

THE HEADMAN SYSTEM IN THE BRITISH ADMINISTRATION OF THE MARITIME PROVINCES OF SRI LANKA, 1796 - 1833

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The nature and extent of local participation in the colonial government of Ceylon (Sri Lanka) is underestimated for several plausible reasons. The focus of attention is usually on the Governor and a handful of Civil Servants of European origin, whose activities, opinions, etc., occupy a prominent place in the records of the period. Besides, before more sophisticated forms of local participation developed through the medium of the English language, with the establishment of legislative councils etc., towards the second half of the nineteenth century, local participation was limited to what the British described as 'the native establishment'. Most of the correspondence between Sri Lankan and European officials, conducted through the medium of the indigenous languages, was considered unimportant, and was subsequently destroyed. Consequently, the source material being limited, subsequent historical writing has been conditioned by the factual knowledge obtained from the records that were preserved, and the angles of vision suggested by them.

This article attempts to examine British policy towards 'the native establishment', its consequences, and the nature and extent of local participation in the administration during the period under review. The most effective means for such participation during this period was what was described as the Headman system. It was a machinery which the British inherited from the Dutch. By the time the British took over the administration the ancient Sinhalese system had undergone several changes designed to suit the political, economic, and administrative requirements of the Portuguese and Dutch rulers. The Portuguese established an European superstructure over a part of the indigenous administrative machinery which they inherited.¹ Thereby they virtually set a pattern for administrative change in the future. It was perhaps a recognition that in a conquered country, which had a well entrenched institutional structure of its own, the socio-economic environment, as well as political necessity, called for a system of indirect rule. During Portuguese times the Sinhalese divisional arrangements were continued virtually unchanged. The Sinhalese districts of the Maritime provinces were divided into Disavanis, the Disavanis into Korales, the Korales into Pattus and the Pattus into numerous village headmen divisions. The Tamil

1. For further details on the Portuguese administrative arrangements see T. B. H. Abeysinghe, *Portuguese rule in Ceylon, 1594-1612*, Colombo, 1966, 69-98.