

Colonial Pragmatism and Religious Assimilation: Dutch Conversion Strategies and their Social Consequences in Jaffna

Dinosha Sujindar

Department of History, University of Jaffna, Sri Lanka
dinosha@univ.jfn.ac.lk

Introduction

The seventeenth century marked a decisive transformation in northern Sri Lanka, particularly in Jaffna, where the Dutch East India Company (VOC) consolidated its authority following the defeat of the Portuguese in 1658. Unlike the Portuguese, who had pursued Catholic evangelization with uncompromising zeal destroying temples, prohibiting Hindu rituals, and enforcing mass baptisms the Dutch adopted a more calculated and pragmatic religious policy. As a trading corporation primarily driven by commercial imperatives, the VOC could ill afford to destabilize local society through excessive religious coercion (Arasaratnam, 1996). Nevertheless, the Company recognized religion as an essential instrument of colonial rule: a means of legitimizing governance, consolidating authority, and eroding the entrenched Catholic influence of the Portuguese era (Indrapala, 2005).

This study examines the dual character of Dutch religious policy in Jaffna: the promotion of Calvinist Christianity as the official faith, and the pragmatic accommodation of local customs and economic necessities. It argues that the resulting tensions between ideology and expediency shaped the contours of Dutch religious assimilation. While the Dutch succeeded in altering aspects of Jaffna's socio-religious landscape, their policies ultimately produced only a partial transformation, leaving significant continuities within indigenous and Catholic traditions.

A study on Dutch conversion strategies and their social consequences in Jaffna, primary sources are considerably important, as they provide immediate evidence from the period of Dutch rule, 1658–1796. The records available from VOC archives (Dutch Documents), in the form of Memoir, letters, reports, instruction and church documents, indicate how the Dutch used religion as an instrument of administration and control. Missionary records, baptism registers, and school reports show how conversion was interwoven with education and social status. The court records, petitions, and local Tamil documents detail the ways in which the people of Jaffna reacted sometimes

resisting, sometimes adapting to the religious policies of the Dutch. These sources are also necessary because they represent both colonial motives and the local experiences that lie behind religious change. The study of the true nature of Dutch pragmatism and its enduring impact on Jaffna society would not have been possible without such original materials.

Objectives of the Study

1. To critically examine the strategies employed by the Dutch in advancing religious conversion in Jaffna from 1658 onwards.

This objective seeks to analyze the policies, methods, and mechanisms adopted by the Dutch authorities and the Reformed Church, highlighting both the continuities with and departures from earlier Portuguese Catholic initiatives.

2. To investigate the intersection between Calvinist missionary aspirations and the administrative imperatives of the VOC.

Here the focus lies on exploring how spiritual objectives were shaped, constrained, or redirected by the economic, political, and governance priorities of the Company in a colonial context.

3. To assess the long-term repercussions of these conversion strategies on Hindu society, the persistence of Catholic traditions, and the formation of Protestant communities. This involves evaluating how Dutch religious interventions reconfigured local social structures, influenced inter-religious dynamics, and contributed to the emergence of distinct religious identities in northern Sri Lanka.

4. To position Jaffna within broader comparative frameworks of European evangelization in South Asia.

This objective situates the Jaffna case alongside parallel experiences of missionary activity in regions such as coastal India and Ceylon under Portuguese and later European powers, allowing for a nuanced understanding of commonalities and divergences in colonial evangelization.

Methodology

The study adopts a descriptive-analytical approach grounded in historiography and archival analysis. Given the historical nature of the research, qualitative methods provide the flexibility and depth required to examine complex administrative structures, policies, and their socio-cultural implications over time. This approach allows the integration of primary archival documents with secondary scholarly interpretations to construct a coherent narrative of Religious Assimilation and Colonial Pragmatism: Dutch Strategies of Conversion and Their Social Impact in Jaffna. The foundation of interpretivism, why this study Implemented This Specific Research Framework, because “Understanding individuals’ subjective meanings and experiences within their social context is the main goal of the interpretivist paradigm, a sociological research

approach” (Nickerson, 2024). This is central to the interpretivist paradigm, and this study adopts that framework to analyse how the people of Jaffna perceived, negotiated, and responded to Dutch conversion strategies during the colonial period. Interpretivism, a social sciences approach, critiques positivism with a subjective perspective, focusing on in-depth variables and factors related to context. It acknowledges human differences from physical phenomena and emphasizes the need for social sciences research to distinguish it from natural sciences research, aiming for rich insights rather than universal laws (Chhachhar, 2023). Interpretivism, a social sciences approach, critiques positivism by prioritizing a subjective perspective that examines in-depth variables and context-specific factors. It recognizes that human behavior cannot be studied in the same way as physical phenomena and therefore emphasizes the need for social sciences research to be distinguished from natural sciences. Interpretivism is the idea that reality is socially constructed, subjective, and multifaceted. In other words, we can only comprehend a person’s reality by means of their experience of it, which may differ from another person’s due to the influence of their social or historical background.

This specific paradigm was implemented in my research because Interpretivism relies on the premise that reality is used to identify the Jaffna socially constructed, multifaceted, and subjective. Consequently, this style of intensive research involves creating theories or generalizations based on certain observational facts. The creation of a theory is the aim of inductive research techniques. Modernization theory, which studies social evolution and society development, is considered unsatisfactory due to its Western bias, capitalist ideologies, and social Darwinism. It lacks understanding of socio - economic development, economic sustainability, political freedoms, and social emancipation. The logic of classical modernization theory is unsophisticated and erroneous, making it a strong case for its extinction and deserving no further attention (Goorha , 2017). Classical modernization theory has been widely criticized for its failure to engage with the complex realities of social change. It offers an oversimplified, linear model of development that overlooks essential dimensions such as socio-economic development, economic sustainability, political freedoms, and social emancipation. By assuming that all societies inevitably progress toward a single, Western-defined notion of modernity, the theory disregards variations in historical experience, cultural context, and structural inequalities.

Research Finding and Discussion

The Dutch colonial religious policy in Jaffna was a strategic blend of evangelical zeal and pragmatic governance, reflecting the complex dynamics of religious transformation during the 17th century. Under the administration of the Dutch East India Company

(VOC), the GovernorGeneral and the Council of India recognized the entrenched influence of Roman Catholicism from the Portuguese era. This necessitated a cautious approach to the propagation of the Reformed faith, aiming not for immediate mass conversion but for a long-term program of structured religious education.

Minister Philippus Baldaeus, serving in Jaffna from 1658 to 1665, was instrumental in this strategy. He identified children as pivotal agents of sustainable religious transformation. Baldaeus emphasized compulsory schooling, catechism training, and the nurturing of Christian identity from an early age. This approach marked a deliberate departure from Portuguese methods, which primarily relied on adult baptisms without sustained pedagogical reinforcement. Baldaeus's efforts led to the establishment of academies in Jaffna in 1690 and Colombo in 1696, serving as centers for both education and religious propagation.

The Dutch policy also sought to prevent relapse into indigenous practices by embedding Christian belief within the next generation. This was achieved through the regulation of church attendance, prohibition of forced marriages, and efforts to reunite separated spouses, thereby linking religious reform with social governance. Local officials, such as Majorals, Taljuors, and schoolmasters, played a crucial role in monitoring compliance, collecting fines, and reporting transgressions, effectively embedding ecclesiastical policy within the structures of everyday administration. *(Instructions from the Governor - General and Council of India to the Governor of Ceylon, 1656 to 1665. To which is appended the memoir by Anthony Paviljoen, Commandeur of Jaffnapatam, to his Successor, in 1665., Sophia Pieters (tr), 1908).*

Financial considerations also influenced the implementation of these policies. While the Dutch authorities endorsed schoolmasters and church repairs, they sought to minimize Company expenditure by funding these initiatives through locally levied fines. This system reflects the dual imperative of religious instruction and fiscal prudence within the VOC's broader administrative framework.

Ultimately, the Dutch approach to religious assimilation in Jaffna was neither purely coercive nor wholly voluntary. It represented a negotiated process: compulsory schooling, catechism, and the policing of ritual practices were balanced by allowances for local resistance, gradualism in adult conversion, and financial decentralization. This policy reflects a distinctive blend of theological principle and colonial pragmatism, aiming to secure the long-term establishment of the Reformed Church without provoking widespread opposition.

Conclusion

The Dutch religious policy in Jaffna emerges as a calculated form of colonial social engineering, in which religion functioned as both a spiritual mission and a mechanism of governance. By shifting their focus from adult conversion to the systematic education of children, the Dutch constructed a generational strategy that sought to embed Protestant orthodoxy as a cultural foundation rather than as a superficial imposition. This approach reflected the belief that the durability of the Reformed Church depended not on rapid baptisms but on the gradual cultivation of disciplined Christian communities.

In practice, this policy transformed children into instruments of colonial conversion, positioned at the heart of ecclesiastical reform. Through catechism, schooling, and ritual participation, they were molded into the bearers of a new religious identity, while their parents were indirectly compelled to cooperate with colonial objectives. The regulation of marriage, church attendance, and ritual practice further demonstrates how religion was deeply intertwined with administrative authority, extending VOC control into the intimate and moral spheres of Jaffna society.

At the same time, the reliance on fines, community monitoring, and local officials illustrates the pragmatic constraints of colonial governance. Religious reform was implemented with fiscal caution and administrative delegation, ensuring that the cost of Protestantization was borne by local society rather than the Company's treasury. By embedding religious policy within everyday governance and financial structures, the Dutch blurred the boundaries between faith and authority, reinforcing their rule through both divine and bureaucratic legitimacy.

The Dutch Reformed Church in Jaffna was not simply a matter of theology but a carefully orchestrated project of cultural transformation. The focus on youth, the policing of ritual practices, and the integration of religion with social regulation demonstrate how the VOC sought to reshape Jaffna's spiritual and social order in accordance with both Christian orthodoxy and colonial pragmatism.

References

- Arasaratnam, S. (1996). *Ceylon and the Dutch, 1600–1800: External influences and internal change in early modern Sri Lanka*. Variorum.
- Baldaeus, P. (1672). *A true and exact description of the great island of Ceylon*. The Ceylon Historical Journal, Colombo.
- Chhachhar, A. G. (2023). *Advances in social science research methods: Challenges and perspectives*. Karachi: Academic Press.

Goorha, P. (2017). *Critiques of positivism and contemporary research methodologies in social sciences*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Indrapala, K. (2005). *The evolution of an ethnic identity: The Tamils in Sri Lanka, c. 300 BCE to c. 1200 CE*. M.V. Publications.

Instructions from the Governor - General and Council of India to the Governor of Ceylon, 1656 to 1665. To which is appended the *memoir* by Anthony Paviljoen, Commandeur of Jaffnapatam, to his Successor, in 1665., Sophia Pieters (tr), 1908.

Nickerson, C. (2024). *Innovations in qualitative research: Approaches and applications*. London: Routledge.

Reimers, E. (Trans.). (1932). *Selections from the Dutch records of the Ceylon Government: No. 3. Memoirs of Ryckloff Van Goens, 1663–1675*.

Van Goens, R. (n.d.). *Translation of the memoir of Ryckloff Van Goens for Ryckloff Van Goens the Younger and the Council of Ceylon, dated April 12, 1675*. (Trans).

Van Goens, R. (n.d.). *Translation of the memoir of Ryckloff Van Goens to Jacob Hustaart dated December 26, 1663*. (Trans).

Zwaardecroon, H. (1911). *Memoir of Hendrick Zwaardecroon, Commandeur of Jaffnapatam, 1697, for the guidance of the Council of Jaffnapatam during his absence at the coast of Malabar* (S. Pieters, Trans.). Colombo.