

# **Military Geography; A Historical Perspective from Colonial Period of Sri Lanka**

*T.P.G.R.U. De Alvis and P. Jayasingha*

*Department of Geography, University of Colombo. [raveenumsha1999@gmail.com](mailto:raveenumsha1999@gmail.com)*

## **1. Introduction**

Military geography, the study of how geography influences military operations, has been a strategic consideration throughout history. The interplay between geography and military strategy has been a cornerstone of human history. Ancient civilizations like the Greeks utilized terrain advantage to defend against larger forces, while empires like Rome constructed infrastructure to secure their vast domains. In contemporary times, the rugged Afghan landscape continues to pose significant challenges to invading armies, highlighting the enduring impact of geography on warfare. Sri Lanka, a teardrop-shaped island nation in the Indian Ocean, is a prime example of how geography can shape military history. Its unique geographical features, including rugged terrain, dense jungles, and towering mountains, have served as formidable natural defenses against invaders for centuries (Gunasinghe, 2016). Hence, the main objective of the study was to analyze how the geographical location was used for the military security of Sri Lanka during the colonial period and its impact on shaping war activities.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

This research investigates the geostrategic significance of battlegrounds in Sri Lanka during its 443-year colonial period, spanning from the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505 AD to the nation's independence in 1948 AD. By analyzing the unique geographical features of seven key battle sites namely Mulleriya, Balana, Danture, Randeniwela, Gannoruwa, Wellassa, and Matale, this study aims to understand how these landscapes influenced military defense strategies and tactics. Through the investigation of historical records, topographic maps and other secondary data sources, the research explored the interplay between geography and warfare during Sri Lanka's colonial era. Here, a historical study based on descriptive facts from literary sources was presented. By conducting a library survey, relevant historical books and records were consulted to gather primary data. The study investigated historical library bibliographies and works by various authors to explore Sri Lanka's colonial war history. Genealogies and ancient literary sources that provided detailed insights into Sri Lanka's history were also analyzed. The sourced historical facts obtained through the exploration of descriptive facts were analyzed using the 'Reading between line' method through qualitative data analysis methods through content analysis (Burns, 1994). Using above qualitative data analysis methods, analyzed historical accounts to identify the geographical factors that contributed to military victories. By examining the descriptions of battlefields and the tactics employed, were able to discern the importance of terrain and natural features. Finally created hypothetical maps that illustrate the geographical context of the battles to visualize these historical events. These maps helped understand how forces were deployed, lines of communication were established, and strategic advantages were exploited.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

During Sri Lanka's colonial period, the unique geographical features of Giri Durga (mountain fortress), Jala Durga (water fortress), Vana Durga (forest fortress), and Panka Durga (cave fortress) played pivotal roles in shaping military strategies and outcomes (De Silva, 1981). These locations were central to battles named Mulleriya, Danture, Balana, Randeniwela, Gannoruwa, Uva Wellassa, and Matale.

The Danture battle, which took place during the Kandy Kingdom, exemplifies how geography can be a decisive factor in warfare. The Portuguese forces, attempting to isolate the Sinhalese army, exploited the narrow valley's terrain (Koonuwagama, 2018). By blocking the roads on

both sides, they effectively trapped the Sinhalese troops in a confined space. The Sinhalese, however, utilized the surrounding highlands to their advantage, launching attacks on the Portuguese from elevated positions (Fig.1). Ultimately, the Portuguese army's strategic positioning and control of the valley led to their victor

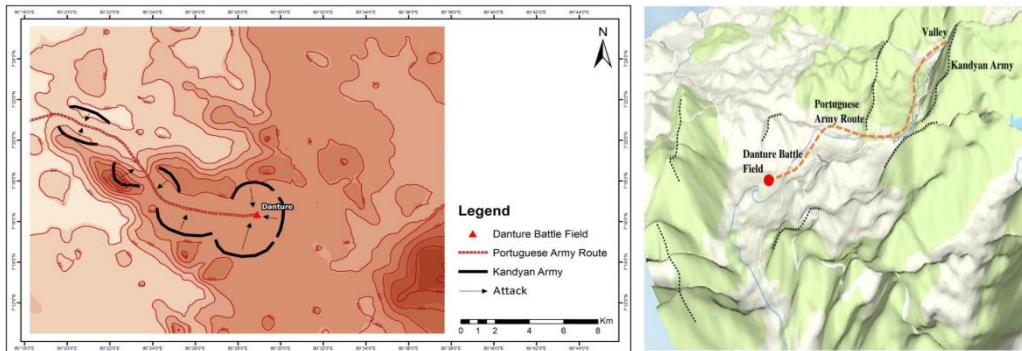


Figure.1: Troop deployment during the Battle of Danture (Created by author based on details from Grenoble and Mahajan, 2006)

The Battle of Balana, also during the Kandy Kingdom, showcases another instance of geography influencing military outcomes. The Sinhalese forces surrounded the Balana fort, creating a circular defensive perimeter on both sides of a narrow valley (Fig.2). This strategic positioning effectively trapped the enemy within the fort, making it difficult for them to escape or receive reinforcements.

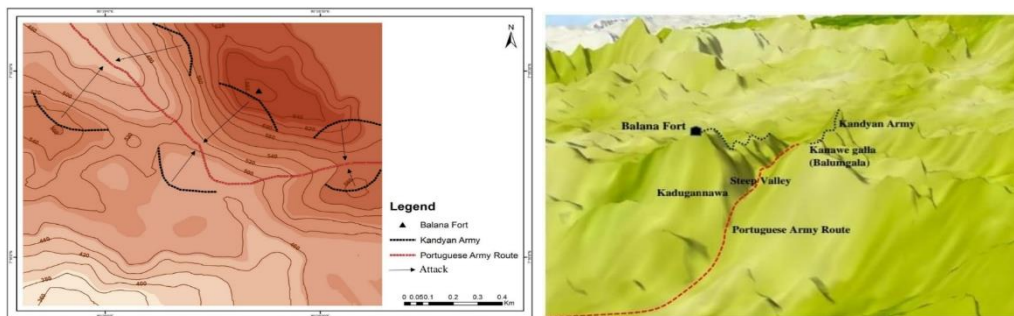


Figure 2: Troop deployment during Battle of Balana (Created by author based on details from Rajawaliya: Suraweera, 1976)

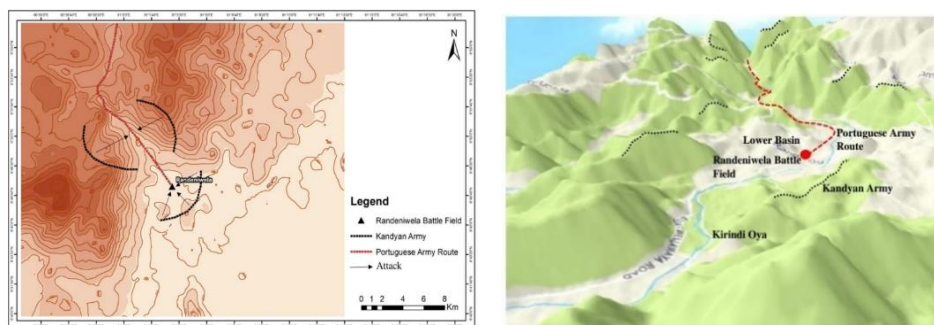


Figure 3: Troop deployment during the Battle of Randeniwela (Created by author based on details from Rajawaliya: Suraweera, 1976)

During the Kandy Kingdom in 1630, the Battle of Randeniwela showcased the strategic advantage of mountainous terrain. The low basin surrounding Randeniwela, encircled by hills, proved to be a natural fortress (De Queiroz, 1930). The Kandyan army, positioned in the highlands, effectively trapped the Portuguese forces in the valley below. The Portuguese were encircled in a crescent shape, their movements restricted by the surrounding mountains. The Kandyan army launched coordinated attacks from three sides, forcing the Portuguese to retreat towards the Badulu Valley and Kirindi Oya (Fig.3). The Kandyan forces employed guerrilla

tactics, utilizing the narrow valley's terrain to their advantage. They cleared trees, dug up the ground, and ambushed the Portuguese forces. As the Maha Vamsa records, arrows rained down from the surrounding hills, creating a veritable cloud over the Portuguese camp. Trapped in the Badulu basin with no escape, the Portuguese army was eventually defeated (Geiger, 1958).

The strategic importance of terrain was evident in subsequent conflicts. During the Uva Wellassa Rebellion of 1818, the British army exploited the geographical characteristics of the Uva basin. Positioned on the surrounding hills, they were able to trap and attack the rebel forces in the valley below. Similarly, in the Battle of Matale in 1840, the British advanced along the Mahaweli River valley while upland troops surrounded and attacked the enemy forces (Powell, 2007). The mountainous terrain on both sides of the valley provided a strategic advantage, allowing the British to weaken the enemy. The Battle of Gannoruwa, fought in 1638, took place in the Mahaweli River region, approximately 500 meters above sea level within the Kandy city limits. Situated near the Gatambe Port of Ganga, the battleground offered a natural advantage with its water gorges, forest ravines, and gorges. The Sinhalese forces strategically deployed on both sides of the Mahaweli River, effectively preventing the Portuguese from crossing and retreating. The following map illustrates how the enemy forces were encircled and attacked, ultimately leading to their defeat (Fig.4). This strategic use of the terrain's geographical features highlight the importance of understanding and exploiting the battlefield's advantages.

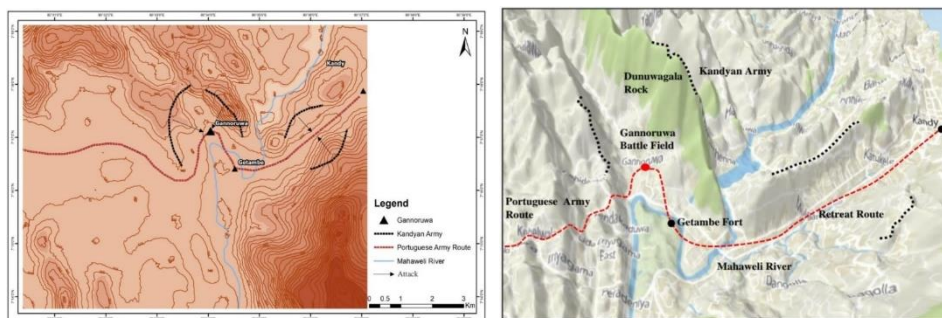


Figure 4: Troop deployment during the Battle of Gannoruwa (Created by author based on details from Rajawaliya: Suraweera, 1976)

The Battle of Mulleriya, fought in 1562, involved a Portuguese army that sailed from Colombo Fort along the Kelani River towards Seetawaka kingdom. Midway, they were ambushed by Seetawaka forces, who trapped and decimated the enemy army in the Mulleriya paddy field (Perera, 2007). The open plains between Mulleriya and Kaduwela proved to be a tactical disadvantage for the Portuguese. Familiar with the terrain, Seetawaka army exploited the open area to launch a surprise attack, overwhelming the Portuguese forces (Fig. 5).

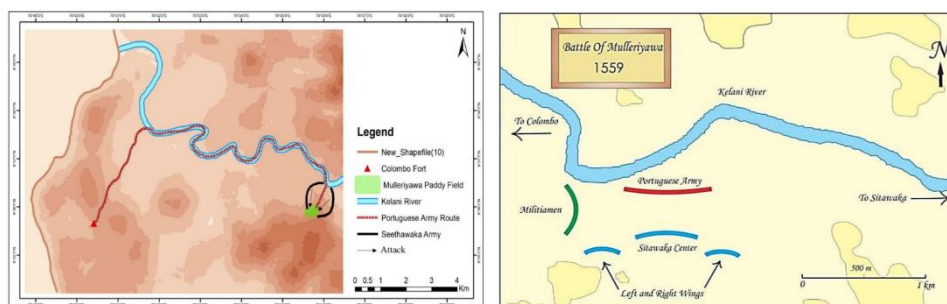


Figure 5: Troop deployment during the Battle of Mulleriyawa (Created by author based on details from 'Kandy fights the Portuguese': Perera, 2007)

This battle demonstrates how the heterogeneity of the battlefield can significantly impact the outcome of a conflict. The Portuguese, unfamiliar with the swampy terrain, were at a distinct disadvantage, further highlighting the importance of understanding the geographical environment. Thus, the contribution of the unique geographical location of the Central Highlands and the natural environment consisting of gorges, water gorges, forest gorges and swampy gorges was immense for the military defense of Sri Lanka during the colonial period. Therefore, it can be investigated based on the results obtained based on the historical sourced evidence uncovered in this study that the geographical phenomena have provided a special contribution in shaping the political independence and military security of Sri Lanka in every war with foreign nations during the colonial period.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Throughout Sri Lankan history, the strategic use of terrain has played a pivotal role in warfare. From the ancient Battles to the more recent conflicts, the ability to exploit the natural landscape has often determined the outcome of battles. In key battles named Mulleriya, Danture, Balana, Randeniwela, Gannoruwa, Uva Wellassa, and Matale, the indigenous forces skilfully utilized the main four types of gorges (Giri Durga, Jala Durga, Vana Durga, and Panka Durga) for defensive purposes. The indigenous forces' effective use of these geographical features contributed significantly to the establishment of political sovereignty and military security. This study confirms the vital role of geography in shaping Sri Lanka's war history.

#### **5. Keywords**

Colonial period, Geographical features, Historical records, Military geography

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