

Rajasinha II (1635-1687) was born at Mahiyangana in 1612. He was the son of King Senerat (1604-35) and Kusumasana Devi (Dona Catherina). Kusumasana Devi was the daughter of Karaliyadde Bandara, who ruled the Kandyan Kingdom from 1552 to 1582. Senerat was the son of Henerathamy, a village headman (gamarala) from Matale. Rajasinha II married from Madura and had one son who succeeded him as Wimaladharmasuriya II. Rajasinha took an aggressive stand against the Portuguese. He invited the Dutch into the island, to help him get rid of the Portuguese. However, the Dutch took over the Portuguese territories and refused to leave. Though Rajasinha II was not able to free the island from Dutch rule, Sri Lankan historians are full of praise for Rajasinha. Dewaraja said that Rajasinha was an outstanding personality. He was the greatest of the Kandyan rulers. He succeeded in preserving the independence of his kingdom and halting the advance of the foreigner. The opposition he maintained toward the Dutch was the last worthwhile resistance shown by Kandy to any European power. K. W. Goonewardena said Rajasinha was an astute and able king.

Arasaratnam said that Rajasinha II was called upon to face singularly difficult circumstances and he faced them with courage and wisdom. His reign of fifty years was of great importance. It was packed with incident and activity. As the ruler of the sole remaining Sinhala state, Rajasinha became the focal point of resistance against foreign rule. He accepted this role courageously and continued to play it till the end of his career. Arasaratnam says Rajasinha II struck terror in the Dutch authorities and forced them to recognize that he was not a spent force but a power to be reckoned with.

Rajasinha II rejected Dutch claims to sovereignty over the coastal areas. He said he was the sole king of Sri Lanka and the Dutch had no legal claim. This made the Dutch position weak. Rajasinha made use of the divided loyalties which this created among the Sinhalese in Dutch controlled territories. In the 1630s, Rajasinha ordered cinnamon peelers to stay six miles away from Galle and sent for the Sinhalese chiefs of the area to explain their conduct in being friendly toward the Dutch. The Dutch on the other hand complained that their subjects were in touch with Rajasinha's men. Arasaratnam says his name worked wonders in all parts of the country as the focal point of opposition to the Dutch. Sinhala soldiers in the Dutch army defected and the Sinhalese dropped their allegiance to the Dutch at the mere mention of Rajasinha II's name. The cinnamon peelers abandoned their lands and moved to Kandy when ordered to do so.

Rajasinha was well aware of both his weaknesses and strength against the Dutch. He sometimes ignored their letters and often kept their envoys waiting. When the Dutch sent him a lion as a present, he detained both lion and the person who came with it. He contemptuously referred to the Dutch as "Casta Hollandeza". When the Dutch governor wrote objecting to the insulting term, Rajasinha ignored the letter. On one occasion, Rajasinha kept the Portuguese and Dutch envoys 'dancing about his court, confronting each other' for many months.' Rajasinha planned his war campaigns against the Dutch carefully and struck only when he was sure of success. He showed shrewdness and strategy in selecting targets for attack. When the Dutch took extensive territory in all directions in the 1660s, he waged war and took it all back. Knox called it the greatest war that had happened in his time in Kandy.

Rajasinha II was the last king to lead from the front in war. He was responsible for the victory against the Portuguese at Randenivela (1630) and Gannoruwa (1638). He commanded the troops and was in the thick of the battle. Arasaratnam says Rajasinha had a remarkable grasp of military and strategic problems. Dewaraja says he was one of the earliest Asian kings to see the need for European trained armies led by European officers. He created a separate 'Great guns' unit under the Englishman, Richard Varnham and placed 970 soldiers under him. French officers commanded the army. They trained the Kandyan forces and served Rajasinha II loyally. Rajasinha gave these Europeans privileges denied to his subject.

Rajasinha grew up in a highly Europeanized royal court where they spoke Portuguese and listened to European music which he liked. He was also a good swimmer. He liked hunting and used hawks for the purpose. Knox says he liked horses that were trained to dance but could also appreciate an Arab war steed. He loved dogs and had several. He seems to have maintained a sort of zoo where according to Knox 'he had many strange kinds of birds and beasts' The ruler of Bengal had sent him a rhino, ibexes, horses, dogs and buffalo. The Dutch sent him a cassowary, a Dutch bear and a Persian greyhound.

Educated under Franciscan friars, Rajasinha II could read, write and speak Portuguese fluently. He was familiar with the manners and customs of many European peoples. As a result he could meet foreign ambassadors and 'discuss terms with them without the need for intermediaries and interpreters.' He knew of the French and English interest in the region. He negotiated with the French but imprisoned the crew of two English ships. That is how Knox ended up in Kandy.

Rajasinha had great personal charm, an easy manner and endearing qualities which helped him to win over the loyalty of several Europeans who subsequently took service under him. French Admiral de la Haye arriving in Sri Lanka in 1670 sent his officers to meet the king. They were so taken with him that they pleaded with de La Haye to be allowed to return to Kandy. They took office under Rajasinha II and settled down in Kandy. Three of the ambassadors sent to him by the Dutch, Van den Burg, Draak and Baptista also took office under Rajasinha II. In 1686, when Dutch prisoners were released, a good number chose to stay behind in Kandy. There were also several Englishmen and Portuguese who were happy in his service. Arasaratnam says 'Rajasinha II seems to have had some attraction which drew towards him the loyalties of people from different parts of the world.'

Rajasinha was tolerant towards all religions. Buddhist, Hindus, Muslims enjoyed equal rights. He allowed Portuguese families to settle in Ruvanwella, when the Portuguese left the island. Catholics expelled by the Dutch also settled in the Kandyan Kingdom. The Catholic Church had its headquarters there'.

Dewaraja says Rajasinha II was the most eulogized monarch of the Kandyan Kingdom. Wimalaratne says he was known as 'Rasin Deviyo'. The Sinhala and Pali literature of the period as well as the folklore and folk songs of the time depict him as a popular hero. He is the subject of several writings such as 'Rajasimha sirta,' by Uve Kuda Mohottala, 'Rajasimha Sirita' by Bintenne Sami, 'Maha hatana' by Kirimetiyaawe, 'Parangi Hatana' by Vevaldeniya Mohottala, as well as 'Rajasinha varnanava,' and 'Rajasimha hatana', by unknown poets.

Kandy reached its peak of power during the reign of Rajasingha II. The Kandyan Kingdom in 1638 included Sabaragamuwa, Sath koral and part of Sathara korale with access to Kottiyar, Batticaloa, Chilaw and Kalpitiya ports. Within his kingdom Rajasingha established undisputed authority. He defeated his rival, Vijayapala, who defected to the Portuguese. In 1664 Rajasingha effectively crushed an attempt to assassinate him and put his son on the throne. When this assassination attempt was known the people rallied round the king. Rajasingha II was not the unmitigated tyrant that Knox said he was. Sources such as Mandarapura puwatha and Culavamsa refer to him as a brave warrior and a venerated monarch.

~ www.island.lk ~ By KAMALIKA PIERIS (The writings of T. B. H. Abeysinghe, S. Arasaratnam, C. R. de Silva, L. S. Dewaraja, K. N. O. Dharmadasa, Padma Edirisinghe, K. W. Goonewardena, R. A. L. H. Goonewardana, P.E . Pieris and K. D. G. Wimalaratne were used for this essay.)