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*Introduction***Caste, patronage and politics; the Pan-Indian background**

It is tempting to study caste, patronage and politics in Sri Lanka in a Pan-Indian context. Certainly the country bears many similarities to her giant neighbour to the north. However, in several important respects a comparison has to be qualified. First, Sri Lanka is only a fraction of the size of India, and in terms of both area and population smaller than the average Indian state. This physical difference is compounded administratively, India being a federation of states many with their own particular identities, whilst Sri Lanka is a unitary nation. Thus any comparison of Sri Lanka should strictly be with a particular part of India rather than with the whole country. Secondly, even then it should be recognized that Sri Lanka, despite its geographical proximity to India, has had very different historical antecedents. The prevalence of Buddhism since the second century BC meant that the caste system was never so rigid and hierarchical as in most parts of Hindu India. Moreover, the Low Country was exposed to four-and-a-half centuries of Western influence in a way few Indian states were. This helped to undermine further what little caste hierarchy did exist in Sri Lanka.

However, the literature on India which is chiefly confined to particular provinces or districts does provide some sort of framework within which Sri Lankan politics can be studied. In particular there are several studies of patron–client relationships at the village and district levels.¹ It has been shown that these form the basis for political allegiance.² Although horizontal political links (between actors of the same social and economic status) tend to be intra-caste, vertical links between patrons and clients are intercaste.³

Some studies which suggested that caste groups in parts of South India formed an important base for political mobilization have been shown to

¹ Some good studies are Breman (1974) and Carter (1974).

² Carter (1974).

³ *Ibid.*

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be redundant.⁴ Many of the regional caste categories (such as the *Reddi*, *Vellalla* or *Kamma*) represented no more than amorphous status blocs, lacking any form of social organization to support them and with no sense of community.⁵ In the North too it was noted that ‘beneath the veneer of theoretical categorization the *Kayastha* “caste” scarcely existed as an ongoing community and possessed little or no social reality’.⁶ In the South it was the British who, with the extension of their administration, gave these categories a definable identity.⁷ But even then they were not to be important as a means of social organization, let alone political mobilization.

Washbrook, Carroll and Baker have made an important contribution in questioning whether the mere use of a caste name in political rhetoric warrants the assumption of a group identity, still less implies it is a vehicle to support this identity in the political arena.⁸ They have quite correctly stressed that we should look behind the rhetoric to examine the material interests and linkages of the so-called caste spokesmen.

Roberts, who has touched on this literature in the process of examining caste in Sri Lankan politics, has however criticized Washbrook’s thesis. Roberts argues that Washbrook ‘cannot conceive of corporate consciousness and communal solidarity without some concrete organizational foundations, whether in the form of marriage networks, panchyats, associations or interlocking patron–client networks . . . [and that] . . . his approach is characterized by misplaced concreteness and crude materialism’.⁹ However, Roberts himself does not provide any alternative evidence for a ‘corporate consciousness and communal solidarity’ of any particular caste. He only argues that ‘localized caste networks were penetrated and permeated by numerous indigenous channels of cultural transmission . . . [which included] . . . cultural brokers (such as wandering minstrels, story-tellers . . . troupes of actors . . . and . . . pedlars)’.¹⁰ Yet the fact that such modes of cultural transmission existed is not evidence of their having created a ‘corporate consciousness and communal solidarity’. Still less is it evidence of their having created a caste basis for political allegiance. In this context Washbrook’s basic argument stands firm.

⁴ Hardgrave (1969), Jeffrey (1974) and Jeffrey (1976) are instances of these (now redundant) studies.

⁵ Washbrook (1975), pp. 168–9 and 172–4 and Washbrook (1976), pp. 126–7, 129–30, 133–4.

⁶ Carroll (1975) and Carroll (1978).

⁷ Washbrook (1975), pp. 181–4, Washbrook (1976), pp. 263–4 and see Hawthorn (1982).

⁸ Washbrook (1975), Washbrook (1976), Carroll (1975) and Carroll (1978).

⁹ Roberts (1982), pp. 201–2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

Thus an assessment of the literature of the Indian political scene does not point to caste-based electoral allegiances and intra-caste vertical ties. However the literature on electoral politics in Sri Lanka suggests that this is the pattern there, a point examined in the next section.

Electoral politics in Sri Lanka: a survey of the literature

The existing literature on politics in Sri Lanka is of two kinds. On the one hand there are some fairly general surveys of behaviour at an Island-wide level since Independence.¹¹ On the other, there are some very detailed studies of politics at the village level, over relatively short periods.¹²

At present there is nothing which bridges this gap. There are no detailed comparative studies of entire electorates over a period of time.¹³ Thus, we are unable to explain why some villages in a given area voted one way, and other villages, in close proximity, another. We are also unable to explain why certain sets of villages have changed their allegiance over time. Finally we are unable to explain why some localities or electorates have produced some leaders, and others, others, the bases for their support, and whether these bases have changed over time (and if so how). In short, the determinants of political allegiance and leadership at the electoral level have not been examined.

This has meant that often some of the factors seeming to explain political allegiance at the village level have been assumed to explain allegiance at the electoral level too. Thus some fairly superficial, and sometimes misleading, explanations of the determinants of political allegiance have come to be accepted.¹⁴ These explanations have something in common with the caste-based views of politics in India described earlier, which have been criticized by Washbrook.

Agriculture was, and is, the chief occupation of the inhabitants of the interior of Sri Lanka. The traditional cultivating caste, the *Goigama*, generally, but not always, produces the locally dominant landlord family in the area, the village elites who were dependent upon it, and the majority of the other inhabitants who were dependent upon these elites in turn. The locally dominant landlord families tended to produce

¹¹ See for instance Jupp (1978), Kearney (1973), Wilson (1979), Woodward (1969) and Wriggins (1960). Critiques of the existing literature can be found in Moore (1978), Moore (1981a) and Moore (1981b), Appendices 6 and 7. See Farmer (1963) for a succinct historical introduction.

¹² See for instance Morrison *et al.* (1979) and Robinson (1975).

¹³ There are only some descriptive studies of elections at the national level, lacking in analysis. See Jennings (1948), Jennings (1952), Jennings (1953), Weerawardene (1952), Weerawardene (1960) and Wilson (1975). There are also two short and superficial articles on by-elections, Jiggins (1974) and Phadnis (1969).

¹⁴ See, for instance, Jiggins (1979) and Ryan (1953), pp. 275–82.

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candidates for election to the legislatures from 1931 onwards. In doing so they operated through traditional intermediaries, the village elites, who delivered them blocs of votes. As these village elites and most of their clients in turn tended to come from the landlord's *Goigama* caste, the fiction of a caste basis for voting emerged.

However, this was in reality only a special case of a more fundamental patron–client relationship. There is a vast literature on patron–client relationships in general and the terms have been used by different writers with different shades of meaning.¹⁵ In what follows a patron is defined as an individual exercising control over a set of individuals (termed clients) over several years and often over several generations, in more ways than the mere monetary. In politics this control was exercised via a set of lesser influentials, termed intermediaries, who themselves acted as patrons to even poorer clients (see Chapter 2, pp. 32–3). The whole system of patrons, intermediaries and clients is defined as a patronage network. Patrons tended to live amongst clients of their own caste: *Karave* landlords and fish *mudalalis* along the coast; the *Goigama* in the interior; and the *Salagama* and *Durave* in isolated pockets. The fact that these patrons could later count on these clients for political support was not surprising. But the fact that these clients generally came from their own caste was dictated by a geographical coincidence: the tendency of a caste to congregate in, and numerically dominate, a particular village or locality, so that clients in the caste often tended to depend on patrons of that same caste. The clients' support for a member of their caste then was dictated by his having been their patron. Where the patron came from a different caste, he could just as surely draw their support. Thus where the patron–client tie cut across the caste tie, the former relationship proved more important in explaining political allegiance. The caste tie can therefore be said to have been important only in so far as it was congruent with a patron–client tie.

The point has been missed by several writers, notably Jiggins.¹⁶ In all the electorates she has examined, the numerically largest caste has generally sent its representative to Parliament.¹⁷ But in all these cases the numerically largest caste has also produced the leading patrons of the area. The importance of the patron–client tie is therefore not apparent, as it would have been had she chosen an electorate where a numerically minor caste produced one or more of the leading patrons and candidates for political office.

¹⁵ For a review of the literature on patronage and some general discussion of the term see Eisenstadt and Roniger (1980), Eisenstadt and Roniger (1984) and Gellner (1977).

¹⁶ Jiggins (1979). ¹⁷ *Ibid.*

In the next section we shall try to show that there are several electorates in Sri Lanka which have, since Independence, returned members from numerically minor castes to Parliament. It can then be seen that this is a general phenomenon, and that membership of a numerically dominant caste is not a necessary condition for political success. Thereafter, the problem posed can be defined and the best means of approaching it assessed.

Our problem defined and an approach to it

An examination of the caste backgrounds of successful candidates of the eight General Elections to the Parliaments of Sri Lanka reveals that several have come from minority groups. As much as a fifth to a quarter of successful candidates in the Sinhalese seats have been from communities which in their constituency have been numerically exceeded by at least one other community (see Table 1).

In this context Jiggins' basic argument that 'caste identities . . . appear to be nearly always a necessary condition for voter, party manager and candidates alike'¹⁸ deserves to be seriously questioned. This is especially so as most of the more general works on the subject also take caste as an important independent factor in determining voter allegiance.¹⁹

The problem then is one of trying to assess how true this is, if at all. This involves looking at alternative bases of such allegiance. Such a problem could be approached in two ways: either by focussing on a political party and trying to assess its bases of support nationally or within a particular district, or by focussing on one or more electorates and assessing the bases for support of the candidates contesting.

There are a number of reasons for adopting the latter approach. First, in Sri Lanka, political parties did not emerge for a long time. The first such party to be formed was the Trotskyist LSSP, which emerged in 1935. Several of its leaders were jailed during the war, and the party never assumed the sort of 'national' role representative of a wide cross-section of communities that the Indian National Congress did at this time. The first non-Marxist party, the UNP, was only formed on the eve of the 1947 General Election with the purpose of contesting it. Then too, in several electorates, the UNP ticket was given to more than one local patron, the philosophy being let the more influential man win. The 1947 and 1952 General Elections were not fought on party-ideological grounds. Instead, they entailed rival patrons mobilizing their different local networks. Focussing on an electorate thus enables us to study the

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 152–4.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Kearney (1973), pp. 105, 106, 149 and 181–8 and Jupp (1978), p. 210.

Table 1 The caste of successful candidates for Parliament in relation to the caste compositions of their electorates (1947–77)

Number of seats where:	Election							
	1947	1952	1956	March 1960	July 1960	1965	1970	1977
The successful candidate's own community/caste is in a majority	40	47	50	89	92	95	97	99
The successful candidate's own community/caste is the largest, but not in a numerical majority	1	2	1	2	1	1	1	1
The successful candidate's own community/caste is equalled by another	8	6	6	3	2	2	2	2
The successful candidate's own community/caste is exceeded by another ^a	16 (25%)	18 (25%)	16 (22%)	27 (22%)	26 (21%)	23 (19%)	20 (17%)	33 (24%)
Non-Sinhala electorates (Sinhalese forming less than 60% of the total population)	30	22	22	30	30	30	30	33
Total	95	95	95	151	151	151	150^b	168

^a Includes the cases of Muslims winning one of the two Kadugannawa seats in 1952 and 1956, one of the two Akurana seats in March 1960, July 1960, 1965 and 1970, the Galagedera seat in March and July 1960 and the Balangoda seat in 1977.

^b Welimada uncontested.

Sources: GOC (1946), GOC (1959), GOSL (1976) and CDN (1947), CDN (1952), CDN (1956), CDN (1960), CDN (1965), CDN (1970) and CDN (1977).

relative strengths of these different patrons, and the various bases for this, in a way focussing on a political party does not. It also enables us to identify the bases of support from a very early period, before political parties had been formed.

Secondly, it enables us to study the growth of the State, and the way in which this undermined private patronage, in a way that focussing on a nationally based party does not. We can more clearly see how different State institutions emerged in particular parts of the electorate, and how this altered the local patronage networks of the area.

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Thirdly, the national and international constraints restricting candidates can be more clearly identified and isolated in an electorate than in a party. This is because in an electorate we can more clearly assess the impact of world recession, inflation and national budgetary imperatives on local projects and the availability of goods and employment. The implications this has for the political sympathies of particular areas, and the ability of patrons to mobilize these sympathies, can be assessed area by area and village by village. This can be observed in an electorate in a way that focussing on a political party operating at the national level does not allow us to see.

Shortages of goods were felt by the public through the Co-operative system. After 1956 this institution became the sole official distributor of rice and basic consumer durables. After 1970, it came to be wholly State-controlled, its officials being Government appointees. Studying the Co-operative network enables us to see first, the use to which an important State body would be put in gaining or losing political support and secondly, the ways in which the nationally and internationally induced shortages of goods were felt by the public and the impact this had on political goodwill in particular areas. In choosing an institution to reflect the growth of the State, the use to which this was put, the constraints upon such use, and the political impact of such use, the Co-operative network is of prime value.

The Central Wholesale Depot of the Co-operative in Colombo sold commodities to local retail outlets, sometimes at heavily subsidized rates. These commodities were then supposed to be sold or distributed to the public on a quota or ration basis.

Meanwhile there were certain State projects in each electorate, which we have covered to some extent. Some of these were financed from the decentralized budget scheme, and each electorate's allocation was Rs 2.4 million. Some of these were financed partly from the decentralized budget, and partly from national and/or international sources. Some were financed wholly from national and/or international sources.

By focussing on more than one electorate the way in which the national standing of the parliamentary representative was able to influence the benefits secured will be shown. A senior Minister was able to secure funds for a national project in his electorate which an ordinary MP was unable to do. He was thereby able to influence the proportion of the national budget going to his electorate in a way an ordinary MP was not. However, once these proportions were decided upon, he was no more influential than an ordinary MP in deciding upon disbursement within the electorate. (This is described in Chapters 4 and 6.)

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To conclude this section: in the Sri Lankan context, the bases for political allegiance can be better studied by focussing on one or more electorates than on a particular political party. This is done in the next section where the reasons for choosing these electorates are discussed.

The electorates chosen: where and why

To assess the relative importance of the identity of caste and the power of patronage in political allegiance at least two rural electorates should be chosen which are as similar as possible in terms of all variables which could possibly explain electoral support, but only different in the castes of their political leaders. In this way one can ensure that any differences in the types of leaders emerging are not due to an accident of history, or some discrepancy in the social structures prevailing in the two areas.

For this reason this study has been restricted to the Sinhalese Low Country, excluding the Tamil and Kandyan constituencies. The latter have had very different histories to the former, with far less exposure to Western influence. The caste structures prevailing there are far more hierarchical, and the patterns of economic and political patronage underpinning them are also very different. They cannot be realistically compared with the patterns of patronage operating in the Sinhalese Low Country.

Within the Low Country three electorates have been selected, two rural and one urban. One of the rural constituencies, Bluville, has been traditionally dominated by a patronizing family from the numerically minor caste, the *Karave*. It has returned a member of this family to Parliament at six of the eight legislative elections since Independence. This same member was successful in securing a majority for his party at the 1982 presidential and referendum polls as well.

The other rural constituency, Greenville, lies in a coconut-growing area. It is numerically dominated by the *Goigama* caste, and has traditionally returned members from one of two patronizing families of this caste to Parliament. Greenville is one of several constituencies studied by Jiggins.²⁰ By focussing on it more closely than she did, the aim is to show that, although dominated numerically by the *Goigama*, and returning a member of the caste to Parliament, this political success was due to factors other than caste identity *per se*. Economic ties of dependence through land and the *Mudaliyar* system were, as in Bluville, more important.

The third constituency, Red Town, is a suburb of Colombo. In terms of population density in 1970, the electorate as a whole was not classified

²⁰ Jiggins (1979), Chapter 3.

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as urban or quasi-urban by Wilson.²¹ However, as early as 1947 it contained more industrial ventures and a greater proportion of white- and blue-collar workers than many electorates within the large towns of the country. These characteristics were accentuated as the country developed. Thus, in terms of patronage networks contrasting with those in our rural constituencies, it is a more useful electorate to study than some of the more densely populated ones classified as urban by Wilson.

In each of our three constituencies the status and power of the dominant families of the area by 1947 have to be explained. It is then necessary to trace how the growth of the State affected this. So, focussing on the pre-Independence period is essential in explaining the patronage that prevailed thereafter. Focussing on the period 1947–56 itself is less helpful. First, little happened then to alter the patterns of dependence established earlier and secondly, there was no major extension of the State. The social and economic relationships established in the pre-Independence era continued to persist unaltered until 1956. So the events of this period itself are themselves less important for the argument than the contrast between the events of the entire pre-1956 era and those of the years after 1956.

Moreover there is a dearth of source material on the period 1947–56. This is because there were no major Government or private programmes which significantly altered the patterns of patronage disbursement in the areas, so that there is little published or unpublished material to consult. *Kachcheri* records also became more sketchy after the British withdrew, so that there is little here which covers the mundane day-to-day activities of the regions. Also, the major actors who have been interviewed are very hazy in their recollections of this early period and can say little about it.

For these practical and methodological reasons, there is relatively little on the actual events of the period 1947–56. Relatively more space has been devoted to explaining how the dominant families in these areas came to exercise the dominance they did at Independence, and then at looking at how this dominance was undermined and the bases for it changed with the growth of the State after 1956.

To sum up, this study focusses on three electorates; Bluville, Greenville and Red Town. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 cover Bluville, 5 and 6 Greenville, and 7 and 8 Red Town. Chapter 9 examines the role of communal minorities, political dissidents and the JVP insurgency in each of the three electorates. Chapter 10 summarizes and concludes the entire work.

²¹ Wilson (1975), Appendix 2.

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Bluville: the constituency and the patronage network of Doctor Ay (1947–1959)

Introduction

Bluville is a coastal electorate. In 1946 the boundaries of this constituency stretched fourteen miles along the coast and about five miles into the interior at its northernmost point.¹ It comprised parts of Grey *Pattuwa* and Purville *Korale*.² In 1959 the constituency was redrawn to exclude Grey *Pattuwa* and to include a larger part of Purville *Korale*.³ The southern coastal boundary was limited to only ten miles.⁴ The new northern boundary lay about eight miles into the interior.⁵

These changes are unlikely to have significantly altered the caste composition of the electorate. There may have been a slightly larger proportion of the economically dominant *Karave* (fishing) caste in 1959 (25 per cent) than in 1946 (20 per cent), but the proportion of the *Goigama* is likely to have remained about the same at 50–60 per cent. So the *Goigama* community's numerical dominance in this electorate has been maintained since Independence.

The Bluville electorate of 1946 consisted of parts of two Revenue Divisions: Grey *Pattuwa*, which accounted for just over half of the constituency's population and Purville *Korale*, which contained the remainder.⁶ Each Revenue Division had, until 1938–46, been administered by a *Mudaliyar*. These *Mudaliyars* had been the most senior native officers serving in the British Provincial Administration. Their positions had often enabled them to build up considerable patronage networks in their areas of jurisdiction. These networks significantly influenced patterns of political allegiance in 1947 and after and will be examined in detail later.

The main economic activities of the people of Bluville electorate in 1947 were fishing and agriculture. There were a few large estates devoted to the cultivation of tea, rubber and coconut, and, to a lesser extent, cinnamon and citronella.⁷ Paddy, of which there was about 5,000 acres in

¹ GOC (1946).

² *Ibid.*

³ GOC (1959).

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ GOC (1946).

⁷ Ferguson's (1946).