

# URBAN CHANGE IN SRI LANKA 1946-1981: A REGIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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The study of urbanisation is in effect a study of urban changes. In fact, the study of urbanisation should concern itself with all the processes of urban growth. However, population change is a clear index of these processes essentially because this facilitates comparison (Law, 1967). It is this view this paper particularly addresses. In recent years, there has been an increasing concern for growing urbanisation in the developing countries. While there were sentiments expressed about slowing down this growth, the strategies proposed and implemented in several cases proved either inadequate or inefficient. Urban growth does not seem to provide a respite. On the contrary, it has been on the increase. The present paper addresses the problem of urban change in Sri Lanka within a time frame and also provides for a regional perspective at two levels: the provincial and the district. However, the historical growth process, prior to 1946, is only very briefly described.

Further, the reasons for urbanisation and urban change in Sri Lanka is discussed relative to temporal trends as well as spatial dispersal of urbanisation. The factors responsible for urbanisation, notably the change in census definitions of urban areas in Sri Lanka, are given emphasis. In following up this trend analysis, the paper also discusses

some summary measures of urbanisation, like the population change in urban areas through natural and migration components, degrees and rates of urbanisation and an index of concentration including primacy rates and gini coefficients of concentration. Then, the paper turns to regional dimensions of urbanisation in Sri Lanka, once again using temporal and spatial trends. Finally, the population potential is considered as a measure of regional variations in urbanisation and this is done for three recent census periods 1963, 1971 and 1981.

## Definitions

The definitions of the concept of urban areas in Sri Lanka, is administratively categorised. There are three councils: town councils, urban councils and municipal councils. The village councils are exclusively rural. Census definitions of the urban area have changed over time. In the censuses of 1871 to 1901, the municipal and urban councils were considered as entirely urban. In the year 1901, local boards were created, but these were abolished by 1953 and there were in the years that followed the creation of town councils, whose lower limit of population was 2000.

Abeysekera (1980) suggests that Sri Lanka uses local government areas to define urban populations while

Jones and Selvaratnam (1970) have indicated that there are no definite criteria to guide the Ministry of Local Government in its decision for conferring areas, urban status. But the Department of Town and Country Planning appears to hold the view that ministerial discretion, based on the nature of development, is the basis of the creation of urban areas. When comparing different areas, the basic problem appears to be that there is no consistency in their demographic, occupational, sociological or morphological aspects. This inconsistency resulted, for example, in a total of 56 settlements having more than 5,000 populations, and three with over 10,000 persons, being designated as rural in the year 1971. While on the other hand, some 40 out of 135 localities defined as urban in the same year had fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (Abeysekera, 1980).

The categories of councils were essentially created for internal, administrative purposes. It is normally the village councils that progress into town councils or they are designated as such once they attain certain urban characteristics. This apart, some of the councils have been so named purely on the basis of political clout and lobbying. Hence, in the creation of urban councils, there is no application of a comprehensive set of criteria.

## Historical Background

Historically, Sri Lanka's urbanisation has been influenced upon by colonial development. During colonial rule, Colombo was more important than other cities and towns for commerce and trade. This pre-eminence was partly a result of hinterland support. As Colombo grew in eminence in administrative and commercial activities, other port cities declined in their functional importance. However, during the Portuguese and Dutch occupations, Colombo, Jaffna, Mannar and Batticaloa grew significantly as urban centres. This was essentially a consequence of their location along the coastal region and the development of trade. During the same period, in India coastal urban centres and port cities such as Madras, Vishakapatnam, Calcutta, Goa, Cochin and Bombay also grew significantly. During British rule, plantation agriculture developed, resulting in Colombo being connected with transport corridors from major plantation areas. Thus Colombo became the principal trading centre and the port became the most important import-export point. Consequently, the eastern coastal areas with Batticaloa and the northwest coastal strips, including Chilaw, Puttalam, Kalpitiya and Mannar declined in importance. Transport lines radiating from Colombo into the interior began to be developed. Hence, highway towns and railway junctions came to be developed as towns.

Some areas in the northern plains where irrigation was available grew into cities and towns mainly as a result of historical developments. With the government's efforts at integrated administration, the capital towns of the districts and the provinces also grew (Panditharatne, 1964). After independence, however, the principal port towns declined in growth. In fact, after 1940, the population of port towns declined from 72

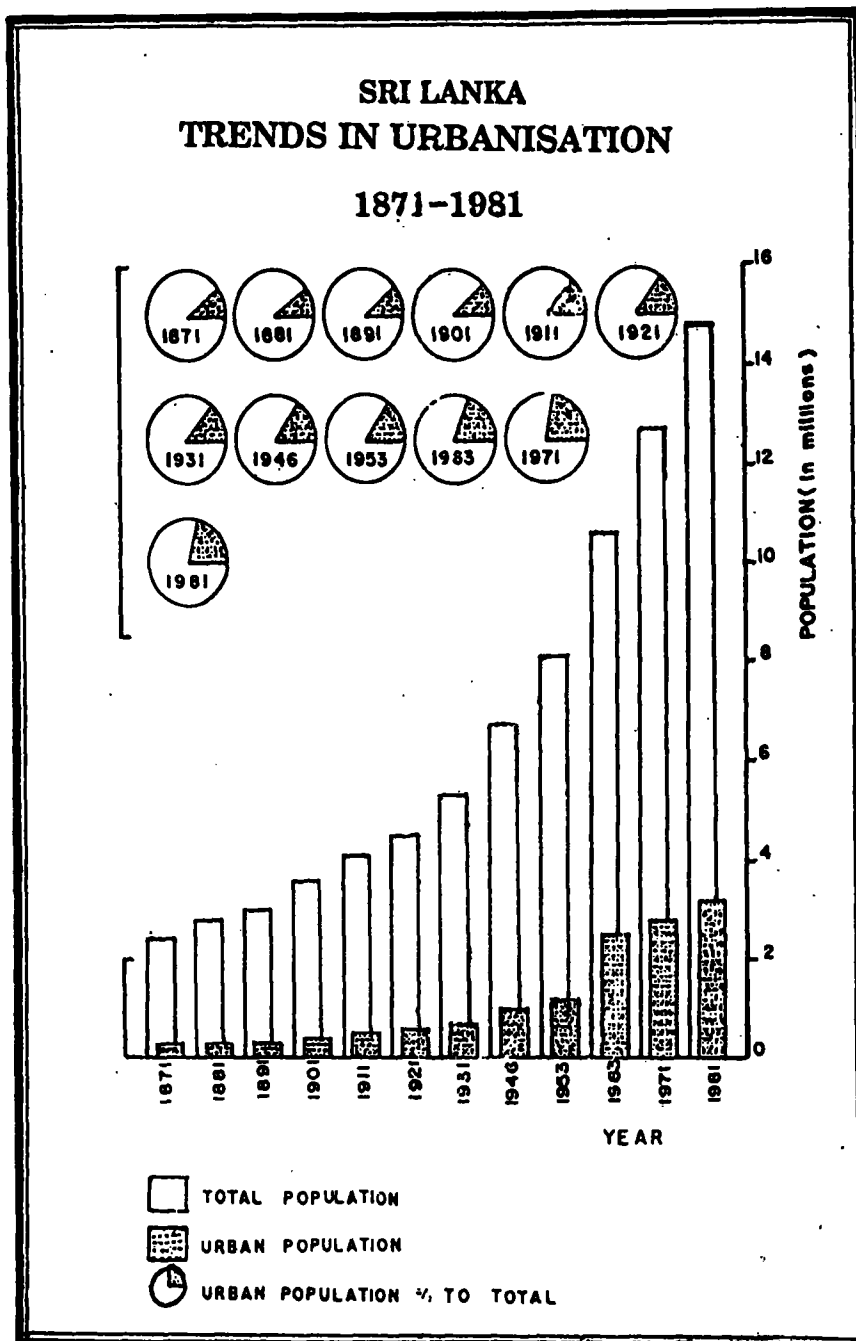


Figure 1

per cent to 53 per cent. In the interior on the other hand the towns grew by population increases.

### Growth of Urban Population

In 1871, the urban content was just about 260,000 of the total population of 2.4 million. In 1946, the population went up to 6.6 million and the urban population was then of the order of 1.06 million. In 1981, the urban content rose to 3.2 million while the total population reached 14.85 million. In percentage terms,

the urban population of 1871 was 10.8 and this increased to 15.4 in 1946 and to 22.4 in 1971. In 1981, however, the urban population was just about 21.5 per cent (Figure-1). During the period 1871-1946, the increase in the total population was of the order of 177.3 percent while that of urban population was of 292.9 percent. During 1946-1981, the increase was 123.1 percent and 212.3 percent respectively of total and urban population.

As for the number of urban settlements, there were only 19 in the year

1871 and only one urban centre was added in the following census. However, between 1891 and 1901 there was a spectacular increase of 8 towns making a total of 28. This number at the following census rose to 36, an addition of another 8 towns. The period of small increase in the number of urban places are the years between 1911 and 1953. The 1963 census reported a far remarkable number of 99 towns. This however was the result of a reclassification of urban areas. As such, merely by the change in the definition, the urban centres became larger in number. This trend continued in the following eight years with, finally, 135 centres having been conferred urban status. In the year 1981, the number had however come down to 134.

With the burgeoning of urban centres, the intercensal periods have shown increases in urban population. In 1881, the 20 towns of that time showed an increase of 7.9 per cent. This percentage increased in 1901 to reach 28.8 per cent and the increase in the following decade was 31.1 per cent. The intercensal increase showed a sudden drop during the decade 1911-21 with 17.5 per cent, which in turn declined further to 15.6 in 1931. This drop can be attributed to prevalence of disease and epidemics. The 1946 census reported once again a high intercensal increase of 38.8 per cent. The most significant increase of all was in the year 1963 as a result of another reclassification which spilled over into the 1971 census as well. The intercensal growth has, however, shown a tremendous decline to reach 12.2 per cent in the last census. This means that the intercensal growth of urban population is erratic and widely fluctuating. There is a parallel fluctuating growth in the intercensal total population which in a sense a corollary to the whims and fancies of those defining urban areas.

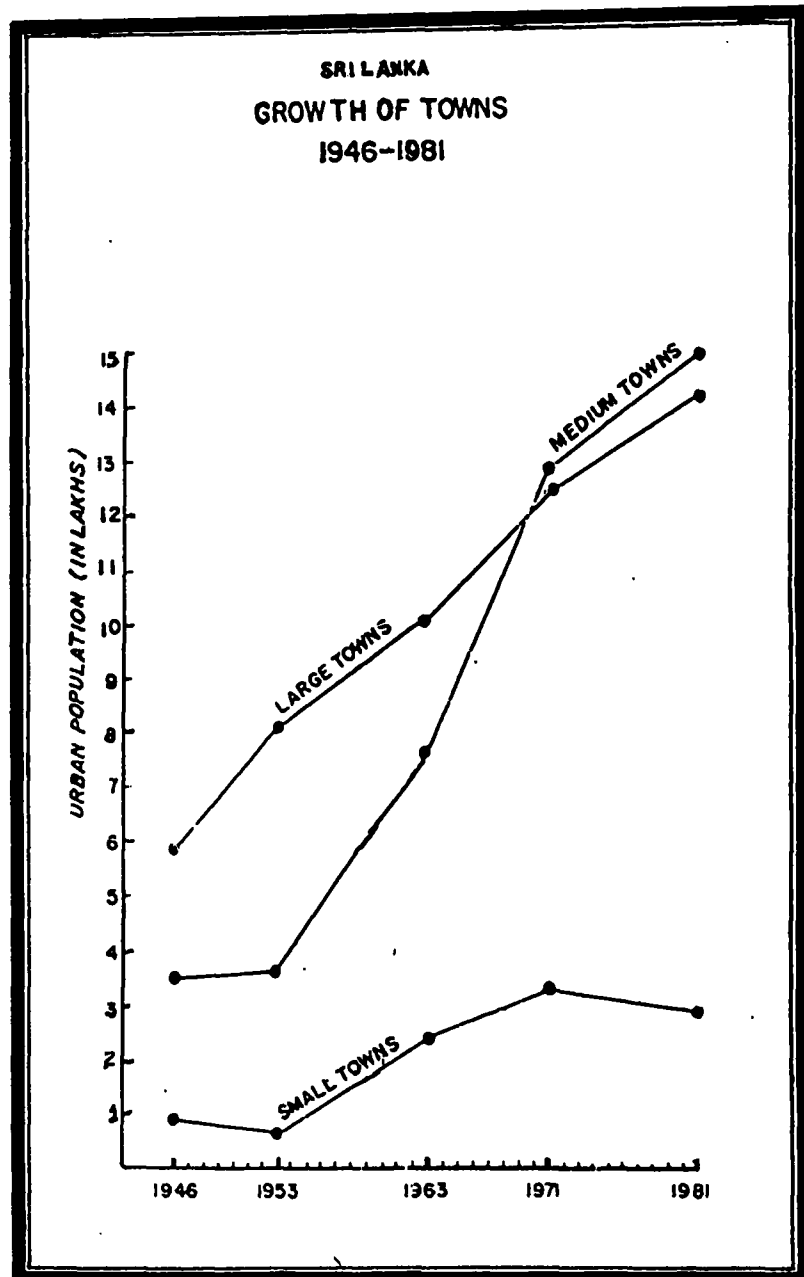


Figure 2

### Demographic and Spatial Analysis of Urban Population

#### Urbanisation

It is quite clear that Sri Lanka, urbanisation was not associated with the process of industrialisation. For since 1946, the rate of urbanisation has been slow. The reason for this slowing has been found in the slow growth of the economy. After independence, with increases in balance of payments, imports became af-

ected. As a result, two distinct characteristics emerged. One commercial development was limited which can be considered as a main determinant of population growth and, two, development of transport was staggered (Jones and Selvaratnam, 1970). At the same time, emphasis on villages and cottage industries as a matter of policy by the governments of the day hindered urbanisation. Industries, whatever they were, emerged at places

where raw materials were available—cement, plywood, caustic soda, paper and ceramics being most important. As such, these industries were away from the existing urban centres.

Also, after 1946, the population dispersals towards the dry zone controlled the movement of population towards towns and cities. In the dry zone, the extent of agricultural land increased from nearly 770,000 hectares in 1946 to about 1 million hectares in 1962. The new rural sector thus became a counter to the established urban sector and attracted the impoverished and the rural landless away from the towns and cities, where the sluggish expansion of economic activities offered only few opportunities. The social welfare programmes of the successive governments resulted more or less in an equitable distribution of facilities like health and education; consumer subsidies and changes in pricing policies (Gunatileke, 1973). This militated, against massive migration to urban places. It is because of these developments that even today, the villages are well served with amenities and therefore, in general, the rural-urban dichotomy is less sharp in Sri Lanka than in many countries in Asia (Jones and Selvaratnam, 1970). It follows from above that the growth of the urban sector largely determined by the development of rural sector.

The trends in urbanisation indicate that the urban population increased ten-fold in the hundred years between 1871 and 1971 while the total population saw only five-fold increase during the same period. In terms of share of urban population to the total, it was 21.5 per cent in the year 1981 which was not very much different from 19.1 per cent in the year 1963, while it was 22.4 per cent in the year 1971. The reason for such differences could be attributed to the fact that the definition of an

urban area has been varying from census to census. Suffice it to say that over the years the urban population increased faster than the total population as can be seen from figure 1 and the accompanying pie diagrams.

Following Second World War, the proportion of urban population grew from 15.4 in 1946 to 21.5 in 1981. During 1963-71, 35 town councils were created purely by ministerial decision, resulting in a higher proportion of urban population in the 1971 census. Hence, the creation of new towns through administrative decisions played a vital role in the process of urbanisation in Sri Lanka (Puvanarajan, 1985).

During 1963-71, the urban population increased by 41 percent compared with the 20 percent increase in the national population. However, when only the areas classified as "urban" in both the 1963 and 1971 census are considered, the population increase in these areas is only 21.3 percent. This clearly indicates that the urban growth during 1963-71 was mainly due to the creation of new urban centres by ministerial decision. Data for 1971-81 suggest that although the size of the urban population increased, its share in percentage terms declined. This unprecedented trend could be attributed not only to a decrease in the number of urban places during the period (one new urban centre was created and two urban places were assigned rural status) but also to faster growth of the rural sector when compared with the urban sector.

#### Growth of Towns

There were four large towns in 1946 with population more than 50,000. This number rose to seven in 1953, eight in 1971 and nine in 1981 (Colombo, Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia, Jaffna, Moratuwa, Kotte, Kandy, Galle, Negombo and

Batteramulla). The share of large towns in 1946 was 8 per cent of the total population and this share increased to 9.7 per cent in 1971 only to become slightly less (9.5 per cent) in 1981. On the other hand, the population of the large towns as a share of urban population was 52 per cent in 1946, 65.3 per cent in 1953 but declined sharply over the years to 49.7 per cent in 1963 and 44.2 per cent in 1981. However, this share in the year 1971 was slightly lower at 43.4 per cent. The share of population of medium and small towns of the total population has been increasing over the years—34.3 per cent in 1953 to 50.3 in 1963 and 55.8 per cent in 1981. Seen in terms of growth by sizes small, medium and large (Figure-2) the populations of small towns have grown slower than that of either large or medium towns. In fact, medium towns tend to show very high increases in population than even the large towns.

#### Indices of Primacy

Primacy means that the size of the first city in a country is disproportionately large in relation to the size of the second city. This index comes closest to measuring the 'super eminence' in size and possibly in influence of a dominant city and the degree of primacy. There is a declining extent of disproportionality in the two-town and four-town indices of primacy over the years between 1946 and 1981. Colombo gets a two-town primacy index of 6.37 in 1946 which declines to 5.45 in 1953, 4.61 in 1963, 3.65 in 1971 and 3.36 in 1981 when compared with the second largest city of Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia. The four-town index also shows a decline for Colombo from 2.13 in 1946 to 1.98 in 1953, 1.81 in 1963, 1.57 in 1971 and 1.37 in 1981 when compared with Dehiwala-Mt. Lavinia (second largest), Jaffna (third largest), and Moratuwa (fourth largest).

The indices are a pointer to the fact that contrary to the common

incidence that the largest town or the primacy town, Colombo in this case, is disproportionately large compared with other towns - the primacy is being scaled down with the passing years. In other words, the share of the primacy town of Colombo is likely to become smaller over the years, giving way to alterations in the hierarchy of towns in the future. The satellite towns around Colombo show this trend most markedly. The city of Colombo indicated an increase of only 4.0 per cent for the period of 1971-81. On the contrary, Dehiwela-Mt.Lavinia showed an increase of 13.0 per cent, Moratuwa 40.0 per cent, Kolonnawa 11.0 per cent, Kotte 10.0 per cent and Maharagama 19.0 per cent.

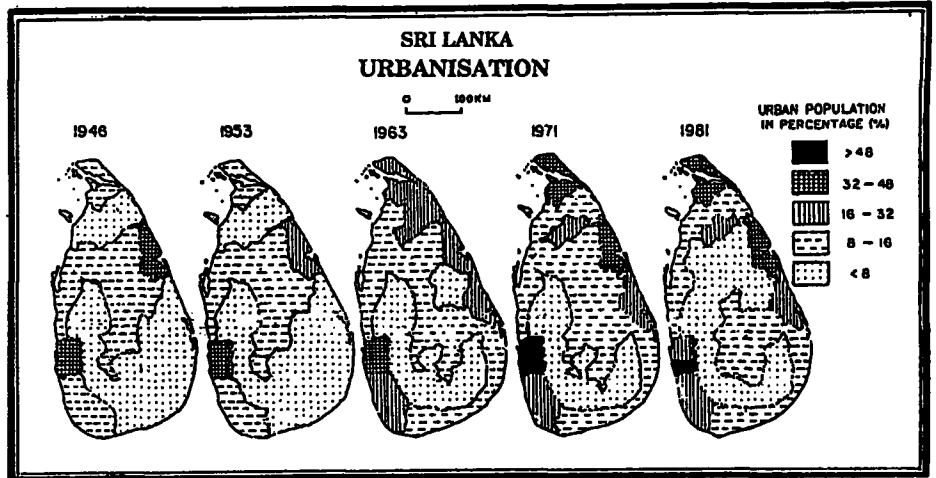


Figure-3

**Gini Coefficients**

The gini concentration ratios computed for the urban areas, grouped into classes for the various years have shown declining trends of about 0.6. The ratio was 0.643 for the year 1946, 0.634 for 1953 and 1963, 0.608 for 1971 and 0.613 in 1981. The declining ratios are indicative of the fact that the urban population is becoming dispersed, although more slowly over the years. But then the gini ratios are also indicative of the fact that the urban population is concentrated in large cities. This is supported, as indicated earlier, by the distribution of urban population in the towns above 50,000, with more than 40 per cent in nine of the towns in the Island in the year 1981. It must be mentioned that this share has been gradually declining since 1953.

**Urban Change: A Regional Analysis**

The urban change in Sri Lanka may be looked at also from the provincial and district levels. The general trend is that, at the provincial level, there was an increase in urbanisation through the years 1946 to 1981. However, except in the case

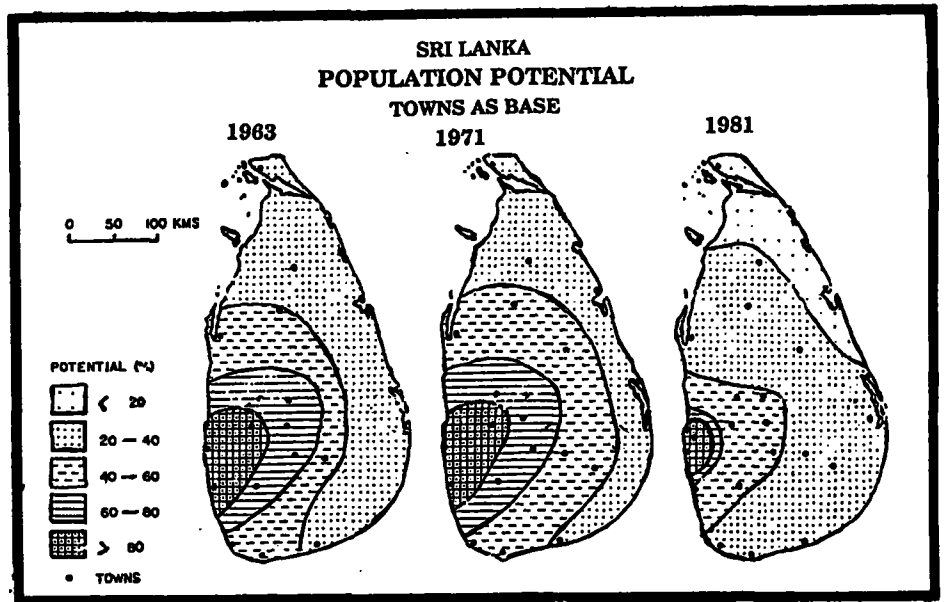


Figure-4

of the Central and Sabaragamuva provinces, the degree of urbanisation in 1971 was higher than that in 1981. That is, in seven of the nine provinces, the urbanisation has shown clear cut increases until 1971, but in 1981 the ratio fell, slightly in some (Western, Southern, North-Western) and significantly in others. The increase in the degree of urbanisation is a result of increases in population, both natural and through migration, but more so by migration. On the other hand, the Wet

Zone provinces such as the Western, Central and the Southern have shown a decline in the urban population to the total urban population in the country. The share of the urban population in South-West Quadrant in national urban population was accounted for 80.9 per cent in 1946 which decreased to 74.1 per cent in 1981. While the North Western Province has more or less maintained its share over the years, the other five have increased their share of the national urban population. Also,

while the Western, Northern and Eastern provinces have also had urban content of more than 12 per cent of the total (Eastern province in 1953) and as much as 48 per cent (Western province in 1971) as the maximum, the rest of the provinces have always had a lower share, a low of 2.6 per cent (Sabaragamuva) in 1946 and a high of 15.3 (Southern province) in 1971.

In 1946, there were two districts (Colombo and Trincomalee) with more than 20 per cent urban population. The position remained the same in 1953, only to change by 1963 when there were six districts with an urban population above 20 per cent to the total. Kalutara, Galle, Batticaloa and Jaffna were the four additions. In the year 1971 Vavuniya became the seventh. In 1981, however, the district of Vavuniya returned to its 1963 status, again making the total number of districts with more than 20 per cent urban content six. This may be attributed to the creation of a new district of Mullaitivu, by carving out sections of Vavuniya.

During 1946-53, there was a 21.4 per cent increase of the urban population in the country, nine districts had higher than national average rates-Nuwara-Eliya, Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, Badulla/Moneragala, Kurunegala and Ratnapura inclusive. Only Trincomalee showed a decrease. The following decade 1953-63 witnessed the most rapid increase in urban population, amounting to 63 per cent. Rates varied from 32 to 347 and many districts experienced record increases in the level of urban populations. During the next 8 years (1963-71), urban places grew from 99 to 135 and the country's urban population increased by 41 per cent, with district rates ranging from nine (Matara) to 163 (Kegalle). During 1971-81 Colombo, Jaffna, Trincomalee, Gampaha, Batticaloa, Kalutara and Galle are the seven districts having an urban popula-

tion more than 20.0 per cent. However, except for Colombo, Nuwara Eliya, Kegalle, Hambantota and Ratnapura, all the other districts showed a decline to varying degrees.

The major reasons for the process of urbanisation during 1946-81 appear to have been (a) the creation of urban places, (b) state sponsored colonisation schemes (in Batticaloa-Ampara and Anuradhapura-Polonnaruwa), (c) state policies of urban development and (d) immigration into urban places. However, owing to categorisation of urban settlement as rural, there has always been an underestimation of levels of urbanisation in Sri Lanka (ESCAP, 1980). Moreover, the prevailing urban outlook in rural areas would suggest that the current proportion of urban population is not an effective measure of the degree of urbanisation.

A series of five maps (**Figure-3**) provides an understanding of the changing urban content in terms of regional units (districts) in the island country. The levels of urbanisation in 1946 was much lower than in the subsequent period. The concentration of urban population along the coasts, both in the West and the North and East, is unmistakably the combined impact of various forces, most notably investment in agriculture and the colonisation schemes in the Dry Zone.

#### **Population Potential in Sri Lanka**

Population potential is a measure of accessibility of the total population. The potential at any given place is found by summing the potential interaction between the given place and all other places. The population potential surfaces therefore can be seen as highly generalised or simplified distribution of population. Using the towns as base, the population potential of the country has been mapped as in **Figure-4**. The potential is at its greatest most un-

derstandably, around Colombo (97.67 per cent) with the gradual decline into the interior, first towards east and then towards east and north. During the past three decades, the potential has undergone perceptible changes mainly owing to the factors affecting urbanisation in the island. For the census years 1963 and 1971, the largest potential was centred at Kalutara district and for the year 1981 it was centred in the Gampaha district (Antony Norbert, 1989). In the year 1963, the potential around the city of Colombo was more widespread than during the next census years of 1971 and 1981. This is perhaps because most economic activities are, close to Colombo although not necessarily in the capital. It is even likely the EPZs, which has in recent years attracted most industrial development to itself has been the cause of such economic potential being concentrated away from Colombo city, while leaving the administrative infrastructure intact. Over the decade 1971-81, only Colombo has shown a decline in potential (-0.06 per cent) while all others have gained, with less than 2.0 per cent over the decade shown by seven towns (Kalutara, Kandy, Galle, Matara, Jaffna, Ratnapura and Kegalle), between 2.0 and 5.0 per cent by a similar number (Matara, Nuwara Eliya, Hambantota, Mannar, Kurunegala, Puttalam and Mullaitivu), between 5.0 and 10.0 per cent by four (Vavuniya, Trincomalee, Anuradhapura and Badulla), between 10.0 and 15.0 per cent by only one town (Polonnaruwa) and over 20.0 per cent by two (Batticaloa and Ampara). The change in potential is a general reflection also of regional forces operative in urbanisation.

#### **Conclusion**

The paper has presented an account of the changing urban scene in the country with a view to provide a gestalt of urbanisation. There has been a process of decentralised urbanisation, although not as a result

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of a deliberate policy. Interestingly, urbanisation in Sri Lanka does not provide support for the theory of the close association ascribed to industrialisation and urbanisation, as in most western models, but certainly provides some support for investment in agriculture and also directed colonisation. But then, the future is likely to be one where industrial expansion would further provide impetus for increased urbanisation.

The share of the urban population is expected to increase from 21.5 per cent in 1981 to 23.2 per cent in 1991. This accelerated urban population growth rate has been induced by the concentration of investment in urban manufacturing industries under the ongoing liberalisation policies in Colombo and its vicinity. High priority should be given for Provincial urban centres to be developed as regional administrative and commercial headquarters of their respective

provinces so as to restrict the migration flows towards the capital city in the future.

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