

**EDMUND SAMARAKKODY**



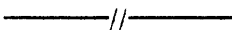
**THE  
CRISIS  
OF  
LOCAL  
GOVERNMENT**

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*WITH A FOREWORD BY N. M. PERERA*

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# FOREWORD



Comrade Edmund Samarakkody has set out the case for the extension of local Government institutions through the establishment of Provincial Councils. Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake who was the then Minister of Local Government had made a strong case for the development of these provincial councils which would eventually replace the old colonial Kachcheri system.

For some unknown reason the U. N. P. government, from the time of the then Prime Minister, Rt. Hon. Mr. D. S. Senanayake, has never been in favour of Provincial Councils. Although this capitalist government has never tired of talking about the independence they have won and the freedom that has been achieved, the political set up that it has encouraged and fostered is the old colonial set up. The development of local self government which is a corollary to the democratic assembly in the centre has never received its benediction.

The kachcheri system is ideally suited for a bureaucratic regime. It makes for maximum slowness, indifference and red tapeism. It is part and parcel of the archaic headman system which is a remnant of feudalism in Ceylon. The U. N. P. Government has of course tried through the Rural Development Societies to breach the gap that has already existed between the people and the kachecherie. But these societies themselves are evidence of the gross inadequacy of the kachecheri system. These societies, carried on through headmen, are self-appointed bodies responsible to no one, and are a source of friction for the Village Committees in the country. Com. Edmund has done well to high-light this basic problem of local government in Ceylon. The fact is that our government has no policy with regard to local self government and is not interested in solving this problem.

**N. M. Perera**

16th December 1954

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Central Government has led to complaints of niggardly treatment. One may point out the too frequent failures of Chairmen of Local Bodies to create an effective and honest Administration. However disturbing they may appear, squandermania, misuse of funds and even misappropriation of funds are not symptoms of crisis. The standards of administration and of morality in Local Bodies cannot rise above the standards prevailing generally in society. **But the fact that Local Government Institutions in Ceylon are beginning to be viewed as an opposing force in relation to the Central Government is certainly a sign of crisis.** The opinion is growing that Local Bodies are parallel authorities that are seeking to oust and undermine the Central Government. In the result, the inevitable suspicion and mutual recrimination has stunted the growth of Local Government, thereby increasing the problems and difficulties of the National or Central Government. Further, a state of frustration has come over Local Bodies, leading to general dissatisfaction among the population, which will necessarily be directed against the Central Government.

## KACHCHERI SYSTEM IS NOT A SUBSTITUTE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In Ceylon, the term Provincial Administration has been used to mean something different from Local Administration, and the idea has persisted that these are two spheres or Departments of Administration where functions are different and diversified. The reason for this is not far to seek. Local Government Institutions in Ceylon have grown up within the framework of a Colonial Government. While the Central Government and its departments were directed for the purpose of maintaining British rule in Ceylon, Local Bodies grew up as organs of the people, to which they looked and through which they one day hoped for relief and redress against the wrongs of the Central Government and its Departments. In fact the Provincial Administration introduced by British Imperialism was the **Kachcheri system** which was the channel through which officialdom exercised control over and collected revenue from the rural population. Under such a regime, the question of rendering service was incidental, while the paramount question was the collection of revenue. The Government Agents, Mudaliyars, etc. were revenue-collecting officers and that was the main machinery for the purpose.

So that in fact it could be said that there was, then, no provincial administration as such, as there was no administering to the needs of the people. However, with the constitutional changes that have taken place, the idea of service and administering to needs has arisen. Thus we could only in that sense talk of Provincial or Local Administration. It follows then

that machinery that was utilised to collect revenue for the Colonial power cannot be the means of administering to the needs of the people. Besides, the increasing needs of a population that has grown up to nearly 8 millions of people and the complex problems arising out of new conditions of National freedom and the development of Democratic ideas need different machinery and organisation. In fact the failure and reluctance to do away with the old machinery of Provincial Administration resulted in the blocking of the road to progress and prevention of the benefits of constitutional changes reaching the people. In 1931, for instance, this country had the Donoughmore Scheme granting universal franchise, a measure of political freedom to the people of this country. This measure of freedom should have been passed down to the people. The provincial administration (Kachcheri system) should have been removed. The old machinery could not work and in fact did not work.

It was through the rudimentary forms of Local Governing bodies that the Government was beginning to reach the people. The widening of the franchise and increase of powers and augmentation of the resources of Local Bodies over the last three decades has resulted in a measure of development in our Urban and Rural areas which could never otherwise have been achieved.

The developing democratic structure at the centre over this period created new duties and functions which have inevitably led to new departments and sub-departments (Over 200 Departments and 300 sub departments have been created since 1923). The duties of Government Agents, Mudaliyars and Village Headmen are now being carried out by various departments. The links between the Central or National Government (as well as the numerous sub-departments) are no longer the Government Agents, Mudaliyars or Village Headmen, but the Local Government Bodies, i. e. Village Committees, Town Councils, Urban Councils and Municipal Councils.

## **FORWARD TO LOCAL DEMOCRACY OR BACK TO THE G. A.'s AND VILLAGE HEADMEN?**

A desire to promote and develop Local Government was noticeable during the last decade before the year 1952. Even grudgingly, the principle of Autonomy was accepted and more confidence was reposed in Local authorities. Two principal factors have operated in bringing to a halt the policy of extending the powers Local Bodies. **Firstly:** (mainly in the rural areas) the Government Agents, Divisional Revenue Officers and Village Headmen were, from the outset, antagonistic to the development of Village Committees and Town Councils, as the sphere and area of their influence and authority were gradually narrowing. The Village Headman and Mudaliyar (now the D. R. O.)

have lost importance — their influence and power have been transferred to member of Local Bodies and Chairmen and Officers of Local Bodies.

**Secondly:** Since the widening of Local franchise, elected bodies became more independent. The character of the average representative has changed, as in all representative institutions. Those who were first elected to local bodies by the people were often the oppressors of the people and the well-to-do. The post-war period of Local Government has been marked by the voice of the people being heard in local bodies. Capitalists, land-owners, contractors and bus owners are being replaced in these bodies by poor school teachers, Ayurvedic doctors, workers and peasants. The development of the class struggle has found an inevitable reflection in Local Bodies. The fighting of elections on party lines changed the character of these bodies. From organizations that were merely conscious of Local problems, these bodies have begun to understand the close relationship between the Local and National problems. They are no longer by and large the tools of the Central Government, but are, for the first time, showing an independent outlook. They have dared to disagree on many matters with the Central Government and the party in power.

This is the testing-time for the Central Government. The National Government can do one of two things. Either readjust its relations with Local Bodies, realising that democracy has come to stay, or decide to use the big stick, decrease the power of Local Bodies, withdraw financial assistance and crush these rudimentary democratic institutions. The policy sought to be followed during the last two years points clearly to the fact that the latter course of action is contemplated.

So far as the Village Committees and Town Councils are concerned, the old power of the Government Agents, Mudaliyars (now D. R. O.'s) and Village Headmen is being restored. This is insistently taking place through an apparent concern for democratic institutions. The Rural Development Society has become the channel for the Government Agent, Divisional Revenue Officer and Village Headman to stage a come-back. The construction and maintenance of Village roads, wells and latrines, which properly and naturally fall within the sphere of the duties of Village Committees and Town Councils, are being taken over by the Government Agents and Divisional Revenue Officers through the Rural Development Societies. Large sums of money have been placed in the hands of Government Agents to be spent through Rural Development Societies — thus bypassing Local Bodies. This process can speedily undermine the authority, influence and usefulness of local bodies. Further, there is the growing tendency for the Central Government to

pay more emphasis on corruption in Local Bodies and abuse of authority by them and to interfere, control, dissolve and take over local Institutions on the slightest pretext.

Local Institutions and associations of Local Bodies have been alive to corruption in local bodies and have been foremost in the movement against bribery and corruption in these institutions. In fact, the clamour for a permanent Bribery Commission was the subject matter of constant agitation by Local Bodies. Local Bodies and representatives of Local Institutions have been foremost in the fight for the removal of Chairmen who were guilty of maladministration. These Institutions were powerless in the face of the indifference of the Local Government Commission or the Minister. The request and demand for more power and responsibilities by Local Bodies is often opposed on the footing that Local Bodies are not producing men of integrity and responsibility. In the face of ministerial inaction and encouragement of corruption, such an argument is hardly tenable. Men of different calibre will not appear overnight in democratic institutions. Public opinion and censure is the most effective cure for corruption in Local Institutions. If it is ministerial policy to shield wrong-doers, then public opinion becomes public apathy. Finally, the irresponsibility of elected representatives is eliminated and checked only through election. The fear of the voter who will throw out the unpopular candidate is the process through which democracy can grow. The utterly indefensible action of repeatedly postponing elections to Local Bodies has increased corruption and irresponsibility in Local Bodies. The resulting public apathy must eventually defeat the ends of democracy.

Such are the consequences of the new policy of the National Government towards Local Government institutions. It is not merely unfortunate for the Local Bodies. It is not a question of what course of action is desirable; *i. e.*, whether to allow Local Bodies to grow and develop or allow them to weaken and get into disrepute. On the contrary, it must be realised that failure of Local Government will mean the end of Rural and Urban Development in this country. In fact the question of Urban and Rural Development has just begun in Ceylon. Most of our so-called Local Institutions, like Municipal Councils and Urban Councils, are merely maintaining roads and ineffectively lighting-systems. Water-service has remained a dream for a large majority of Local Bodies. Public wells, baths, Public Playgrounds and libraries are luxuries of a few Local Bodies. In our Rural areas, a road for vehicular traffic or a public latrine is still a dream. 90% of the population lives in rural areas. The idiocy of rural life is perpetuated by the failure to develop the communication system.

The machinery that is nearest and dearest to the people are the Local Governing Bodies — Urban or Rural. These are the institutions that will radiate, through a hundred channels, a new light into the dark caves and corners of rural life. They are the institutions that can understand the urgency and acuteness of local problems. The dead hand of the Government Agent or the D. R. O. cannot give life to the village. In a hundred ways, the Local Body can lift up the people. A wide field is open to these bodies. The work of several Government Departments could be undertaken by Local Bodies. The distribution of Ration Books, the preparation of Electoral Registers, supervision and distribution of Milk-Feeding, Distribution of Poor-Relief, the supervision of Local Dispensaries and Maternity and Child-welfare work, the supervision and administration of Education work, within their areas, are all matters that could well be undertaken by Local Bodies. With increased grants, more and new avenues of finance and more power, our Local Institutions can rapidly transform our cities and villages and speedily bring the amenities of civilized life within the reach of the people.



# THE CRISIS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*(Memorandum to Commission of Inquiry into Local Government.)*

If Central Government is the determination of National Policy and principles, then Local Government is the application of these principles to the peculiarities of Local fact. In other words, Local Government is the channel through which the National Authority reaches the individual and ministers to his needs. With the realization and creation of the "National State", every Capitalist Society was faced with the question of organising its administration throughout the entire area of its authority. After years of experiment and experience, the advanced Capitalist States, particularly the United Kingdom, have evolved a system of provincial administration which has served as a model for Capitalist Countries. While the British system of Provincial Administration has in its detail suited the peculiarities and national prejudices of the British people, nevertheless, the structure of British Provincial Administration in its main outline can fit into the framework of any Capitalist Country. Every Capitalist Country is to-day faced with the complex question of how to bring to the inhabitants of the remote corners of its administrative areas the amenities of civilized life, i. e., Roads, Housing, Water, Lighting, Drainage, Maternity and Child-welfare, Baths, Wash-houses, etc. The ministering to these needs is the function of Local Government. If the relations between the Central Government and Local Bodies are viewed in this light, Local Government will appear, not as a problem, but as a solution to the problems of National Government, and the development will be reflected concretely as the rendering of services to ever larger sections of the population. Stated differently, Urban and Rural development can be realised with speed and economy only through the institutions of Local Government that have been evolved and tested through centuries of experiment and found to be the apparatus of administration consistent with National Freedom and Democracy

The failure to appreciate the role of Local Government in the Administrative set-up of the Country has contributed in no small measure to the crisis of Local Government in Ceylon. But it may be asked, "Is there a crisis and wherein lies the crisis of Local Government?" To the average observer, there appears a growing friction between the Central Government and Local Bodies. But this is not in itself a phenomenon peculiar to Ceylon nor is it a sign of crisis. The need to define from time to time the relative duties, responsibilities and rights as between the centre and the periphery has resulted in friction in most countries with a Parliamentary form of Government. Besides, the dependence of Local Bodies for finance on the

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