

LOCAL BODIES AS DOMAINS OF LOCALISED POWER

Jayadeva Uyangoda

After over one year of postponement by the government under Emergency powers, the local government elections are scheduled to take place in late March. And the campaign has started, just one day before nominations were closed, with murder and violence. The polls campaign started with a cruel bang, when an MP from the ruling People's Alliance was gunned down by a gang, reportedly led by a fellow MP of the victim, belonging to the opposition UNP, at Kuruwita in the Ratnapura district. The violence that followed this senseless and brutal killing of Nalanda Ellawela continued for nearly a week with unruly mobs destroying property and setting fire to houses and shops. The police had added further fuel to the tension by shooting at angry crowds on rampage, resulting in both further deaths and serious injuries.

While the outrage and righteous anger generated by the Kuruwita killing is being slowly dissipated in forgotten memories, this episode of political violence points to some disturbing dimensions of Sri Lanka's contemporary political culture— dimensions that are rarely acknowledged or raised in the public debate¹. Why should local elections necessitate so much violence, so acute a contest among major contestants? What explains the intense hatred that some appear to entertain against their electoral opponents?

If we scan our memories of local elections held in recent years, we could recall violence occurring almost regularly. The provincial council election held for the Southern Province in early 1994 saw clashes among contesting groups practically every-day of the election. The recently held elections for cooperative society boards were not an exception. Shootings, stabbing, beatings and destruction of private property occurred in the campaign for as insignificant an election as one meant for village cooperative societies. Why?²

Theoretically, provincial, local and cooperative bodies are meant to be institutions of participatory democracy. In an abstract sense, Sri Lanka is a text book case of participatory institutions, elected by the people and spread over a number of levels of governance and administration. Just beneath the central government are provincial councils, established in 1987. Then a variety of local government bodies — from Municipal Councils to *Pradeshiya Sabhas*— constitute a somewhat older system of local government, which has been subject to reform many times. At the village level are *gramodaya mandalayas*, rhetorically described as a system of *gram raj* (village republics). The cooperative societies are also governed by boards, directly elected by their members. If this entire system works well, Sri Lanka's polity should be an ideal form of participatory democratic governance.

That, incidently, has not been the case. It has worked exactly the other way round. These local institutions have been politicized in a

very specific manner, stripping them of their participatory, democratic and representative potentials.

Localised Power

To return to the question raised earlier as to why elections for local bodies should necessitate, on the part of contenders, so much adversarial enmity, hatred and violence, we may need to examine how institutions of local governance have become localised domains of rival political power.

Institutions in any political system are means that provide access to institutionalised power and resources. The control of institutions of power and resources has, in the Sri Lankan context, become important due to variety of reasons— electoral, political, social and economic. That is how political institutions work in real life.

The fact that there exists a multi-tier system of representative institutions — at village, division, district, province and national level — also means the availability for the politically ambitious elements of an institutional channel for political upward mobility. During the Village Council days too, many future MPs started their political careers as chairmen of these rural elected bodies. But now, unlike in the olden days when many a retired politician died in debt and destitution, a greater association of material and social capital with progressively higher elected offices makes ambitious men and women, even at the lowest level of office, treat elections with an inexorable do-or-die seriousness. Becoming a chairman of a *pradeshiya sabha*, or a Mayor of even a provincial municipal council enables one to enter into a complex web of economic and political relations that are strategically important in capital accumulation and upward economic and political mobility.

Winning an election at any cost has thus become a life-and-death motif of struggle among national as well as local politicians.³ Political power has become an end in itself, based on the generalized assumption that the end justifies means. The fact that national political parties with head offices in Colombo rely on their provincial strong men and women has made them an essential resource base for the party bosses. At the provincial or local level, they do a fantastic job for the party leaders, who usually come from the upper class elite families in Colombo. The elitist party bosses have neither the time nor the emotional courage to roam around provincial towns and villages with armed goon squads. Thus a neat division of labour exists between the national party leaders and their gladiatory cadres in the provinces⁴.

Two areas where there has been a concentration of inter-party political violence are the Ratnapura district and the Western coastal

belt between Wattala and Puttalam. An examination of some of the political-economy and social specificities of these two regions may reveal why violence and thuggery have become an integral component of electoral as well as inter-party politics. These two regions have the most active and lucrative networks of the informal economy in entire Sri Lanka. The coastal districts between Wattala and Puttalam have the Free Trade Zone, the Katunayaka Airport, fishing and prawn industries and of course the immensely profitable smuggling industry. Ratnapura has an unbeatable economy of instant accumulation of capital associated with the gem industry. The informal economy in these two regions is far more gainful than the formal version of it. Getting elected to, and controlling, institutions of local power in these areas offers tremendous opportunities for the control of resources the full extent of which, is known only to the players of the game. Just consider the violence that erupted soon after the PA came into power in the battle to gain control of the taxi service at the Katunayake airport and of the prawn farm business in the Puttalam district. The seemingly irrational extent to which an MP and an ex-Mayor of Ratnapura went in gunning down their leading political opponent in the district is not without logical reasoning grounded in the political-economy of local power. It is not an accident or an aberration that intense political violence has in recent years been localised in these two areas.

Specificity of Ratnapura

Ratnapura also offers a somewhat unique sociological dimension to political violence. Although not subjected to any serious study by either political scientists or sociologists, the Ratnapura district represents a fascinating case study of social — class — conflict, expressed at the level of competition for electoral dominance. For many years, the political leadership of the Ratnapura district has come from the aristocratic layers of the *goyigama* caste, and they were also in the leadership of the SLFP. Ratnapura, in this sense, is a district which has produced progressives and reformists — the Ellawelas, Muttetuwegamas and to some extent the Ratwattes — from among the high caste landed aristocracy, the so-called *appos*. But the contradiction of that progressivism is that neither the SLFP nor the Left parties could produce a district leader from ranks of the lower social classes and castes.

Ironically, it is the socially conservative and bourgeois UNP which had provided opportunities for non-aristocratic and non-elitist elements of Ratnapura's caste-ridden society to emerge as municipal or district and parliamentary leaders. The Mathews and the Ratnatileke's, not to mention the Puchinillames, would never have got their national and municipal position of power from the SLFP, which is generally viewed as socially more progressive than the UNP.

This contradiction needs to be understood in terms of the economic and social changes that have occurred in the Ratnapura district over the past two to three decades. Even a brief visit to Ratnapura, Pelmadulla, Eheliyagoda, Rakwana and Kuruwita would enable any casual visitor to identify the enormous transformation of class relations that has taken place due to the gem mining industry. The

folklore in the region contains many legends of extraordinary rise to wealth - of a betel-leaves seller or pavement hawker becoming a multi-millionaire businessman overnight, with Lakshmi smiling over a rare and very valuable gemstone. With the gem business, a new generation of considerably rich businessmen has emerged in Ratnapura.

This class has a number of unique characteristics. Firstly, they have accumulated enormous wealth with relative ease and in comparatively brief — one must say, very brief — time spans. Conspicuous and thoroughly exhibitionist consumption patterns — building houses in unbelievably fancy architectural designs, purchasing expensive luxury cars and vehicles of the latest models, and throwing lavish parties with pop music groups from the city to entertain friends, policemen, politicians and bureaucrats in the area — constitute one of the defining cultural habits of this class of exclusively men⁵. A great deal of male solidarity and machoism exists in their collective and individual culture, because the very nature of the gem business requires trickery, intimidation and more often than not gladiatory power. It is an open secret that these businessmen have many enemies and therefore they maintain close clandestine links with the police, while having their own 'body guards' — the latter being a sanitized expression for illegally armed musclemen recruited from the semi-underworld. Actually, there are many stories to suggest that a local and mini version of the New York mafia functions in Ratnapura, just like in Wattala, Negombo and Puttalam in the Western coastal belt.

The class dynamics of this extremely rich social group are fascinating to the student of sociology. Although they have acquired enormous wealth, their economic activities are primarily limited to speculative enterprises — big time money lending, the purchase and sale of gems, buying and selling land, transport and to a limited extent investment in the tourist hotel industry. Speculative capital is essentially a form of the informal economy. Therefore, seldom do they transform themselves into capitalists, in the political economy sense of the term. They are rich men, but not capitalists. They remain rich men and excluded from the class of the bourgeoisie, in social and cultural terms. Coming from lower layers of the social structure and lacking in social esteem in the traditional, social structural sense of the term, they are treated with suspicion and contempt by the landed aristocracy in the area as well as by the Colombo bourgeoisie. They have acquired material capital, but not social or cultural capital to be admitted to the authentic Sri Lankan bourgeoisie. That honour awaits their children who are admitted to St. Thomas's College or a convent in Colombo or an International School with an exotic name⁶.

The same dynamic operates at the level of politics too. Ratnapura district is an amazing case, with SLFP and Left politics dominated by individuals coming from the culturally modernized landed aristocracy and the UNP attracting the recently wealthy elements whose social origins are essentially plebeian. This particular social constitution of UNP and SLFP/Left politics, to a great extent, explains the perennial tension that has existed between these two rival political camps. The ultimate tussle in the politics of Ratnapura has been centered on the issue of who dominates the Ratnapura

district politically— sons of the traditional landed aristocracy or sons of the new rich with plebeian class origins. It is such an unintended irony that the Kuruwita battle was waged by a minor chieftain — Punchi Nilame— against an *appo*, a 'lord of the land'. To stretch this irony a little bit further, these are two social groups who rarely meet over dinner at a Colombo bourgeois house where that magnificent obsession with colonial table manners and the public school English accent still persist. The class reality of politics has predicated that their frequent meeting place should be the streets of the district.

Sociologically speaking, Ratnapura is a district whose social structure has gone through a radical transformation. A monied class of recent origins finds itself pitted against a traditional dominant class in the contest for political leadership and dominance. Its political representatives have not been able to rise to national prominence as politicians and therefore their focus is exclusively directed towards gaining control of the local centers of power— the provincial council, the municipality and the *pradeshiya sabhas*. Hence the specificity of Ratnapura where a rapid transformation of economic bases of the social structure has created conditions for the acquisition of social power through coercive political domination.

Kelaniya and Piliyandala - Locations of JSS Mobilisation

Located just outside Colombo city, Kelaniya (north-east of Colombo) and Piliyandala (south-east of Colombo) constitute a somewhat basically similar location of political violence. As local government institutions go, both are *pradeshiya sabhas*. Spatially, Kelaniya and Piliyandala represent the outer boundary of the Colombo metropolis as well as the beginning of the semi-rural region of the Western province. Demographically, the two areas are populated by a mixture of traditional settlers (*gam karayo*) and new settlers who are mostly working class and lower middle class wage earners. For quite some time, an easily renewable relationship of tension, occasionally turning itself into violence, between those who consider themselves as traditional 'villagers' and new settlers (either living on rent or having purchased property) has characterized the civic culture of both Piliyandala and Kelaniya.

The UNP for many years had the tradition of recruiting its strong men from the Kelaniya area, especially from among working class segments. This practice goes back to the 1950s when J. R. Jayewardene did his electioneering for the Kelaniya parliamentary seat. For Jayewardene, Kelaniya electorate was something like a family domain, because his mother's family had a strong patron-client hold over the area, partly by reason of their control over the Kelaniya temple. An electoral loss of a family domain could be a tremendous loss of personal and family prestige and therefore Jayewardene always felt that the Kelaniya constituency should be retained by his party. On one occasion, that is in 1956, the strong arm tactics of Jayewardene failed and he lost the election to another elitist candidate with family roots in Kelaniya, Vimala Wijewardene of the MEP. Actually, Jayewardene earned his reputation as a tough politician from the kind of election campaign he conducted in the

Kelaniya area and needless to say, this toughness was intimately associated with his ability to deploy violent elements against his electoral opponents.

Kelaniya's reputation as a recruiting ground for political thugs as well as a breeding ground for the thuggery of the UNP took a new dimension after 1977 with Minister Cyril Mathew emerging as the new political strong man to look after the interests of the UNP leadership. There were two factors that characterized the Mathewite intervention in political thuggery: class and caste.

The class factor in Mathewite thuggery in Kelaniya was facilitated by the presence of two major government factories in the area that directly came under Mr. Cyril Mathew, Minister of Industries in the Jayewardene regime of 1977. Mr. Mathew was also the Chairman of the notorious trade union wing of the UNP, the *Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya* (National Union of Workers)⁷. The UNP's entry to the trade union movement in a big way, especially after it formed a government in 1977, introduced to union politics the element of coercion and intimidation, linked to regime interests. Minister Cyril Mathew spearheaded this new thrust of union politics, as a means of breaking the back-bone of the Left-wing and oppositionist union movement. And it was more than coincidence that Mr. Mathew represented the Kelaniya electorate and in the same electorate were located two major government corporations — the tyre factory and the petroleum refinery. Deployment of pro-government union activists and workers against union and political opposition thus also meant the recruitment of violent elements from among the workers employed in tyre and petroleum corporations. A parallel practice was giving employment in these two corporations to UNP loyalists drawn from the area, who could be easily mobilized in emergencies.

The caste factor in Kelaniya under the dispensation of Minister Cyril Mathew worked in a slightly more subtle manner. Mathew was the acknowledged leader of the *Deva* caste community, a fairly large concentration of which has been living in the Kelaniya electorate. A little known factor about Mr. Mathew's leadership of the *deva* community is the caste mythology and ideology he surreptitiously propagated for many years. Mr. Mathew was usually known as an uncompromising Tamil-basher in the public sphere, the most militant and sectarian spokesperson in parliament for Sinhalese-Buddhist interests. But only keen watchers of caste politics in Sinhalese society would have known that Mr. Mathew was in fact attempting to unify the *deva* community on the ideology that this particular caste should revive its historical mission of protecting and defending Buddhism and the Sinhalese race. Mathew saw, and presented to members of his caste community, a particular martial quality and tradition historically associated with that mission. And indeed, it was not a mere coincidence that the goon elements that were activated in 1983 against Tamils, in the worst ethnic riots that Sri Lanka has witnessed in recent memory, came from Kelaniya, Wattala and Gampaha electorates. It is also not a coincidence that the Batalanada army camp, now notorious for being a torture camp in 1988 and 1989 was housed in a residential complex belonging to the petroleum corporation.

Minus the caste factor, Piliyandala presents a case similar to Kelaniya. The Mathewite practice of opposition union-busting spread to Piliyandala, primarily because there were three major public sector institutions in the area—the ceramics corporation, the Werahera central workshop of the Ceylon Transport Board (CTB) and the CTB bus depot of Piliyandala. One event that encapsulates the fate of Piliyandala as a recruiting ground for violent elements to be deployed to cause harm to opposition cadres was the well-known Sarachchandra incident of 1980. The criminal elements that disrupted the seminar held in Colombo on Professor Sarachchandra's book *Dharmista Samajaya* and physically assaulted the revered professor and a few others were reported to have been JSS activists employed at the Ceramics corporation at Piliyandala and transported to Colombo in buses belonging to the Werahera CTB workshop.

Piliyandala has, meanwhile, developed its own political subculture as an electorate dominated by local politicians with an orientation towards the practice of violence against opponents at short notice. Bringing the local police under their control has been a major strategy adopted by UNP politicians in the area to ensure political domination over the civilian population. A few years ago, there were reports of the local MP virtually invading the police station, accompanied by his gladiatory entourage, to rescue a party supporter locked up in the police station on suspicion of complicity in criminal activities.

The two examples of Kelaniya and Piliyandala point to some complex demands placed on politicians in search of political domination. These are electorates with demographic heterogeneity in the sense that there exists a floating population—large numbers of families living on rent, middle and working class families who have bought small properties to settle down in the area and employees working in large public sector corporations as well as of medium and small trading and manufacturing establishments. Political control of such diverse populations, in order to ensure electoral victories and to weaken the opposition, would require more than conventional methods of mobilization and electioneering. It requires total control and such total control is viewed as an end to be achieved through coercion, intimidation, violence and force. When politicians in search of domination are armed and para-military type semi-professionals work in their service, the role of the local police is also re-defined - it becomes an appendage of the power structure designed to serve local political overlords. Hence the realization among politicians of the need to bring the local police too under their command and control.

Western Coastal Belt

The character of political competition in the towns and villages located in the coastal area between Wattala and Chilaw has undergone a remarkable change over the five decades after independence, due to economic and demographic changes. Rapid urbanisation and industrialization, tourism, a swift rise in the population due to migration from other areas have combined to create a heterogeneous mix of different vested interests.

The economy in this vast coastal belt is constituted by a variety of informal and formal structures and activities. It is the 'informal' sector that should draw our special attention. The close proximity to the Southern Indian coast has made this region a lucrative ground for cross border exchange of goods for centuries. The emergence of Colombo port since the early twentieth century as the hub of Sri Lanka's international trade has also enabled commercial adventurers to set up their informal economic activities in smuggling in the Wattala-Negombo region. The technology and means of deep-sea fishing, the traditional vocation of the coastal population, nicely facilitated these non-fishing forms of economic activity—cross-border commerce and smuggling of goods to and from ships. For decades Wattala, Ja-ela, Negombo, Kochchikade, Wennappuwa, Marawila and Chilaw have been some major locations of this specific form of informal economic relations, controlled by a stratum of strong men whose popular image is not a popular one at all—fierce men surrounded by armed gangs and ready to kill any competitor or challenger⁸.

A few localities north of Negombo have had a history and tradition of another form of infinitely lucrative, informal industry and trade—the underground and unlicensed production and distribution of liquor. The laws of accumulation and control of power in the underground liquor industry are fundamentally similar to those governing the illegal cross-border commerce.

Without going into further details of the informal economies in the Western coastal belt, we may now identify the specificity of power relations and its consequences for political competition in the area. An informal set of structures and rules of power and domination have existed, and continue to exist, in this area, relatively independent from the formal structures and rules of power associated with the state. They have scores of strong men in their service: they have easy access to firearms and other means of intimidation and coercion; they have cultivated close links with the police, local politicians and the local bureaucracy; they also donate money to churches, temples and political campaigns.

This relative independence of informal networks of power does not usually mean that they exist parallel to or in antagonism with formal agencies of state power. A particular type of symbiotic relationship has evolved for many decades enveloping all formal and informal, underground and over-ground networks of power. It is not unusual for the police, the bureaucrats, political office-seekers as well as office-holders to enter into a relationship of either patrons or clients of these big-moneyed businessmen of the underworld. The legendary Ossie Corea of Negombo, who was implicated in the assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike of 1958, represented some of the dimensions as well as contradictions of the 'classical' form of this relationship. Folklore has it that Corea, long in league with conspirators, secured the gun for the assassin, provided him training in the handling of the gun, and was even an eye witness to the event when Somarama opened fire at the Prime Minister. But he was never indicted in the assassination case. Ossie Corea of Negombo was the local version of New York's 'God Father.'

The more recent manifestations of this phenomenon do indicate that there are no god father figures any more in the Western coastal belt. Rather, the under - world networks of power are now much dispersed and decentralized. And explicit use of violence, intimidation and coercion for purposes of domination has shifted its locus from businessmen to politicians. This transition appears to have begun in the 1980s when violence linked with the ethnic question, the JVP insurrection and the UNP regime's agenda of taming the working class in the newly established Free Trade Zone began to characterize the general framework of political domination in the region. It is no accident that a number of key UNP Ministers in the Jayewardene and Premadasa administrations emerged as strong men representing their own mini domains of power — Wattala, Ja-ela, Seeduwa, Negombo, and Wennappuwa. One of the most significant changes that occurred in this process is the flexibility demonstrated by the under-world networks to serve a breed of new masters who had national level political power.

Meanwhile, there was another process that changed the traditional relations of political domination in this region — the decline of the Catholic church as a political institution affiliated to the United National Party. This process could be briefly narrated in the following manner. In Sri Lanka's electoral politics since independence, the Catholic church had aligned itself closely with the UNP. The church could deliver to the UNP the Catholic vote en masse against the Left and SLFP candidates. The Church's hold over civil society began to decline after the government take-over of denominational schools in 1962. By the mid 1970s, the church also found itself no longer a politically monolithic entity, particularly when there emerged a new generation of priests and church activists who did not share the conservative politics of the hierarchy. This weakening of the Catholic church as a resourceful electoral ally of the UNP in the Western sea board necessitated new means of political control over the electorate — really, a substitute for religious-ideology based political domination. This was the backdrop against which coercion and violence entered electoral politics in the 1980s in this region, interestingly associated with relatively new entrants to UNP politics.

A third factor can be seen as having constituted the social backdrop for violence-based political domination in the region: it is the enormous demographic transformation that has taken place in this area during the past two decades due to industrialization and urbanization. The entire landscape between Wattala and Negombo has emerged during the recent past as the main location of Sri Lanka's labour intensive manufacturing industry. A direct consequence of the rapid industrialization has been the constant movement of population to the area from outside — particularly young workers from rural areas — resulting in a thoroughly changed socio-demographic map. Consequently, taking control over political institutions also meant taking control over a heterogeneous population, a large share of which are not traditional settlers of the townships and villages in the area.

When rapid industrialization and urbanization impacted on the political relations of domination, it also necessitated monopolistic political control of material resources spawned by the new eco-

omic expansion. These resources available to politicians in this region include granting licenses for businesses (distribution of liquor, petroleum and gas, tourist hotels, transport, particularly bus and taxi services), providing protection to informal economic activities, creating employment, self-employment and small business opportunities — all these for clientele groups. And the clients, in return, are required to provide material resources, votes, as well as political cadres for politicians⁹.

The logic of this phenomenon is quite interesting. When one set of political leaders are challenged by another set for the control of the area, it also takes a dimension outside the normal electoral competition. The leaders who already exercise control would not easily give up, because their loss of control over elected bodies would invariably mean the breaking down of a regime of networks spread across political, economic and resource control. The politicians who challenge the existing regime of domination are then required to organize their own counter networks of domination and control. In a period of regime change, as it happened in the area in 1993-96, this transition of domination knows no other form than violence. The violent clashes recently occurring between UNP and PA politicians in Wattala, Negombo, Seeduwa, Ja-Ela and Katunayake are primarily battles for hegemony; they represented the transition from one regime of domination to another.

Conclusion

In a fragmented society, institutions of participatory democracy have become domains of fragmented power. In these regionalized, localized locations of power, gaining control of elected bodies of local governance are both symbolic and real. Transformed into localized bodies of domination and control, they have also become mini-republics in a thoroughly distorted manner. Gaining control of these mini-republics has produced its own art—the art of election-centered warfare.

End Notes

1. This does not however mean that one should underestimate the public outrage over violence presently being practiced both by the ruling PA and opposition UNP in their local election campaigns. Meanwhile, what may transform one's outrage into acute anger is the manner in which the two main political formations — that calls themselves democratic — have been cynically manipulating incidents and reports of violence for their own political advantage.
2. A question recently put to me by a friend who happens to be of the Tamil community stunned me. My friend asked : "If the Sinhalese political parties cannot share power among themselves even at the local government level, do you seriously believe that they are ready to share power with the Tamil community ?"
3. A less acknowledged fact of life about politicians in countries like Sri Lanka, Pakistan, India, and the Philippines is that politicians have developed an international life style of prosperity, affluence and comfort. Even an ordinary MP, originating from a rural middle

class background, would want to buy or build a house in the capital with such modern emblems of affluence as a swimming pool, a dish TV antenna, a private bar and of course guards at the gate hired from a private security company. Their children are usually admitted to private elitist schools that prepare students for British or American examinations. A fleet of modern Japanese vehicles, mobile telephones and a few guns would also be necessary to complete this demonstration of an internationalist consciousness of material acquisition, generally shared by successful politicians in the underdeveloped world.

4. In this, there is an interesting parallel between upper class politicians and high ranking officers of the police. Usually, officers of the ranks of Assistant Superintendent of Police and above would not torture criminal or political suspects brought to police stations. They would merely give orders to their subordinates to 'record statements' from suspects or to 'get the truth out' knowing quite well that the sub inspectors, sergeants and constables would, as a matter of routine, torture the suspects. The senior officers would then record the 'voluntary confessions' made by the tortured bodies and souls who are brought before them. The unwritten professional code of ethical conduct in the police service, just like in the case of political party leaders, has it that the senior officer should not take part in or witness 'aberrations'. Rarely would a court of law in Sri Lanka acknowledge this bizarre dimension of police torture when an ASP comes to the witness box to say under oath that he recorded a statement 'voluntarily' made by the suspect accused.

5. A story I heard from a number of sources reveals the bizarre architectural imagination of rags-to-riches gem traders. This particular person, as the story goes, built his house in such a way that he could drive his Mercedes Benz straight to his bed room on a ramp. Instead of bothering myself to check the veracity of this story, I found the story itself terribly fascinating, because it represents the popular mythology of an actual social transformation, although in an exaggerated form.

6. A phenomenon that caught my attention in the 1970's is the tendency among *nouveau riche* gem traders from Ratnapura to buy old houses in elitist localities in Colombo, usually the areas known as Colombo-3 and Colombo -7. The early 1970's was a period that favored the indigenous and of course Sinhalese gem traders, because the establishment of the State Gem Corporation broke the traditional monopoly of wealthy Muslim businessmen in the gems trade. The interesting point is that although these Sinhalese gem

traders — enormously rich, yet rural and provincial in culture and upbringing — bought bourgeois houses in Colombo, they could not enter Colombo's upper class social milieu.

7. This trade union had the rather revealing acronym JSS, reminiscent of the storm troopers of the Nazi's in Germany — a fact cleverly used by its Left-wing opponents in the propaganda against Mr. Mathew.

8. D.B. Nihal Sinha's film "*Welikatarā*" (Sand Dunes) depicts some aspects of the culture of domination and power associated with this stratum of big-time smugglers. In a broadly South Asian imagery, they are rustic men who had suffered poverty and misery in childhood, and became enormously rich through illegal means of accumulation. The control of a network of economic relations — a network that overlaps nation-state borders, disregards customs and other laws that regulate international trade — requires the control of the law enforcement agencies as well. In the popular cinema in Kerala, Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, there is an occasional police inspector who may defy the rules of control as set out by these local lords of cross-border trade. A long duel between the two representatives of evil and good ultimately results in the *mudalali* — *mudalali* being the South Asian word in Sinhala, Tamil and Malayalam to describe traders of this particular social and cultural genre — being killed in a gun battle or led to a prison cell.

9. Personal observations in social analysis are sometimes as important as systematic field work. Some day in 1993, I was returning to Sri Lanka from abroad, and that particular evening I found that there were only few taxis available at the Katunayake airport. After some waiting I found a van to come to Colombo. The van driver told me something that had tremendous political significance. When I asked him why there was a shortage of taxis that particular day he told me that 200 taxis employed at the Katunayake airport and Negombo had gone to the Southern province that day, on behalf of a UNP minister from the area, to do election work. And that was the day of elections for the Southern Provincial Council. When the driver realized that I was reluctant to believe his story, he told me that we might see on the way those taxis returning from the South. While reaching Wattala, we actually saw a fleet of airport taxis speeding on the Negombo road. The motorcade was led by the Minister's Mercedes Benz. The driver further told me that the minister was to look after the election in the Balapitiya electorate. In that particular provincial council election, the UNP lost in most of the electoral divisions, but in Balapitiya, the UNP won with a comfortable margin. ■