LOCAL PARTICIPATION AND PARTICIPANTS IN
BRITISH COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION:
THE SRI LANKAN SCENE: 1833—1900

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To understand the nature and extent of junior partnership in the colonial
administration during the period under review it is necessary to have some
idea regarding changes in colonial policy as applicable to Sri Lanka, and the
structure of its politics and of the administration. The Colebrooke - Cameron
Commission was a landmark in colonial policy as applied to Sri Lanka. Hitherto
the British had generally followed a policy which carried forward the system
which they had inherited from the Dutch in the Maritime provinces and from
the Kandyan Kingdom. The few changes which they made had as its main
objective the stability of their political power and were changes in emphasis
rather than in direction. The Colebrooke - Cameron recommendations saw
an attempt to introduce a far more liberal, laissez-faire and utilitarian
outlook and concepts in the administration of the colony. Most of the reform
proposals of Colebrooke and Cameron were accepted at the Colonial Office,
which was influenced in its decisions more by the ideological and political
environment prevailing in England at the time, rather than by an adequate
consideration of the conservative reactions in the colony, or by an assessment
of future prospects. This background as well as later changes of emphasis
in colonial policy resulted in making the actual implementation of the reform
proposals a half-hearted exercise rather than an enthusiastic response.

In colonies such as Sri Lanka, where there were large indigenous populations,
entrenched traditional structures, and tradition bound socio-economic systems,
and where large scale European colonization was not a feasibility, it was
inevitable that some sharing of power with indigenous elitist groups was a
necessity. Prior to 1833 this was seen in the association of the Mudaliyars and
other headmen in the administration of the Maritime provinces and with the
Kandyan chiefs after the cession of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815.1 By 1833,

1. During the period under review Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon. Thus whenever
Ceylon occurs in quotations and footnotes it should be understood as referring
to Sri Lanka. Also note that this paper leaves out the Headman system, the clerical
services and Municipal Councils.
2. For further details see P. D. Kannangara, 'The Headman system in the British
Administration of the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka', Kelaniya Journal of
Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Kelaniya, Vol. one, Nos. 1 and 2, pp.
96-130.
3. For the role played by the Kandyan chiefs, see K. M. P. Kulasena, British Admini-
stration in the Kandyan Provinces of Sri Lanka, 1815—1833, with special reference
and 3.