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PENETRATION OF CENTRAL GOVERNMENT AND LOCAL LEVEL POLITICS

BY

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Abstract

This paper discusses the effects of the penetration of the central government activities into two villages in the Wet Zone of Sri Lanka. Parallel to the administrative organization of the state, party politics has also penetrated into the villages. This has resulted in the politicization of the administration and the local organizations. It is also argued that political ideology which is general and abstract plays an insignificant role in village politics.

INTRODUCTION

This paper analyses the way in which the central government has penetrated into two villages in the Wet Zone of Sri Lanka—*Menikgama* and *Kurundugama** and how it has affected their local political structures.

One can see many forms of central government penetration into the village. Two major forms are through the village administration and state-sponsored rural organizations. First, I shall discuss the ways in which the villages are integrated with the wider society. Second, an attempt will be made to analyse how the parallel penetration of party politics into villages has affected the outcome of the central government's influence on village politics and power structure.

THE SETTING

The two villages studied for this paper are in the same ecological zone of the island and are by no means entirely dissimilar. But they differ somewhat in their social composition (notably in caste) and in employment patterns. *Menikgama*, a traditional village, is located in the district of *Kalutara*. The village is about six miles from *Kalutara*, half way between *Kalutara* and *Horana* towns.

In 1971, *Menikgama* had 643 households with a population of 3,322. The villagers are Sinhalese Buddhists. The majority (91%) belongs to the *Goyigama* (cultivator) caste while *Badahala* (patterns) is the other caste group. Though *Menikgama* is only 28 miles from Colombo, its communication networks are poor. Most of land, especially the paddy land, is owned by a few families of the dominant *goyigama* caste.

Kurundugama is in the district of *Galle* in the southern province. *Ambalangoda* is the main town close to the village and is about 12 miles away. In 1971, *Kurundugama*, had 379 households with a population of 1,759. The villagers are Sinhalese Buddhists. There is also a group of Indian Tamil labourers who live in a state-owned estate. I have excluded this group from the study because they are not integrated within the village life. The majority of *Kurundugama* villagers belong to the *Karava* (fishermen) caste (69%). The other main caste groups are *Vahumpura* (Jaggery makers (15%) and *Goyigama* (14%). *Kurundugama is* 64 miles from Colombo, but

* Menikgama and Kurundugama are pseudonyms.

has a regular bus service for the use of daily commuters. The village is predominantly agricultural, but no individual owns more than 5 acres of paddy land. Many labourers work on a large plantation, mainly of rubber and tea, which since, 1974, has been owned by the state.

VILLAGE AS AN ADMINISTRATIVE UNIT

I shall discuss village administration under two periods—

1. Administration under the Headman system
2. Administration under the *Grama Sevaka* system.

VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION UNDER THE HEADMAN

Before 1963, the village was under the administration of a Headman. The whole country was divided into several administrative districts, each of which was under the administration of a Government Agent (GA). The disctrict was further sub-divided into divisions, each administered by a *Mudali* or Chief Headman (the name used for the Chief Headman differed from place to place). Between 1938 and 1946 Chief Headmen were gradually replaced by Divisional Revenue Officers (DRO). Once again these divisions were divided into village Headman Divisions where Village Headman (*Aracci Mahattaya*) served. The village Headman's Division may have consisted of one village or many, depending on the population of the village.

Village Headmen were appointed by ascriptive criteria, e.g. caste, wealth, lineage etc. The GA who was formally responsible for the appointment of the candidate was expected to sound public opinion in the village before the final decision was taken. Although there is no conclusive evidence that the recommendation of the Chief Headman or DRO was the criterion, it is clear that his advice carried weight in the appointment of Headmen (Report of the Headman Commission, 1953:17). The qualities looked for were wealth, membership of the majority caste, lineage and family background.

The nature of the Village Headman's activities gave him considerable power which helped him to get respect and deference from other villagers. He was the sole intermediary between the government and the village. Also for every Department, irrespective of its regional organization, the Village Headman was the important instrument at the village level. The Departments of the central government frequently called conferences of Village Headmen and informed them of their projects and programmes (Warnapala, 1976:344). Internally the main function of the Heandman was to settle disputes. As Warnapala says, the Village Headman had a dual role: (a) "a trouble-shooter in the village and (b) link between the village and administration" (Warnapala, 1974:344).

THE REASONS FOR CHANGE IN 1963

The growth of nationalistic and democratic sentiments resulted in a constant attack on the Headman system which was an important link of both the hierarchical administrative structure and the field administration of colonial times.

Even before Independence in 1948, there was agitation for the total abolition of the Headman system on the grounds that it was 'incorrigibly corrupt' (Report of the Heandman's Commission, 1935:19).

The Headman system was corrupt for many reasons. The Headman had an overall authority in village affairs. His authority increased with the expansion of government activities. He took, decisions in an authoritarian manner. The villagers had no means of complaining against him as he was on good terms with the Chief Headman. The Headmen were non-transferable and generally they were men of importance in their own villages. Therefore he had no fear of misusing his powers.

Because of these abuses two commissions were appointed in 1920 and 1935. Several recommendations of the 1935 Headman Commission were later adopted. After Independence, there was much discussion of reform, but no genuine attempt was taken to reform the institution. With the change of government in 1956, with Mr. S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) coming into power, the agitation for reform received an added impetus and the new government decided not to take new appointments in the category of Village Headmen. The demands for the abolition of the whole system, however, continued. The 1960 *Lanka Sama Samaja Party* (LSSP) election manifesto says,

> "Radical reorganization of the obsolete administration system, starting with Treasury, abolition of the Headman system and the Kachcheri system....." (1960:4).

Ultimately in 1963, the Headman system was abolished with the appointment of a *Grama Sevaka* to replace the Headman.

Another reason for the change was the attempt to reorient the bureaucracy from regulatory towards developmental functions. As Warnapala says (1974;339), the Headman was well suited to the regulatory purposes required by a colonial regime. But he was less well adapted for the bigger role he had to play in carrying out governmental development programmes after Independence. These new duties required an officer who has to work at the village level directly under bureaucratic control.

Since Independence, political leaders accepted that their task was to modernize and develop the backward economy. Agricultural improvement and food production which became important aspects of development placed a tremendous burden on the administration. This led to an expansion in government activities with village development as the focal point. The functions of the village administrator also increased. This also lead to the creation of the *Grama Sevaka* system to avoid unnecessary duplication of 'generalist' functions by each department field office (Leitan, 1979:181).

VILLAGE ADMINISTRATION UNDER *GRAMA SEVAKA*

In order to perform these additional functions and also to avoid reinforcing 'feudal' structures, *Grama Sevaka* had to become a part of the bureaucracy and recruitment had to be based on universalistic principles. Therefore, educational qualifications became more important than ascriptive factors. The *Grama Sevakas* are usually young, and not necessarily locally born. Candidates for this new service had to pass the Senior School Certificate (which is now equivalent to the General Certificate of Education (Ordinary Level) Examination). The service is transferable. The transfers however, are made within an Assistant Government Agent (AGA) Division. The *Grama Sevaka* works under the AGA.

However, in practice, the *Grama Sevaka* system does not function exactly as planned. Politicization of the administration is evident. Although selection is

supposedly based on universalistic principles today, political influence also counts. Politicization of the administration goes further than appointments. It even affects the actions of the *Grama Sevaka* after he is appointed.

The *Grama Sevaka* differs in many aspects from the former Headman. First, he does not have the moral authority to carry out the internal dispute settlement function. The disputes are settled among the relative groups and if not, the police or relevant officers will be called. At this stage, the *Grama Sevaka* may intervene to help the officers to carry out an inquiry.

Secondly, the switch over to the *Grama Sevaka* system has been accompanied by an expansion of the admnistrative system, an increase in the division of labour and in the density of administration. After the emergence of many government officers at the village level, *Grams Sevaka's* 'general' functions have been narrowed, and some of the new technical officers such as the Rural Development Officer (RDO) may carry more authority than he.

In spite of the formal narrowing of specialist officers, he, still often, plays a key role, if only, because the other officers do not perform their functions properly. They hardly visit the village and have very little direct interactions with the villagers. The lack of participation by officers and their non-acquaintanceship with the villagers, mean that the *Grama Sevaka* does still play an intermediary role in much the same way as the old Headman was formally required to do.

However, the *Grama Sevaka* does not receive the same respect as the Headman formally received. For villagers, he is an outsider come to their village to work as a government officer. They approach him only for official matters. The Headman was not an officer, but also their leader.

HIGHER ECHELONS AND THEIR VILLAGE BRANCHES

The penetration of the government can also be seen in the rural organizations which are controlled from the centre.

VILLAGE COUNCIL

The Village Committee, known as the Village Council (VC) was started in the latter half of the 19th century. The VC functioned under an Act of Parliament, namely the Village Council Ordinance No. 15, of 1965. Each Council consisted of 13 members elected on the basis of adult franchise. The election was fought on party lines, similar to the elections of Members of Parliament.

The average area which was demarcated for a VC was about 45 square miles; a population of about 18,209 approximately (De Silva 1978;95). The VC was part of the machinery of government. They were under the political and administrative control of the Minister in charge of Local Government. Their powers were generally exercised through the Department of Local Government in charge of a Commissioner who had Asst. Commissioners in all administrative districts to supervise the work of VCs. The present United National Party UNP Government abolished the VCs. and instead *Gramodaya Mandalayas* were formed (this took place after my fieldwork in 1978).

RURAL DEVELOPMENT SOCIETY

The shift towards development oriented administration began to emerge even before the end of the colonial era. This can be seen from the forming of RDSs in 1941.

Since 1977, the RDSs have gained in importance because of the abolition of other institutions such as the Agricultural Productivity Committee (APC) and the Cultivation Committee (CC). The new structure allows every 100 household to have a society which can mean several societies in large villages. Any village level government officer can be elected to the committee, but he will not have voting rights.

CULTIVATION COMMITTEE

The Cultivation Committee or CC was established under the Paddy Lands Act No. 1 of 1958. These committees were formed from elected members among paddy cultivators with the prospective tenant beneficiaries being well represented.

The CC took new shape with the implementation of the Agricultural Lands Law No. 42 of 1978, becoming in effect local subordinate organizations of the APCs These new CCs were supposed to consist of ten persons appointed by the Minister of Agriculture and Lands. The main functions of the committee were to collect taxes and to give letters of recommendations to farmers to get government loans and crop insurance from the Cooperative Society or from the Rural Bank.

AGRICULTURAL PRODUCTIVITY COMMITTEE

APCs were established under the Agricultural Productivity Law No. 2 of 1972 within the area of a VC. A Committee consisted of no more than 10 members appointed by the Minister of Agriculture and Lands in consultation with the MP of the area. The Minister also appointed one person from among the ten members as the Chairman of the Committee. The term of office of a member was three years. However, the Minister had the power to remove from office any member of the committee. The APCs were responsible for performing several functions (see De Silva 1978:89).

No sooner had the UNP come into power (1977) than the CCs and APCs were abolished and instead a cultivation officer was apointed (Also Agrarian Services Committees were formed under the Agrarian Services Act No. 58 of 1979).

PARTY ORGANIZATION AND INTRA-VILLAGE POLITICS

One of the things which intensifies the politicization of the administration, is the fact that parallel to the administrative organization of the state, there are also party organizations which remify down to the village level.

Party politics is deeply rooted in the villages, though unfortunately no written evidence is available to give an accurate picture of the history of these organizations in the villages. *Menikgama* villagers were not certain when the United National Party (UNP) society was first formed. In 1967 there had been a UNP Women's Society, which did not last long. Therefore, one can assume that a branch society would have been there before 1967. However, there was only one UNP society (branch), till 1973, when it was reorganized. Today, one can see three UNP societies–Branch society, Youth Society and Women's society.

The SLFP society in *Menikgama* was first formed on the eve of the March 1960 general elections. The SLFP society was similarly reorganized in 1973. For the first time in the village history, in 1977 a society of the Trotskyite LSSP was also formed.

Kurundugama has a long history (about 25 years) of party orgnizations. The UNP society was originated in 1956 and today there are two societies-Branch and Women's society. As in *Menikgama,* the SLFP society, came into being in March 1960, general elections. But before the SLFP society was formed, there was a LSSP society, showing the greater influence of left politics in the village. Today in both villages the most active parties are UNP and SLFP. Many villagers identify themselves with these two parties.

VILLAGE POLITICS

These party organizations are responsible for the deep penetrations of party politics into the village. This penetration is further revealed in rural institutions, specially in the VC where elections for membership were fought on party lines. In both villages, for more than 25 years VC elections were fought on different political party lines. Therefore party competition is not just a national phenomenon, but is also a village phenomenon. Kearney makes this clear,

> "within the first decade of Independence, party competition spread rapidly to the VC elections as well. In the last dozen years local elections have been dominated by clashes between candidates of the major national parties. Alliances & fronts created for parliamentary elections have often continued to function for local elections" (1973:87).

At the time of my fieldwork, new RDSs were formed and new members were elected I wish to give a short account of the RDSs elections, which will be useful to analyse local politics, although it is, no way similar tc the VC elections since there is no secret ballot. However, even in such elections, politics play a significant role as Robinson argues,

> "Political affiliation is now not only a relevant but often a mandatory component of decisions about village affairs and household matters." (1975:208).

In *Menikgama* six RDSs were formed. The first two went as follows: On 5th of December 1977, the foundation meeting of the RDs (No.1), was held in the village temple. The RDO who was responsible for forming the society came at the proper time in the company of the *Grama Sevaka* and found only a few villagers. As a result the meeting was delayed for about 1 1/2 hours.

The *Grama Sevaka* inaugurated the meeting by introducing the RDO and explaining the purpose of the meeting. Then the RDO addressed the villagers and explained the new RDS structure and the importance of the society for village development. Then he called upon the villagers to nominate a name for the President *K. D. N. Silva** was unanimously elected and likewise all the other officers.

Then again on 22nd of December 1977, the foundation meeting of the RDS (No.2) was held at the village school. About 90 villagers were present and *Piyadasa* (a village rooted absentee landlord) was one of them. His presence was noticeable and it seemed to have created some kind of uneasiness among some villagers.

*The names of the villagers are fictitious.

When the RDO called upon the villagers to nominate a name for the office of President, *Rupasinghe's* name was immediately suggested and seconded, because of previous canvassing. This was no doubt a blow to *Piyadasa* who expected to become the President. However, he did not say anything but waited patiently. Even for other offices his name was not suggested. But at the end, when the patrons of the society were elected, one member suggested *Piyadasa's* name and all agreed.

In *Kurundugama* there is only one RDS and the foundation meeting was more exciting and intense. In this case one could see two rival groups and the clash was more obvious. The two rival groups consisted of old UNP supporters and the new UNP supporters. The second group made an alliance with the SLFP supporters - former officers of the RDS. For the office of President the former RDS President (SLFP supporter) nominated *Somawathie* (a new UNP supporter) and she was unanimously elected. The strong UNP supporters had their own candidate, but feared to nominate his name because they saw little chance of winning. *Somawathie* had support from her kins, new UNP supporters and SLFP supporters. Then again for Treasurer, a SLFP supporter was nominated and seconded. This was a great blow for the strong UNP supporters. At this stage all of them left the meeting.

The following chart (Chart No. 1) gives one an idea of the socio-economic background of the elected members:

CHART NO. 1

THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC BACKGROUND OF THE ELECTED MEMBERS OF THE RDS

Title of Office	*Political Affiliations*	*Caste*	*Economic Category*
Menikgama RDS (No. 1)			
President	UNP	*Goyigama*	Landlord
Vice-President	,,	,,	Tenant/Labourer
Secretary	,,	,,	Son of a Landlord
Asst. Secretary	,,	,,	Son of a Landlord
Treasurer	SLFP	,,	Landlord
Menikgama RDS (No. II)			
President	UNP	*Goyigama*	Tenant/Labourer later dock yard labourer
Vice-President	,,	*Badahala*	Blue Collar worker
,, ,,	,,	*Goyigama*	Teacher
,, ,,	,,	,,	Agricultural Extension worker
Secretary	,,	,,	Owner cultivator
Treasurer	,,	,,	,, ,,
Patron	,,	,,	Absentee Landlord
Kurundugama RDS			
President	UNP (new supporter)	*Karawa*	Owner cultivator Entrepreneur
Vice-President	UNP (old supporter)	,,	Labourer
Treasurer	SLFP	,,	Manager Co-operative Store
Secretary	UNP (new supporter)	,,	Labourer

The RDS elections bring out many aspects of village politics. The differences in ideology on which party rivalry is supposedly based have little significance in village politics. but to some extent one can see the 'class character' of the parties. The landlords are generally aligned to the UNP and the majority of the poor with the SLFP.

But there is enough shifting of loyalities for it to be more likely for candidates of the governing party to get elected. This was clearly seen from the RDS elections. In all three societies the UNP swept the boards except for two posts, and during the previous government, the RDS had SLFP leadership. This is because of the common belief that to get benefits from outside, the officers should belong to the governing party. This was the reason for *Somawathie* being nominated by the SLFP supporters. They very well knew that the villagers will not want a SLFP candidate as the President. They also did not want the strong UNP candidates to take RDS leadership and their best opinion left was to nominate a floating UNP supporter.

One can also see a tendency for political alliances and allegiances to shift, especially when the dependency is on politicians themselves so that the only useful politician to a follower is the one who is going to be in office. Shifts in affiliations are more common in *Kurundugama* which is more volatile than *Menikgama* which has a more stable system of personal loyalties. This switching of allegiances occurs in response to disillusionment with one party and hopes that the other party would create more jobs and provide more benefits with better policies. Once again this becomes clear in *Kurundugama* RDS elections. New supporters are the people with shifting alliances. The SLFP supporters, cleverly made use of this group in the RDS elections for their own interest. The election of *Somawathie* as the President has created more rivalry between the two groups.

Therefore the RDS does not function smoothly and that is exactly what the SLFP supporters wanted to see.

But however, in *Menikgama* where we find the traditional kind of patronage existing, shifting alliances are less important. The personal loyalities seen in the dependency relationships between landlord and their tenants or labourers, at times even override the importance of political ideologies or shifting alliances. For a tenant or for a labourer benefits come from his landlord. Therefore he has to be loyal to his landlord and support the party that he represents.

We have seen that the UNP/SLFP difference has some overtones of class distinction, but there is also something like a class antagonism emerging in the political parties. This was shown from the *Menikgama* RDS (No. 2) elections, where *Rupasinghe* was elected as President. In *Menikgama* one can find a group within the UNP who are against the traditional UNP leaders. The youths are especially critical of this landlord class. Although they do not openly criticise them, they are critical of their leadership.

These sentiments were catalysed by one villager *Rupasinghe*, through his personal qualities. The atmosphere of hostility towards these leaders helps him to appeal to the people for their support. *Rupasinghe*, who was in unfavourable terms with the traditional leaders, was ideally suited to mobilize these sentiments. He is also a UNP supporter and this helped him to become the President of the RDS, in spite of *Piyadasa's* presence.

Even though *Rupasinghe* was able to capture the presidency, there were obstacles to the development of class alliances because of the competition among the peasants to get maximum benefits from the rich. This became clear at the RDS (No. 2) inaugural meeting, where *Piyadasa* was nominated as the Patron of the society. Although *Rupasihghe* and his supporters did not wish to give *Piyadasa* any office, one member did nominate him as their Patron. Here the opportunity was used by this member to establish good relations with *Piyadasa*.

This reveals the importance of factional rivalry in local politics. There are two types of political factions in the village. In the first type, the factional rivalry and conflict is within the same political party while in the other it is between political parties.

Factional rivalry within the same political party is an important aspect of village politics in *Menikgama* where there are three factional groups within the UNP. The two major factions are built around two competing landlords who are of the same economic level. But the third faction which is more recent is led by *Rupasinghe*, President of the RDS (No. 2). *Rupasinghe* who belongs to the lower income group is able to maintain a set of followers through his influence.

Similarly in *Kurundugama*, two factions within the UNP are evident. The two factions could be identified as old supporters and new supporters of the UNP. Usually several factors such as economic dependency, caste, kin ties, personal characteristics are combined in the formation of factions. But, however, today it is clear that traditional types of economic dependency are no longer a necessary factor. Thus men of little wealth can become factions leaders, though their supporters will be generally equally poor.

In spite of the class antagonisms within and between parties, there are features of stable hierachy in contradiction to the egalitarian ideology of party politics. Factors such as caste, wealth, family background are issues in village politics. This is more evident in *Menikgama* where traditional dependency networks are functioning. The UNP societies in *Menikgama* are all dominated by two landowning families.

Kin ties play a considerable role in village politics. In the elections for the RDS, we saw the importance of political affiliations. Nevertheless kin ties can override political affiliations when the family of *K. D. N. Silva* swept the boards for the committee. His brother was made the Treasurer, inspite of being a SLFP supporter.

These new patrons who exercise their ability to grant employment indirectly, by commanding patronage, rather than directly, by employing villagers on their land or in their own business, have rather the character of brokers, who in a sense mediate between the villagers and the wider world—where the critical figure is the local Member of Parliament (MP). However, these brokers try to command the road out of the village, to monopolize the channels of communication in order to enhance their own importance (See Jayatilake 1982).

Beteille in his analysis of village politics gives a vivid picture of the importance of political parties. Discussing the relation between politics and social structure in the village he rightly says:

(1) "It shows that political parties play an important role in maintaining, or in altering, a given distribution of power within the village, although they may operate mainly from outside.

(2) It shows the relevance of existing cleavages within the structure of the village to the nature of political alignments.

(3) It shows, finally, that although political alignments follow pre-existent cleavages, the relation between political party and social segment is a dynamic one, i.e. subject to change over short periods of time" (1965:181).

In this context the political parties play a significant role in the functioning of patron-client networks. It would not be wrong to say that village politics is predominantly a system of brokerage where political patronage has emerged.

CONCLUSIONS

This discussion has tried to show how the village is integrated with the outside society through the penetration of Central Government in the form of administration and local level organizations. The party organizations which remify down to the village level have politicized these two forms of penetration. But, however, party politics operating in the rural setting tends to acquire a local colour where personal ties become more important than political ideology.

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