

The Local Government in Ceylon: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

The objective of the article is to explore the local administrative system of Sri Lanka from 4th century BC to 1815 AC through a historical perspective. The history of local administration in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) could be traced to the period of King Pandukabhaya in the 4th Century B.C. During his period the local administration was given a central attention thus he legitimized the city administration. During the Medieval Ceylon the king was the chief of the entire kingdom. The regions were ruled by the closest members of the royal family. The village affairs were conducted by elders of villages through a council of Village Committee. This early proof of the system of local governance in the country is considered a derivative of Indo-Aryan model of local administration. The Country was invaded by western power such as Portuguese, Dutch and British. The Portuguese did not want to introduce Portugal system of administration in Ceylon. The Dutch did not wish to make drastic changes in the sphere of existing native system of local administration. One of the unique features of the Dutch rule in Ceylon was the emphasis drawn to the City administration. Special Ordinances enacted and enforced by them during their tenure seemed to be relevant to city or town administration. Local administration in the Kandyan kingdom was much more complex and magnitude than that of the ancient and the medieval system. The king's authority was fundamental of the central as well as the local administration. The local government system in the kandyan kingdom had been utilized for tax collection, distribution of income, maintenance of irrigation, veterinary services and judicial procedures.

Key Words: Ceylon, Local Government, Local Administration Village Headman, Mahawamsa

01. Local government in the Ancient Ceylon

Before embarking to the main theme of this discussion, it is important for readers to have a definition to local government. Local government is an operation of local affairs at the local levels. *“The jurisdiction of a local government is limited to a specific area. a village, or a city and its functions relate to the provision of civic amenities to the population living within that area”* (Sarma & Sadana 2007, p. 832). Local governments according to Rao (1965) is *“the part of the government which deals mainly with local affairs, administered by authorities subordinate to the state government but elected independently of the state authority by the qualified residents”* (Rao 1965, p. 1).

The history of local administration in Sri Lanka (Ceylon) could be traced to the period of King Pandukabhaya in the 4th Century B.C. According to ‘Mahawamsa’ the great chronicle of Ceylon refers to the reign of king Pandukabhaya who was the designer of ancient city of Anuradhapura, the local administration was given a central attention (Fernando. Edgar 1967.p.1). In inscriptions dating back to 2nd and 3rd Centuries B.C., the rural institutions were known as “Puga’ or “Puka”¹. In inscriptions found in various parts of the

¹ (a) “Pugiyanalenesagasa dine” (the cave that bestowed for Bhikkus) unpublished inscription near Dombagahawela in Uva Province, Dept. of Wild Life.

(b) Madukasaliyapugiyanalenesagasa(the cave bestowed for bhikkus by the village institution named madukasaliya – the inscription found in Ruhunu National park. See Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Ceylon Branch, New series, Vol. ii, part 2, P. 137

(c) ‘ sideviyapukanalenechatudisicasagasa, caratiseJete, KabaranakaAnujete - The cave bestowed by senior Caratise and junior Kabaranaka to Bhikkus coming from four directions – Unpublished inscription near polpitigama in Kurunegala District mentioned in Archeological Survey Report, 1932, p. 2

country, chiefs and deputies of village councils were known as Jetta (chief) and Anujetta (deputy) (see footnotes). Mahawamsa evidences to the excellent town and country planning that displaying highly advanced modern features of engineering. Guruge (1989) makes an assessment to the king Pandukabhaya's contribution to the central as well as the local administration under three main spheres. First among them was "Irrigation' under which Jayavapi, Abhayavapi and Gaminivapi tanks were built. The second sphere was the "Establishment of the city Anuradhapura- a planned city with well laid out public sanitation, health services and institutions and the provisions of a Municipal Administration under a responsible executive." The all utility services were provided by new establishments constituted within the city limits. Thus provisions of those services, king Pandukabhaya displayed his awareness and commitment to preserve the fundamental rights of people in the city and in return to be legitimized the city administration by providing required services for a convenient urban life. .

The authority of the city administration during the night was assigned to a special post called "Nagaraguttika" (night Kingship) (Gurege 1989, p.549). Referring Mahawamsa, Guruge mentions that "to the eldest uncle the abdicated king Abhaya, he entrusted the kingdom during the night along with the guardian of the city."

The social empowerment through a mechanism of devolution of economic power to particular professional groups through "villagization" of production and services was the other striking feature of the king Pandukabhaya's local administration. The name of villages had been referred to the particular artisan groups. 'Waddakagama (village of carpenters), Kumbakarnagama. (village for pottery community), Kewattagama, (village for fisherman), Gopalagama, (village for shepherds/ herdsman), chandalagama (village for garbage cleaners) are instances in this regard. The city administration was fundamental in the reign of the King Pandukabhaya. Mahawamsa evidences that out of five hundred chandalas, 200 were engaged in garbage clearance and 150 were involved in carrying dead bodies out of the city and another 150 provided security services for cemeteries located out of the city limits (Mahawamsa, 91,92).

02. System of Local Administration

The third sphere to which the king Pandukabhaya paid attention was "the institution of the village boundaries for the entire island. For this he had knowledge of the whole island and exercised a measure of influence over different population groups with their own forms of government and power bases." Though the formal system of overseeing village affairs was started in the medieval Ceylon, it is uncontroversial if says that the seed of the Village headman system was laid during the reign of king Pandukabhaya. The chief of a village was known as "Gamika" and he could utilize the service of minor officials. An inscription, which could be traced to the period of the 1st Century A.C. found in Dewamedi Hthpattu, in Kurunegala district in Ceylon, evidenced that the service of a "Badakarika" (treasurer) had been received by gamika (Ellawala, H 1969, p.115). "Badakarika read in inscriptions is believed to be synonymous to the modern post of 'treasurer' or to the position of Undia, whose duty was making lumps money to be handed over to his superior at the Kandyan Kingdom. In some instances 'Pamukas' had often been accomplished duties of 'badakarikas' too. This is an explicit evidence for the sound financial administration maintained at the rural level. The term "Parumakā" comes in inscriptions is read by the great epigraphist Senarath Paranavithana, as synonymous term to 'Pamukā' that was used in Pali for nobles of the society or for the chief either of a group of people or a governing board (Royal Asiatic Society 1936 p.447-48). Also, the name "gāmabōjaka" (Rasavahinie iii, p. 98) was believed to be the synonymous to the village headman.

Though the king was the absolute ruler of the country, the authority of local administration was assigned to the local chieftains considering the difficulties for efficient and effective control of the king centering at one station. The benefits of distance and underdevelopment of transportation and communication was enjoyed by local chieftains with concentrated powers of legislative, executive and judicial spheres. An inscription found in Anuradhapura dating back to the reign of King Mahinda iv (circa A.D. (953-969) who authorized local chieftains to administer the criminal justice within the area of their jurisdiction. Under this authority

they dealt with cases of murder, violence, theft, robbery and other offenders against the community. Affairs performed by these rural institutions were monitored by royal officials during their annual circuits to inquire into the matters pertaining to the local bodies (Ibid). Thus the Top-Down model applied in the local administration in the ancient and medieval periods contributed to strengthening the unified rule in the country. Also it achieved the administrative efficiency of which benefit was to make ruled ready for an emergency within short notice.

The village was respected as an independent local unit and collective responsibility lay upon the inhabitants of the village for the detection of crimes committed within the area. The royal officers in their annual visits to villages had to maintain a code of ethics which made them be prevented from utilizing labors, carts and bullocks for their personal benefits. Cutting trees and making use of common properties for personal utilities of circuit officials were mentioned punishable offences and officers were expected to be committed to follow the rules. Also arresting offenders who entered the village for seeking asylum within the boundaries of the village was not permitted. The significance of these ethical rules was that the imposition of prohibition of corrupt practices over royal officers during their official tours. The pillar inscription of the King Udaya iii, at Badulla mentions that *“the royal officers during their circuits of judicial functions, should not be received items like liquor, meat, curds, gee etc. from villagers as gifts or bribes and in case of violation of such rules, the royal secretary should be informed by the village headman* (Pillar inscription at Badulla).

Villages (Gama) were evolved to cities known “pura.” The village headed by the headman Anurā dhā, later evolved to Anurā dhā’s purā (Anuradhapura) (Guruge W.P .Ananda op cit. 549) Similarly “Pulathisigama (Village of Pulathisi) evolved as pulathisi’spura (Pulathisipura). Mahawamsa (Guruge 1989) mentioned that the Pandukabhaya – the king of Lanka established the Village boundaries over the whole island of Lanka.

03. Local government in the Medieval Ceylon (8TH C – 12th C)

The king (“Raja”) was the chief of the entire kingdom or the whole country. The regions were ruled by the closest members of the royal family who were also used the name “raja” at the end of their positions. For instance ‘Yuwa Raja’ and ‘Pathi Raja’. The village headman was known as ‘Gamika’ or ‘Parumuka’. Epa, Mapa were also members of royal family who ruled three main regions of Ruhunu, Maya and Pihiti.

03.1 Village Committee System – Gamsabha

The village affairs were conducted by elders of villages through a council of Gamsabhawa (Village Committee). This early proof of the system of local governance in the country is considered a derivative of Indo-Aryan model of local administration. It was composed of elders of villagers whose number in a council varied in accordance with the extent of the village territory and the population density. However the number is believed to be in between 5-10. Gamsabhawa was treated independent political entity and hence the central government’s intervention was absent. The venue of meeting was not fixed but was a convenient place either under a tree or in a common place called “Ambā lamā.” The subject matters pertaining to the committee were deliberated and decided by the majority. It involved in affairs of common interest, adjusted civil disputes, and awarded punishments to ordinary offenders against person and property, cases of serious crime were reserved for the consideration of the king himself” (Chocksy Commission Report Para, 2). The way of functioning of Gamsabha was absolutely democratic. The majoritarian consent was taken as the ultimate. Observing the mechanism of functions of a Gamsabhawa’, Fernando wrote that “The matters of common interests were fully discussed by the council and the decisions of the majority were accepted and acted upon by the community without dissent” (Fernando, Edgar 1967, p. 3).

Villages were continued somewhat independent from royal intervention. Yet frequent visits of royal officers monitored the administrative performances carried out by local officers and examined the feedback of villagers with regard to the administrative performances of headmen. The royal officers implemented the

orders of the king, judged cases, collected taxes. Taxes and dues were the main source of the income of the royal treasury. Yet it is reported that the nature of the ancient fiscal policy was a determinant of the commitment of rulers to “Dasarajadhamma”-the ten principles of kingship or mental status of kings. According to the Galpotha inscription dating back to the 12th Century mentions that King Nissankamalla stopped tax collection for five years of term. The king Vijayabahu during his position as a sub or deputy ruler (“Mahadhipada”) was reported that the due tax of the people was paid by his own treasure. During their official visits to villages, offenders or the perpetrators should not be captured within the boundaries of the village and it was being permitted only in the outside of the limits. The unity of the village was maintained by enforcing laws to bring villagers into a common bondage of collective responsibility. For instance, rules had been enacted laying the responsibility upon all villages of producing a murderer at the presence of the royal tribunal and if they were unable to do so all made obliged to be fined. In case of crime or burglary all villagers were obliged to produce the perpetrator to the royal officers. If they failed to do so, a fine of 05 grams of gold (25 Kalans)² had to pay by villagers collectively. Also offenders should not be arrested and punished within the village boundaries, as a honor to the village and it was an accepted custom. The other important evidences with regard to the local administration in the medieval Ceylon are provided by the reign of the king Parakrama Bahu the great (1153-1186 A.D.). Fernando (Edgar, op. cit. p. 4) mentions, that the king Parakrama Bahu the great who unified the country after the king Dutugamunu, appointed chiefs for provinces with the capacity of in charge among other officials who served under him and were given powers and authorities related to military and civil jurisdiction and judicial capacity.

04. Local Administration in the Kandyan Kingdom

Local administration in the Kandyan kingdom was much more complex and magnitude than that of the ancient and the medieval system. The king’s authority continued as fundamental of the central as well as the local administration. The “Adigar” was the next highest position to the king and was above to the position of disawe in the feudal hierarchy of the local administration in the Kandyan Kingdom. The chief Adigar or Mahadigar³ took precedence over all others in the hierarchy of Kandyan chiefs and resided in his castle known as walawwa⁴ - mansion which is situated closer to the royal palace⁵, as his presence in the royalist council was indispensable. Adigar was honored by rewarding a province. For instance, ‘Keppetipola mahadigar’ was the chief of Uva province during the rebellion of 1818. The tenure of the Adigar was uncertain as the position could be held till the pleasure of the king. The position of the Adigar was not a hereditary but dependent on wish and will of the king. Soon the subordinate feel that the king has inflamed with him, he should find protection in a secret place or get ready to confront with the king. The latter was very rare. “When deprived of his disavany and his honors in early 1814, he (KappetipolaAdigar) tried to raise the people of Sabaragamuwa to revolt against the King” (KM de Silva op. cit. P. 23).

The next to the position of Adigar was ‘Disawe’- the chief of the area known as Disawa (district). Disawe was appointed by the king as the chief of a region of disawa /disavani.⁶ The administrative unit of “Disawa” could be defined as an area which was geographically demarcated and administered under a Disawa-the agent of the king. The Kandyan kingdom had been divided into two regions viz. “rata”⁷ and ‘Disa or disawa’.⁸ Dewaraja (1972, p.160) noted that when the British captured the Kandyan kingdom, there were twelve “Disawas. The area of the disawa was subdivided into Korals, and Korala into Patthus, and Patthu into villages (Leitan.Tressi, G.R. (1979, p.1-2). Korals which were subdivisions of disawa, were administered by a royalist officer name Korala or “Ratemaththaya.” They served the king by sending their people to protect the country in case of external invasions or internal threats to the peaceful existence of the

² A traditional unit used in weighing of small items (1 grams = 5 kalans)

³ The number of Adigars increased over the time up to five by the end of the 19th Century

⁴ Walawwa was and is even now the residential place of aristocratic people. Though a mansion belonging to non-aristocratic is not walawwa

⁵ The palace was known as mahawasala or Raja Maligawa

⁶ Province under the administration of a disawe in the Kandyan kingdom. See History of Ceylon, ed. KM de Silva, Univ. of Peradeniya

⁷ It was an administrative area relatively smaller than a disawa

⁸ Disawa was an area analogous to a modern province in extent

throne or in such cases like peoples' uprisings which seemed challenge the maintenance of law and order of the territory. There were seven korals during the reign of Sri Wickrama Rajasinghe- the last king of the Kandyan kingdom. As Silva (2009, p.29) mentions that:

“seven Korals were next to go over to the rebels and soon the whole of the Kandyan provinces with the exception of lower Sabaragamuwa, the Three and Four Korals, Udunuwara and Yatinuwara had joined the resistance movement.”

The Disawe could enjoy all powers except exercising the death penalty which could only be enforced by the king. The people in a disawa were obligatory to serve Disawe on behalf of the king. The Disawe could employ people of his area in related activities of production, distribution, maintenance and security services. The official services of nobles were paid by granting service lands which were known as 'divel' or 'badawadiligam' in the 10th Century.⁹ The involvement of people in production or providing of kind of service had been organized in the manner of forced labor which was compulsory for them to provide for the king who was treated and admired as their protector, savior, guardian and peacemaker.

Under disawe there were three deputies, namely Disawe Mohottala (he was just below a disawe but above the other mohottalas. Attapattu Mohottala, Kodituwakku Mohottala. Vannior or Tamil districts were coordinated by Tamil mohottalas named vanniya under a disawe. A Disawani had been divided into sub areas of Korales which were administered by an officer called Korala. A Korale had been divided into sub areas called Pattu and a chief of a Pattu was called athukorala. Under him there were three main subordinate officers called 'Muhandiram', 'Vidane', Duraya in accordance with their positions of the caste hierarchy. Undiya or Undi Rala (Knox 1681, p.82) was an officer who collected tax for the king.

A Gam Sabha (village council) was not only an institution for village administration but also a conciliation court as it was in the medieval local administration. The villagers and the chief of a village had to facilitate the visit of royal officers providing food, lodging and assisting them in administrative procedures. However, according to the historical records, the local government system in the kandyan kingdom had been utilized for tax collection, distribution of income, maintenance of irrigation, veterinary services and judicial procedures.

05. Local Government Administration under the early Colonial Powers (Portuguese and the Dutch periods: (1505-1798)

The main objective of Portuguese in capturing Maritime Provinces in Ceylon was commerce and trading. The diffusion of Christianity was second and supplementary to the former. The administration of Portuguese was military in nature and it revolved in the authority of Viceroy in Goa. They did not want to introduce Portugal system of administration in Ceylon as done by the British in their colonial administration during the 19th & 20th Centuries, but employed the existing caste system which had also been incorporated by Sinhalese rulers in administering the socio-economic and cultural life of the ruled, in conducting and managing the trade and commercial relations. One particular caste group which was involved in specific production or a service under Portuguese rule was known as Badde (Abeysinghe.Tikiri, op. cit. p. 72). Badde, as Codrington believed was a synonymous term used to introduce a group of caste or the area in which the particular caste group was inhabited or for a due payment to be made to the government (Abeysinghe.Tikiri, op. cit. p. 72), Peiris (1956, p.187) In that sense, a caste group had been reserved for producing a particular goods or provision of specific service under the Portuguese rule. Badda as Abeysinghe explains was a social group (caste) who performed an economic activity as a social bound for rulers. Mahabadde, for instance, was the name for the caste of cinnamon peelers and Kuruwe Badde for elephants captures and tamers, Kottal Badde for smiths and foundry people and kinnarabadde for,mat weavers (Abeysinghe Tikiri, op cit. p. 178). The in-

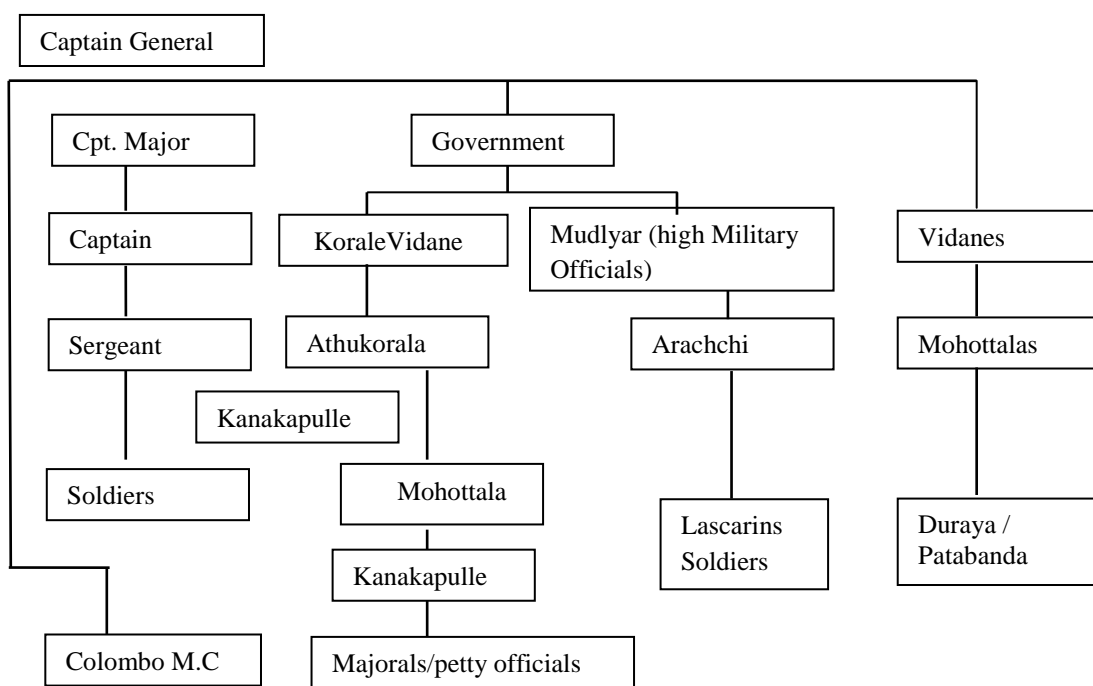
⁹ It was an area of which extent was demarcated by the horizon of the eye sight or the area till where you can hear the sound of a drum or a conch see also Pro. Tikiri Abeysinghe, op cit. p. 101

charge of a Badde was known as “Korale Vidane”. The coordination between householders of particular caste and the Department of “Badde” was done by the minor officer known as “Duraya”.

“Disawe”, the chief of a District even under the Portuguese rule, was played a prominent role in local administration. As Prof. Abeysinghe, (1966), observed, that the Kotte kingdom, at the arrival of Portuguese had divided into four “disawas.” Though their authorities were supervised and monitored by a Portuguese official, they could enjoy a considerable length of powers even under the centralized rule of Portuguese. As de Silva (1972, p.156) mentioned “at the early days of the Portuguese rule, Sinhalese “Disawe” in Kotte kingdom had enjoyed wider-range of powers ranging from powers to land allotments to enforce the death penalty which were not granted even the reigns of Kadyan kings.

He had been empowered authority to appoint all officials subordinate to him and he was the commander in chief of a platoon of “lascarin” of which all soldiers were Sinhalese (Ibid). The Portuguese did not want to make drastic changes to the traditional system of local government but reprocessed the existing caste system with some modifications if they were relevant and beneficial for their trade and commercial purposes.

Table I: The central and local governing System under the Portuguese Rule



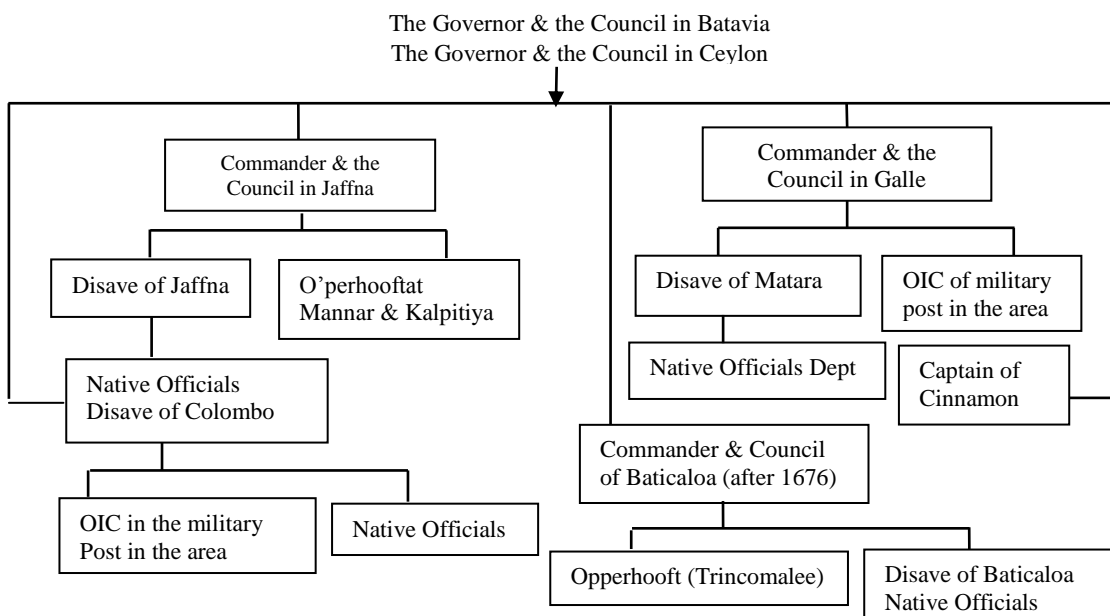
Source: The machinery of Administration in the Kotte Kingdom 1594-1612, Abeysinghe. Tikiri, p. 99

The Dutch as Portuguese did not pay much attention to the local administration unless it was not beneficial for their main objective of trading and commercial activities. Arasaratnam (1988, p.121) wrote, “*their intention was to reap all the benefits that the country had to offer, with the least expenses and with the least disturbance of the social structure.*” Also the Dutch were with an understanding of the soundness of the local administration which was continued even by the Portuguese, in some extent with certain modification. Arasaratnam (Ibid) continued that “*The Dutch, were forced to rely much upon the native chiefs who were the only people with any knowledge of the working of the system of land tenure and other connected problems of administration.(yet), “dependence on native officials was there only to the extent that it was necessary and prudent to do so.”*”

The Dutch following their predecessors experiences and arrangements incorporated the traditional caste system which had been constituted as an effective mechanism of economic and social maintenance in to the Dutch administration. Yet “the key administrative positions were kept in the hand of Dutch officials who delegated the responsibility of mobilizing the people in the villages to the graded native officialdom. Thus the native officials the koralas the majoralas, the Vidanes, and the Aratchchi came as a liaison between the Dutch and the ordinary people” (Ibid 121-122).

The main station of the Dutch rule in Asia was established in Batavia in Indonesia. The whole authority was concentrated in the Governor and the council of Batavia. A similar structure was stationed in Colombo (see table II). The governor and two commanders of Galle and Jaffna stood at the apex of the administrative ladder. The commanders were enjoyed substantial powers and authorities in their respective areas. The governor and the council exercised a supervisory control. Though the central authorities were retained in the hands of the Dutch officials, it was understood that carrying out the local administration was somewhat unaccustomed. The Dutch pouring old wine into new bottle appointed their own men as disaves in respective to each of the three administrative sub-divisions (Colombo, Jaffna and Galle). Deputy disaves were appointed to assist three chiefs Disaves.

Table II The central & Local Administration under the Dutch Rule



Source: Arasaratnam. 1988. Dutch Power in Ceylon. Navarang, New Delhi. p.144.

One of the unique features of the Dutch rule in Ceylon was the emphasis drawn to the City administration. Special Ordinances enacted and enforced by them during their tenure seemed to be relevant to city or town administration. The following ordinances ¹⁰ provide evidences in this regard. It should be noted that during the period of the Dutch rule, no specific arrangements were made in the sphere of local government but a substantial contribution has been made by them to development of an independent judicial system in the country.

1. Ordinance of March 2, 1666 referred against cutting earth and building houses in the street and roads.
2. Ordinance of August 10, 1673 ordered to keep streets clean on pain of a fine of 50 Rix. Dollar

¹⁰ See Sessional Paper xxxiii 1955, (Chocksy Report para, 2)

3. Ordinance of December 17, 1676 ordered all persons having houses in town covered with cadjan to get the same covered with tiles on pain of forfeiting the whole ground, that the street before each houses be kept clean; and that the cattle be driven without the Fort for pasture on pain of punishment and forfeiting of the same.

06. Conclusion

Local government is an operation of local affairs at the local levels. The history of local administration in Ceylon could be traced to the period of King Pandukabhaya. During the King Pandukabhaya the local administration was given a central attention. During the Medieval Ceylon (8TH C – 12th C) the king was the chief of the entire kingdom. The village affairs were conducted by elders of villages through a council of Gamsabhawa (Village Committee). Villages were continued somewhat independent from royal intervention. Yet frequent visits of royal officers monitored the administrative performances carried out by local officers and examined the feedback of villagers with regard to the administrative performances of headmen. Sri Lanka was colonized by Portuguese, Dutch and British. It has found that the Portuguese did not want to introduce Portugal system of administration in Ceylon. The main objective of Portuguese in capturing Maritime Provinces in Ceylon was commerce and trading. One of the unique features could be found in the Dutch rule in Ceylon was the emphasis drawn to the City administration. Local administration in the Kandyan kingdom was much more complex and magnitude than that of the ancient and the medieval system. The king's authority was fundamental of the central as well as the local administration.

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