

The Mudaliyar Class of Ceylon: Its Origins, Advance, and Consolidation*

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BY 1900 the political power and social supremacy of the Sinhalese Mudaliyar class in Ceylon, a group that drew its members from every Sinhalese caste group that succeeding foreign rulers had found useful and worthy of reward and honour, had apparently reached its height. Contemporary accounts of Ceylonese social activities provide ample evidence of the continuing social influence, the wealth, and the westernisation of this ruling class. Their lives were leisured, their tastes and interests very nearly identical with those of the English upper classes in the same period.¹ They accepted their leadership of what was then called 'native society' as a matter of course, having been accustomed to it through several generations of personal and official service to the Crown. Challenge was not looked for, almost unthinkable: yet by 1900 the time-honoured right of the Mudaliyars to the respect and deference of their fellow-subjects (a tradition which, in association with their possession of lands by virtue of their office which had become very nearly hereditary, tended to endow them with aristocratic status) was being challenged from many quarters. Their privileges were regarded with envy, their 'omnipotence', arrogance, and ostentation bitterly complained of, their exclusiveness resented, and their assumptions of antique, aristocratic origins energetically questioned.²

While the claims of the Mudaliyar families to a long and distinguished past history often rest on the entries made in the Parish records or *Thombos* maintained in Dutch times³, the official title of *Mudaliyar* appears, from the evidence available, to date much further back in the island's history. Little is known of the administrative system that prevailed in the Maritime Provinces or low-country prior to the Portuguese invasions of the 16th century. The Provinces were ruled by Sinhalese Kings, and histories of these regions written by Buddhist monks, who were apter to record the history of their faith's diffusion and peaceful glories than to note the mechanics of local administration. Certain factors when considered in association, however, help to build up a composite picture of the administration in pre-European times.

First, there is the system known to have existed in the Kandyan Kingdom of the mountainous interior. This survived, complete in most details, until the time of the British invasion of Kandy in 1815, the mountains that separate the land from the Maritime Provinces having helped to obstruct the free flow of political and social influences from the coastal holdings of the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the British. Although the kingdoms were separately ruled, the systems according to which land was distributed, order maintained, and the dignity and prosperity of the commonwealth guaranteed in the several regions are likely to have been broadly similar. The system of land tenure appears to have been common to the low-country and to the Kandyan Kingdom, according to which all occupied land was divided into allotments liable to contribute towards the King's dignity, service, and protection either by personal service or by payment in kind ; sometimes by the supplying of soldiers with their weapons in time of war. While the Kandyan chiefs had better claims to ancient lineage and a flawless descent than the Sinhalese leaders in the low-country, they occasionally acknowledged a common tradition of royal service⁴ and supported the authority of the Mudaliyars as the repositories of knowledge and experience in administrative matters pertaining to the Kandyan Kingdom as well as to the low-country⁵.

Secondly, it is satisfactorily established that the Portuguese, on assuming control over the Maritime Provinces, did not set out to destroy established systems of administration. On the contrary, they preserved the native institutions, systematically manipulating them to serve the ends of commercial profit and private gain⁶. Allowance having been made for the corruption and peculation that prevailed in most departments of the administration, and for the tyranny and injustice caused by the carrying of the indigenous system of government to its logical conclusion by foreigners and their avaricious officers (both Portuguese and Ceylonese) regardless of custom's restraining influences, it is possible to recognise in the administration of the Maritime Provinces in Portuguese times an outline of its earlier character in the time of the Sinhalese Kings⁷.

The title of *Mudaliyar*, to judge by available evidence, seems originally to have carried military associations, and to have distinguished the leader of a group of fighting men from a particular district who shared common bonds of caste. Such a leader, by the very circumstances of his place in the social structure of his time and country, was necessarily influential in his home area, an able soldier and a resourceful diplomat, accustomed to be first among equals, and would probably have had a long and wellknown tradition of family loyalty to his sovereign. The military duties traditionally carried out by them were continued during the intermittent warfare that marked the period of Portuguese rule in the island⁸.

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The gradual transition of the Mudaliyars from their earlier and traditional status of military officers in charge of native troops to that of administrative officers of power and influence, is likely to have been brought about by a combination of many factors. The evidence suggests that they earned the confidence of their foreign rulers by their loyalty and their skilful diplomacy during the months of internecine warfare ; the Portuguese policy of promoting conversion to Christianity and of encouraging intermarriage between their officers and the daughters of Sinhalese leaders in order to create a loyal, Europe-orientated administration that would relieve the drain on Portugal's human resources⁹ helped to draw these bonds closer. The esteem in which the Mudaliyars were held by their Portuguese rulers can be judged by the terms according to which Colombo was surrendered to the Dutch : 'The natives were to be dealt with at the discretion of the General, though a special condition was inserted that the Mudaliyars, Arachchis and Lascarins were to be treated with favour.'¹⁰ At the close of Portuguese rule in Ceylon, the role of the Mudaliyars was still military in character, but the confidence of their superior officers and the experience they had gained in participating in the administration of what had been, in fact, a military regime, together with their new interests as landlords and cultivators of large tracts of property, are all factors likely to have made them ready for administrative responsibility.

In Dutch times, the Mudaliyars' tradition of loyalty to the sovereign was continued, recognised, and substantially rewarded.¹¹ Ignorant of the native languages and social customs, the Dutch generals appear to have depended greatly on the Sinhalese Mudaliyars, using them as interpreters in the field, relying on their experience and loyalty in dealing with the Kandyan Kingdom in the interior¹², and absorbing impressions of their very considerable influence among the communities whose leaders they were¹³. Officers who had rendered loyal service were honoured with gifts of gold medals and chains, and trusted with responsibility¹⁴. The customary authority of a Mudaliyar was increased in the time of Governor Falck by having added to it the duties of a Korala¹⁵. In the place of salaries, Mudaliyars and other officers received grants of tax-free land, for their accommodation and enjoyment during their term of office,¹⁶ sometimes receiving whole villages in gift as in previous times. Grants of land, honours and titles were given to Ceylonese who promoted the commercial interests of the Company by cultivating cinnamon, coffee, pepper and other cash-crops on the land they were given.¹⁷ Although the offices they held were not hereditary, in practice they gradually appear to have become so, and with them the lands and the privileges they carried. Christian officials were preferred to the higher positions of responsibility by the Dutch, as their loyalty to a Christian government could be presumed to be less in doubt than that of others¹⁸, and so the 18th century appears to have been a period during which the Mudaliyars consolidated their position as a social class, acquired

new sources of wealth firmly based on land-holdings that had come to be hereditary, and enjoyed in increasing degree the confidence and trust of their rulers.

They began, in the Dutch period, to take an active part in the civil administration of the Maritime Provinces, which, although conducted according to the Statutes of Batavia, employed the First Maha Mudaliyar, the Atapattu Mudaliyar, and the Keeper of the Thombos on the *Landraad*, a court of law with jurisdiction over natives of the country in all disputes concerning land, and in matters of contract and debt involving sums exceeding 120 rix-dollars. Working in association with the Dutch Disāva of Colombo, the Fiscal, and one or two members of the Political Service, all Europeans, the Ceylonse officials were there in order to see that all ancient customs were observed.¹⁹ Here were means of building up experience in administrative and legal matters, and the probable origins of the Mudaliyars' special position in later years as authoritative sources of ancient, customary lore. As early as 1740 it can be established that the Mudaliyars were exercising real authority, for any lapse in the efficiency of the Dutch administrators placed real power in the hands of the Ceylonese officials.²⁰ There is also evidence that suggests that the Company had deliberately adopted the policy of replacing the military responsibilities of the Mudaliyars with administrative duties, in order to reduce their power and their local influence.²¹

NOTES

- * This article is based on research carried out during the tenure of the Bartle Frere Memorial Exhibition of Cambridge University, a Leon grant from the University of London, and an International Research Fellowship awarded by the American Association of University Women.
- 1 A source rich in information regarding the wealth and influence of the Mudaliyar families at the end of the 19th century is *Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries, and Resources*, ed. Arnold Wright (London, 1907). Its many photographs illustrate the prevalence of English fashions in dress and leisure-time activities among the Sinhalese upper classes. Lists of wedding-presents published in the time provide evidence of the status of some of these families. One account describes gifts from 'the bride's friends in England, former Governors of the Island, past Judges and distinguished civilians of every rank, archdeacons and clergymen, prominent members of the English aristocracy'. Among the gifts were 'costly articles of jewellery made in Europe, exquisite in workmanship and chaste in design...watches...watch-guards...dressing cases...dinner-services...teasets...portfolios in costly Russian leather...parasol handles in silver, hand-painted screens, riding whips mounted in gold...fans, bicycle 'extras', mirrors set in real china and in old oak,-all expensive, tastefully chosen, and appropriate', as the *Ceylon Observer*, April 12th 1898, put it. Wedding dresses were supplied by Bond Street firms, fir trees for Christmas parties 'got out from England', *Times of Ceylon*, February 23rd. 1905.

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- 2 A pamphlet entitled *Caste and Class. The Aristocracy of the Maritime Provinces of Ceylon* (Colombo 1887), by J. W. P., exemplifies the new spirit of dissatisfaction with the existing institution : ' We are inclined to believe that a Native aristocracy in the Maritime Provinces never existed...the ancientness of antiquity of the aristocracy (?) of the Maritime Provinces is problematical, if not utterly mythical...How the descendants of the Natives who had only about a century ago served the Dutch Government as mudalyars, mohandi-dirams and Arcchies, can claim to form an aristocracy in the present age, we cannot conceive...Our contention is that no native aristocracy had ever existed, or can exist, in the Maritime Provinces. That institution which pretends to be aristocratical is an excrescence of modern date '.
- 3 ' The registering of names in the Thombo-Roll was looked upon as an enrolment in the Herald's Book...The rank, position, status, the very legitimacy of the villager, was involved in the proper filling up of the Register ', E. W. Perera, ' The School Thombo-Holder ', *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, I, 89-93. The office of Thombo-holder and Headmaster was created by the Dutch and combined the task of teaching in the Parish School with the custody of the Parish records. It is worth noting that the Thombo-holder was generally chosen from among the country gentry so that his family's influence should help him in his work ; and it is an interesting fact that the Thombo-holder of the Wolfendahl Church School was created *Maha Mudaliyar* by the Dutch. ' The control of the Register provided a formidable weapon, ready to hand...The School Thombo-Holder knew his power and exercised it ', Perera, *op. cit.*
- 4 and 5. In a letter to Illangakon, Maha Mudaliyar, of 10th July 1812, a Kandyan Adigar, anxious to maintain friendly relations between the Court and the British government in the Maritime Provinces, reminded the low-country official that the Mudaliyars were themselves officers ' belonging to the Great Household of the Great Gate ', Pusvella to Illangakon, quoted Pieris, *Tri Sinhala*, p. 112. Elaborate protocol was observed at the Kandyan court in the 19th century, and when Sir John D'Oyly apologised to the Kandyan Chief Minister for the lack of ceremony with which an embassy had approached the King, Pusvella reminded him that ' the Mudaliyars of ancient lineage to be found in the British territories could enlighten him as to what was proper and what was not ', *ibid.* p. 118.
- 6 Cf. H. W. Codrington, *Short History of Ceylon*, pp. 129-30, and Colvin R. de Silva, *History of the British Occupation*, I, p. 4 (among other, more detailed accounts) for descriptions of the Portuguese administration of the Maritime Provinces. P. E. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Portugals* is rich in detail.
- 7 The following accounts are quoted in extract, in order to provide a clear picture of the administrative system in early European times :
 - (a) Colvin R. de Silva, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2 : The Portuguese possessions in Southern and Western Ceylon were divided into four *disavas* or provinces radiating from Kotte, viz, Seven Korales, Four Korales, Sabaragamuwa, and Matara. In the north they had made themselves masters of the Kingdom of Jaffna ; and on the east coast they held the forts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Subject to the Viceroy of Goa, Portuguese Ceylon was governed by a Captain General, assisted by a Vedor da Fazenda in charge of the revenue, and an Ouvidor or judge. The four provinces were placed under separate *Disavas* with civil, judicial and military jurisdiction over the natives ;...The *disavas* were divided into *Korales* under Korale Vidanes; the *Korales* into *pattus* under Atukorales ; while the villages were in the charge of headmen called mayoraals. The chief military officer, after the Captain-General, was the Captain-Major of the Field. . Besides the land

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revenue and the *marala* or death duty, the revenue was chiefly drawn from the royal monopolies of cinnamon, arecanut, pepper, precious stones, elephants, and the pearl fishery.

- (b) H. W. Codrington, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-50 : With the Portuguese administration, the Sinhalese land system can be seen in all its detail. The village usually consisted of the holdings possessed by the cultivation headmen or mayoraals and the village servants, such as the blacksmiths, potters and the like. These holdings were indivisible, often heritable in the male line only, and liable to escheat to the Crown or to the lord in default of performance or service. The balance of the village was divided among the rest of the population, who paid a share of the produce of their fields. These lands were heritable and alienable, and seem to have descended in the male or female line. In addition in many villages there was the home demesne or the King or lord, cultivated free of cost by certain tenants. The villages in most cases were given to individuals for life or for a term of lives, when the temporary lord enjoyed the produce of the home demesne, was entitled to the services of the people, and received various payments at the hands as well as the share (*otu*)...

The two features of the Sinhalese system, as developed by the 17th century, were firstly the complete merger of the lands paying a share of the crop in the service tenure system, and secondly, the gradual conversion of the great majority of holdings into heritable (*paraveni*) tenure, subject to the performance of services and payment of success on duty and in many cases to considerable limitations in the disposition of the property.

- (c) P. E. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Portugals*, p. 178 : Of the villages...available for distribution, the best were reserved for such of the Portuguese as had specially distinguished themselves in the work of conquest in India and Ceylon, and for native Christians who had served with loyalty in high office. The smaller ones being allotted to the Mudaliyars, Archchis and Lascarins, either as gifts or by way of remuneration for services rendered...grantees who were of Sinhalese nationality were expected to live with their families in the various fortresses along with the Portuguese who had their villages in the neighbourhood.

- 8 Cf. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Portugals*, pp. 37-38 : ' Under the system of land tenure which prevailed in the Island from the earliest times, all occupied lands was divided into *Pangu* or allotments...Some *pangu* would have to supply soldiers with their weapons...When the summons to arms arrived, the cultivator would exchange his plough for the bow...and join the rest of his fellows at the appointed rendezvous. Over each group of 20 or 30...would be an Archchi...To act as Archchi would be the service which his *Panguva* carried with it. The superior officers were known as Mudaliyars.

Each caste among the soldiery would be grouped separately, and no one of a low caste could take command over a man of higher caste'. C. M. Fernando, in *Twentieth Century Impressions*, p. 50, records the association with a Portuguese general, Pedro Lopez de Sousa, of ' the powerful chief called by the Sinhalese Jayasuriya Bandara, with the title Maha Mudaliyar, who joined him with 20,000 native troops ', A Portuguese viceroy found that his decision to torture some of the chief Mudaliyars in order to obtain information regarding the whereabouts of the King's treasures, led to large scale desertion of the Sinhalese fighting men in his army, *ibid.* p. 48.

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- 9 Cf. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Portugals*, pp. 127-8, an account of the meteoric career of Edirille Arachchi, the honoured son of such intermarriage, and of the policy adopted by Albuquerque in general. Cf. also Fernando, *op. cit.*, p. 54, and R. G. Anthonisz, 'The Dutch in Ceylon. Glimpses of Their Lives and Times', *Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register*, I (1915-16) pp. 185-201, with its discussion of the word *tupas*, or *tuppahige*, 'which still occurs as the cognomen of some Sinhalese families, may be supposed to indicate a remote Portuguese paternity'.
- 10 Pieris, *Ceylon and the Portugals*, p. 284.
- 11 Dassanayake, the Mudaliyar of Hapitigam Korale, saved the life of the Dutch General Van Eck during the retreat from Kandy in 1765, and was rewarded by Governor Falck with a medal and chain and allowed 4 drummers as a mark of distinction, cf. Pieris, *Ceylon and the Hollanders*, pp. 77-8. This is one among many similar instances of reciprocal warmth of affect on and respect between the Dutch and their Ceylonese officials.
- 12 On the word of an Interpreter Mudaliyar that a Dutch ambassador to the court of Kandy in 1714 had behaved disrespectfully to the King and to his people, the offender was arrested on his return to Colombo, and an apology conveyed to the Kandyan court, cf. Pieris, *Hollanders*, p. 35.
- 13 Don Joan Ilangakon, who had been banished to the Cape, was recalled after two years at the direction of the Batavian government. According to Pieris, Ilangakon's social position and wealth, which was believed to be immense, gave him much influence, which Van Eck was eager to secure for the Dutch East India Company: 'he therefore appointed him to be Field Maha Mudaliar, hoping that self-interest at least would keep him faithful', *Hollanders*, p. 75. Cf. also S. Arasaratnam, 'The Administrative Organisation of the Dutch East India Company in Ceylon', *The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies*, VIII, 1 & 2 (Jan—Dec, 1965) pp. 7-11.
- 14 Abayasinha, Mudaliyar of the Galle Guard, had come into prominence during the troubled times of Schreuder, who had presented him with an inscribed plate of gold. Very old in 1785, Abayasingha was appointed Maha Mudaliyar by Jacob Van der Graaf, received another medal and chain, and until his death in 1794 'continued to exercise much influence over the Governor', Pieris, *Hollanders*, p. 94. It is worth noting that this official held diplomatic responsibility, for through his hands passed all correspondence with the Ministers of the Court of Kandy. At this death he was accorded the military honours customary to his rank, 16 of the Company's sergeants carrying his coffin to the grave, over which 3 volleys of musketry were fired. Van der Graaf himself accompanied the body of his trusted Maha Mudaliyar to the grave, *Hollanders*, p. 105. On the point of diplomatic responsibility, and the personal advantage to which it was reportedly put by this official, see A. Bertolacci, *A view of the Agricultral, Commercial, Financial Interests of Ceylon* (London 1817) 53, I am indebted to my late father for this reference.
- 15 On this point, cf. de Silva, *op. cit.*, p. 9; Codrington, *op. cit.*, p. 149; Pieris, *Hollanders*, pp. 52-4.
- 16 Ibid. A Maha Mudaliyar received 20 *amunams* of sowing land, a Mudaliyar 12, a Muhandiram 8, an Arachchi 6, and a Vidane 4. The Lascarins and minor officials held service lands.
- 17 In 1769 a medal was promised to the most successful cultivator of cinnamon, and was awarded to Daniel Alwis Samarasinghe, Mudaliyar of the Salpiti Korale, while Vikramasingha of Negombo was presented with a silver sword and created Mudaliyar, cf. Pieris, *Hollanders*, p. 83, Medals and chains were presented to Andris Mendis, Mudaliyar,

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and Dinese de Zoysa, Maha Vidane, of the Maha badda, for their success in directing members of their own (the Salagama) caste in the production of cinnamon ; and also to the Second Maha Mudaliyar, Vijayasekera Abayaratna, who grew cinnamon with great success at Dematagoda, and cultivated pepper and coffee in the Vidane-ships of Kelaniya and Ambatale. The Company's eagerness for profits made available many tracts of excellent land which were obtained by Sinhalese under agreement to plant pepper and cardamoms, and were used in fact for other purposes, *ibid.*, p. 56.

- 18 Cf. S. Arasaratnam, *op. cit.*
- 19 Cf. de Silva, *op. cit.*, p. 10; Pieris, *Hollanders*, p. 3.
- 20 Van Imhoff found in 1740 that the Landraad had ceased to exist except at Matara, where the overburdened Disava tended to delegate decisions on land disputes to his Interpreter or Atapattu Mudaliyar, who ' was the real umpire in these cases ', cf. Pieris, *Hollanders*, p. 51. In wartime it occasionally happened that a junior native official accepted and wielded heavy responsibility, as on 13th January 1796, when the Disava of Matara and his Dutch officials withdrew to Galle, entrusting the Disavan with its records to the Atapattu Mudaliyar, Don David Ilangakon, cf. Pieris, *Hollanders*, p. 109.
- 21 Cf. Pieris, *Hollanders*, pp. 84-5. The civil duties of the Mudaliyars included the transport of timber felled on the Company's account, the repair of school buildings, assisting in the elephant hunts in the Alut Kuru Korale, promoting cultivation of rice and of cash crops, providing hospitality to visiting ambassadors and officials (including clergymen) on circuit, and in wartime they supplied men for carrying ammunition : ' they must now learn that their chief mission in life was to secure dividends for the Company ' (Pieris).

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