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Hinduism in Jaffna during the Period of Dutch Rule:

A Historical Perspective

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As the other regions of Sri Lanka, Jaffna also has a long and distinct historical tradition. Historical researchers show that several aspects of Hinduism prevailed in Sri Lanka before the introduction of Buddhism as the state religion. But it is notable that Hinduism continued to prevail in Sri Lanka in some form or other with or without state patronage. Besides other facts the conquest of Northern Sri Lanka especially by Aryacakravarti a great army commander of Brahmin descent of the Pandyan emperor in Tamil Nadu resulted in the formation of a Tamil kingdom with its seat of power in Jaffna in the later half of the 13th century A.D. The period of this new king and his successors lasted for about 350 years. Hinduism flourished with new vigour under the patronage of these kings. Later the Portuguese gradually tried to establish their power here but they succeeded in 1619. The whole area was annexed to the growing Portuguese maritime provinces of Sri Lanka. They continued their way till 1658 when the Dutch another European power conquered their territories including Jaffna. The Portuguese were not tolerant towards other religions or cultures. They tried to destroy the centres of Hinduism especially the temple and tried to propagate their religion – Christianity (Catholicism). The Dutch who came after them also followed the same policy of intolerance to other religions till 17th century. But following the liberal developments in Europe like religious toleration etc, they allowed the people of other religions including Hinduism of practice their religion in public. They were allowed to renovate or rebuild old temples destroyed earlier or build new temples also. People who practiced their religion in secret had now begun to practice it in public. A Tamil Nadu (saivite) literature which included poems and prose work was written with notable enthusiasm. People became aware of their great religious and cultural tradition. A Hindu saivite renaissance had started by this time. This renaissance blossomed forth in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

In this article wish to point out the crisis that Hinduism faced during the first period of half of the Dutch rule, the religious toleration that the Dutch granted in the later period the subsequent changes and developments that took place in Hinduism here (Jaffna). I have used as primary sources for this article the Dutch documents, archaeological and other historical materials. I have utilized as secondary sources, the relevant researches, other books, articles in the journal, magazines and internet based the primary sources.

Key words: Policy of destruction of Arts, Protestant Christianity, Hinduism, Hindu literature.

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