

Battle of Colachel

The Battle of Colachel was fought between the Kingdom of Travancore and the Dutch East India Company in August 1741. The battle ended in a decisive victory for the Travancore forces, forever ending Dutch colonial ambitions in the Indian subcontinent.

This is considered one of the earliest instances of an organised Asian power overcoming a European army.

This article will give details about the battle of Colachel within the context of the [Civil Services Examination](#).

Events preceding the Battle of Colachel

Early 18th century Kerala was a collection of small kingdoms in perpetual war against each other. It was in the 1730s when the new ruler of Travancore, Marthanda Varma, adopted a policy of expansionism. He conquered several small kingdoms of Malabar which threatened the economic interests of the Dutch East India Company. The reason being Marthanda Varma and his vassals had little interest in honouring the contracts the Dutch had made earlier with the conquered states.

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The Dutch Governor of Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff, visited Kochi and recommended military action to protect Dutch trade in Malabar. A military alliance was made with the neighbours of Travancore such as Kolam, Kochi and Kayamkulam. Van Imhoff used diplomacy as a last-ditch effort to avoid conflict, personally meeting with Marthanda Varma to negotiate peace. In the subsequent meeting, Van Imhoff threatened war if the terms were not met by Travancore. But Marthanda Varma simply laughed off these threats stating that “should the Dutch lose the war he would invade the Netherlands itself one day”. The negotiations broke down eventually with war eventually becoming a reality.

In late 1739, the Dutch army at Malabar declared war on Travancore deploying soldiers from Ceylon. The Dutch army and their allies achieved many victories forcing the Travancore army at Kollam to retreat. The British East India Company (founded on [December 31, 1600](#)), who were concerned about the growing power of Travancore sent 150 of their own men to supplement the Dutch forces

By early December, the Dutch and their allies marched towards Attingal and Varkala. When the Travancore army withdrew to check an invasion by Chanda Sahib of Arcot in the south, the allies achieved further military successes.

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The Dutch wanted to take advantage of this situation, but they were unable to receive reinforcements from Batavia because of logistics problems. In November 1740, the Dutch command in Malabar received two small reinforcements of 105 and 70 soldiers from Ceylon, and launched a second campaign against Travancore, resulting in the battle of Colachel.

Siege of Colachel

On 26 November 1740, the Dutch sent a naval force to Colachel where they proceeded to bombard the town forcing its inhabitants to abandon it. In response, Marthanda Varma sent a force of 2000 to Colachel. By November 29, the Dutch commander van Gollennesse announced a complete blockade of Travancore coast around Colachel. They intended to occupy Colachel with the objective of taking Padmanabhapuram, the Capital of Travancore.

After occupying Colachel, the Dutch started capturing nearby villages and plundered the region between Colachel and Kottar.

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Reinforcements were requested from Sri Lanka and Indonesia, but the authorities in Indonesia had their hands full due to the rebellion by the natives there, but about 300-00 more men from Ceylon did arrive as reinforcements.

Taking advantage of the shortage of Dutch troops, Marthanda Varma launched an offensive to take back Colachel. Using his patrol boats to block any supplies from the sea, Marthanda Varma laid siege to the Colachel, encircling the Dutch with a 1,000 strong army. Despite the advantage in numbers, the Europeans had technological superiority through which they proceeded to inflict casualties on the Travancore army

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Adverse conditions such as rains and floods prevented any inflow of supply the Dutch and their failure in keeping most of the gunpowder dry meant that they could not offer much resistance.

Then on 5 August 1741, a cannonball fired from the Travancore army hit a barrel of gunpowder inside the Dutch garrison which blew up the ammunition store as well as the food stores. Out of ammunition and food, the Dutch were forced to surrender on August 7 (although some historians considered 10 August as the official date of surrender)

Impact of the Battle of Colachel

Although the battle did not immediately end the Travancore-Dutch war it led to a chain of events which eventually led to the end of Dutch trade in Kerala. It did decrease the morale of the Dutch forces as the native chiefs saw that the Dutch force could be defeated. One significant outcome

was that the Dutch prisoners offered their services who proceeded to modernise the Travancore army on European lines. The newly trained Travancore army proved to be devastatingly effective in Marthanda Varma war against other kingdoms of Kerala.

The Travancore military which the Dutch prisoners were was instrumental in modernizing, went on to conquer more than half of the modern state of Kerala, and the Nedumkotta forts De Lannoy had designed, held up the advance of Tipu Sultan's French-trained army during the Third Anglo-Mysore War in 1791 AD till the British East India Company joined the war in support of Travancore.

To know more about the [Third and Fourth Anglo-Mysore Wars](#) visit the linked article

Another direct outcome of the event at Kulachal was the takeover of the black pepper trade by the state of Travancore. This development was to have serious repercussions on the Dutch and the trading world of Kerala at large. In 1753 the Dutch signed the Treaty of Mavelikkara with the Dutch agreeing not to obstruct the Raja's expansion, and in turn, to sell to him arms and ammunition. This marked the beginning of the end of Dutch influence in India.

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