

# Political Clientelism and Underdevelopment

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## Introduction

Clientelism, patronage or patron-client relations all describe a relation between unequals, or in the way Pitt-Rivers (1954 : 140) puts it, "a lop sided friendship". As with kinship and friendship, clientelist or patron-client tie involves multiple facets of the actors involved and not the segmented needs of the moment (Wolf 1966 : 16). In fact, it is an exchange relationship between two roles which may be defined as "special case of dyadic (two-person) ties involving a largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance including personal services to the patron" (Scott 1972a : 92).

Anthropologists and sociologists locate patron-client relations in environments where peasants are confronted with a whole gamut of risks and uncertainties threatening their subsistence (see Wolf 1966; Scott 1972a, 1972b, and 1976; Migdal 1974). Eventhough economists do not use the term 'patron-client relations', but instead use the concept 'interlinked deals', they seem to agree with the anthropologists and sociologists that patron-client relations are institutional arrangements adapted to a world fraught with costly information and risks and uncertainties (see for example, Posner 1981; Hayami & Kikuchi 1981; Platteau 1983, 1987,

1988; Rao 1988; Amarasinghe 1989). The marxists are more concerned about the power asymmetry in these relations and they consider them as forms of class control (Bhaduri 1973; Flynn 1974; Bodeman 1979; Soiffer & Howe 1982).

Among those who attempt to explain the rationale behind the formation of patron-client relations are the political scientists who lay more emphasis on the mediatory or brokerage functions of the patron. They are especially interested in the roles of the patron in linking the clients to the national state, politicians and national institutions. When governmental structures fail to extend beyond the confines of a relatively narrow perimeter, usually the capital city, and where the scope of governmental activity is equally restricted, no amount of structural differentiation at the center can prevent the development of clientelism on the periphery. Under such conditions, the rural patrons are likely to serve as intermediaries between the rural population and governmental officials (Lemarchand & Legg 1972: 162). Mediatory or brokerage roles seem to gain importance when the society moves from 'segmentation' to 'integration'; the state assuming a rather reformist role superseding its traditional regulatory role.

In this process of change, the variation in the intensity of mediatory or brokerage services of the patron is quite evident. As explained by Lemarchand & Legg (*op.cit.*), first, the significance of brokerage functions increases in proportion to the expansion of state structures at the center, providing in effect the linkages necessary for state activities to reach the villages and to meet their demands. Second, new institutions are built with political development and brokerage functions of the patron supersede or complement the chan-

nels of influence hereto provided through kinship and family ties. Finally, as state structures become more complex and differentiated, brokerage functions tend to be performed not only by nation-oriented individuals, but by national institutions, parties and pressure groups. Such patronage systems become more important as the electoral process reaches the countryside. At the level of the village, brokers will compete with each other for peasant votes to be delivered to a political patron.

Emergence of political clientele systems or party-directed patronage systems is well described by Weingrod (1968 : 383)-"party patronage becomes of great importance as state power expands throughout the society, and as the political parties themselves become even more closely linked within the state structure". These systems can be defined as "the ways in which party politicians distribute public goods or special favours in exchange for electoral support.... Patronage from this perspective is therefore largely the study of how political party leaders seek to turn public institutions and public resources to their own ends, and how favours of various kinds are exchanged for votes" (ibid : 379). When political parties are closely linked with the state structure, party-directed patronage is quite prominent even in the development strategies of the state. "Development implies the establishment of new national or regional organizations, the initiation of new agricultural and industrial programmes, the recruitment of cadres of workers, the commitment of huge capital funds, etc. These new resources of jobs and funds are typically administered or controlled by political party members or by persons designated by the parties" (Weingrod op.cit.:383). On the part of the clients, the

patronage system provided them with land, credit, extension services, infrastructure and marketing services. The system has an enduring element because the peasant is continuously in need of services (see Powell 1970).

Whether party-directed patronage fosters development or whether it is an obstacle would depend on several intervening variables. As Weingrod himself identifies, it can foster development if patronage resources can be seen to open up new avenues for political mobility and to stimulate political talents at the various levels. It could be an obstacle if national resources are used to serve the narrow needs of the party rather than the economic needs of the country. Moreover, if a certain patronage system effectively links the rural agrarian population to the central planners and policy makers, such a system will have a strong positive influence on economic and agricultural development in terms of adoption of new innovations. Because the patronage system will lead to an effective working of the 'two-way communication process' between the peasant and the central planners, researchers and policy makers, innovations will be generated that suit well the needs of the peasant. But, where the government is economically and politically dependent on the willingness of local patrons to deliver the goods, that is, where the hold of the local patrons over their clients permits them to control both economic production and the vote, the patrons would try to focus the attention of the government on the preservation of their own interests which will curtail development efforts (see Lemarchand & Legg *op.cit.*).

In this paper, an attempt is made to describe the functioning of political clientele systems in a marine fishing community; Weligalle, in Southern Sri Lanka, which came

under the heavy impact of market penetration and state intervention since independence in 1948. The paper is divided into three main parts. Part I gives a brief description of development of marine small-scale fisheries in Sri Lanka since independence, along with a short account of changes that took place in the Weligalle fishery which came under the impact of mechanization since late 1950's. In part II, the functioning of political clientele systems in Weligalle will be described using information collected from a random sample of craft owners. The main emphasis here is on the relation between political clientelism and access to state-controlled resources. A few concluding remarks made in part III will close the paper.

The name Weligalle is a pseudonym.

## **Part I**

### **The reformist state and modernization of Sri Lankan fisheries**

For over a century until about 1950, the economy of Sri Lanka has been somewhat a dual economy in that two broad sectors - the modern and the traditional - existed side by side in virtual isolation. The modern sector was mainly centered around the commercial plantations - tea, rubber and coconut - and the vast array of supporting activities in the form of financial and commercial establishments at Colombo and few smaller towns, transportation and communications and service industries. The traditional sector was confined largely to village-based agriculture, especially the cultivation of rice and other subsidiary food crops for domestic consumption, and nature crafts, traditional service occupations and fisheries.

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Since achieving independence in 1948, the government of Sri Lanka has played an active role in the country's development efforts, compared to the passive role of the colonial government. Diversification, to relieve the heavy dependence on plantation agriculture, and the integration of the economy- i.e. the elimination of its dualism - have become the key objectives of economic planning in Sri Lanka.

The post-war development efforts in Sri Lanka saw almost all the governments placing a high priority on food self-sufficiency and generating employment opportunities to the large numbers of educated youth seeking employment. Fisheries sector was considered having a good potential for providing employment to rural youth as well as the most important sector providing animal proteins to the population. The increased need to tap protein sources from the sea on one hand, and the poor sea-going power of the traditional crafts and the limited ability of the traditional fishing gear in harvesting sea resources on the other, led to the past efforts in the development of traditional fisheries. Many technological innovations have been introduced into the traditional fisheries sector with major emphasis on mechanization. The major objectives of such programmes are, mainly, to increase productivity of fishing operations, to use new fishing aids for better security, proper detection of shoals, etc. and to improve living standards of fishermen. Achieving these objectives through technological innovations involved, improvement of the present crafts and gear (mechanizing traditional crafts and using new techniques of fishing), introduction of new crafts and gear, improvement and introduction of new fishing techniques, development of infrastructure to

facilitate reaping the full benefits of the above changes and improvements of fish preservation and processing techniques.

Formation and implementation of a scheme for the mechanization of fishing craft and modernization of fishing gear devolved on the Department of Fisheries because the traditional financiers and leaders of the fishing community had neither the risk-bearing capacity nor adequate incentive to embark on a programme of mechanization and modernization of the fishery (De Alwis 1985).

The first government-sponsored loan scheme was initiated in 1957, primarily for mechanization of crafts and purchase of gear. Although the initial loan issues were made with more stringent conditions, the scheme was continuously altered. The subsidy scheme that was introduced in 1958 to encourage mechanization of fishing crafts was modified from time to time in order to offer relief to fishermen and these schemes usually subsidized upto 50% of the cost of mechanized crafts.

The new mechanized crafts designed for fisheries were too expensive for the fishermen to purchase outright, and the state designed a loan scheme with a high rate of subsidisation. These funds were channelled through fisheries cooperatives. Further, there were other needs with regard to anchorage, repair facilities, sources of input supply, short-term credit, etc. Such demands were met by channelling large amount of money in building up harbours, repair workshops, and establishing credit schemes for fishermen through banks. Moreover, in order to protect the small-scale fishermen against fish merchants, the Ceylon Fisheries Corporation

was established in 1964, which took up functions of fish marketing, establishing purchasing and sales centres in many parts of the island.

### **Development of fisheries at Weligalle**

Weligalle is a fishing village in the South of Sri Lanka which too came under the impact of modernization since independence. Traditionally, the fishermen in Weligalle used to employ three techniques of fishing to harvest fish; beachseining, fishing by deep sea canoes and fishing by small canoes in inshore waters. Beachseining was the most popular technique of fishing in Weligalle that provided employment to more than half of its population, followed by deep sea fishing. Fishing in inshore waters using small canoes was a subsistence activity.

By independence, the Weligalle fishing community was stratified clearly into two socio-economic groups; the owners of fishing equipment and crew labourers. The owners of fishing equipment, especially those who owned expensive beachseines and deep sea crafts, were the village elite. Apart from fishing assets they owned land and they had also invested in other non-fishing income generating activities. The crew labourers formed the poor in the village, whose livelihood was dependent on the work opportunities offered by the asset owning elite.

The emergence of patron-client relations between the asset-owning elite (the patrons) and the crew labourers (the clients) has been well described elsewhere (see Amarasinghe 1989) and it has been shown that these relations are formed



as means of coping with risks and uncertainties confronted by both actors. While for the crew labourers, the patron-client tie guaranteed security of employment and basic means of subsistence, for the patrons, the tie guaranteed a readily available supply of labour. Such relations enabled the equipment owner-patrons to wield power since they had a large clientele under their control, and a large amount of village capital concentrated in their hands.

In 1950's, the Weligalle fishing community too came under the heavy impact of the mechanization drive implemented by the state in order to develop small-scale fisheries in Sri Lanka. To be eligible to receive state services in the form of mechanized crafts and improved gear, many fishermen grouped together and formed a cooperative - the 'Fishermen's Cooperative Society of Weligalle' under state sponsorship in 1958. The cooperative idea was attractive mainly to beachseine workers (who formed the majority of the population) and to canoe fisheries crews since they could now have access to mechanized crafts by offering 'group guarantees' (which are, in fact, collateral substitutes) through their cooperative. The beachseine owners did not join the cooperative because they were not actually participating in fishing and only labourers were entitled to crafts under this scheme. However, many owners of traditional crafts too joined the cooperative hoping to receive state services.

## **Politicisation of rural areas**

The first Sri Lankan government was formed in 1948 by the United National Party (UNP) which was founded in 1946 by the fusion of the Ceylon National Congress and the Sinhala Maha Sabha, both representing the interests of the landowning westernised elite. The affluent fishermen or the large equipment owners aligned with the UNP. However, the UNP received a big 'blow' when Bandaranayake (the second in command of the party) broke away on a language issue and formed the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (MEP). With the slogan 'Sinhala only' (Sinhala is the language of the majority of Sri Lankans), Bandaranayake pledged that he would make Sinhalese the national language soon after coming to power. As for the leftist parties existing at that time- the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP) and the Communist Party (CP) - they both fought against the English-dominated administration and pledged equal status for both Sinhalese and Tamil, representing the languages of the two major communities in Sri Lanka. The poor Sinhalese peasants, including the non-owners of equipment at Weligalle, who represented the majority Sri Lankans, hardly possessed any English education and were thereby restricted in their access to higher education and many outside employment opportunities including those in the state sector. For them, the slogan 'Sinhala only' of the MEP appears to have opened up hopes of upward mobility, and the MEP was gaining considerable support in the Sinhalese villages in rural Sri Lanka. Weligalle did not form an exception to this rule. This wave of politicisation engulfed the cooperative system too, which had important repercussions at Weligalle.

## Part II

### Political Party Patronage

The system of party politics in Sri Lanka is such that the political parties contest elections where each party selects its own candidates for each electorate depending on their ability to control a large number of votes in that area. The elected member is called the Member of Parliament (MP) for the area, while the party whose candidates form the majority among the winners forms the government. In this system, it is usual for political party leaders to seek the political support of the peasant masses living in rural areas through village-level leaders. By controlling a large clientele, the latter develop links with the electoral-level political leaders.

The cooperatives hastily formed in 1958 were important avenues for local political leaders to distribute the state services to their clientele. The political parties, in return for votes, had to do special favours to their clients and the limited state help that came to Weligalle was distributed under the supervision of the MP for the area and his close political aides. The party political system also ensured that the cooperative Society of Weligalle (FCSW) formed in 1958, was mainly dominated by fishermen aligned with the then most powerful political party, the MEP (the MEP formed a government in 1956). In order to ensure the functioning of cooperatives towards achieving the political objectives of the ruling party, the state appointed 4 members to a 9-member director board of the cooperative, and also had its discretion, to appoint a chairman if necessary. Therefore, the board of directors represented the interests of the state rather than those of the fishermen.

After the death of Prime Minister Bandaranayake, the MEP lost power and the majority of the members broke away from the party to form the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), which in fact, pledged to continue with 'Bandaranayake Politics'. The SLFP again reigned the country from 1960 to 1965 and lost power to the UNP at the general election in 1965. The UNP, with the help of 6 other parties, formed a coalition government. At the general election in 1970, the UNP lost power to a strong coalition formed by SLFP, LSSP and CP. However, in 1977, this coalition was again overpowered by the UNP. Shift of power from one political party to the other was reflected even at the level of the Fishermen's Cooperative Society at Weligalle where the composition of the director board changed correspondingly. I shall show in the next section that this resulted in a set pattern of 'different groups receiving state help during different periods'.

### **State Patronage and Weligalle Fishermen**

In order to understand how state patronage services were distributed among Weligalle fishermen, it is necessary to look at the details of the issue of mechanized crafts through the FCSW. It is worth mentioning beforehand, the criteria laid down by the FCSW in selecting the members eligible to apply for large mechanized crafts issued to fishermen through cooperatives. It is required that the applicant be, a. a senior member of the cooperative; b. an efficient fisherman; c. a person having good management abilities; d. a non-owner of a craft (crew labourer); and, f. a person who has not already received such state help.

To find out whether the above criteria of selection have been followed by the cooperative in issuing mechanized crafts to fishermen, a random sample (56% of the population) of large mechanized craft owners who have received crafts through the FCSW was selected and they were first asked as to what their occupations were at the time they received crafts. Their responses are summarized in Figure 1. It is evident that, although the state loan schemes were designed to help those who do not have crafts and those actually engaged in fisheries, almost 56% of the recipients belong to the group of equipment owners and fish merchants. Such discriminatory treatment in favour of these groups against the criteria of selection has to be understood in relation to political party patronage. When a certain political party, dominated by elite interests, is in power, the party ensures that their clients, usually the equipment owners and merchants, receive special treatment.

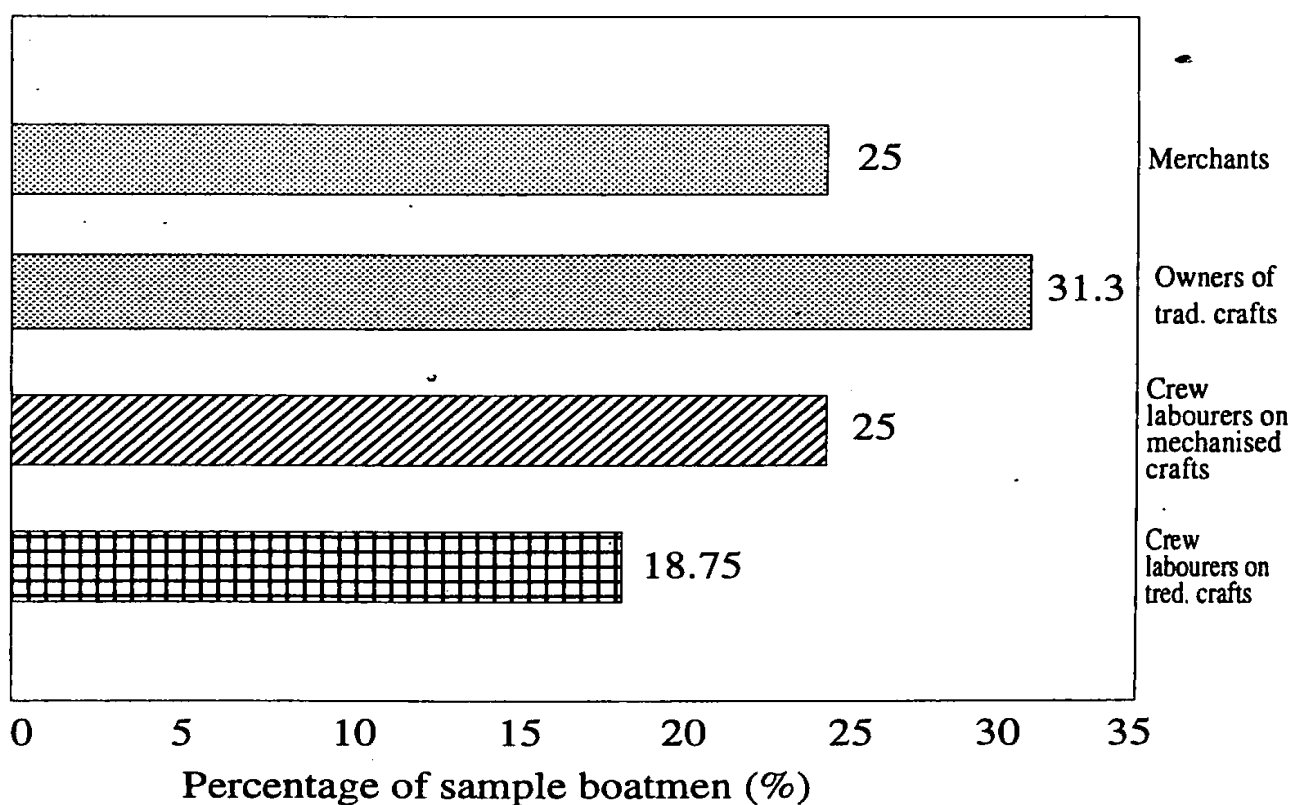


Fig. 1 Occupations practiced by present owners of large mechanised crafts, at the time they received them.

Extending the investigation further, the occupational histories of the sample boatmen were traced back; the year they entered fishing, the types of fishing techniques practiced since then, the status of employment (time of shifting from one occupational category to the other), etc. By studying the occupational histories of present-day boatmen, it was possible to compute the number of present-day boat owners engaging in a particular occupational category at a certain time in the past. It was also possible to see over time, the shifts from one occupational category to another by the sample boatmen. The results are presented in Figure 2. It is evident that, most of the early beneficiaries of state services have been crew labourers or non-owners of equipment. The failure of some original boat owners to manage the mechanized crafts is reflected as a decline in the percentage of fishermen employed as owners, in mechanized fishing, during the years 1960-1965. The increase in ownership of traditional crafts between 1960-65 resulted from the fact that some crew labourers on traditional crafts and new entrants to fisheries took up inshore fishing as owners of small crafts. However, the above picture has changed from 1965 where craft owners have been able to obtain new crafts despite the fact that the state loan scheme was designed to help only those non-owners of fishing equipment (crew labourers). Since 1977, even merchants have been able to benefit from this loan scheme, as it is clearly evident from Figure 2. It is worth noting a very important point at this juncture. While it was clear that initially the crew labourers benefitted from the state loan scheme, with the rise of the MEP, it appears that since late 1960's, many owners of equipment and merchants have been able to receive crafts irrespective of which political party was in power. This is a very important issue that will be dealt later.

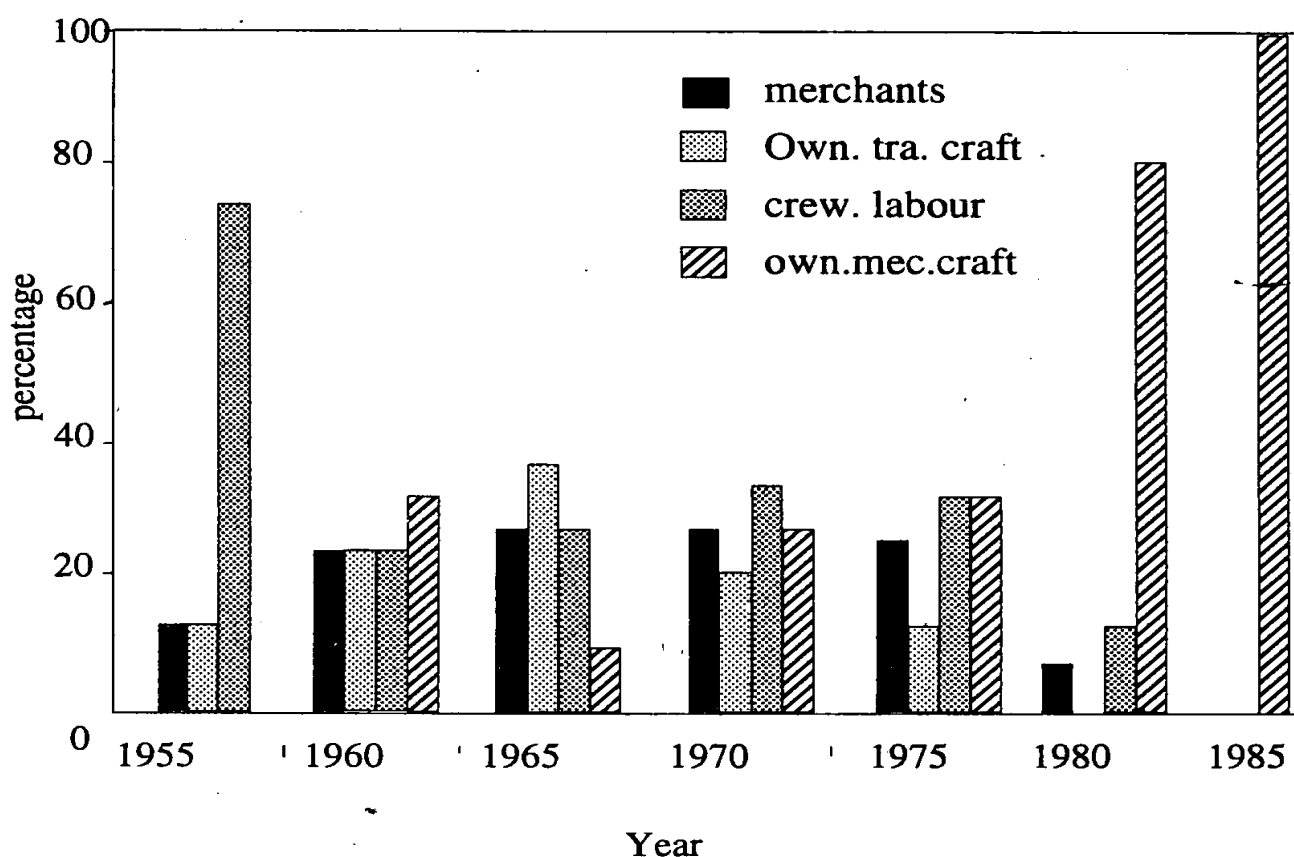
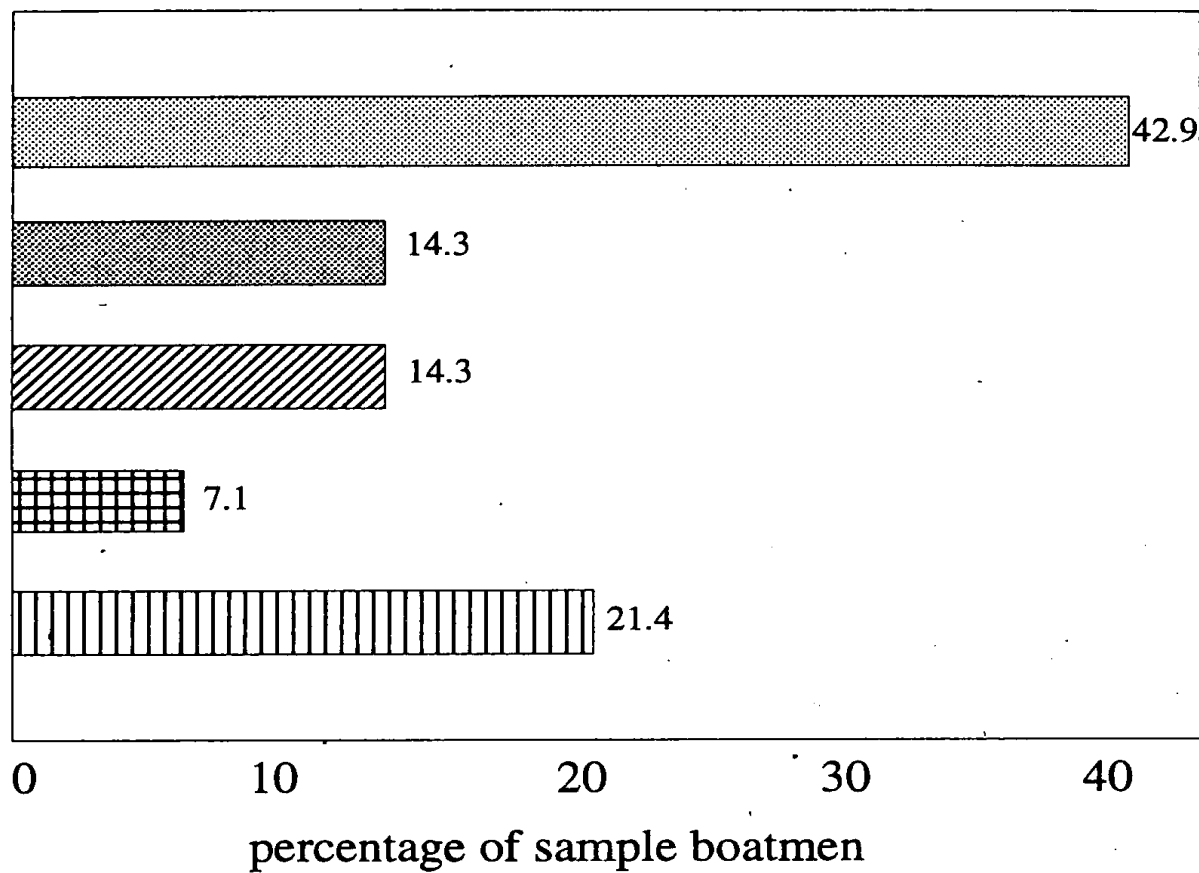


Figure 2 occupational histories of large mechanized craft owners

Employment histories of boatmen also revealed that 25% of the boatmen in the sample had already received mechanized crafts in the past, which were seized by the FCSW or other state institution on the score of loan defaulting. Therefore, despite their proved incapability to manage a boat, these fishermen were given a second boat after the seizure of the previous one. It is a clear demonstration of what party patronage could do to its clients, irrespective of the regulations laid down by the national state. It is also evident from Figure 3 that, seniority in the cooperative membership hardly matters in receiving crafts from the cooperative since 40% of those who had received mechanized crafts through the FCSW had one or less than one year of seniority in the membership.



Seniority (Yrs)

1 or < 1

2

3

4

<5

Figure 3 Seniority (of the cooperative membership) of the craft owners at the time they received mechanised crafts from the cooperative



The patron-client pattern which is typical of the traditional village societies is thus replicated on a higher level of organization, and all people are more or less dragged into the ambit of what Powell (1970) has called the 'clientelist state'.

### **Political Party Machines**

One should also take cognizance of the functioning of 'Political Party Machines' because this reveals another facet of political clientelism. Scott (1969) discussed the functioning of political party machines in contemporary societies in which exist adult suffrage, selection of political leaders through elections and, a high degree of electoral level competition. The way Scott puts it, "the machine is not the disciplined, ideological party held together by class ties and common programmes..... The machine is rather a non-ideological organization interested less in political principle than in securing and holding office for its leaders and distributing income to those who run it and work for it" (ibid. : 1144). Electoral level competition of political parties require expenditure of vast sums of money on political campaigns and usually assistance of local elite is sought by political parties in financing such campaigns. In return for the support the political party in power does special favours for these rural financiers and one could witness the functioning of a political party machine. As Scott has correctly identified, those who control the political party machine tend to "seize on it as a private tool for carving out slices of personal power" (ibid : 54). In these circumstances, there can be no political consciousness amongst people since, as Bhushan has rightly reminded us, political consciousness can develop among

them “only if they can participate and effectively control the political process that govern their lives” (Bhushan 1984 : 1989).

It was clear from figure 2 that since the latter part of 1960's, irrespective of which party was in power, a large number of craft owners and fish merchants have been able to receive state institutional help although such services were destined to reach poorer groups. Such special favouritism towards the affluent members of the community could be attributed to the presence of “political machines”. The machine has to organize and finance election campaigns, political meetings, other propaganda to win public support for the political leader.

Two distinct phases of the formation of political clientele systems (and their impact at the village level) can thus be identified.

- a. In the first phase (1950-1965), emergence of political parties and their interest in seeking votes in the countryside led to the formation of political clientele systems. The two major political parties, the UNP and the SLFP (formerly the MEP) clearly represented the interests of different categories of villagers. The UNP represented the interests of the rural elite and, the MEP (or SLFP) represented the interests of the less privileged members. Thus, when the UNP was in power, the elite group (equipment owners and merchants) gained privileged access to state help and, when the MEP (or SLFP) was in power, the poorer groups (crew labourers) had easy access to these resources.

- b. In the second phase (since 1965), political party competition has become intense at the electoral-level and political party machines have been organized to fight electoral-level political campaigns. "The machine must in a sense, buy its popularity. To the extent that it faces competition, the cost of popularity is raised and the public till may not be sufficient to the demands it must meet" (Scott 1969 : 1155). Thus, the party machines have sought the support of the local elite to finance their political campaigns. Those who could finance the working of such political machines in Weligalle were the merchants and equipment owners who had sufficient finance to deploy on the above activities. It is therefore not surprising that these groups had privileged access to state help in Weligalle, irrespective of which political party was in power. At this stage, political ideology plays a less important role.

### **Part III**

#### **Concluding Remarks**

It appears that political clientele systems are purposely organized by the political party leaders through which they achieve the dual objective of transforming the countryside and reciprocating the political support lent by those who voted them to power. In the context of the present study, it is hard to accept political clientele systems as 'rural problem-solving systems' (as described by Powell, 1970). The system, rather than one communicating the needs of the villagers (fishermen), was organized by the center and help was channelled to those who supported the ruling political party. Assuming that economic development encompasses equal access to productive resources to all agents of production, it

is evident that political clientele systems would hamper equalization of wealth associated with modernization and development. Moreover, such political clientele systems prevent efficient utilization of resources of the country, since resources will not be channelled to where they are most needed. In fact, the process may lead to the concentration of productive assets in the hands of a few and the masses of the poor will not have opportunities of social and economic advancement.

It also appears that political clientele systems have an enduring character, especially due to the fact that state-controlled productive resources are in short-supply compared to the magnitude of demand for these resources. Channelling the 'limited good' to the political clientele through the cooperative is a 'rationing device' adopted by the ruling political party to distribute the limited good and to consolidate its position in the game of politics.

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