Chapter six:

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to analyze social change in rural Sri Lanka over the past decades starting from 1930s. The study argued that the changing nature of the state policies from a time of colonial administrator to that of a 'benevolent distributor' since 1930s has had a decisive influence on the rural communities of Sri Lanka. In this concluding chapter, I seek to relook at the approach of the study and hope to address some of the question, which I raised at the beginning of the thesis.

By the beginning of twentieth century, Sri Lankan society had been subjected to a series of diverse transformations that created different socio-economic scenarios. The later colonial impact of the British in the 19th century led the economy of the country to turn to the plantation economy. This was geared towards the western metropolis and also benefited some local sections who served the colonizers in colonial administration and service sector of the plantation economy. At the same time, under the colonial land acts, vast areas of lands had been denied to the local inhabitants. Colonial land policies paid scant attention to traditional agricultural economy. Also, those areas with few resources or prospects to attract the attention either of the colonial state or of individual entrepreneurs remained isolated. Kurulubedde was one such village. The inhabitants here lived as an isolated face-to-face small community following subsistence agricultural economy, particularly chena cultivation, using reciprocal labour relations within a comparatively mild caste structure. Their life was ridden with ecological threats, epidemics, an exploitative barter system, starvation, to mention a few. In
contrast, rural communities in the areas which attracted the Europeans or local commercial cultivators also suffered from landlessness, poverty, unemployment etc. Since the plantation economy had taken over the possible lands where the villages could have moved to the opportunities for growth were limited.

With the growth of the social awareness in the country, the socio-economic conditions of those people were increasingly subjected to the discussions. The endeavor of these discussions was to change the socio-economic conditions and raise the standards of living conditions of those people. But, until 1930s, the colonial government was not much concerned with the harshness of life conditions of native rural communities, because welfare was not the operative term for the colonial regime. However, there was a sudden shift of state policy after 1930s. The major reasons that could be seen behind these policy changes of the state were that the political transformation at the beginning of 1930s which included the introduction of universal adult franchise and establishment of ‘State Council.’ Accordingly, this point was a threshold for the changing role of the state and the political system of the country in the coming years adopting a direct distributional state intervention to change rural Sri Lanka through the distributive welfare mechanism. After independence of the country, an extensive distributive welfare mechanism was designed by the post-colonial state which sought to secure its legitimacy by helping the subjects that led the country towards a modern welfare state.

As I argued, this process has taken place within a clear political background creating a national system of patronage in which the political parties, the state and the rural masses are closely linked. This distributional state intervention later led to a competitive and
confrontational society in the rural areas of the country when there was a decline in the state resources. It is in this context that the study raised four interrelated research questions. The first; how has rural society in Sri Lanka changed since 1930s under the influence of politically motivated distributive welfare mechanism of the state? The second; what has been the nature of actual interrelationship created among the state, politics and rural masses within these changing processes? The third; what has been the pace of the formation of rural level political mechanism which developed within this changing process? The final question; how can the contemporary intra-village political polarization and conflicts be explained within the context of the process of social change in Sri Lanka? In an attempt to answer these questions I aimed to pay special attention to identify new social and political identities which have emerged in the village in this changing process, and how such identities confront the changing political and economic condition at the village level.

Changes of rural society in Sri Lanka under the politically motivated distributive mechanism of the state

As a new settlement which stood on its old foundation, Kurulubedde provides a distinct case that helps us look at the impact of the changing state policy from a colonial administrator to a benevolent distributor since 1930. I have sought to study how it affected the lives of rural communities who had been hitherto isolated from the colonial social and economic transformations. Land grants in 1942 for permanent cash crop cultivation to the villagers who survived after the malaria disaster envisaged the role of the state in the coming years. The difference between the chena or shifting or slash-and-burn cultivation and permanent cash crop cultivation (mainly coconut, citrus and
cashew) signifies the emergence of new socio-economic relations between the villagers and the state in forthcoming years. Development of healthcare and road facilities gradually reduced the danger of malaria and other diseases, ecological dangers, loneliness and thus diminished chronic uncertainty on the human lives of Kurulubedde and surrounding areas. This marked the beginning of the ‘patriarchic benevolence’ of the state on its subjects in the coming years.

These improvements in the area were significant as Kurulubedde was subjected to another national development process by the post independent state which aimed at, first, restoration of settlements in dry zone areas which had a glorious and prosperous past during the ancient Rajarata kingdom, and secondly, eradication of the distortions of the colonial era through land grants to the landless communities from densely populated areas of Puttalam and Kurunagale district. Although it was not similar to villagization program of some post colonial countries, one of the major development policies of post colonial political leadership of Sri Lanka was to keep rural population as agricultural communities and capture the political benefits through restoration of glorious and prosperous agricultural civilization. This process was considered as the major drive to improve the socio-economic conditions of the poorer landless rural population. This land grant led to a huge influx of landless people into the village and the creation of new social, economic and political formations in the village. The state began to benefit villagers extensively through the distribution of public and individual material benefits. New settlers as well as old villagers were helped to enter the cash crop cultivation leading to novel avenues of the economy termed as ‘modern.’ Rather than being a way of life, cash crop cultivation became an occupation and an enterprise that linked the
villagers with the new market network. Although the decline of per capita holdings of paddy lands due to population growth persisted and paddy cultivation remained at subsistence level, renovation of minor tanks in the village reduced the uncertainty of paddy cultivation to some extent. However, adaptation of new varieties of seeds, fertilizer, mechanization of production methods, and techniques modernized the paddy cultivation structure. Through its deep penetration into the life of the masses, the post colonial Sri Lankan state directed the villagers towards these novel avenues of the agricultural structure.

However, one of the significant changes that happened in the village was that the rise of non-agricultural occupations since the beginning of 1960s. Inability of the inelastic agricultural economy to absorb the increasing population forced the villagers to find new economic activities. As I pointed out, the policy of the post independent ruling class was to keep the increasing population within the village itself. The state directed villagers to find alternative occupations within the village itself and facilitated many of those alternative economic activities. Emergence of these new economic activities gradually minimized the significance of the agricultural economy in the village. As we observed in chapter three, we cannot frame the economy of Kurulubedde as only an agricultural economy.

Significant among the changes was the creation of new social identities among the hitherto isolated and neglected rural community. The range of the state distribution had reached the old villagers as well as landless new settlers giving them much better opportunities to mobilize themselves for social and economic status than they had (see
chap: 3.4). Expansion of educational facilities gave opportunities to the poor low-caste people to develop new social identities. Public sector job opportunities further helped to break traditional caste values. This situation led to dramatic changes not only in attitudes, but also in the basic principles of caste system that traditionally ensured that marriage alliances were endogamous.

**The changes of interrelationship between the rural masses, the state, and politics**

This study suggested that instead of focusing on unleashing peoples' energies for the improvement of their conditions, politicians and political parties concentrated their efforts on bolstering the political positions among the rural population of the country. In this regard, they continued with the perception of the rural community of the country as 'underdeveloped' and 'poor,' who needs support from the state and government to improve their life conditions. The relative economic prosperity during 1940s and 50s enabled politicians to expand welfare schemes and to introduce new such schemes.

As it was pointed out in chapter two, confining the increasing rural population to rural areas itself was a result of the fear of postcolonial political leadership that industrialization would strengthen working class movement backed by Marxist political parties. Thus, post independent governments hoped to develop agriculture with the facilities provided by the government and to expand other welfare measures. As we saw in chapter three, the villagers willingly accepted the new role of the state as a provider and distributor of its resources to its subjects. After independence, both politicians and masses extensively accepted that the righteous government had to ensure the welfare
and prosperity of the masses. The direct and indirect interdependence of the rural masses, the state, and political parties was unavoidable within this context.

To understand the dependency of the villagers on the state and government which had emerged in the context of vigorous distributive mechanism of the state, one needs to recall the two different contexts which I have already discussed earlier. The first one is the poor condition of the village and the villagers before 1940s. The second one is the condition of newcomers who came to the village after mid 1950s. They also had suffered from landlessness, poverty, unemployment etc in their native villages. Both these groups benefited from a variety of state distributions. As we observed so far in preceding chapters, a range of public facilities and individual benefits had been given to the villagers. In brief, by playing a role as a provider and facilitator, post-independent regimes became an all encompassing regime that covered the entire social fabric of the masses by claiming to provide socio-economic necessities for the well being of the population. This created a very powerful view on the state, that, according to Fuller and Harries, appeals to a notion of a benevolent Leviathan chartered to bring about growth or to eliminate poverty (2000: 3), and bring the postcolonial modernity and fulfill the social hope. Consequently, new aspirations developed among the new generations of the village. The villagers relied on the state and successive governments for gaining different socio-economic benefits.

We have seen how all encompassing the state has been in Kurulubedde village. This we saw has persisted despite diminishing state resources. At present, except for a few families of Harumanwile who are the descendants of old goigama families, all the
people of the village have settled down on the lands distributed by the state. Majority of the villagers have been aided to initiate cash crop cultivation (coconut and cashew). All the paddy cultivators of the village are getting a subsidized fertilizer ration according to the size of their paddy lands. At present, there are twenty-six government sector jobholders in the village compared with the period before 1950s where there were no government servants except the village headman. Until 1977, all the villagers had benefited from free rice ration. At present, out of 412 of all households of the village, 226 (54.85%) households receive Samurdhi subsidiary, although some of them do not need such help. Almost all the children of school-going age attend the government schools and enjoy the benefits of free education. They are getting school uniforms and textbooks free of charge and also subsidized season tickets to travel by government bus. Old villagers are getting spectacles and senior citizens’ identity cards that accord them priority in hospitals or any other government offices. The villagers have been assisted in other different ways too; the government has provided financial assistance to start or to improve self-employment activities, to build new houses or to improve the quality of prevailing houses, to improve sanitary facilities, electricity etc. All the villagers have access to the government hospitals where they receive free medication. Agrarian service center, post office, divisional veterinary office, monthly medical clinic for pregnant women etc, all these things symbolize the pervasive role of the state on the masses.

However, one interesting observation to raise here is that all these facilities and activities of the state functioned with strong political identities in terms of the parties and politicians that initiated those distributive schemes. Villagers identify all the welfare facilities in a context of party politics. Although not all, these identifications
have affected their personal political allegiances (see chap. three, p. 183, and chap. four, p. 205). This is not accidental. We have seen how since 1930s, the politicians and political parties have used the state apparatus of distributive mechanism to establish their political identities. As I pointed out, politicians and political parties have had to work within the established system to contend favour from the masses, more particularly favour from the electorate (electorate system with the tradition of franchise). After independence, political power has become largely dependent on a large range of small benefits that have been conferred to the voters. Thus, although the possibility of the state to fulfill the aspirations of the masses has been limited, political parties, which were in power or aspiring to gain power had to continue bestowing small benefits on the masses in order to keeping their hold among them. When the political process of the country largely consists of this kind of national system of patronage, partisan links between the masses, political parties, and the state are inevitable.

The rural level political mechanism in the context of a politically motivated distributive mechanism

This study suggests that while people did benefit, perpetuation of the system created problems. Since the 1950s, population of the village grew quantitatively (with high population growth) and qualitatively (educated young generation with rising social aspiration) creating a competitive society. The post independence state policy was to keep the growing population in the rural sector by granting lands and other necessities. But, over a period, the state ability to do so at the national and village level became limited. For instance, we have seen that the demand for lands in Kurulubedde has increased considerably since 1960s. And, even as early 1960s, gaining limited paddy
lands in the village had been subject to party political relations. Though the extent of paddy lands for distribution diminished considerably, the state possessed a large amount of high land till late 1970s. But, after that too was gradually exhausted, there was just not enough land in the village to distribute according to the growing demand. Alongside this, there was a huge demand for public sector job opportunities in the village since the beginning of 1970s; although over years opportunities were limited. One has to also draw attention to the fact that state policies themselves have changed over time to reduce the welfare expenditure.

However, villagers and the larger political system were accustomed to this system. The villagers were seeking different benefits from the state. For instance, despite having a sufficient income, newly married couples were intending to include their names in the *Samurdhi* subsidiary program. Brick makers were seeking some subsistence for improving their brick production. Others who were engaged in self-employment projects were also seeking financial aids or subsidized loans from the government to develop their self-employment activities. Some other villagers were waiting for housing loans, coconut or cashew sprouts, fertilizers for their paddy or high land cultivation. I observed that many of them were in a position to continue with such work even without government subsidies. It was also evident that instead of attempting to realize their aspirations on their own, people pursued their dependence on the larger political system. A clear example for this is the pathetic situation of educated youth in the village. Even degree holders were expecting public sector job opportunities and were lamenting as they did not have the necessary political relations to get such opportunities. In such a
context of dependence, the role of the state as a distributor or provider and the influence of micro politics on those roles of the state become vital.

As we observed in chapter four, one of the major paradoxes of this system has been the rise of politically motivated mediators and institutionalized organizational mechanism within the village to handle the state resources and different kind of activities according to allegiance and proximity to political parties. Yet, this development is not haphazard either. What has happened in the village level reflects the recent political history of the country. Although a competitive and pluralistic political system has been established in the country since the beginning of 1930s, the local level aristocrats who were part of the colonial local administration controlled the electoral politics in the rural areas. We have seen that the influence of such leaders in peripheral villages like Kurulubedde (Korele Mahatmaya, village headman and Vel Vidane) had been immense. They had family relationships with each other. They dominated the administrative functions and other state affairs in the village level. Later, most of them joined UNP, the party which formed the first post-independent government in the country. They dominated administrative powers and controlled the state affairs at the village level even after independence. However, the SLFP, formed as a party of a common man with a strong rural base, and believing that independence itself did not capture the imagination of the rural masses, came into power in 1956 as MEP. It sought to involve actively the rural masses in national development process through the newly established or re-organized rural level organizations such as RDS and CC. These institutional and organizational bodies became part of the legitimized organizational structure of the state-funded development programs in the rural areas. These organizational and institutional
structures accumulated the power around new social groups (Ganarathne, Baddenayake and others) to acquire enough control on state activities and distribution in the village.

Since the very beginning of its initiation, the institutional and organizational structures like RDS and CC in Kurulubedde had been dominated by leading MEP figures. Interestingly, most of these authoritative figures came from new settlers. They were active in politics in their native areas, but had no participation in the state affairs. Together with Baddenayake, an active MEP member from the village itself in 1956, they were opposed to the dominance of Korale Mahatmaya in the area. When they dominated the statutory bodies which were responsible for handling state distribution in the village, the rights of the allocation and disposal of those state resources passed into the hands of this politically motivated group. Their influence on the handling of those resources was very high, when the growing proportion of the state resources came to be seen as means to get individual rather than collective advantage.

Since 1960s, the pursuit of purely personal and factional advantage has become the dominant factor. When the local branches of the SLFP and UNP were established in the village at the beginning of 1960s, those organizations like RDS and CC became clearly political or semi-political institutions in the village. Under the SLFP government of 1970, this system comprehensively organized within the party political structure which promoted factional advantages in the village remarkably. The SLFP government in 1970 directly intervened to appoint members of the official bodies to some of these organizations (APC and CC), while office bearers of other such organizations (RDS, CSMF) also came directly from governing political party backgrounds. Further,
governing party leaders of the village directly intervened to prevent opposition party members from getting public sector employments. When the UNP government came to power in 1977, prevention of opposition party members for getting public sector job opportunities was further legitimized (see chapter 4.4.2). Not only that, the fractional distribution of state benefits became systematically accepted as part of the political system since 1977 as a result of the respective governments appointing their own people to handle state distribution in the village areas after 1977. It is in this spirit that, the appointments of SSO and CO in 1977 under the UNP government and SDO and ARPA in 1994 under the SLFP led PA government have to be understood.

**Contemporary intra-village political conflicts and the changing process**

The nature of the changes of hitherto neglected rural communities of Sri Lanka since 1930s under the benevolent state policies was not conceived here as redemption for the difficulties which the communities faced, or as a transition from tradition to modernity only. It was considered as a politically designed and later politically institutionalized process that created conflicts among the villagers. But, it does not mean that the village communities have been free from the factional conflicts and differences (like caste prejudices, personal differences etc.). Some causes like caste prejudices have been remarkably mitigated by the distributive welfare mechanism. But, at the same time, new factional conflicts have been created within this changing process. As political identification and politicization of distributive mechanism both in national and village level was unavoidable since very beginning, the next major inconsistency of the Sri Lankan welfare democracy was a result of the continuous decline of economic capacity and opportunities relative to the rising social and political demands. In this context,
factional political relations became the major criteria of exclusion and inclusion to the distributive mechanism. These processes of exclusion and inclusion caused popular discontent. While those who receive benefits were satisfied and wanted more, those who were denied began to complain against opposition party members who handled state resources. The post 1977 election period witnessed such events frequently and often violently. A glaring instance of this violence is the UNPers of the village who were victimized during the SLFP government in 1970-77 marched into the houses of the SLFPers who were responsible for preventing the different benefits to the UNPers during SLFP regime.

Prevention of opposition party members from state benefits has continued obviously upto now. Due to this situation, vicious cycle of violence and vengeance continues to operate more openly, more directly and more ruthlessly and the villagers are accustomed to this whole system. Although a considerable reduction of welfare distribution occurred, political parties cannot neglect voters’ satisfaction. Through the village level party members and politically appointed officers, governing parties assure that the distribution of the state resources go to their party members rather than to the others. The social segments that have faced the harsh consequences of this politicized system are the youths of the country. They grew up in a postcolonial welfare state as relatively healthy, educated, politically conscious and ambitious generation. When they had to confront the politicized competitive society, they had to face exclusion, victimization and negligence. In effect, they believed that the system was against them and that the only alternative left for them was to take up arms against the system. Although there was no effect of the JVP insurrection in 1971 on Kurulubedde, the JVP
was considerably influential in this village as was evident during the second abortive but widespread and brutally wiped out southern youth insurrection led by JVP in 1987-1989.

The continuity of the political patronage has led to bitter conflicts, and thus fragmented the village (I have discussed this situation clearly throughout of chapter five). It has also rendered political relations more relevant transcending traditional cleavages among the villagers. For instance, a young degree holder worries that he may not get a government job as he was an UNPer. A young farmer who had UNP political identity was accusing ARPA as the former has not been provided subsidized paddy fertilizer. Some others are waiting for revenge as they had been oppressed due to political rivalry and as they had been denied of lucrative government contracts. The more dynamic and ambitious villagers have become involved in political parties as it has become a good source of income. Clashes have broken out and threat and intimidation have become part of everyday life. Chapter five elaborates this situation comprehensively.

The global discourse over the recent decades critically interrogate the role of the state in modernization and development in post colonial Third World countries that focus on the privatization of the state in the form of a dispersal of the state’s governance and redistributive functions to non-state and charitable organizations etc. (Sharma and Gupta, 2006: 22). Although Sri Lanka started to follow economic liberalization policies after 1977 (including privatization of state institutions, opening up of its import-substituting economy, welfare reduction etc.), the commitments of the state on welfare, social services and public interests in Sri Lankan society during the past decades have
shaped social expectations from the state which present till date despite the state's declining commitment to social welfare. In such a context, we observed that the state is forced to continue its role as a benevolent distributor (distributing subsidized fertilizer, continuing poverty alleviation, initiating new social service like state-funded nursery schools, Society for the Aged, and community level medical facilities and so on), while some charitable INGOs (CCF) entered to fund social service in the village. But, we observed that the potential of the state to fulfill these expectations has been shrinking rapidly. Although the dominant discourse is that the administrative mechanism of the state should be apolitical (Weber, 1978), and researchers have frequently emphasized the necessity of apolitical bureaucratic structure for the success of development programs in developing countries (Ferguson, 2001 [1990]; we observed how this supposed apolitical state activities have over politicized creating an increasing dependency on the part of the villagers on this heavily politicized set up. To analyze this situation, as pointed out by Partha Chatterjee (1998: 282), we have to provide new conceptual map of the emerging practices of the new political societies though he himself may not have used the theme in this way.

In such a context, we need more ethnographic research on the state, practice of local bureaucracies and activities of local political leaders because according to Akhil Gupta, "Research on the state, with its focus on large-scale structures, epochal events, major policies, and "important" people..., has failed to illuminate the quotidian practices of bureaucrats that tell us about the effects of the state on the everyday lives of rural people." As he further pointed out, "Studying the state ethnographically involves both the analysis of the everyday practices of local bureaucracies and the discursive
construction of the state in public culture... It also enables one to problematize the relationship between the translocality of “the state” and the necessarily localized officers, institutions, and practices in which it is instantiated” (2006 [1995]: 212; italics in original). It is obvious that, in the context of neo-liberal scenario, ethnographers have widely dealt with analyzing the effects of state on the everyday life of the people in developing world (Das and Poole, 2004; Ferguson, 2001 [1990]; Fuller and Benei, 2000 ;...). In the case of Sri Lanka, even if there is a wider discourse on the reduction of the role of the state, still the influence of the state, bureaucratic state power or activities of local political leaders on everyday lives are vital as we observed in Kurulubedde. This further highlights the crucial significance of ethnographic research on state in Sri Lanka. In this context, I would like to narrate what Lasanthe, the leading SLFP figure of Kurulubedde, told me during my stay in the village as it captures this reality. In my encounter with him during my second field visit, he told me, “I earned something, constructed a house due to my political relationships. I do not want to lose my contracts or gravel business. Like me, Antony (one of the UNP stalwart of Kurulubedde and stepson of Lasanthe) also has earned something when the UNP was in power. Others are also the same.”