

Book Review

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Patrick Peebles, *Social Change in Nineteenth Century Ceylon*, Navrang, New Delhi in collaboration with Lake House Bookshop, Colombo, 1995, 288 pp.

This book, the author points out in his preface, is a “revised version of a doctoral dissertation, the Transformation of a Colonial Elite—the *Mudaliyars* of Nineteenth Century Ceylon,” submitted to the University of Chicago. The title of the original title reflects more accurately the contents of this book than the one given to it by the author.

The strength of the book lies in its exposition of three interconnected themes. First of all, the author shows that on the latter half of the nineteenth century more government land was sold to Sri Lankans than to Europeans (pp 197-230). Secondly, some of the *goyigama Mudaliyars* acquired enormous wealth by purchasing these lands, and some members of the *karava* caste rose to extraordinary wealth through arrack renting and land purchases (pp 145-170). Third, some lawyers from both castes rose to prominence and in each of these castes some of these persons evolved business and marriage connections. The author provides a wealth of evidence in support of these themes. In the case of land sales and arrack rents he provides convincing data. Where the author moves into other areas, he loses the sureness of touch he demonstrates in the three themes referred to earlier and, as we shall show, much of the book suffers severely from the weakness of evidence adduced in support of his arguments.

This book, as the title given by the author makes clear, is on social change. A study of social change in 19th century Sri Lanka involves an investigation of processes that begin in pre-colonial times. In addition one needs a familiarity with these same processes under Portuguese and Dutch rule in the littoral regions of the island. With regard to these many of the author’s contentions are not supported by reliable evidence. Quite

apart from pre-colonial times, the author leaves many questions unanswered about social change on the littoral in the period of Portuguese rule there. He argues that the Portuguese were “isolated outnumbered and underfinanced” (p 26) and yet goes on to say that they replaced “all higher officials with their own.” He neither explains the contradiction nor provides adequate or reliable evidence to support his contentions.

It is hard to believe that these displaced Sinhalese officials submitted tamely to their suppression considering the fate of the Malabar administration in British times and the dependence on the headmen of both the Dutch and British governments. It is hard to believe, too, that the new Portuguese officials could administer the country with the aid, only, of the *korales* and *vidanes*, who are purported to have been new too. Did the displaced Sinhalese officials continue to help behind the scenes? Which language was used? Who were the “leaders” of “the masses”?

Again, *apropos* of the areas under Portuguese rule, the author states, without any evidence in support, that service tenures formed only “a small proportion of the total cultivated lands” (p 48) and further, again without supporting evidence, that the Portuguese withdrew “their patronage from networks of traditional payment and thereby undermined the basis of the traditional social structure” (p 33). For undermanned, underfinanced persons, the Portuguese seem to have been capable of effecting an extraordinary amount of change.

The same pattern of assertions and conclusions without adequate evidence continues when the author moves on to the period of Dutch rule on the littoral. He claims that, in 1680, due to the decline in agriculture, the oppressive nature of *rajakariya* and its fraudulent use by Dutch officials, the government transferred the responsibility of mobilising it to Sinhalese administrators (p 35). It is incredible that Dutch officials could mobilise it on their own. This view, further, taxes belief by implying that the reliance of the government on the headmen was a matter of choice and not necessity. It is said that between 1737 and 1769, the government made a special effort to curb the power of the headmen. Here, too, the evidence is tenuous. It is not shown that the *muhandirams* were antipathetic to the *mudaliyars* or were beyond their influence, or how or why the village headmen were neglected. By 1796, we are told that the *mudaliyars* were firmly in control” (p 39) without adequate explanation, based on evidence, about their purported resurgence. In their Memoirs, the Dutch Governors Rycklof van Goens (p 12 ff), Becker (p 6 ff), Imhoff (p 21 ff) and Jan Schreuder (p 63 ff) gave many other reasons for compiling the *thombos* than the wish to curb the power of the headmen.

Citing D A Kotelawe, the author says that by the mid 18th century service lands, were less than one-sixth of the 30,000 land holdings. Citing no evidence at all, he says that by British times they had dwindled much more. Both statements require more evidence in support of them.

When we come to the period of British rule we are told that, by the first quarter of the century, the British had come to the conclusion that the headmen were a feudal aristocracy, and that the British advantage lay in winning their loyalty with honours, appointments, land grants and elaborate gestures of respect (p 57). No such conclusion was reached consciously by the British government. The author tries to overcome this obstacle by implying that it was the result of a subconscious collective process (p 4). The fact, however, is that there is no shred of evidence of such a process. This kind of claim can be postulated about anything. It is certainly not used by the author to explain the development of the elites nor anything else.

There is no evidence of the existence of feudalism in Sri Lanka. There was no surrender of freedom by some to others, no vassalage, no serfdom, no network of local relations based on protection and dependence and no armies kept by headmen. It is strange that British Governors should have become enamoured of feudalism in Sri Lanka, when it was being abolished in Europe. The French Revolution had abolished it in France and it was not restored in 1815. In Britain it had ceased to exist before that.

Contrary to the author's view, the evidence shows the early British Governors tried to curb the power of the headmen, not to augment it. One of the aims of North's land tenure reforms was to reduce headmen power. It was Maitland's stated aim to "diminish by every possible means the overgrown authority of the *mudaliyars*." Brownrigg, after putting down the Kandyan Rebellion of 1818, reduced, drastically, the power of the Kandyan *radalavaru*, despite their being of a more ancient lineage than the low-country headmen. The Kandyan Kingdom was the place to cosset an aristocracy, if such had been the wish. The evidence adduced about Barnes shows him wishing to cultivate social relations with the headmen, not anything more.

As the reforms proposed by the Colebrooke Commission in the headmen system were not implemented, its structure remained unaltered until 1935. It is true that more non-*goyigama Maha-Mudaliyars* were appointed then than before. The numbers were too few however to betoken a deliberate policy. On the author's own showing, only four *Gate Mudaliyars* were non-*goyigama* between 1870 and 1882 out of a total of 16 (p 235). Matthew Gomes of the *rajuka* caste, whose career began in 1803

had become Cashier of the General Treasury by 1824. If there was a policy, it seems to have been one of appointing persons more by merit than by caste.

Too much is made of Layard's appointments. He appointed several *mudaliyars* from the *goyigama* caste including "first-class" *goyigama* persons. His own importance is exaggerated. After all he was only the Government Agent of the Western Province, not an important policy maker.

Gordon is charged with a policy of filling *mudaliyarships* with the *Maha-Mudaliyar's* relatives. He is shown to have exhibited deplorable caste prejudice against the *karava* caste. These actions by themselves are insufficient evidence of a policy of confining appointments only to the *goyigama* caste. Gordon denied this charge of favouritism but his view point is not adequately represented by the author in this book. Gordon regarded the headman as a shield protecting the government from friction with the governed. McCallum, in regularly held *durbars*, regarded them as the medium through which the people could communicate with the government and as the instrument by which they could be persuaded to abandon long standing, but obnoxious, customs and practices.

In any case, too much significance is given to Gordon. The evidence does not warrant the claim that "his influence was mainly destructive of the British government" (p 248) or that he "created precedents that made it impossible to return to a more open recruitment" (p 249). It was always possible for his successors to reverse his policy, such as it was, as he is purported to have done with that of his predecessors. It is a wild exaggeration to imply that he alienated the *karava* caste so much as to prevent the development of a nationalist movement (p 263). The *karava* caste did not develop a political ideology nor create a political party. Its members were to be found in all the political parties, when these developed. Far more damaging to nationalism was the division, which emerged, not long afterwards, between the Sinhalese and Tamils.

At the heart of the author's arguments with regard to the headmen is an egregious absurdity. We are asked to believe that the headmen were less respected, when they had become extraordinarily rich, than when they were much poorer, respected as "feudal aristocrats" but not as burgeoning capitalists. The Headmen Commission Reports of 1922 and 1935 show that, contrary to the author's views, government departments had to depend on headmen for the implementation of their policies, at the local level and that this dependence not only kept increasing but was as great in urban and municipal areas as in rural areas. Nor was their work perfunctory. Indeed the initiation and supervision of land colonisation

schemes, alone, would have made it anything but perfunctory. The author cites Layard as saying that the sale of crown land and the settlement of land questions required the recruitment of *mudaliyars*, who were better educated and more conversant with the English language than before, (p133ff) without noticing the contradiction between that statement and his own view.

When we turn to the author's views on elites and elite status on the nineteenth century we confront the same problem of insufficient evidence in support of his views and contentions. We are told that "elite status is conferred from below" (p 15). Evidence relating to this is provided about some members of the *karava* caste, but is singularly lacking about the leaders of the *goyigama* caste, before they gained administrative office. Not enough information is provided, too, about those below the rank of the leaders in both castes. An elite cannot consist of just a few families.

We are told that an elite is formed by the "interaction of all the actors" (p 16) leaving many questions unanswered. Did the government reward men of economic and social eminence with government office perforce? Was it obliged to show preference to their heirs? Certainly an examination of the records leads us to conclude that the government does not show any awareness that it was taking part in the formation of elites. Elsewhere, in a contradictory vein, the author says that a *mudaliyar*, unlike a feudal baron, acquired legitimacy from his relation with his sovereign without "bestowing it."

Many generalisations and statements are made without sufficient evidence, and some of the more egregious ones are set out below. The allegation that the *mudaliyars* secured their appointments by large bribes, which they then recouped, by exactions from their subordinates and the people, (p 260) is devoid of evidence and contradicts everything the author says about the formation and development of elites. The statement that the *mudaliyars* became renters by bribery is equally bereft of evidence (p 60). So, too, is the statement that the relationship between the government and the renters became antagonistic in the early years of British rule (p 161). The renters were government administrators. The British Government did not "rapidly" expand the renting system which the Dutch had begun in "a small way" (p147). British officials studied the renting lists of the Dutch and conformed closely to their practice. North made minor alterations. The Colebrooke Commission's records show that, by 1833, the system had remained largely unaltered. Nor did Maitland and Brownrigg make *rajakariya* into "a legal obligation" which was then "upheld in the British courts" (p 66). North had done so

already. No such innovation is attributed to Maitland and Brownrigg by the Colebrooke Commission or later British official sources.

There was no extraordinary expansion of the power of the *mudaliyars* before 1833. The increase in the use of the services of the *mudaliyars*, entailed by the expansion of road building, does not warrant such an extravagant claim. The appointment of non-*goyigama* headmen after 1833 would have put headmen power into new hands, not reduced it. The development of departments increased the dependence on headmen and did not diminish it.

The “non-recognition of caste” did not become “official policy” due to Goderich (p 118). Such a claim makes nonsense of the author’s argument that the *mudaliyar* appointments of Layard and Gordon were determined by their views on caste.

No evidence is adduced to support the claim that competition among the elites became more severe by the 1870s and that the death of James Alwis amounted to the passing of an era (p 176).

British policy makers were not heavily influenced by the writing of Robert Knox. When, after the conquest of the Kingdom of Kandy in 1815, Bathurst, Brownrigg and D’oyle were urgently searching for information on its polity, they did not turn to Knox.

Other statements, of the same kind are that the British considered school-masters to be competitors of the *mudaliyars* as rural elites, (p 99) that lawyers of the *karava* caste outnumbered those of the *goyigama* caste in the second half of the nineteenth century (p 260) and that North and Maitland were aristocrats “who never forgot the importance of class distinctions in their personal lives” (p 76).

Casual, throwaway remarks of individual governors do not represent official policy. Copious evidence of policies sustained, preferably, through more than one governorship is needed. Official sources while being the best for eliciting a government’s policy, are not the best for showing the economic and social conditions of a country. When using them, different criteria have to be constructed.

There is a dearth of evidence in this book and inadequate assessment of what is adduced. It is not rich enough in Namierite evidence for it to be a successful Namierite history. It is even poorer as an ideological history. Academically, it does not rise above the level of a collection of short biographies.

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