

Role of Government Agent in Local Administration in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The Government Agent (GA) represented the highest authority of the district Administration in the pre-independent Sri Lanka. A similar position known as the "Disawe" could be found in the local administration in the kandyan kingdom. The post of the disawe was replaced by the colonial post of the GA. The powers and functions of the GA made him a petty king in the district. The GA commanded his duty centering in his official place known as Kachchery. The beginning of the 20th Century, the GA played a significant role in district administration in Sri Lanka. Despoil of power and functions of the GA by the political authority were accelerated with the introduction of the Provincial Council system in 1987. Presently the GA is not other than a government servant who plays a role of a coordinator. Also GA has become a victim of the rapid process of politicization of bureaucracy.

Key Words: Government Agent, Disawa, Local Government, Administration, Local Administration

01. Introduction

The Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) became a victim of the western colonialism since the beginning of the 16th Century. The significance of the island in geo-political location and resource endowment was attracted by world powers especially the western imperialists who were been involved in a great competition for naval and commercial power since the 16th century to 19th century. The first Western invasion to the Ceylon that was made by Portuguese in the early 16th century. The Portuguese were in occupation of the coastal areas until 1658 when they were replaced by the Dutch. The Dutch were in turn replaced by the British in 1796 but the kingdom in the highlands retained its independence until 1815. It was only in 1833 that a nationally integrated administrative system was established under which the country was divided into provinces, administered by Government Agents representing the rulers, who made use of the existing system of feudal Local Government which consisted of feudal chiefs at divisional level, and headmen at the village level (Navaratne 1989 p.280).

The historical roots of the local government system in Sri Lanka go back to the reign of the Sinhala Kings. Therefore the concept of decentralization is not new in Sri Lanka. Its existence in varied forms is deep-rooted in history. On the other hand there are arrangements to ensure the central level influence at local level. The Government Agent system is one of them. Among the positions of the bureaucratic set up in the pre-independent Sri Lanka, the Government Agent (GA) represented the highest authority of the district Administration. A similar position known as the "Disawe" with more or less similar powers could be found in the local administration in the kandyan kingdom. The post of the disawe was replaced by the colonial post of the (GA).

The powers and functions of the GA granted him by the colonial government made him a petty king in the district. The GA became the sole representative of the central government promoting the general interest of his province. Thus the beginning of the 20th Century, the GA played a vital and significant role in district administration in Ceylon. However at present the GA has become a victim of the rapid process of politicization of bureaucracy through the central, provincial and divisional political authorities.

2. The District Agent system in Traditional Local Administration

Among the positions of the bureaucratic set up in the pre-independent Sri Lanka, the Government Agent (GA) represented the highest authority of the district Administration. Though the position of the GA is treated as a leftover of the British colonial administration, a similar position known as the “Disawe” with more or less similar powers could be found in the local administration in the kandyan kingdom which lasted from 16th century to the second decade of the 19th century.

He was the chief of Disawa (district) which was an administrative unit of the traditional local administration in the Kandyan era. As Prof. Abeyasinghe, (1966, p.69-72), observed, the Kotte kingdom, at the arrival of Portuguese had divided into four “disawas.” According to de Silva (1972, p.156) “at the early days of the Portuguese rule, Sinhalese “Disawe” in Kotte kingdom had enjoyed wider-range of powers in land allotments and the power of enforcing even the death penalty which were not empowered even during the reigns of Kadyan kings. A disawe under the Portuguese rule had been empowered to appoint all officials subordinate to him and he was the commander in chief of a platoon of “laskiringha”, of which all soldiers were Sinhalese (Ibid). The Portuguese did not want to make drastic changes in the traditional system of local government but reprocessed the existing caste system with some modifications and utilized in their trade and commercial purposes. One particular caste group which was involved in specific production or a service was known as Badde¹. The position of “Disawe under the Dutch rule became one of the members of the advisory board to a Dutch commander of whom administrative region was known as commandary (Arasaratnam 1969, p.123). It should be noted that during the period of the Dutch rule, no specific arrangements were made in the sphere of local government but there was a substantial contribution to the development of an independent judicial system in the country.

The administrative unit of “Disawa” could be defined as an area which was geographically demarcated and administered under an agent of the king known as the “disawe”. The Kandyan kingdom had been divided into two regions viz. “rata”² and “Disa or disawa”³. Dewaraja, (1972, p.160) noted that when the British captured the Kandyan kingdom, there were twelve “Disaswas. The area of the disawa was subdivided into Korals, and Korala into Patthus, and Patthu into villages (Leitan 1979, p.1-2). Korals were administered by a royalist officer name Korala. They served the king by sending their people to protect the country in case of external invasions or internal threats to the throne or peoples’ uprisings which seemed to 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.23) mentions that

1 A badde or Badda was a departmental system under which one particular group of people /caste was organized to produce a commodity or to provide a particular service

2 It was an administrative area relatively smaller than a disawa

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

“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.”

Disawe was appointed by the king as the chief of a region of disawa /disavani. The “Adigar” was above the position of disawe in the feudal hierarchy of the local administration during the Kandyan era. The chief Adigar or Mahadigar took precedence over all others in the hierarchy of chiefs and was second only to the king in position and rank. He resided in his castle known as walawwa⁴ which is situated at a short distance to the royal palace⁵ as his presence in the royalist council was indispensable. Adigar was honored by granting a province. Keppetipola mahadigar was the chief of Uva province during the rebellion of 1818. However, the authority over these grants lasted till the end of the 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 (Kappetipola Adigar) tried to raise the people of Sabaragamuwa to revolt against the King”* (KM de Silva op. cit. P. 23).

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 lands which were known as “gamwara” or badawadiligam. The involvement of people in production or some sphere 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, guardian and peacemaker by preserving law and order.

3. The Role of Government Agent in the Colonial Administration

The post of the disawe with his powers and functions as the chief executive of the province known as disawa was replaced by the colonial post of the Government Agent (GA) on the recommendation made by the Colebrook Cameron Reforms of 1832 that was the driving force which accelerated the process of the transition from feudalism to the rising capitalism in Ceylon. Yet the concept of the colonial post of the GA with such powers and functions as a chief executive and revenue official of a defined geographical area having direct responsibility to the center was nothing new. It was common even in the Portuguese and Dutch administration which adopted many features of the system of the traditional Sinhalese in their local administration. With the subjugation of the entire country in 1815 and hence the central as well as the local administration under the British colonial rule, became more complicated and extensive. It resulted to entrusting the GA with a great variety of functions in addition to the duties related to the revenue collection. The multitudes of duties that had been assigned to a GA could be observed through the following instructions given to the collectors by the Governor Maitland.

“The first great object for every collector is to make himself acquainted with the various district in his province and the various headmen belonging to such district, by making frequent circuits through the whole of his province. ..., and it is upon such occasion in particular that the attached to the collector ought principally to

4 Walawwa was and is even now generally used for the residential places of aristocratic people.

5 The palace was known as maha wasala or Raja Maligawa

be made use. Settling all petty dispute in the different villages of his district ...supplying them with seed, grain, clothing and agricultural tools.”⁶

Thus the powers and functions of the GA granted him by the colonial government made him a petty king in the district. He became a plenipotentiary of the central government, by reason of his numerous powers and functions. The position of the GA was so needed by the Kandyan⁷ peasantry in arranging their livelihood; it was obvious that without his administrative assistance, the people could hardly manage their living in a society which was an enclave by poor education and caste-driven slavery system. The GA, therefore, was respected as “disapathy-hamuduruwo” (sanctified person in the district in Sinhalese colloquial speaking) by them as he was the supreme person with whom they could be kept their final hope for relief. Thus, by virtue of his authority and the duties assigned to him, the influence of the GA over the routine of the people was immense.

The poor villagers in their routines in rural administration had to be dependents much upon the petty officials. Owing to the fact that the inclusive power of decision making and implementation and maintaining the law and order were in the hands of these officials, they could make innocent peasants into punishable offenders in the presence of the high officials. Yet it was the ordinary people who provided all what was requested by minor officials at rural level to make their higher official satisfied. It is reported that when officials were on their circuit, they were welcomed and regarded respectfully by subordinate officials with providing required amenities for his official tour. Yet the status and powers of officials under the colonial rule began to weaken due to economic and political reasons. With the centralized arrangements of the colonial rule, from the budgetary point of view, the maintenance of such larger staff was calculated by colonial authorities as costly. Then the colonial authorities were with the idea to reduce powers while increasing duties of traditional staff in particular and foreign officers in general. This policy of curtailment of authority entered the implementing phase after the great rebellion in 1818. In his explanation of the situation Silva (p.46) wrote that chief of the Kandyans suffered a loss of their authority and powers at the local administration. It was later realized a mistake done by the Kandyan chiefs to decide to transplant foreign rulers in the Kandyan kingdom where the traditional chiefs were enjoying semi- autonomous powers though, their tenure was uncertain as it was a determinant of the will of the king. The admiration to the upper and oppression to the below was the usual practice of the officials irrespective of their positions and levels.

However, in 1818 governor Brownrigg proposed to reduce the status of Kandyan chiefs both in power, functions by requesting them to function completely subordinating to and under the direct orders of British officials” (Ibid). Agents of Government with wide executive and judicial authority were appointed in every outline districts and yet the districts neighboring to Kandy were brought under the control of the Board of Commissioners (BOC) which was the colonial body especially established to administer the Kandyan areas. The political affairs, revenue collection and judicial matters were assigned the Board of Commissioners. Yet the revenue collection and judicial matters should have to be assigned to the high ranking chiefs of the traditional order. However, it seemed that the performances of the BOC were inefficient and incapable. This was mainly because of the unfamiliarity with the indigenous context and inadequacy of the human resources. The situation compelled the colonial government to choose members of traditional families to whom the people paid their loyalty.

⁶ See Report of Donoughmore Commission , 3131, HMSO, p. 215-216

⁷ The term used to identify the inhabitants in the Kandyan provinces it contains three district namely Kandy, Matale and Nuwaraeliya. Also by surnames Sinhalese people could be identified as kandyan

The positions of the colonial administration during the mid-40s of the 19th Century were decided to open for English speaking natives and educated British residents in Ceylon. Nevertheless, the expectation of the colonial government to accelerate the recruitment of English speaking natives was in vain. It resulted in occupying almost all positions of the colonial administration by two British families that were namely Layards and Templars (Ibid). Reportedly, members of these two families held all higher positions except the most powerful post of the civil service that was the colonial secretary. Soon the colonial government realized that the English was not panacea to overcome all kinds of shortcomings that appeared in the colonial administration and the medium of English was not the avenue that could be made use to penetrate into the life pattern of the natives. The authorities further realized that unless steps were taken to indigenization of the local administration, shortcomings appeared in the local administration that could not be overcome. The situation was facilitated by the rising tension among the civil servants who were suffering from the maltreatment and underassessment of their service. Many including Govt. Agents were with the expectation of their promotions and salary updating.

Portraying the situation, de Silva (p.214-215) mentioned that “by the end of 1830s, civil service morale had declined due to lack of promotion and ill-payments.” In order to avoid the situation in 1844/45, a strict prohibition on civil servants engaging in plantation activities was imposed. Actions were taken to promote them in their positions and to increase salaries. Promotions were decided to grant for the most competent men in native languages.” Though the enforcement of regulations that laid down the requirement for obtaining the competency in native languages as a qualification for confirmation of junior civil servants in their post, the process was reportedly in slow pace. These directives produced not an accelerated improvement but a gradual in the sphere. “Even in the late 1840s civil servants knowledge of the vernaculars was far from satisfactory (Ibid).

However, the colonial administration was not admired by natives and consequent resistance against the system was frequent. The headmen, who wanted to preserve the old order which enabled them to wield considerable powers and influence over the innocent peasantry, employed two alternatives viz., genuine or disgrace abuses. The raising people against the alien rule or groveling for status were general practices used by local heads for their glory which they were enjoying during the pre-colonial era. The colonial administration in Ceylon, hence, paid much attention to revise the provincial administration. The provinces were reorganized to be administered by GAs through a hierarchy of local officials. The most influential factor for increasing of the powers and responsibilities of GAs was the rapid growth of the plantation economy that was booming during the second half of the 19th Century. As Panditharatne (203-218) points out that “*the plantation industry accounted for the growth of several towns and the most of which were in the hill (up) country. The urbanization and mushrooming of small towns in the plantation areas create unprecedented social issues which drew the attention of the colonial administration to take immediate intervention. The development of transportation and the needs of the plantation industry led the planters and their political masters to reorganize urban areas offering certain public utilities and service centers.*”

The breaking out the isolation of the hill country which had been utilized by kandyans only for common purpose, a network of minor and main roads were constructed linking the area with Colombo-the major port and the commercial city of the country. The Provincial Road Committees and the District Road Committees were established under the “Thoroughfare Ordinance no. 10 of 1861.”(Ranasinghe RAW 1981, p.51). In the management of new improvements, the GA was made the ex-officio chairman of the Provincial Road Committees consisting of 3-5 members (Report of the Commission on Local Government S.P. xxxiii, 1955, p.6) while he or his assistant was assigning duties of acting chairman of the District Road Committees. As scope of economic activities increased a considerable widening of the existing administrative structures became imperative. Hence new posts were to be created and many fresh departments were to be setup within this socio-

economic development. The widening of economic and social activities assigned more powers to a Government Agent GA who commanded his duty centering in his official place known as Kachchery (Hicks 1961, p.60) which were established in provincial capitals or district centers.

The establishment of Municipal councils in highly commercialized and administratively significant cities under the Municipal Council ordinance no. 17 of 1865, further extended the responsibilities of the GA. Three Municipal Councils were established in Colombo, Kandy and Galle and GAs were made chairmen of Kandy and Galle MCs. With the out breaking of Cholera epidemic in the plantation districts in 1845, the governor commanded to establish an institutional mechanism to combat against such transmitted diseases under the Ordinance no. 10 of 1852.⁸ In addition to the responsibilities of the affairs of the Municipality, the Government Agent was appointed as the ex-officio chairman of the Local Boards of Health and Sanitary Boards (Leitan, p.41). Though the principle of election was adopted in, these bodies were not independent from the point of local autonomy as they had to depend financially on the GA (Ibid). Thus, the GA as the chief representative of the government in his province could enjoy the executive authority of the state. Apart from his duty to maintaining law and order in his province through his native headmen, the GA had to collect revenue and keep the people loyal to the government. Yet the administrative glory which was once exercised by the traditional disawe or the GA at the early colonial rule could not be enjoyed by the GA with the centralized arrangements of the plantation era of the colonial rule.

With the increase of functions of government, the GA became the general field officer of the central government. Consequently the line of authority was changed. The Colonial Secretary became the head of the system of administration and the GA had to implement the general orders made by the colonial secretary. The GA became the supervisor of the indigenous hierarchy of officials which had been extended down to the Village Headmen System. The Headman Commission of 1922 states that “under the existing system each village or group of small village is placed under the supervision of minor headman known as Gam Arachchi in Kandyan areas and police vidane or police headman in low country. The positions above those headmen were Korala in Kandyan districts; Uddaiyar in Tamil districts Vidane Arachchi in districts of low country. The top rank above all officials was represented by “Rate Mahatmaya, and Adigars in Kandyyan districts, Maniyagars and Vanniyars in Tamil Districts and Mudliers in southern provinces.

The GA has an extensive authority over village headman system. It is reported that “the promotion of village headman from one class to another to be dependent on satisfactory performances of duty, certified by the GA”⁹.

Although the Government Agent was primarily a revenue collector, great varieties of functions were exercised by him (Jack of all trades). The arrays of duties and functions embraced in the instructions¹⁰ of Governor Maitland made GA a district potentate with a combination of legislative, executive and judicial functions.

1. Circuit visits to whole of his province
2. Exercise judicial power during those visits to resolve petty disputes

8 Ordinance to amend the laws relating to small –Fox quarantine and for preventing the spread of certain contagious disease in the Island Sec. 2

9 Vide, paragraph 48 & 49 of S.P. 11 of 1923 and S.P. XXVII-1935 – Report of the Commission on the Headman System, Nov. 1935. Ceylon Govt. Press Colombo

10 See Report of Donoughmore Commission , 3131, HMSO, p. 215-216.

3. Make arrangements to guarantee the supply of necessities such as seed, grain, clothing and agricultural tools to the villagers.
4. Relieving villagers from the vexation of the Tax Collector.

In addition, he was expected to give his recommendation at the conference of Govt. Agents and to appoint justice of peace. Thus the GA became the sole representative of the central government promoting the general interest of his province. According to the Civil Service Manual, the task, expected from him was practically unlimited with comprising of the obligation of being fully acquainted with the system of agriculture and industrious pursuits and all relations of trade. Thus the beginning of the 20th Century, the GA played a vital and significant role in district administration in Ceylon.

By the end of the World War 1, as Pakeman (1964, p.96) pointed out that the GA and his assistants were entrusted with a variety of duties, carried out by their 19th century predecessors. The most significant evidence relevant to the multifarious powers and functions of the GA is Woolf's Diaries in Ceylon, in 1908-11.

- 1st Sept. 1908 Inspected town with Sanitary Inspector
- 10TH Sept 1908 Inspection of Hambantota Hospital
- 13th Sept. 1908 rode out with the Mudliyar in the early morning along the Kirama Oya to inquire into the question of the Tangalla Field.
- 23rd Oct. 1908 went to see the chain of Bridge across the paddy field the beginning of the road to Gonadeniya.
- 27th Oct. 1908 inspected Wallasmulla School and found it excellent
- 23rd, 25th and 26th Nov. 1908 investigation of murder at Tissa

Thus the diaries of Woolf provide explicit evidences in proving that the GA had enjoyed a vast range of powers and functions in the district administration. Yet the depriving of the power of the post of GA as a provincial Chief began with the implementation of terms made by the Donoughmore Commission in 1931. The establishment of the Executive Committee system (there were seven committees and each was headed by a chairman who were later known as ministers) and assignment of related powers and functions to the chairman of the committee was the turning point of depriving the powers so far enjoyed by the GA. The chairman of an executive committee became the sole authority of the affairs assigned to departments and bureaus under his purview. The entire power and functions of successive steps of an administration conceptualized in the POSDCORB¹¹ model by Luther Gullick was vested with the Minister. The subject of Local Government too, with the new reforms under Donoughmore Commission broke away from the coordinating influence of the GA. Leitan (p.54), mentions that the structural reforms already outlined, abolished the membership of the GA and other officials of the district administration on local bodies. With the rapid growth of the socio-economic formations, and consequently the multiplication of needs of the people who were confronting with the new

11 Planning, Organizing,, Staffing, Directing, Coordinating, Reporting & Budgeting - the model was constructed by Luther Gullick vide Public Administration in Theory and Practice

developments were being required field branches of departments, which were concentrated in the capital cities. These branches occupied their places in the Kachchery, where the office of the GA too, was located in, and acquired some powers and duties which were previously being exercised by the GA. Education, for instance, which was under the supervision of the GA, was transferred to the District Branches of the Department of Education. Thus legal affairs, health, agriculture & land, social services, food & cooperatives etc. were transferred away from the GA to the relevant departmental branches in the district. Thus the acquisition of powers and responsibilities of the GA by the executive committee system made him suffer from power dehydration.

The status of the GA after the Donoughmore recommendations could be portrayed through the following note. *“The division of government’s activities into ten ministries with a minister in charge of each activity, in place of general surveillance by the colonial secretary reduced enormously the power and responsibilities of the GA and led to the appointment of the departmental organizations responsible to the minister to manage many of the executives formerly entrusted to GA.”* Thus the power and status of the GA, who was once an unquestioned authority in the district, underwent gradual erosion with the acquisition of his powers and authority of local administration by the departmental field agencies (Leitan p.41) Local administration for instance, under which Sanitary Boards and Village Committees were formerly supervised by the Kachchery organizations was now under the Department of Local Government. Education, Agriculture, Health and Public Works that were the subjects under the purview of the GA were the responsibilities of relevant departments under the executive committee system.

5. The Role of the GA in Post Independent Era

The next phase of the erosion of the status of the GA was commenced with the introduction of the Westminster model of government under the Soulbury constitution in 1948. The system of the government was cabinet of which executive power was constituted in nominal and real executive positions. The commanding of public administration was vested with the governor who was appointed by the crown (queen) on the recommendations of the Prime Minister (PM). He, therefore, had dual responsibility to the crown as well as to the PM and thereby, to the legislature of Ceylon. The entire management and commanding of the public service was legally assigned to the Public Services Commission which was appointed by the governor on behalf of the queen as well as the leader of the commonwealth. The GA was still powerful official at the District administration. As Warnapala (1970, p.13) mentions that the GA for Badulla District which was 3200 sq.mile in extent and contained 50,000 population were supported by 12 assistant Govt. Agents, 7 District Revenue Officers and 176 Village headmen.”

Even though the GA’s control over rural development and agricultural spheres was continuing it seemed thawing with the new arrangements made in the central as well as local administration. The authority over rural development which was under purview of the GA, for instance, seemed breaking away from him and assigned to the newly formed department of rural development within the ministry of Home Affairs. Leitan explained that “even though the Department of rural development detailed its staff for the field, the GA was assigned general responsibility of rural development in his district.” Furthermore, at the divisional level the entire staff of the department worked under the District Revenue Officer (DRO) of the District administration.

The role of the GA played in agricultural sector with substantial powers during the first quarter of the 20th century, was limited only to general coordination of activities pertaining to agriculture and irrigation in the

district with the adaptation of the Central Planning Machinery in 1965. The GA was assigned the initiation of preparation of implementation program for the district.

During the period until the enactment of the First Republic Constitution in 1972 which is treated as a main departure from the Westminster model of government, the GA enjoyed a large extent of powers in district administration with an erosional tendency. The introduction of this indigenous type or as Warnapala¹² termed the “Autochthonous” mode of constitution affected greatly on the powers and functions of the GA that were being enjoyed so far uninterruptedly. The first challenge to the power and status of the GA was the replacement of the colonial name of Government Agent by Sinhalese traditional name of “Disapathy ” and the Assistant Govt. Agent who was previously known as District Revenue Officer (DRO) as Upa-disapathy. The replacement of colonial names by Sinhalese traditional names marked a turning point of detachment from the British influence on the politics and administration of a sovereign state. It was also a great revolution and the completion of the right to “self-determination” of the nation.

The Public Service Commission (PSC) was abolished and the personal management of the public service was assigned to the cabinet and thereby to the parliament opening avenues to politicization of bureaucracy of the country. In order to avoid the above accusation, a new arrangement was made by establishing the State Service Advisory Board and Disciplinary Board which were nothing more than decorations made to the constitution.

Thus the operation which targeted to localize (indigenize) of the system of government was not bound only to the frontiers of the central government but also to the district and local government. The control of the local (district) administration by the central authority under the arrangements of the Public Services Commission (PSC) which was constituted as an independent body from the national politics under the Soulbury Constitution seemed weaker and inefficient. The provincial administration was beyond the touch of the central / national executive. The importance of the capacity of central control over the peripheral subjects through administrative units that are answerable to the center in an emergency situation was apprehended during the first youth uprising in 1971. The prime motivation for the United Front government to take such measures was not only retaining provinces under control of the central government but also to the necessity of reorganizing the provinces/districts bring into the terms and conditions of the new Republic constitution. The main anticipation of the reorganization of provincial administration was the subjugation of the prominent role played by the Government Agents and their assistants with colonial consciousness to the people sovereignty. This goal was achieved by establishing the District Political Authority (DPA) in 1973. This specific arrangement was also to set the stage as a panacea to the issue of the devolution of power of the country. Nevertheless, the underlined idea of establishing of the DPA was to use as an instrumental measure to achieve the national aspirations of a centralized power. The government announced that the main objective of the establishment of the DPA was primarily to accelerate the food production in the district and to cover the general supervision of the administrative affairs in the district. Yet in the course of work the DPA tried to grasp all powers in planning, decision making, staffing and implementation of the district administration. The GA was made subjected to the Political Authority. The government of Sri Lanka appointed 20 political authorities for twenty two districts and directed the GAs and the AGAs by a circular¹³ issued on 10 Dec. 1973, “to act in accordance with the decisions and instructions of the District Political Authority (DPA) in their district.” The GA became the administrative

12 A seminar Article presented by Wiswa Warnapala at the seminar on US- Sri Lankan constitutions organized by the International Ethnic Studies Centre in Dec. 1987 at the American Centre, Kandy and published in Sinhala as a translated article by RAW Ransinghe in ANUBHUTHY magazine, (ed. by Rev. P. Soratha & et. al) vol.1, no.3 1989, p. 89/110

13 The Circular of 10 December, 1973, Ministry of Public Administration, Local Government and home Affairs AB I DC 17

coordinator in the execution of decisions taken by the District Planning Unit which was consisted by the DPA and the MPs within the district, with regard to the utilization of funds allocated for the district under the Decentralized Budget. As Leitan (p.41) mentions, the execution of works assigned to each district departmental heads had to carry out with the GA who acted as administrative coordinator of this program. The Kachchery which was maintaining hitherto as the office of the GAs, converted into the office of the DPA and consequently the GA became the secretary to the political Authority. Since then the role of the GA was not other than a coordinator between the DPA and the officials of the various departments at the district level.

The GA was assigned the responsibilities of administration and the duties of the District Decentralized Budget (DCB). With the increasing power of Members of Parliament (MPs), the GA had to act as a coordinator of the development activities in consulting the Politicians in the district. Thus paying a greater admiration to the First Republic Constitution as the Autochthonous legal document which completed the sovereignty of the state by detaching from all kinds of ties that had been linked the country to the imperialism, an accusation could also be made to it as pioneer of politicization of the bureaucracy of the country.

The decline of power and functions of the GA who exercised the full authority in every aspect at the district level further continued even under the District Ministerial System introduced by the Development Council Act no. 35 of 1980.¹⁴ From there onwards the Government Agent was a secretary to the District Minister. The GA was assigned the duties of summoning meetings preparing and submitting of reports to the ministry and performing the duties of a chief accountant.

The power of the entire administration at the district level was vested with the district minister. Thus the operational directives of the system of District Development Council and the District Ministerial system together made its original hopes of making the system of increasing the political participation of the people at the local levels, democratization of the process of administration and as an ideal remedy to the ethnic conflict of the country, became a fiasco and moreover, it was not more than a concept. The eventual outcome was the extraction of powers and functions of the GA who played a vital role in the district administration by the political authority.

Despoil of power and functions of the GA by the political authority were accelerated with the introduction of the Provincial Council system in 1987. In accordance with the provisions of the Provincial Council Act no. 47 of 1987, and the structural arrangements of the council, the governor under whom the provincial administration is commanded is appointed by the executive president of the country. The chief minister and four other ministers in the provincial cabinet have acquired the administrative powers and privileges at the province that were being enjoyed by the GA. The chief secretary and other secretaries to the ministries of the provincial cabinet are civil servants but in the real sense they are obedient “yes-men” of provincial politicians.

Presently the Govt. Agent is not other than a government servant who plays a role of a coordinator of “samurdhi” (prosperity) program which is the main relief or poverty reduction program which an extension of previous “Janasaviya (Peoples strength) program which is a relief package conducted by the Divisional Secretariats, specially designed for the political purposes rather than a poverty alleviation program. In addition the GA is answerable to the government on the subject of postal and telecommunication and elections. The authority of the subjects of land and settlement, irrigation canals, transport, rural development, motor traffic, social services and rehabilitation, health and Ayurvedic, rest houses, libraries and cemeteries are the subjects that despoiled

¹⁴ Proposal for the establishment of District Councils under the direction & control of the Central Government 1968, p.9

from the GA. The powers which had been assigned to him as a coordinator of the central government are also subjected to the jurisdiction of the provincial council.

Thus the gigantic role of the GA once enjoyed at the district level has become lesser and lesser in snowballing trend with the introduction of reform after reforms. Also he has become a victim of the rapid process of politicization of bureaucracy through the central, provincial and divisional political authorities.

6. Conclusion

Government Agent is a significance position in the Sri Lanka's administrative system. Indeed among the positions of the bureaucratic set up in the pre-independent Sri Lanka, the GA represented the highest authority of the district Administration. A similar position known as the "Disawe" with more or less similar powers could be found in the local administration in the kandyan kingdom during 16th to 19th century. The Disawe could enjoy all powers except exercising the death penalty which could only be enforced by the king. The post of the disawe was replaced by the colonial post of the Government Agent (GA). GA became a plenipotentiary of the central government, by reason of his numerous powers and functions. With the centralized arrangements of the colonial rule, from the budgetary point of view, the maintenance of such larger staff was calculated by colonial authorities as costly. The colonial administration in Ceylon, hence, paid much attention to revise the provincial administration. The provinces were reorganized to be administered by GAs through a hierarchy of local officials. With the increase of functions of government, the GA became the general field officer of the central government. The Colonial Secretary became the head of the system of administration and the GA had to implement the general orders made by the colonial secretary. The GA has an extensive authority over village headman system. The GA became the sole representative of the central government promoting the general interest of his province. Therefore the beginning of the 20th Century, the GA played a vital and significant role in district administration in Ceylon.

With the new reforms under Donoughmore Commission broke away from the coordinating influence of the GA. The next phase of the erosion of the status of the GA was commenced with the introduction of the Westminster model of government under the Soulbury constitution in 1948. The entire management and commanding of the public service was legally assigned to the Public Services Commission which was appointed by the Governor. The GA was still powerful official at the District administration. Meaning until the enactment of the First Republic Constitution in 1972 the GA enjoyed a large extent of powers in district administration with an erosional tendency. The provincial administration was beyond the touch of the central / national executive. The main anticipation of the reorganization of provincial administration was the subjugation of the prominent role played by the Government Agents and their assistants with colonial consciousness to the people sovereignty. The decline of power and functions of the GA who exercised the full authority in every aspect at the district level further continued even under the District Ministerial System. From there onwards the Government Agent was a secretary to the District Minister. Presently the Govt. Agent is not other than a government servant who plays a role of a coordinator of program which is a relief package conducted by the Divisional Secretariats, specially designed for the political purposes rather than a poverty alleviation program. Now the GA has become a victim of the rapid process of politicization of bureaucracy in Sri Lanka through the central, provincial and divisional political authorities.

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