the dates of 12 April, 27 April and 2 May. These letters are not among the texts, while the date of the first letter sent to Domburg from Colombo is November the 5th.¹⁰⁰ In short, the bundle is a bit of a mess for anyone trying to find out about the course of the war. The index at the start shows that the conflict started in 1746 and ended in the same year with a ceasefire and negotiations for a new alliance between the two parties (Sections 1, 12 and 13).¹⁰¹

The content of the other ten sections is then as follows: the documents sent between Ceylon and the VOC-base at Tuticorin in section 2; the letters sent between Ceylon and the officers on Rameshvaram in the third section; section 4 holds the translated messages from the Setupati and his generals to those officers; number 5 has the conceptual messages by Domburg to the Setupati and a proclamation by captain Andrieszoon and his subordinates to the priests and local inhabitants living on Rameshvaram; then, section 6 with the accounts of some soldiers of their activities during the campaign; the seventh one contains a report of a parley between

⁹⁹ NA VOC 2666, 2061.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem, 2100.

¹⁰¹ Ibidem, 2053-2054.

Domburg and a fellowship of dignitaries from the mainland and another parley between captain Jan Bauert and the Setupati's *strantwagter* [beach-guard]¹⁰²; there is an explanation of some events that happened at the island regarding the Company and part of its inhabitants in section 8; followed by the instructions to officer Ramoe, who went to the court of Ramnad; and in section 10, a translated message from the ruler of Sivaganga (known as the *oedea theuver* to the Company) and the responses to his letter in the next section.

The conflict according to book ten

Keeping the general overview in mind, the conflict started when VOC-soldiers commanded by lieutenant Pieter David Meijlant landed on the coast of Rameshvaram in May 1746. As shown in chapter I, the roots of the conflict lay much further back. That is why Section 4 contains several translated messages from the Setupati for Domburg written as early as December the 31st 1745 and received on January the 4th 1746.¹⁰³ The Dutch merchant received at least four messages from Ramnad before headquarters ordered the attack on Rameshvaram. Despite their attempts to keep up the diplomacy, Colombo sent out Meijlant to capture the island and its fortress before the rest of the expedition would arrive. The initial landing took place around May the 26th as Domburg's letter to Colombo from that date does mention the operation, but not the successful capture of the fortress yet.

In addition, he reported on the arrival of some Travancorese envoys at his factory whom he did not inform of the planned assault out of fear to reveal it too soon, as all the kingly courts contained spies and favourites of other kings who could inform Ramnad of the expedition.¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the chief merchant disclosed that he had sent the captain of the ship *Cornelia Magdalena* along the expedition as a sea guide. To help in the landing he did also grant three

¹⁰² NA VOC 2666, 2298.

¹⁰³ Ibidem, 2205.

¹⁰⁴ Ibidem, 2060.

cannons to the troops plus he himself would go to the island after a victory to regulate affairs over there. The letter ends on the note that Domburg would write to all lords in the vicinity that the VOC had maintained the holy places, once the expedition would have succeeded.¹⁰⁵

The significance of the three additional artillery pieces remains undetermined, but Meijlant and his soldiers managed to take the fortress without major difficulty as it was in the hands of the Company by the 10th of June. This outcome becomes apparent from the instructions document given to captain Andrieszoon. His orders were to secure “Het Eiland, en fortje Pambe” against any hostile attacks with the 250-plus soldiers already there.¹⁰⁶ Intelligence from Tuticorin showed that Sivakumara had started to gather his warriors either to recapture the island or to prevent the movements of the Company’s troops around that time. Although the VOC consistently attributed Ramnad’s activities to the young Setupati, the secondary literature shows that the person pulling the strings was probably his general Vellaiyan Servaikkarar – so whenever I mention the kingdom’s ruler in this chapter, I mean the latter. The upper command at Colombo expressed its confidence in Andrieszoon's ability to carry out the given task with the cannons and armed vessels at his disposal. The first priority overall was to get the fort and its outlying batteries in a proper, defensible state.

For these preparations, the war council had sent a ship, the *Maria Louisa*, filled with artisans, coolies (native labourers), building materials and tools to the island. The factories at Colombo and Tuticorin were ready to deliver additional building materials if needed, whereas replenishments and provisions could be sent from Tuticorin, Jaffnapatam (Jaffna) and Manaar (Mannar) as well. The instructions advised the captain to patrol the north-west of the island "ten einde de vijand aan wie de weegen en dieptens volkomen moeten bekend sijn UE: niet onverwagt komt te verrasschen."¹⁰⁷ For this a party of *Lascorijns* together with some Europeans

¹⁰⁵ NA VOC 2666, 2061.

¹⁰⁶ Ibidem, 2055; Translation: the island and the fort of Pambe [Rameshvaram].

¹⁰⁷ Ibidem, 2057; Translation: in order not to be surprised by the enemy who completely knows the roads and waterways of the area.

should be reserved, but the instructors saw the armed vessels situated at the western coast as more effective defenders. Furthermore, the document communicated the necessity to keep discipline and order among the soldiers. The text mentions a number of times that if there would be a lack of supplies the officers should contact the headquarters as soon as possible.

The instructions then explicitly referred to the famous pagoda “Rammenacoil” (which most likely is the Ramanathaswamy Temple). To avoid offending the other Hindu rulers in the Coromandel, upper command warned their captain for damaging the temple or insulting the priests. The expedition should take all possible care to avoid drunkenness among the soldiers and any soldier who could not follow these orders should be court-martialled.¹⁰⁸ The VOC was aware of the importance that the temple had for “de Heidenen” and had promised to all neighbouring kings that the area would again be open to priests and pilgrims after the conclusion of the war.¹⁰⁹ The last bit concern the rumours about two of the Company’s employees getting massacred by warriors from Ramnad. They had dared to go too far into the woods on the island. Upper command was unsure whether the killers had left Rameshvaram or were still there, but it advised Andrieszoon to get rid of them in any case as it was dangerous to have enemies both on and off the island. The letter then ends with the aforementioned blessings and wishes of success.

Several days after the new commander reached the island, a messenger from Sivaganga appeared at Tuticorin. The man carried a message written on the 5th of June in the kingdom to the north of Ramnad still ruled by Sasivarna Tevar. The king had received an earlier dispatch from Domburg in which the Dutch merchant shared his employer’s complaints about the Setupati. For three years, he claimed that the VOC had not received any useful intelligence from the kingdom, but instead it had had to endure “veel onverdraagelijke affronten”.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ NA VOC 2666, 2057.

¹⁰⁹ Ibidem; Translation: the heathens, meaning the local Hindu population and the many pilgrims visiting the temple.

¹¹⁰ Ibidem, 2320; Translation: many intolerable insults.

Furthermore, the young ruler had ignored all the Company's attempts to patch up the relationship or renew the old contracts, which was mostly the result of bad advice from the cunning Moors who used Sivakumara's minority to their advantage.¹¹¹ To address the situation the Dutch finally decided to attack their troublesome 'partner'.

Before they did however, they had informed the oedea theuver of the assault so he could make his own move and also attack Ramnad with his own Marava warbands. Together they could enclose the kingdom: Sivaganga's army invading from the north whereas the Company's ships cut off the access to the sea. This strategy would surely bring them success and the legitimate revenge they hoped for.¹¹² Sasivarna believed in the sincerity of the Dutch, as the Setupati had insulted him too previously. He therefore had already tried his best to influence the neighbouring kingdoms to abandon the cause of Ramnad and join his own campaign against that ruler. He believed nonetheless that they had been bought of earlier as his arguments made little impression. Nevertheless, he had recruited a thousand horsemen while also befriending the nawab *Maboeehan* who gave him another thousand cavalymen commanded by the nawab's brother-in-law.¹¹³ With these Sivaganga's forces were 2000 cavalry and 20,000 foot-soldiers strong whom the king had positioned near the fortress of Pallamaddauw.

There he had then received the message brought by *arraatje* Sangerielingen (probably the one mentioned at the start of the message) which made him overjoyed for he learned of the Company's similar ordeals and intentions.¹¹⁴ Seized by fury and sensing the opportunity present he had marched his troops along three roads into Ramnad where they had done nothing but killing, burning and destroying. He was sure that the Setupati had not expected the Dutch attack;

¹¹¹ NA VOC 2666, 2320; This refers to the Maraikkayar clan from Kilakarai, who were longstanding rivals to the VOC as explained in chapter I.

¹¹² Ibidem, 2321.

¹¹³ Ibidem, 2322; As these additional troops had come from the city of *Tritschenepalij* (probably Trichinopoly, or Tiruchirappalli) nawab Maboeehan could be Khwaja Abdullah who had become the ruler of that place in 1743 and ruled it on behalf of the Nizam of Hyderabad, a former subordinate of the Mughal Empire.

¹¹⁴ Ibidem; *Arraatjes* (Arachchies) were indigenous, Sinhalese chiefs who acted as sergeants commanding up to twenty-four lascarins.

more than that, when news of Rameshvaram's subjugation had reached the young ruler it must have dazed him as his fortifications were almost defenceless and his soldiers confused and frightened.¹¹⁵ Even so, Sasivarna did not think that the Company would be able to hold on to the place. He was all in favour of the Setupati and the VOC renewing their contracts, but he was less keen on their confiscation of the island as the move would make them numerous enemies along the Coromandel coast. These words give the impression that neither Domburg nor his messengers had not informed Sivaganga's ruler beforehand about the intentions to capture Rameshvaram in addition to the reinvigoration of the trading agreements.

The allied king's advice was to hand over the conquered fortress to him as the other rulers in the neighbourhood would never allow the Dutch to control the shrines at which they all practiced their religion. If he, however, controlled the place that would not be an issue while he would do everything to keep his new partner content.¹¹⁶ Sasivarna ended his message with the guarantee that he would send an ambassador and the question whether the Company's ships could enclose Ramnad even tighter, severing all possible supply lines, so that he could obliterate their enemy on land.¹¹⁷ Because of the war, the messenger reached Tuticorin only fifteen days after he had left his lord, who by that time had most likely raised hell across Ramnad. Notwithstanding the war between the two Marava kingdoms, Andrieszoon's men appear to have had some difficulty removing their own opponents from the island.

More than a month after the captain received his instructions, he and his officers drafted a proclamation on July the 23rd for the Brahmin priests and the Setupati's subjects in which they promised that any opponent willing to leave the island was free to go to the mainland. They gave their enemies twenty-four hours to reply: if they would lay down their arms the captain and his men would grant them safe passage, otherwise he wrote they would be required

¹¹⁵ NA VOC 2666, 2323.

¹¹⁶ Ibidem, 2324.

¹¹⁷ Ibidem.

to use force to remove the Ramnad warriors.¹¹⁸ In the same proclamation the Dutchmen also promised the priests that they would not to disturb or harm them if they would stay in their sanctuaries, more than that, in case the holy men lacked food or anything else, the document states that they only had to communicate this to receive a helping hand.¹¹⁹ It seems, the VOC-commanders tried to use ‘carrot and stick’ to pacify the island without having to resort to violence if possible.

Two days later (July the 25th), the Dutch commander received a message from the Setupati’s commanders who were still on the island. They reminded him of the sanctity of the island; of the fact that by their attack, the merchants would antagonise all the kings and monarchs in the vicinity against them; and of the felonies his soldiers had committed on the island and across the water. According to them, the hoodlums had slaughtered cows, which are venerated animals in India; had burned resting places; and had stolen rugs and jewellery from priests and women at a sacred watering place.¹²⁰ The Setupati had expressed his anger over the offences by sending his remaining men on Rameshvaram a letter asking them why they did not confront the violence with violence of their own. The commanders in turn asked their opponents to send an ambassador to the kingdom to restore peace. If the Company would not do so, they however were ready to defend themselves bravely and would risk their blood for the reconquest of the fortress.¹²¹

Whether the captain did anything with their request is unsure. He received the message in Tamil, the language spoken in Ramnad, while he probably did not have an interpreter with him as the text at the end states that the translation took place on August 9th, fifteen days after its delivery. In the meantime, Domburg had already tried to start up some kind of diplomacy negotiating after the expedition had taken the fortress on Rameshvaram. On July the 22nd he

¹¹⁸ NA VOC 2666, 2273.

¹¹⁹ Ibidem.

¹²⁰ Ibidem, 2233.

¹²¹ Ibidem, 2234.

had sent arraatje Ramoe to the Ramnad court with a message for its ruler whom he asked to send his ambassador to Tuticorin. Ramoe's account tells that he arrived there on July the 25th where he, after the usual protocol, delivered the request to the Setupati. Sivakumara Tevar responded with the following, which the clerks included in the report. If the Company's troops stayed within the fortress and did not hinder his people in their religious celebrations, he would send his ambassador to Domburg, but the Dutch had not really listened to this appeal before.¹²² He then told Ramoe that he wanted to consult his general before deciding on the issue and sent him back to Tuticorin.

The arraatje also heard that during potential negotiations Ramnad's ambassador would allow the Company to build a stone wall around its lodge at Kilakarai if they paid the kingdom no less than 30 to 40,000 rupees.¹²³ More importantly, the Tevar king ensured the Dutch that if the negotiations would end in nothing he would send his whole army to reconquer Rameshvaram after his internal war against Sivaganga's troops had ended. As suggested in the bilateral communications, Sasivarna's warbands were busy destroying the Setupati's lands together with *armaneese* troops (maybe referring to the cavalrymen from Tiruchirappalli, see note 119). The news on July the 30th was that the distressed king had offered the assailants 40,000 rupees to leave his country, an offer they might have accepted as nearby 20,000 *morattijse* riders were ready to descend on Tiruchirappalli.¹²⁴

It was Domburg who was in charge of the communications with the Sivagangese allies during the two-front war. Over the course of the conflict he sent them several messages of whom the clerks preserved four examples in the bundle. It seems Sasivarna ended up in some financial difficulties, or pretended to have them, after two months of campaigning in Ramnad. For this reason, he had requested funds for the war effort (in another letter, not present in the

¹²² NA VOC 2666, 2296.

¹²³ Ibidem.

¹²⁴ Ibidem; The descent does probably refer to a Maratha raid from Thanjavur which would have distressed Sasivarna's ally (whoever it was) very much and prompted him to recall his cavalry troops back to defend the city.

bundle). Domburg replied to the request in a letter that he wrote on August the 7th. In it he repeated his promise to give the funds to Sivaganga's ruler, gaining a pledge on the village and harbour of Tondij (Thondi nowadays) and its revenue in return, but that before upper command was willing to enter the deal, they wanted more information on the amount of money their ally needed and how much the village would yield monthly. If they received a satisfactory answer, they would deliver the money as it would help to defeat the Setupati.¹²⁵

That ruler in the meantime understood that he could only save his skin through diplomacy. For this reason, he (or somebody else at the court) wrote a submissive message on August the 23rd for Domburg. It took his ambassadors a bewildering time of two months to reach Tuticorin, though the war with Sivaganga was probably still going strong. Sivakumara opened his message with the memory of the "guldene eeuw toen mijne gloeiende voorsaten met de doorlugtige maatschappij eene duurzame alliance maakten".¹²⁶ Throughout the letter the young ruler refers back to the happier times and the sincere friendship between the two, which had gone downhill only for the last two years due to certain evil goading forces.¹²⁷ He however stated that he had tried everything to restore the relationship from sending ambassadors multiple times to petitioning the Company to send over an interpreter so he could have clearly conveyed his feelings on the matter.

The Dutch reply to these earlier messages had been to demand the Setupati to send over his ambassadors first before they would talk, which in reality meant that the ruler had to send emissaries once more. Battled and bruised, the Setupati had decided to satisfy the demand which resulted in the letter from the 23rd. In the document he appealed to the merchants to tell his emissaries the Company's wishes during the negotiations and repeated his invitation to send an

¹²⁵ NA VOC 2666, 2327;

¹²⁶ Ibidem, 2258; Translation: golden age when my noble ancestors made an alliance with the distinguished Company.

¹²⁷ Ibidem; The message does not specify who these forces were.

interpreter to accompany his men back to Ramnad.¹²⁸ Meanwhile, through the message the king authorised the VOC to establish a new resident in Kilakarai who could restart the commerce that used to happen there. After this concession, Sivakumara ended his message by imploring his former partner to employ all the diligence available to let the friendship flourish again like before.¹²⁹ It seems that for Ramnad peace could not come soon enough, which makes it extra weird that it took so long for the proposals to reach Domburg at Tuticorin.

Speaking of the chief-merchant, three days after the Setupati drafted the letter above, the Dutchman sent his own dispatch to governor Stein van Gollenesse over at Colombo (August the 26th). In the report he passed a harsh judgment on the performance of captain Andrieszoon during the expedition. He wrote that if headquarters really wanted the conquest of Rameshvaram they would have to give the operation's command to someone with more experience both politically and military. He was also of the opinion that it would probably take several years before the island would become peaceful again; he hoped that the plan did not backfire by unsettling the rest of their interests in the region.¹³⁰ The situation at that time was even more desolate than he had written in his daily reports. Domburg had been conducting an inquiry into the officers' conduct, but he had stopped these activities as they resulted in even more disunity between them which negatively affected the troops.¹³¹

Instead he had ordered the troops to dig earthworks (presumably around the fortress) because the soldiers had been sitting ducks for the enemy's canons.¹³² He further reported on the sorry state of Lieutenant Meijlant and ensign Hepner, while the other ensign Hilkemijer was principally at variance with his captain. Andrieszoon himself could be a little more civilised as his men had to deal with enemies and "de quade lugt"; the soldiers had enough difficulties

¹²⁸ NA VOC 2666, 2259.

¹²⁹ Ibidem, 2260.

¹³⁰ Ibidem, 2071.

¹³¹ Ibidem, 2072.

¹³² Ibidem; It is not explained why the officers leading the invasion had not taken such obvious defense measures. Maybe the internal discord prevented them from properly commanding their soldiers.

without the need for additional discord.¹³³ The three subordinate officers had all requested replacement for which Domburg advocated as they had all caught the *Pambese* disease. At the same time the supplies required for the expedition became increasingly hard to fulfil for the depots at Tuticorin, Jaffna and Mannar. They sent what they could acquire, hoping it would be accountable later on.¹³⁴ The chief-merchant ended the account by wishing God's blessing upon the governor and his wife.

Mysteriously the bundle does not seem to have any rapports or letter from September (maybe because of a monsoon that disrupted communications). In any case, the next documents all come from the last three months of 1746. October finally saw the arrival of the two ambassadors carrying the Setupati's letter from August. Whether it was for Sivakumara's belated message; further deterioration of the conditions for the Dutch troops at Rameshvaram; or some untold mainland developments, like more financial problems for Sasivarna or the Marathas raiding around Tiruchirappalli; Domburg sent sergeant Ramoe back to Ramnad that month with another letter and the following instructions. He wanted the Tevar lord to know that although he was willing to start the peace negotiations with the emissaries, usually these kinds of talks could only begin when the hostilities between the parties had ceased. Both sides had to agree to a ceasefire which had to last as long as the meetings took place.¹³⁵

The chief merchant's request to the king was that the fighting would stop for at best a month. Ramoe was to explain this at the court to the best of his abilities and urge its ruler to make haste with the request, otherwise time that could be spend on peace talks would be wasted. What is more, the merchant had considered the possibility that the Setupati did not dare to send a messenger with the ceasefire orders to his men on the island. If that was the case, Ramoe had

¹³³ NA VOC 2666, 2072; Translation: the evil air, which could refer to low morale among the Company's troops or to bad odours, meaning diseases.

¹³⁴ Ibidem, 2073.

¹³⁵ Ibidem, 2318; These words indicate that the fighting on Rameshvaram was still going on.

to persuade him that when the messenger's boat carried a white flag it would be permitted.¹³⁶ As the arraatje already had been at the court, and therefore knew its customs, more instructions were unnecessary. He just had to follow the customs, reach the goal as specified and keep notes carefully for when he would return so Tuticorin and Colombo could gain more intelligence on the situation in the kingdom.

Even with the mainland fighting and the Setupati's professed wish for reconciliation, his warriors kept disrupting the Company's plans on Rameshvaram. At a certain point Stein van Gollenesse and the rest of the military council had to replace Andrieszoon with a new chief-in-command, captain Johan Bauert. In the letter they sent him on November the 5th, they expressed their hope that his first completed patrol on the island would deter their enemies from: "UE 'snagts tekomen bespringen en ons volk in haar rust testooren".¹³⁷ This nightly assault had triggered chaos among the troops who had responded by firing their guns all around them without knowing the strength of the enemy and thus spilling a lot of powder in a ridiculous way in the words of upper command.¹³⁸ According to intelligence there were not many Ramnad troops on the island, who experienced a lack of everything on top of it.

Another issue which displeased the executives at Colombo was the slow progress concerning the reinforcement of the fortress. In the document they promised that the persons responsible for the neglect would have a lot to answer for.¹³⁹ Headquarters did nevertheless, sent eight ship carpenters to Tuticorin to repair some damaged barges. The damage was the result of a monsoon, which the ships had failed to withstand. Van Gollenesse and his colleagues questioned the veracity of the claim as the enemy had managed to transport soldiers to the island through the same monsoon with ships that were less sturdy than those of the Company, in their opinion. Lastly, they gave Bauert the advice to keep a positive attitude towards the whole

¹³⁶ NA VOC 2666, 2319.

¹³⁷ Ibidem, 2203; Translation: pouncing upon your honour at night and disturbing our people in their rest.

¹³⁸ Ibidem.

¹³⁹ Ibidem.

operation in order to inspire his troops, as it was not feasible to substitute them at that moment.¹⁴⁰

The same month Bauert held a conference with Wirewe Cheerwegaren, the *strantwagter* [beach-guard] of Ramnad who appeared with some others in the morning of November the 20th on the island carrying a white flag in their little boat. The Dutch leading officer went to meet them with his subordinates (not lieutenant Meijlant, but someone called Gräsman). After they had seated themselves, Cheerwegaren explained that Ramnad's second-in-command had sent him to Rameshvaram in order to conclude peace similarly to the what their ambassador was trying to achieve at Tuticorin.¹⁴¹ The Ramnad court was aware of Andrieszoon's replacement; they thought (or hoped) his replacement Bauert had arrived there to come to a reconciliation.¹⁴² The Dutchman's reply however was that he had not come to make peace, but to keep the conquered fortress safe from hostile endeavours. For negotiations the envoys had to go to Tuticorin, not to him. Thereupon he asked them for a letter from the Setupati himself on the nature of the negotiations, as he was not aware of them.¹⁴³ The *strantwagter* replied that the Dutch captain would soon receive such a message.

He then inquired about the rumour of a large amount of masonry goods turning up on the island. It seemed to the Maravas that the Company was trying to (re)build fortifications, which they protested against since the negotiations were still happening. Bauert had to confirm the rumour, but he claimed the material was for the construction of residencies meant to house the soldiers. Headquarters had ordered the fabrication, so he did not dare sending it back.¹⁴⁴ Subsequently, Cheerwegaren informed whether the Dutch would allow his people to come over to the island and practice their religion. Their answer was affirmative on the conditions that the

¹⁴⁰ NA VOC 2666, 2204.

¹⁴¹ Ibidem, 2303

¹⁴² Ibidem, 2304.

¹⁴³ Ibidem; Apparently, the soldiers on Rameshvaram had not received any information on the possibility of peace talks.

¹⁴⁴ Ibidem, 2305.

people would come in small boats, would land at the same location, would not carry any weapons and would return to the mainland as monitored by the Company's soldiers. The talks concluded with the Dutchmen sharing a bottle of spirits with their opposition and seeing them off the island.

Aftermath analysis

In the end, the proposed positive mind-set or the sharing of spirits were not enough to decisively turn the expedition into the merchants' favour. After five months on Rameshvaram both parties decided to end the conflict with a ceasefire on November the 30th. Five days later, Domburg presented a document with thirty-six points and conditions to the Setupati's envoys in order to renew the contracts and alliance between the two parties. The thirty-six articles are an interesting bunch with some obvious demands and some more obscure ones. Most importantly, the VOC promised in article 22 to return the island and its fortress to its protectors, with all the guns and ammunition found there, but after it had removed all its own possessions.¹⁴⁵ To compensate for this, the Company asked in points 23 for the right to build its own residence next to the fortress where three to four Dutchmen and five to six natives could reside to assist its ships getting through the channel; in point 24 it asked for these servants to have two small boats at their disposal; and in point 28 for the Setupati to install a company of sentries on the island against smuggling, whom their own servants would monitor.¹⁴⁶

The smuggling was probably the main issue during the new peace negotiations, with five points dealing directly with the matter and many more indirectly. In article 10, Stein van Gollennesse and his subordinates requested the Setupati to stop his subjects, and especially the "sinistre killkareese mooren", from the substantial smuggling they perpetrated between mainland India and Sinhalese harbours like Putulang (Puttalam nowadays) and help the

¹⁴⁵ NA VOC 2666, 2342.

¹⁴⁶ Ibidem, 2344.

Company to subdue illegal trade activities by other actors as well.¹⁴⁷ To win over Ramnad's king the merchants promised him half of all the goods and ships confiscated during inspections in point 11 and point 29. Additionally, the ruler would receive the necessary trade permits for all VOC-harbours and all harbours of entities allied to the organisation; and the rights to send a ship with chank shells and 200,000 pearls up north (to Bengal) for export yearly.

The rest of the document, however, is full of demands benefiting the Dutch: free passage through the Rameshvaram channel; ownership of the Wedalie village (could refer to Vedalai); exclusivity of certain fishing grounds; less customs for their ships in the Setupati's territories; and restoration of the Kilakarai lodge with its former privileges, a stone wall against fires and sixty houses for their servants and merchants under the protection of the Tevar king.¹⁴⁸ Whether Ramnad's negotiators did comply with all these demands cannot be said based on the bundle as the outcome of the peace talks was not included among the documents. It is reasonable to assume that the return of the island mattered most to the Setupati and that he adhered to the other points fulfilling his side of the bargain for a short while to gain some needed tranquillity.

All in all, the bundle "spreekende van den theuverheer en de expeditie tegens denselven" answers some questions surrounding the conflict, but it leaves a lot unanswered as well.¹⁴⁹ For instance, what happened to the cooperation between Sivaganga and the Company? What of the Thondi harbour that king Sasivarna had promised to pledge in exchange for financial assistance? Where did the 20,000 Maratha horsemen go to? How many casualties did the different parties actually suffer during the struggle? How did the temporary possession of Rameshvaram influence the VOC's relations with the other kingdoms of the Coromandel? More

¹⁴⁷ NA VOC 2666, 2337; translation: sinister Moors from Kilakarai.

¹⁴⁸ Ibidem, 2334-2336; One of the minor demands of the Company was that its employees should no longer have to endure the insults and other abuse done by "baldadige jongens" [rowdy boys] while crossing the streets of Kilakarai.

¹⁴⁹ Translation: speaking of the Tevar lord and the expedition against him.

importantly though, how should historians define the outcome of the 1746-campaign? Was it indeed “a miserable failure” as concluded by Bes in his article?¹⁵⁰

The Company did indeed have to give up their conquest for the reconciliation, they did lose troops to disease and nightly Marava attacks, and they did probably waste a lot of resources that they could have used differently. Did that make the operation a failure? The Dutch successfully captured the fortress in the first place, during the months on the island the Setupati’s warriors never managed to dislodge them from that position or beat them in the field, and Ramnad lost more men, money and other resources in the war overall, fighting Sasivarna’s invasion. The merchants succeeded in getting their former partner back to the negotiating table where they seem to have dictated the peace terms. Regarding the peace talks, it is unfortunate that the bundle’s editors did not include their outcome among the papers. If the VOC got some of its conditions through the talks though, they can be considered successful as well. At least the organisation regained its residency and trade at Kilakarai during the occupation of fort Rameshvaram.

Apart from the outcome, it is quite difficult to analyse the conflict extensively as for all the reports about the expedition its narrators say pretty little on the actual fighting. Possibly because after the capture of the fortress both parties did attempt little fighting at all. It seems the patrols of the Dutch did not uncover the Marava hiding places or stop them from the nightly raids. These incursions disrupted the soldiers’ daily activities, but did not force them out of their new fortifications. The scenario looked a bit like a fight between a blind man and a cripple. The much more furious attack of Sivaganga’s 22,000 soldiers left Ramnad’s forces hamstrung to defend the island, while the Company had not learned anything from their earlier wars against other Indian opponents, or so it seems.

¹⁵⁰ Bes, ‘The Setupatis’, 566.

The same issues that plagued their war against Travancore popped up on Rameshvaram: bad leadership on the operational level, lack of an answer to hit-and-run attacks apart from little-yielding patrols, not enough soldiers once diseases started to spread, not enough food, gunpowder and other supplies for longer-during conflicts, use of unreliable local allies, slow and deficient fortress-construction practices, little use of Asian troops that could better withstand the tropical diseases and could counter the ambush-tactics, little resilience against the annual monsoons and a penchant for internal investigations that only lead to dissent. Frankly, it is a wonder that the Company managed to win any conflicts given these problems. To be fair, the merchants were likely still recovering from the lost war against Marthanda Varma and given that, their performance against Sivakumara Tevar is excusable, but it does not deserve any beauty prizes to say the least.

On a more personal level, the most important figure on the side of the Dutch was not the cheerless first expedition-leader Carel Andrieszoon, nor was it his superior, governor Stein van Gollenesse. The archival material gives the impression that Domburg was the glue that held the operation together; that he salvaged the potential disaster that might have occurred. Colombo, Ramnad, Sivaganga and the troops all communicated to and through him. Moreover, he and his subordinates at Tuticorin were responsible for the mission's supplies. My depiction could be the fault of the time-honoured truism that 'they who write down history are the ones who determine what happened', as the chief-merchant wrote many of the remaining documents. Therefore, it is absolutely possible that he could have cleverly masked his own failures, but because of the similarities between Rameshvaram and Colachel I give him the benefit of the doubt. Even exercises in incompetence need some kind of hero.

Conclusion

Dat daarentegen door d' Comp: aan den heer theuver wederom sal werden gerestitueert het fortje pambenaar met het geheele Eiland Rammenacoil sodanig het selve laast in haare magt gevallen en thans is, [...], nadat door d' Comp: alle het geen haar Edele toebehoorend is, vandaan vervoert, en het vredens contract behoorlijk van bijde sijde geratificeert en geteekent sal weesen, mids dat dan ook den heer theuver gehouden blijft tot de terug gaave van alle het geene dat van d' Comp: onder sijn magt vervallen is geraakt.¹⁵¹

Soon after its arrival on the Coromandel Coast the VOC turned its eyes to Rameshvaram for its strategic value controlling the channel between Ceylon and mainland India. Up till 1746 a shaky alliance with its protectors alternated with the warnings from neighbouring kings and monarchs prevented any expeditions from happening. Whereas in the 17th century one Portuguese fortress after another fell to the Company's amphibious assaults and naval bombardments, no such operation disturbed the island's priests or temples. The merchants were aware of the importance that the shrines held to the people in the region, as appears from their internal communications. They knew that an attack would cause an uproar from southernmost Cape Comorin to Negapatam (now Nagapattinam).

Despite the knowledge, Stein van Gollenesse and his council decided that an attack was the best course of action to stop the incessant smuggling, especially that by the sinister Maraikkayar clan, undermining the monopolies. Maybe the governor needed a success to wash away the bitter defeat against new strongman Travancore from when he was commander of

¹⁵¹ NA VOC 2666, 2341-2342; translation: That on the other hand the Company will restitute the fortress of Pamban and the whole island of Rameshvaram to the Setupati as it used to be, [...], after the Company has moved everything which belongs to it from the location, and the peace contract has been properly ratified and signed by both parties, provided that the Setupati returns all the Company's assets that have fallen under his control.

Cochin. Maybe the directors actually thought that their harsh punishments for wrongdoers would convince the surrounding kings of their good intentions. Whatever it was, the stars seemed to align three years after the governor took office: Ramnad's ruler was still a minor without much power, the English and the French were busy making life miserable for each other and there was one king who did not mind an alliance against the young Setupati.

Despite these promising factors, the campaign turned sour after lieutenant Meijlant captured the fortress and captain Andrieszoon took over its command. For the umpteenth time the same skeletons came flying out of the Company's military closet. Tropical illness, shortages in supplies and soldiers, an inability to adapt to the opponents' tactics and infighting among the officers complicated an errand which practicability was already questionable at best. The Dutch were fortunate that their adversary was too debilitated to exploit the incompetence, otherwise another Colachel had been possible. Ramnad's willingness to settle the conflict through diplomatic means saved the merchants from an impending fiasco after which the situation returned quickly to its prior state.

Here I get to some kind of answer to my underlying question: what does the military conflict between the VOC and Ramnad in 1746 reveal about India's balance of power at the dawn of British Raj? The Company's inability to clear a piece of land spanning less than a hundred square kilometres proved once more their fear or unwillingness to spend too much of their yearly revenues on anything not business-related. An attitude that had worked to some extent from the 1680s to the 1730s when the organisation was the strongest European trading company of the subcontinent. After that however it was only a matter of time before other more dynamic powers who from the middle of 18th century had the capacity and who saw the necessity to invest more in their armed forces would fly past the Dutch, and in turn the minor players who depended on the merchants to some extent, like Ramnad. If he had seen the state of affairs in India, Coen would surely have been spinning in his grave.

The VOC finally got possession of the Rameshvaram channel in 1767 as the condition for another alliance with Ramnad, this time against Muhammad Ali, ruler of the Carnatic and Madurai at the time. They agreed to let the then Setupati share in their pearl-fishing operations while he retained the right of free passage in the channel for himself. It was a case of too little too late as the agreements did not protect either of them against the might of the EIC's sepoy armies. The Dutch managed to keep their independence a little longer than their former partners and rivals, but they too would kick the bucket before 1800. With their mutual demise the tale of the merchant-warrior and the bandit-king came to an end as well; its legacy lost for about two-hundred years in the vastness of time, and by happy chance in the vastness of the Company's archives.

Bibliography

Primary sources

Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), number entry 1.04.02, inventory number 2666; *Overgekomen brieven en papieren uit Indië aan de Heren XVII en de kamer Amsterdam; 1747; Tiende boek: Ceylon, vijfde deel. Folio 2053 tot 2354: Een bondel met translaat brieven en andere papieren onder een apart register alle spreekende van den theuverheer en de expeditie tegens denselven.*

Literature

Andaya, Leonard, 'De militaire alliantie tussen de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie en de Buginezen' in: Gerrit Knaap and Ger Teitler (eds.), *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tussen oorlog en diplomatie* (2002) 283-307.

Bayly, Susan, *Saints, goddesses and kings. Muslims and Christians in South Indian society 1700-1900* (Cambridge 1989).

Bes, Lennart, 'The Setupatis, the Dutch, and other bandits in eighteenth-century Ramnad (South India)' in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 44.4 (2001) 540-574.

Cooper, Randolph G. S., *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India* (Cambridge 2003).

De Iongh, D., *Het krijgswezen onder de Oostindische compagnie* (The Hague 1950).

De Lannoy, Mark, *The Kulasekhara Perumals of Travancore. History and State Formation in Travancore from 1671 to 1758* (Leiden 1997).

- //, 'The Trials of Captain Hackert and engineer Andries Leslorant at the Malabar Council of War' in: Jos Gommans and Om Prakash (eds.), *Circumambulations in South Asian History. Essays in Honour of Dirk H.A. Kolff* (2003) 105-116.
- Emmer, Piet and Jos Gommans, *Rijk aan de rand van de wereld. De geschiedenis van Nederland overzee 1600-1800* (Amsterdam 2012).
- Gommans, Jos and Dirk Kolff, 'Introduction', in: Jos Gommans and Dirk Kolff (eds.), *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia: 1000-1800 AD* (New Delhi 2001) 1-42.
- Howes, Jessica, *The Courts of pre-colonial South India. Material culture and kingship* (London 2003).
- Knaap, Gerrit; Henk den Heijer and Michiel de Jong, *Oorlogen overzee: militair optreden door compagnie en staat buiten Europa 1595-181* (Amsterdam 2015).
- Narayana Rao, Velcheru; David Shulman and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Symbols of Substance. Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamilnadu* (Oxford 1992).
- Parker, Geoffrey, *The Military Revolution: military innovation and the rise of the West, 1500-1800* (Cambridge 1996).
- Price, Pamela, *Kingship and political practice in colonial India* (Cambridge 1996).
- Raben, Remco, 'Het Aziatisch Legioen. Huurlingen, bondgenoten en reservisten in het geweer voor de Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie' in: Gerrit Knaap and Ger Teitler (eds.), *De Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie tussen oorlog en diplomatie* (2002) 181-207.
- Subrahmanyam, Sanjay and Geoffrey Parker, 'Arms and the Asian. Revisiting European Firearms and their Place in Early Modern Asia' in *Revista de Cultura* 26 (2008) 12-42.
- Thiruvenkatachari, S., *The Setupatis of Ramnad* (Karaikudi 1959).
- Van de Beek, Eric, "Iemand als Coen hoor je niet te eren" in *De Volkskrant* (12-7-2011).

Vink, Markus, 'Images and Ideologies of Dutch South Asian Contact. Cross- Cultural Encounters between the Nayaka State of Madurai and the Dutch East India Company in the Seventeenth Century' in *Itinerario* 21.2 (1997) 82-123.

Winius, George and Markus Vink, *The Merchant-Warrior Pacified. The VOC (The Dutch East India Company) and its Changing Political Economy in India* (Delhi 1991).