

# The Intrelationship between Peasants and Officials

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*This article presents the facts borne out of field research conducted in an old Colonization Scheme in the Anuradhapura District*

The Colonization Scheme is based on a Tank. Unlike in other schemes, there is no standard unit of land for each colonist here. There are about 1000 families belonging to different nationalities. The Scheme is divided into two sections—North and South. A majority of the settlers are agriculturists. Yet there are some who engage in trade, in addition to their agricultural pursuits. All the residents have come from outside this area.

The main goal of the research here, was to study the inter-relationships between the government officials, appointed to implement the governments policies and the agriculturists in the Colonization Scheme.

Some sociologists who investigated the Colonization Schemes of Sri Lanka, have studied the socio-economic aspects and the causes of failure of these schemes. Further they have paid attention to certain courses of action which the government should follow in order to achieve its objectives. One such item is the state subsidy scheme for the colonists—financial and otherwise. In addition the state has appointed a set of officials, in order to guide and advise the colonists and create a healthy atmosphere within the colony. These officials hold a strategic position with respect to the Colonization Scheme. But the sociologists referred to above have not devoted sufficient attention to this aspect. All their studies, taken as a totality, have generally dealt with the origin of these colonies, sociological facts leading to their failure and the steps that should be taken to rectify such failures.

Settlers in this Colonization Scheme are agriculturalists who have moved in from other areas. A majority of them are the descendants of those who originally settled in the 1920s. Various officials were appointed to this scheme to attend to the administrative as well as agricultural matters. All these can be categorised into official colonists. This group did not

two, namely 'internal' and 'external' officials. The 'external' officials are the government officers. The 'internal' officers are the office-bearers of Productivity Committees, Cultivation Committees etc. They are selected from amongst the colonists. By this means it was hoped to involve the local agriculturists in their agricultural affairs. The government believed that, since the 'internal' officers knew their problems and needs best, it was beneficial to transfer powers from 'external' to the 'internal' officers. The State thus appointed officials to execute the complex load of work.

Government Officers appointed to a Colonization Scheme are expected to guide and assist the colonists who in turn fix much hope on these officers, to fulfil their expectations. The officers too should perform their duties in such a way that the colonists expectations are fulfilled. Only then will it be possible to establish an inter-relationship between the colonists and the officers. It is necessary to inquire into the extent of this inter-relationship as it exists.

It is after such a healthy inter-relationship is built up that the development of the colonization schemes and the achievement of their objectives can be fulfilled. It is only then that the colonists can utilize the services of these officers. The officials too should well understand the aspirations, living conditions of the colonists and perform their duties in an impartial manner to be of common benefit. In this study certain hypotheses were used in interviewing the colonists. One hypothesis is that 'a close association between the colonists and the officials helps the development of the Colonization Scheme'. Many aspects come to light as a result of this study. 11 of the 45 families interviewed, fell into the category of 'internal officials',—being office bearers of Agricultural Productivity Committees, Cultivation Committees etc. These 'internal' officials had a good relationship with the 'external' government officers and benefitted from their services well. This was seen in the responses of the non-'external' government officials. One

An important aspect of the changing village is the inter-relationships between villagers and government officers. In the previous article a picture of the new emergent leadership of the village was clearly sketched. In the article Susila Ranaweera discusses the relationship between the village leadership and government officers and its resultant socio-economic impact on the entire village. Miss Ranaweera who is a graduate of sociology presents in this article the facts borne out of a field research study conducted in an old Colonization Scheme in the Anuradhapura District.

typical response of this group is as follows:

"These gentlemen (Government Officers) visit the homes of the rich (Colonists) and have meals with them. They keep each others company. They come to our homes only if we call them. Usually they do not chat with us. They are seen walking on the roads, but we do not know where they go. They serve only according to status".

Further, all those who are "internal officials", belong to the landed agricultural and merchant class who are economically better off. It appears that the officer-peasant relationship gets based on the economic status and the better-off colonists receive more service from the government officials, than the poorer colonists. This was implied in the statement of an office-bearer of the Agricultural Productivity Committee. "Those gentlemen (Government Officers) are very nice. After harvesting we present them with rice and vegetables, and give them a grand dinner". The person who said this was more affluent than the others. It is clear that he had a close relationship with the Government Officers. The internal officials get a higher social status due to the office they hold and their economic status too is higher. Due to this status hierarchy it seems that the colonists do not receive a fair service from the 'external' officers. A situation has arisen in this colonization scheme, where the officials using both political and economic pressure attempt to subdue the rest. The officers and the higher level peasant occupy a different social status. Since the rest of the colonists do not receive

a fair service it affects the development of the scheme. The ordinary colonist has no expectations from the officers. He thinks that the Government Officers serve only the better off Colonists. Hence no inter-relationship has grown. An anomaly has arisen in this context as the key elements required to build a inter-relationship, hope and decision, have been discarded by the ordinary colonist.

Many colonists disclosed that, they obtain more water after spending money. An example they quoted was that, during the recent severe drought, another tank was given water, overlooking the Northern area. The peasants observed that since this other tank was a separate one, usually it is supplied only with the excess water after supplying the Northern area. Although some water was later supplied to the Northern area at the insistence of some Colonists there, most of the paddy cultivations there, were destroyed due to lack of water. The colonists further disclosed that when such unfair practices were brought to the notice of the official bodies, the officials protected the miscreants. This is due to their close association. Hence it appears that the officers, richer peasants and the Mudalalis (Merchants) are well inter-related.

Despite this condition, due to the influence of modern ideas the people are more concerned now than before. They are aware that they too have means of action available, when the officials do not look after their responsibilities. Hence the sense of subordination is now thinning away. Out of the 'officer, rich colonist and merchant' combine has arisen a new situation of the clash between the officials and peasants. When they are faced with threats due to unfair official practices, they try to utilize higher pressure and control the officials. An example of such action is when the Colonists petitioned against the Technical Assistant who was responsible for providing water for the outside tank. As a result that officer was transferred out. Although the colonists may be vigilant throughout, any unfair practices hinder the progress of the Colonization Scheme.

Another feature which comes to light through this 'combine' is the existence of class distinctions among Colonists. For the organisations created within the Colony neither representatives of low income colonists nor the tenant-cultivators are appointed. This makes the class distinctions more obvious. It is more apparent here than in other Colonization Schemes as the gap between the haves and have-nots is very wide. As mentioned earlier, there is no uniform unit of land per Colonist. The findings show that an able middle-aged peasant has only half an acre and he is an ande-cultivator (tenant). By contrast, an adjoining Colonist has an extent of several acres. This atmosphere has been very conducive to the growth of the 'Officer-rich Agriculturist, Mudalali' combine. This situation is an obstruction to the development of an inter-relationship between the colonists and officers. Hence it appears that the anticipated objectives of the Colonization programmes cannot be fulfilled and that inegalitarianism among the people gets more and more stabilized. The officers do not apparently provide a fair service for all. Since a rich class of colonists has emerged, the officials often succumb to monetary power. Many instances of lack of fair service came to light. If the officials perform their duties with a dedication towards improvement of the colony, this situation may not arise. A clear example is, the hardship faced by the peasants during the severe drought this year. Since most of the Colonists live on agriculture, they lost their means of livelihood. As a remedy the Department of Social Services commenced a system of drought relief work centres. The Government expected them to engage in such activities as clearing lands, repairs of bunds etc. for which they were entitled to a daily wage which was to be paid to them at the end of each week. The investigations in a section of the southern area disclosed that they were not paid their wages for 4 weeks. On further inquiry as to the causes of the delay it was mentioned that in order to expedite the weekly payment inducements had to be made to various officials in the relevant offices of the area. The peasants said that when no such arrangements were made their

wages were delayed. When they failed to do so they faced this plight. Many peasants, who were questioned as to whether the officials perform their duties well mentioned this situation and retorted that this could not be called fair and just work. The resultant situation is that the distance between the officials and the peasants widens.

With the strengthening of the relationships among the 'Officer-rich Agriculturist and Mudalali' group, many malpractices occur within the Colonization scheme. The services that the Government expects carried out are not performed. Several such instances were revealed from the information supplied by the peasants. The Government agricultural extension services, entrusted the responsibility of distribution of fertilizer to the Cultivation Committees. The Office-bearers distributed it in such a way that it benefitted mainly themselves. The peasants believed that the external officers, though they were under obligation to the internal officers, had no idea as to what fields needed more assistance. This is detrimental to the growth of the colony. A solution will be to appoint members from all social strata, to be internal officials.

More evidence was shown by the peasants to elucidate how malpractices occur within the Colony, due to the alliance of the three groups mentioned. The Government approved monies to be paid to clear the canals and construct culverts in the southern area. But as the construction work was of such poor quality they were destroyed with the oncoming rain, despite the procedure of irrigation officials inspecting and approving the construction prior to making payments. Some more revealing observations of the colonists regarding Government Officers are as follows:—

"They do not speak to us. They walk on the road but we do not know where they are going".

"We have not even seen the so-called C.O. (Colonization Officer), D.L.O. (District Land Officer) and the T.A. (Technical Assistant). We have only seen the K.V.S. (Agricultural Extension Worker). We know that there are officials. But we don't know what they are doing".

Government appoints officials in order to carry out certain functions. When the communication gap between the people and the officials widens, the fulfilment of government's objectives becomes hard and obviously the expected results do not occur. This situation can be overcome. The officials

should have a sound understanding of the plight of the peasants and they should forget their class distinctions and work in close relationship with the peasants with a full understanding of their life-styles. Only then will the official and peasants be able to establish a close relationship and also fulfil the government's expectations.

The sense of helplessness of the colonist indicated in his expression "we have not even seen the higher officials" also shows a clear feature of the bureaucracy. The higher officials do not usually come into contact with the peasants. They do more administrative functions. There are other subordinate village level officials who deal directly with the problems of the colonists. They should establish a good relationship with them if they are to provide a satisfactory service. But the survey data indicated obstacles to such a relationship. Officials invariably cater to the colonists of their own status in the prevalent social system. In order to achieve the government's economic objectives, this sort of 'Special' Officer attitude, should be eradicated.

Another feature which emerged during the study is the patron-client relationship that exists between the officers and the peasants. The patron helps the clients and in turn expects a favour. The peasants occupy a dependent position. "Since the officials guide us, we should help them" is the feeling they have.

If the objectives of the Colonization Schemes are to be achieved the relationship between the officials and peasants should cease to be that of patron-client. They should be partners. None of the past officers had played that role. But the Colonization Officer who assumed duties about 3 years ago received much praise from the colonists. It was revealed that he has acquired a good understanding of the life conditions of the peasants and was not prone to unfair practices.

It can be concluded that for a proper relationship to develop the undermentioned action is needed:—

1. Removal of the 'Officer-rich-Agriculturist-Mudalali' complex.
2. Reduction of the gap between haves and have-nots among the colonists.
3. Selection of internal officials from all strata within the colony (landed and tenant cultivators etc.).

The scholars who have studied Colonization Schemes earlier have not paid attention to this aspect. They have concentrated on social stratification, lack of social cohesion etc. These no doubt are vital factors, but the inter-relationship between the officers and the colonists are also equally important.

The conditions of these Colonization Schemes too have changed since then. One earlier study attributes the lack of success of the Colonization Scheme, to non-adoption of modern technology. In the current study it was found that the colonists have now adapted more and more of new technology. The old negative ideas about application of fertilizer have declined. Only about 1/3 cling on to outmoded practices. In view of all these data it can be concluded that a most vital factor which influences the goal-achievement of the Colonization Schemes is the relationship between Colonists and Officials.