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**Urbanization and
the growth of small towns
in Sri Lanka, 1901 - 71**

Dayalal Abeysekera

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PREFACE

I am most grateful to Professors Sidney Goldstein and Alden Speare, Jr., for having made many valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I also gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the Ford Foundation in the form of a Traineeship in Demography, which enabled me to work toward completion of my doctoral degree in sociology at Brown University. This paper is dedicated to Shantha, who stoically bore the brunt of over three years of separation during my voluntary exile into academic incarceration.

- 1 -

ABSTRACT Using published census data, this paper examines the pattern of urbanization in Sri Lanka from 1901 to 1971. Like most South Asian countries, Sri Lanka shows a low level of urbanization. The annual urban growth rate for the seventy-year period has been well under 3 percent, while the national population has grown by less than 2 percent per annum. Contrary to the widely held belief that medium-sized towns have dominated urbanization in Sri Lanka, this paper demonstrates that the highest growth rates have occurred in the small towns during most of the century and that this phenomenon has created a pattern of decentralized urbanization. In addition, mitigated primacy and metropolitanization have characterized the growth of the capital city of Colombo during the recent past.

The paper reviews several factors affecting urban growth (amid ruralward migration) and creating an incipient pattern of decentralized urbanization. Urbanization is postulated as a response to the demands of the political economy of the country.

In attempting to document and analyze the process of urbanization that has occurred in Sri Lanka during the twentieth century, I will place special emphasis on the differential growth of large and small towns and on the possible determinants and consequences of that differential growth. To provide a frame of reference for documenting the growth of town types, I will first briefly discuss problems of definition associated with the concept of "urban." Next I will examine the urban-rural composition of the country and its 22 districts, which I have grouped into five regions for easier comprehension. Finally I will probe the nature of the growth of town types and identify some factors that may have affected this particular pattern of urbanization. The basic source of data in documenting the processes of urbanization is published census tabulations.

PROBLEMS OF DEFINING URBANIZATION

The definition of "urban" is beset with many unresolved issues. Some countries use the criterion of population size per locality (areas with 2,000, 2,500, 5,000, or 10,000 or more inhabitants, for example), whereas others use gazetted townships, local government units, or other such definitions to describe the urban population (see, for instance, various editions of the United Nations *Demographic Yearbook*).

Sri Lanka uses local government areas to define the urban population. As might be expected, the census definition of "urban" has changed over time. Before considering changes in its definition, it is worthwhile to explore the process by which a locality inherits urban status and also to get some insight into the arbitrariness that clouds the process. Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:200) have stated:

In Ceylon, urban status is conferred by the Minister of Local Government for local administrative purposes and the classifications are, in ascending order, Town, Urban and Municipal Councils. Towns can graduate from one status to the next. There are no definite criteria to guide the Ministry in its decisions. According to the Department of Town and Country Planning, ministerial discretion in the creation of new Town Councils, in the absence of such criteria, seems to be based on the nature of the development . . . [of the locality] . . . or its amenities and urban character. These are not defined and are vague, but apparently, accessibility of the locality and the availability of electricity are given some weight. There is no question that personal and political consideration are also of some importance in the creation of new Town Councils, the upgrading of Town Councils to the higher status of Urban Councils, and the upgrading of Urban Councils to Municipal Councils.

Any locality coming under the purview of a village council is defined as "rural" by the Department of Census and Statistics.

The basic problem of such procedures for defining an urban area is that urban areas so defined lack consistency "in demographic, occupational, sociological or morphological terms" (Jones and Selvaratnam, 1970:199). For instance, in 1901 five localities with populations of 20,000 or more were classified as urban whereas 13 localities with fewer than 5,000 people were also classified as urban. By 1971 the situation had not changed very much; urban areas comprised 34 localities with 20,000 or more inhabitants and 40 areas with fewer than 5,000. Another problem related to this procedure is the existence of urbanized villages, about which Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:200) have commented: "The Department of Town and Country Planning [n.d.] states that there are many urbanized villages with populations exceeding 5,000, with developed socio-civic institutions, transport facilities, and electricity supply, which indeed are comparable to most Town Councils in terms of urban character, but which have not been accorded Town Council status."

In 1971 a total of 56 localities having more than 5,000 inhabitants, three of them with over 10,000 people, were still classified as rural (Table 1). More than three-quarters of these "villages" were in the Colombo and Jaffna districts, although other regions were also af-

TABLE 1 Number of villages of specified population size by district:
Sri Lanka, 1971

District	10,000+	5,000- 9,999	2,000- 4,999	1,000- 1,999	500- 999	≤500	All sizes
Colombo	1	18	146	175	168	316	824
Kalutara	0	2	61	139	129	206	537
Kandy	0	0	23	141	328	1,091	1,583
Matale	0	0	2	128	124	490	744
Nuwara Eliya	0	0	0	19	82	489	590
Galle	0	0	16	123	257	685	1,081
Matara	1	3	56	125	158	238	581
Hambantota	0	0	3	26	139	638	806
Jaffna	1	23	54	52	51	119	300
Mannar	0	0	4	3	22	318	347
Vavuniya	0	0	4	7	25	315	351
Batticaloa	0	2	17	35	53	352	459
Amparai	0	3	26	64	58	117	268
Trincomalee	0	0	13	16	30	156	215
Kurunegala	0	0	4	100	358	3,045	3,507
Puttalam	0	0	20	46	123	599	788
Anuradhapura	0	0	6	20	76	1,372	1,474
Polonnaruwa	0	2	13	39	35	113	202
Badulla	0	0	13	54	158	767	992
Moneragala	0	0	4	16	60	546	626
Ratnapura	0	0	0	105	161	1,119	1,385
Kegalle	0	0	14	114	272	621	1,021
All districts	3	53	499	1,547	2,867	13,712	18,681

SOURCE: Department of Census and Statistics (1975: table 18).

fect. On the other hand, 40 out of 135 localities defined as urban in 1971 had fewer than 5,000 inhabitants (Department of Census and Statistics, 1972:5-35). Though the criterion used in this instance was a purely demographic one, it serves to point out the anomalies pervading the classification of urban areas in Sri Lanka; other criteria would similarly reveal nonuniformities.

The definition of "urban" has undergone few changes since the turn of the century. From 1901 until 1946, any area governed by a municipal council, urban council, or local board was defined as urban. (The last category included only one area, Minuwangoda in Colombo dis-

tract.) After 1946 the local board area was deleted from areas defined as urban and in the 1953 census only areas with municipal or urban councils were classified as urban; areas under town or village councils were defined as rural. By 1963 areas under town councils had been upgraded from rural to urban status, and this is the definition of urban area that currently prevails.

The other obstacles to tracing time-series data on urbanization are associated with geographic changes—annexations and deletions of territory. The geographic boundaries of urban areas have not remained constant over time; some of them have expanded or contracted. For instance, the municipal limits of the city of Colombo encompassed 24.48 square kilometers (9.45 square miles) in 1881; the city's land area had increased to 25.90 sq. km. (10 sq. mi.) by 1901 and from then until the census of 1953 increased at every subsequent census (Kannangara, 1954). By 1971 it was 37.32 sq. km. (Department of Census and Statistics, 1974:2). Thus the city of Colombo in 1971 was not the same geographic unit as the city of Colombo in 1901.

The use of census data uncorrected for these definitional changes, reclassifications, and annexations and deletions of territory can lead to erroneous results. For example, the change in the percentage urban from 15.3 in 1953 to 18.9 in 1963 (Table 2) is due mainly to the inclusion of "15 new Town Councils with populations ranging between 2,000 and 33,000 which were established after 1953" (Gunatilleke, 1973:43) with perhaps a minimal contribution from annexations and deletions.

Urbanization, however, being a process of change, cannot realistically be tied down to constant areas. To obtain a realistic picture of the process of urbanization, one has to estimate the size of preurban populations of spatial units that have become urban over time. In Sri Lanka, it is not possible to do this with published census data, which are, for the most part, unadjusted. Some effort toward adjustment of census data is currently being made by the Surveyor General's Department (personal communication).

URBAN-RURAL POPULATION COMPOSITION AT NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS

Narrowly defined, the demographic study of urbanization is concerned with the level and tempo of change in the distribution of population between urban and nonurban areas (Goldstein and Sly, 1974:8). The level of urbanization conventionally refers to the population living in urban areas expressed as a proportion of the total population at a

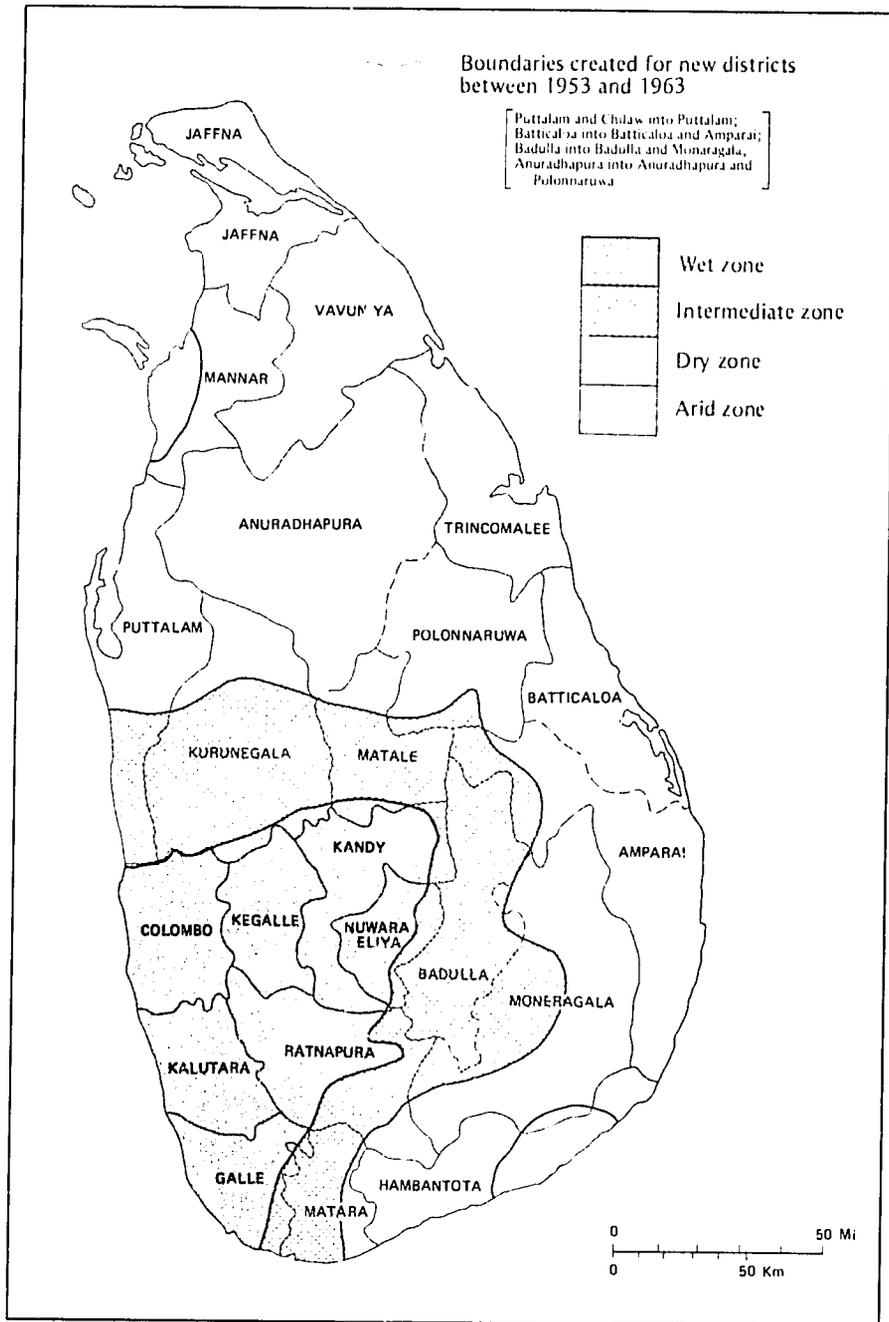
particular time. Tempo of urbanization refers to the difference in the level of urbanization at two points in time, usually expressed as an annual rate of change.

Before turning to Table 2, one should note changes that have occurred in the number of districts of Sri Lanka (see Map 1). At the turn of the century, Sri Lanka's nine provinces had 20 districts. At the census of 1971 there were 22 districts. Comparability over time can easily be established. The changes took place between 1953 and 1963, when the districts of Puttalam and Chilaw were amalgamated to form one district and another three districts (Batticaloa, Anuradhapura, and Badulla) were divided to form six districts. The newly created districts were Amparai, Polonnaruwa, and Monaragala. Thus the 19 districts that are comparable over time are Puttalam and Chilaw, Batticaloa and Amparai, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, Badulla and Monaragala, and the other 15 districts whose boundaries remained unchanged. Regional-level data presented in this paper are comparable over time because they reflect these boundary changes.

The districts of Sri Lanka have been divided into various regional groupings based on somewhat different criteria (see Department of Census and Statistics, 1973; ESCAP, 1975; World Fertility Survey, 1978). The regions identified in this paper differ slightly from the others. Because urbanization cannot be studied in isolation from dominant internal migration streams, the regional classification I have adopted depicts the destination and origin districts of the country within the broader framework of agroclimatic topography. Two dominant internal migration streams are observed in Sri Lanka, one to Colombo district containing the capital city (region A, Map 2) and the other to a collection of districts in the rural dry zone (region E), where the government has invested heavily in peasant agriculture (Abeysekera, 1979). Accordingly, these two areas are treated as two regions in this paper. Three other regions consist of the maritime districts of the wet zone (region B), the *kandyian* (hill-country) districts of the wet zone (region C), and Jaffna district (region D) in the extreme north of the dry zone.

The maritime districts are the most developed areas of the country, having been exposed to Western influences since the early sixteenth century. They include Kalutara, Galle, Matara, and Puttalam/Chilaw (the last actually situated in the intermediate zone). The *kandyian* districts are less developed and have had less exposure to Western influence; they also contain the tea plantations of the country. Furthermore, the maritime districts are inhabited predominantly by the low-

MAP 1 Administrative districts and climatic zones of Sri Lanka



SOURCE: ESCAP (1975:17).

MAP 2 Regional groupings by district

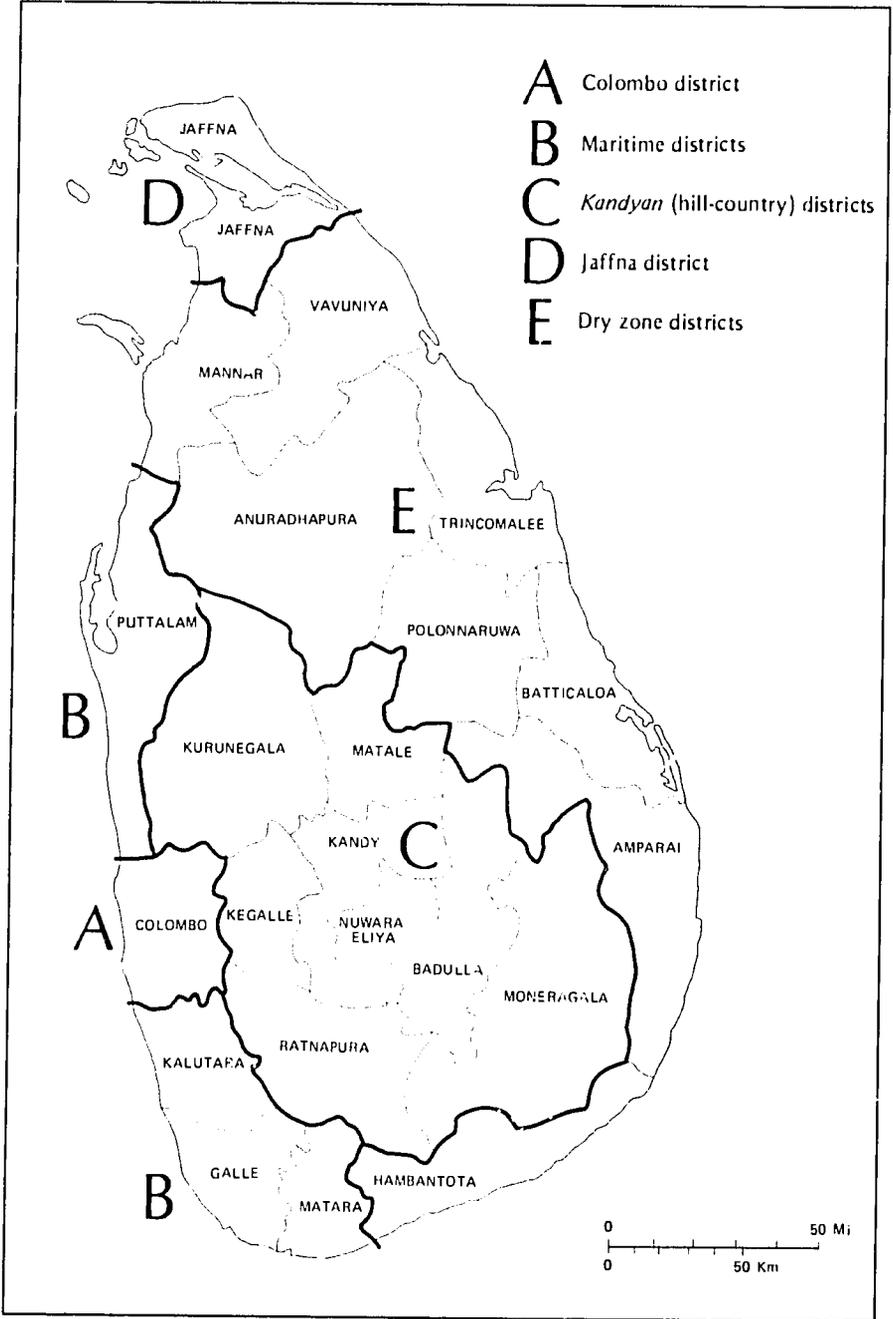


TABLE 2 Percentage urban in specified regions of Sri Lanka, census years 1901–71

Region	1901	1911	1921	1946	1953	1963	1971
Colombo district (wet zone)	29.6	35.3	38.3	40.7	41.5	46.5	55.0
Maritime districts ^a (wet zone)	12.2	10.7	11.0	11.1	11.0	17.6	18.0
<i>Kandyan</i> (hill-country) districts ^b (wet zone)	4.6	5.1	5.4	5.7	5.8	8.7	8.1
Jaffna district ^c (dry zone)	11.3	12.4	12.8	14.7	15.7	24.6	33.4
Dry zone districts ^d	7.6	7.5	7.8	11.0	8.6	16.9	19.1
All regions	11.6	13.2	14.2	15.4	15.3	18.9	22.4

a Include Kalutara, Galle, Matara, and Puttalam/Chilaw districts.

b Include Kandy, Matale, Nuwara Eliya, Kegalle, Badulla/Monaragala, Ratnapura, and Kurunegala districts.

c Jaffna "has been classified separately as the historic, ethnic and other considerations have produced a special combination of demographic and agricultural factors that deserve to be treated separately" (ESCAP, 1975:16).

d Include Hambantota, Mannar, Vavuniya, Batticaloa/Amparai, Trincomalee, and Anuradhapura/Polonnaruwa districts.

SOURCES: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 3; 1967: table 2; 1974: tables 14, 24).

country Sinhalese, whereas the *kandyan* districts are the home of the *kandyan* Sinhalese along with the South Indian Tamil laborer population that was imported by the British to run the plantations. Following the reasoning of ESCAP (1975:16), I have classified Jaffna district separately because "historic, ethnic and other considerations have produced a special combination of demographic and agricultural factors that deserve to be treated separately." Unlike most of the districts in the rest of the dry zone, Jaffna has been a district of net out-migration since 1946.

As Table 2 reveals, according to census definitions of "urban" the level of urbanization in Sri Lanka increased at each successive census (except for a slight dip in 1953). From 11.6 percent in 1901, the proportion of the population residing in urban areas almost doubled by 1971. Although the rise in the level of urbanization when compared

with the experience of some Latin American countries is quite modest, considered within the South Asian context it is noteworthy. What Table 2 does not reveal is that in 1901 only 28 spatial units were defined as urban, but by 1971 the number so defined had grown to 135, representing more than a quadrupling of the number of urban localities (Table 3).

There is no possibility of identifying these 135 urban places of 1971 in the published census data for previous years; if this information were available, one could ascertain whether there was increasing concentration of population in these areas over time and, if so, determine the tempo of changes in concentration. In the absence of these data, however, one can identify in the 1971 urban classification the same areas that were defined as urban at previous censuses. Thus one can ascertain the proportion of urban population in these areas and compare it to the proportion urban at preceding censuses (Table 3).

Two interesting observations emerge from Table 3. First, the proportion of the population urban as defined by the 1971 census deviates by hardly more than one percentage point in either direction when

TABLE 3 Percentage urban at each census, percentage urban in 1971 in areas defined as urban at each respective census, population in census-defined urban areas as a percentage of total urban population of 1971, and number of urban areas: Sri Lanka, census years 1901–71

Item:	1901	1911	1921	1946	1953	1963	1971
Percentage urban (from Table 2)	11.6	13.2	14.2	15.4	15.3	18.9	22.4
Percentage urban in 1971 in areas defined as urban at each census	11.4	14.3	14.7	14.7	14.7	u	22.4
Population in census-defined urban areas as percentage of total urban population of 1971	51.3	64.0	66.0	66.0	66.1	u	100.0
Number of urban areas	28	37	42	42	43	90	135

u—unavailable.

SOURCES: Same as in Table 2 and Department of Census and Statistics (1972: table 4).

compared with the proportion urban at each previous census (cf. rows 1 and 2). In fact, the proportion defined as urban in 1971 was lower than the proportion urban as defined by three of five previous censuses for which data exist (1901, 1946, and 1953). This comparison obscures the possible geographic expansion of urban places over time caused by boundary changes (for example, the expansion of the city of Colombo mentioned earlier) and therefore probably overstates the 1971 level of urbanization depicted in row 2. The highest positive divergence, between the censuses of 1971 and 1911 (14.3 versus 13.2 percent), is due mainly to the granting of urban status to the suburbs of Colombo City (e.g., Dehiwela-Mt. Lavinia, Kotte, Kolonnawa, and Wattala-Mabole-Peliyagoda), which alone accounted for almost one-third of the total intercensal increase in percentage urban between 1901 and 1911.

Second, relatively more of the urban population of Sri Lanka is concentrated in the earlier established localities rather than in the newly created ones. The 28 urban areas of 1901, which represent just one-fifth of the total number of urban places in 1971, contain slightly more than one-half the 1971 urban population; one-quarter of the 1971 urban places (i.e., the 37 urban localities of 1911) contain almost two-thirds of the 1971 national urban component. Conversely, over two-thirds of urban places, which came into existence after 1953, contain only one-third of the 1971 urban population. One might infer that the recent additions to the urban areas lacked potential for population growth; one might even speculate that the recently created urban places were no more than overgrown villages, possibly containing a few regional or local government offices and a bazaar with hardly any commensurate economic activity capable of sustained growth. Unfortunately, the unavailability of published census data on the proportion of the population residing in each urban area in 1963 precludes verification of this hypothesis.

Colombo district consistently reveals high levels of urbanization in comparison with other regions. It had the largest urban population at the turn of the century and maintained its ranking until 1971. In contrast, the maritime districts had the second highest proportion of urban population (12.2 percent) in 1901 but were soon surpassed by Jaffna district and recently by the dry zone districts. At the 1971 census, their level of urbanization was below the national average. The lowest level of urbanization is found among the *kandyan* districts, which have maintained their low ranking throughout the century. The two large increments in the regional proportion urban observed during

1953–63 and 1963–71 were due mainly to reclassification and have been felt in all the regions; the impact appears to have been heaviest in Jaffna district, however, followed by the dry zone districts and Colombo.

As already mentioned, urbanization and urban growth are not synonymous. Urbanization is measured by the percentage change in the proportion of the urban population to that of the total population. Urban growth, on the other hand, is measured by the percentage change in the urban population itself between two points in time. A rise in urban growth need not entail an increase in urbanization, or vice-versa. The level of urbanization rises only when the rate of growth of the urban places is higher than that of the growth rate of rural localities.

The level of urban growth in Sri Lanka is unquestionably rising, at both national and regional levels. None of the regions has recorded a decline in urban concentration within any intercensal period, although at the district level there have been a few sporadic occasions of intercensal urban decline. The magnitudes of urban growth have been much higher than those of urbanization during the twentieth century. (The same has been true in Malaysia, according to Hirschman, 1976.)

The impact of reclassification of urban areas is much greater on the measure of urban growth than on the measure of urbanization. This is due principally to the absence of the stabilizing component of total population in the former. Until the intercensal period of 1953–63, when the highest number of areas was reclassified, intercensal urban growth was well under 100 percent, the dry zone experiencing the highest proportionate growth (93.5 percent) during the 25-year intercensal period of 1921–46 (Table 4). But during 1953–63, even the *kanayan* districts almost doubled their urban populations and only Colombo district grew at a rate below the national average. The dry zone districts had a phenomenal 209.3 percent increase, due partly to the fact that the districts of Mannar and Vavuniya acquired urban status for over 15 percent of their inhabitants. Urban growth during 1963–71 was second only to that of the preceding intercensal period (a two-year difference favoring the latter); Jaffna and the dry zone districts continued to grow substantially, with Colombo following closely.

A basic difficulty in comparing rates of urban growth between censuses is due to differences in intercensal time periods. Three periods comprised 10 years each, one had 25 years, another 7 years, and yet another 8 years. To overcome this difficulty, I have computed annual

TABLE 4 Percentage of intercensal change in urban population by region: Sri Lanka, 1901-71

Region	1901- 11	1911- 21	1921- 46	1946- 53	1953- 63	1963- 71
Colombo district (wet zone)	42.6	21.0	63.7	22.6	44.3	43.6
Maritime districts (wet zone)	2.2	12.6	44.7	15.8	96.7	19.3
<i>Kandyan</i> districts (wet zone)	29.1	15.7	62.4	26.2	93.4	9.0
Jaffna district (dry zone)	19.4	4.9	47.4	23.4	95.4	56.2
Dry zone districts	4.2	12.2	93.5	6.8	209.3	50.8
All regions	31.1	17.5	60.4	21.1	62.7	41.0

SOURCES: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 4; 1974: table 24).

rates of urban growth (Table 5), which are a better measure of the tempo of urban growth than the intercensal rates. Table 5 assumes there was exponential change in the urban population as well as linear change between any two censuses.

TABLE 5 Percentage of annual exponential change in urban population by region: Sri Lanka, 1901-71

Region	1901- 11	1911- 21	1921- 46	1946- 53	1953- 63	1963- 71
Colombo district (wet zone)	3.6	1.9	2.0	2.9	3.7	4.5
Maritime districts (wet zone)	0.2	1.9	1.5	2.1	6.8	2.2
<i>Kandyan</i> districts (wet zone)	2.6	1.5	1.9	3.3	6.6	1.1
Jaffna district (dry zone)	1.8	0.5	1.6	3.0	6.7	5.6
Dry zone districts	0.4	1.2	2.6	0.9	11.3	5.1
All regions	2.7	1.6	1.9	2.7	4.7	4.7

SOURCES: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 4; 1967: table 2; 1972: table 4).

Nationally, the tempo of urban growth appears to have dropped in the second intercensal period (1911–21) and increased from then onward until 1953–63, when it peaked; in the last period a slight drop was recorded. However, the steep increase from 2.7 during 1946–53 to 4.7 during 1953–63 was an artifact of the doubling of the number of urban areas during the latter decade.

Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:204) have attempted to make a rough adjustment for the distortion caused by the reclassification of urban areas during 1953–63. They explain the method of adjustment and its rationale as follows:

The populations of Town Councils created between 1953 and 1963 were projected backwards to 1953 and 1946 on the assumption that in both 1953–63 and 1946–53 periods, their rate of population increase was a third higher than that of the other towns that were in their town size class in the terminal year of the period under consideration. The reasoning behind this assumption was that a town probably had a better chance of being awarded Town Council status if its growth was unusually rapid, and that there is no question that some of the new Town Councils (especially those near Colombo) were growing more rapidly than other towns of comparable size.

When this adjustment is made, the rate of growth during 1953–63 drops to 2.7, which is the same as the rate that prevailed in the earlier period. But the decline, according to Jones and Selvaratnam's calculation, was not from 4.7 to 2.7 but rather from 3.6 to 2.7 (p. 201). The difference originates from Jones and Selvaratnam's having added the populations of the town councils in 1953 as found in the Registrar-General's reports to the census-defined urban population of 1953. As noted earlier, town councils were defined as rural in the 1953 census. Thus even the unadjusted data in Jones and Selvaratnam (1970) represent some degree of adjustment, which has the effect of boosting the census urban population of 1953 by 13.2 percent and increasing the number of urban places from 43 to 67.

I have made a similar adjustment of the data measuring urban growth. To ascertain the tempo of growth, I have identified in the 1971 census the areas defined as urban in the 1953 census and compared the 1971 "adjusted" urban population with the 1953 urban population. When the 1971 urban population of 1953-defined urban areas is taken as the population at t_2 and the 1953 urban population as t_1 , the annual growth rate of the national urban population drops to 2.3 during the 18-year period, reflecting a decline from the 1946–53 rate of 2.7 (not shown in Table 5).

What all these adjustments point to is the extent to which urban

growth and urbanization may be an artifact of reclassification. When adjustments are made for reclassification, the increase in the rate of urban growth is almost zero. As Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:205) observe, "according to this adjusted data, the urban population grew at the same rate as the rural between 1946 and 1953, and only marginally faster than the rural in the decade to 1963. In the entire 17-year period, the percentage urban increased only from 18.3 to 18.8."

Table 6 presents the comparable annual rates of growth for Sri Lanka and its regions (urban and rural areas combined). Considering the adjusted rate of urban growth for 1953–71, one observes that there was a higher rate of urban growth than of total growth only during the first half of the century. Even during this period, the greatest differential between urban and national growth rates was observed during the 1901–11 decade, when nine rural areas were reclassified as urban: these included the suburbs of Colombo City, which were growing rapidly. From 1921 to 1953, the differential growth rate between the urban population and the total population was almost negligible. In fact, since 1946 the total population has exhibited a higher rate of growth than the urban areas. As the total population contains the urban population, this means that the rural areas grew faster than the urban areas.

If one controls for effects of reclassification, the growth of a particular area is the joint function of natural increase and net migration.

TABLE 6 Percentage of annual exponential change in total population by region: Sri Lanka, 1901–71

Region	1901–11	1911–21	1921–46	1946–53	1953–63	1963–71
Colombo district (wet zone)	1.8	1.1	1.7	2.6	2.6	2.4
Maritime districts (wet zone)	1.5	0.9	1.4	2.2	2.1	1.9
<i>Kandyan</i> districts (wet zone)	1.5	1.0	1.7	2.9	2.6	2.1
Jaffna district (dry zone)	0.8	0.1	1.0	2.1	2.2	1.7
Dry zone districts	0.6	0.7	1.3	4.5	4.5	3.6
All regions	1.4	0.9	1.6	2.8	2.7	2.3

SOURCE: Computed from ESCAP (1975:18, table 19).

Malaria was brought under effective control in 1946 and the death rate afterward declined precipitously. Since malaria may be assumed to have been a more effective "Malthusian check" of natural increase in rural than in urban areas, the improved mortality conditions probably tipped the fertility differential in favor of rural areas, fostering population growth. The changes in the rates of growth around 1946 probably reflect this increased differential. To the extent that there was a possibility of neutralizing or reversing the growth rate of rural areas through rural-to-urban migration, the persistence of higher growth rates in rural areas indicates that the volume of rural-to-urban migration was not sufficient to accomplish this.

Another part of the picture has been the existence of a heavy stream of migration to the districts of the rural dry zone from 1946 onward. This is a rural-to-rural stream of migration from the land-hungry wet zone to the newly irrigated locations of the dry zone; insofar as it is a geographic transfer of people within rural Sri Lanka, it should not affect the counterbalancing effects of rural-to-urban migration. But as data on internal migration reveal (Abeysekera, 1979), the majority of migrants who were born in urban areas left their places of birth to live in rural areas, and this ruralward migration has had a substantial negative impact on rural-to-urban migration.

Regional data, when unadjusted for reclassification, suggest that most of the regions have generally maintained a higher rate of urban growth compared with that of the whole region. Until 1946, all regions were characterized by a less than 2 percent growth rate, whereas the postmalaria era has been conspicuous for its more than 2 percent rate of increase. The very high growth rate of the dry zone population during the latter half of the century is the most striking exception to the otherwise uniform growth pattern of the regions. During the 25 years from 1946 to 1971, the dry zone grew at the rate of 4.2 percent per annum while Colombo, the next fastest growing region, grew at only 2.5 percent per annum. This was the period during which land colonization took place in earnest, especially from 1946 to 1963; the high rate of growth resulted jointly from net in-migration and increased infant and child survivorship due to the conquest of malaria. A comparison of Tables 5 and 6 reveals that urban growth in the dry zone was a delayed phenomenon when compared with the timing of growth of the entire region. Although the growth rate of the region was 4.5 percent during 1946–53, the urban areas of the region grew by a mere 0.9 percent. It was only with reclassification of urban areas that the urban growth rate in the dry zone reached an unprecedented 11.3 percent during 1953–63.

TABLE 7 Percentage of annual growth: selected areas of Colombo district, 1901–71

Area	1901– 11	1911– 21	1921– 46	1946– 53	1953– 63	1963– 71
Colombo district	1.8	1.1	1.7	2.6	2.6	2.4
Urban Colombo district	3.6	1.9	2.0	2.9	3.7	4.5
City of Colombo	3.1	1.4	1.6	2.3	1.8	1.2
Dehiwela-Mt. Lavinia	a	3.2	3.2	4.5	3.5	4.2
Kotte	a	3.6	4.1	4.3	3.0	2.8
Moratuwa	-0.8	0.5	2.3	2.5	2.6	2.7

a Not defined as urban in the 1901 census.

SOURCES: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 4; 1974: table 26).

The growth rate of the city of Colombo has been consistently lower than that of urban Colombo during the 70-year period and lower than that of Colombo district since 1921 (Table 7). It is the three major suburban satellites of Colombo City, with growth rates two or three times that of the city of Colombo, that have boosted the growth rate of urban Colombo. This slow growth of Colombo City has occurred despite an areal annexation of 11.4 sq. km. (4.4 sq. mi.), representing an increase of 44 percent.

SIZE CLASS DISTRIBUTION

To the extent that there are differential patterns and rates of change among the various urban areas, neither the percentage urban nor urban-to-rural ratios are able to provide any information on such dynamics. For instance, a question such as "Have the smallest urban places grown at the same rate as the largest ones?" cannot be answered by these summary measures. Examining Indian data, Bose (1974:72) found that whereas the proportion urban increased from 11 to 20 percent between 1901 and 1971, the proportion of the city population (i.e., the urban population living in cities of 100,000 or more) increased from 23 to 56 percent during the same period. Thus he found that from the perspective of planning and policy in India the ratio of city population to that of the urban population is a more sensitive measure of urbanization than the percentage urban.

Demographers have traditionally classified urban localities by size of population. In the study of urbanization six size classes are commonly used for towns (Table 8). One must recognize, however, that

the dividing points between classes are somewhat arbitrary and that the range of population size within classes varies considerably. I have selected the size classes shown in Table 8 because, first, in recent years they have become the most common ones and using them therefore facilitates cross-national comparison, and, second, they seem to reflect meaningful differences in urban functions and organization in Sri Lanka. I also use the more common terms "large town" (for urban places with 50,000 or more people), "medium town" (for places with 10,000 to 49,999 people), and "small town" (for those with fewer than 10,000).

During the 70-year period, the number of towns in all size classes grew from 28 to 135, increasing by 382 percent. Large towns increased sevenfold, medium towns by six and one-half times, and small towns by two and one-half times. Although the last group increased in absolute numbers, their relative numbers declined. Large towns accounted for 3.5 percent of all towns at the turn of the century and for 5.9 percent in 1971; the proportion of medium towns increased from 28.6 to 43.5 percent; but the proportion of small towns declined from 67.8 to 49.6 percent.

These figures, which compare the two end points of the 70-year period, do not reflect the fluctuations that took place during this span. These fluctuations become prominent when one considers urban populations of the towns expressed as a percentage of the total urban population (Table 8). At the two end points the large towns' increase is quite modest, from 37.4 to 43.5 percent. In 1953, however, large towns contained almost two-thirds of the country's urban population (63.3 percent), and also, incidentally, constituted 16.3 percent of all towns—their largest share. On closer scrutiny, it becomes evident that the performance of large towns can be divided into three phases: an initial period of stability from 1901 to 1921, a period of increasing concentration between 1921 and 1953, and a final phase of decline from 1953 to 1971. An initial period of stability is observable in medium and small towns as well, whereas both exhibited a decline in the second period and an increase in the last period. However, it must be noted that the historical performance of town types is not necessarily a function of the rate of concentration of people in urban areas; in Sri Lanka it is (confoundingly) more a function of reclassification.

Table 9 shows the performance of different size classes during five intercensal periods for which data are available, yielding information as to how many localities in a particular size class remained within that size class, moved up by one size class, or moved up by two size

TABLE 8 Number of towns by size class, percentage distribution urban population: Sri Lanka, census years 1901–71

Town type and size class	1901			1911			1921		
	Num-ber	% of urban places	% of urban pop.	Num-ber	% of urban places	% of urban pop.	Num-ber	% of urban places	% of urban pop.
Large	1	3.5	37.4	1	2.7	38.9	1	2.4	38.3
≥100,000	1	3.5	37.4	1	2.7	38.9	1	2.4	38.3
50,000–99,999	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Medium	8	28.5	43.9	10	27.0	39.9	12	28.6	41.7
20,000–49,999	4	14.3	30.7	4	10.8	25.3	6	14.3	29.7
10,000–19,999	4	14.3	13.2	6	16.2	14.6	6	14.3	12.0
Small	19	67.8	18.8	26	70.2	21.2	29	69.1	20.0
5,000–9,999	6	21.4	9.7	14	37.8	16.5	12	28.6	14.1
<5,000	13	46.4	9.1	12	32.4	4.7	17	40.5	5.9
All town types and size classes	28	99.8	100.1	37	99.9	100.0	42	100.1	100.0

NOTE: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

SOURCES: All years except 1963: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 4; 1972: table 4). 1963: Jones and Selvaratnam (1970: table 2).

classes during an intercensal period. Between 1953 and 1971, for example, 34 localities were in the size class of 10,000–19,999 persons; six of them remained in the same class throughout the 18-year period, three were in the 5,000–9,999 class in 1953 but by 1971 had moved up to the 10,000–19,999 class, one moved up by two size classes, and 24 other localities not classified as urban in 1953 were so by 1971. Only shifts in size class during the longest intercensal period (1921–46) can be studied without being biased by reclassification. The 1946–53 period is minimally affected by two new additions, each of which carried fewer than 5,000 people. Almost one-quarter of all urban areas were reclassified during 1901–11, almost one-eighth during 1911–21, and more than two-thirds during 1953–71. (Published census data on individual urban locations were not available for 1963; had they been available, shifts in size classes could have been observed for the 1953–63 and 1963–71 periods and the performance of almost half of the areas that became urban through reclassification during 1953–71 could have been documented during 1963–71.)

of size classes, and population in size classes as percentage of total

1946			1953			1963			1971		
Num- ber	% of urban places	% of urban pop.									
5	11.9	57.0	7	16.3	65.3	7	7.8	50.1	8	5.9	43.5
1	2.4	35.4	1	2.3	34.4	2	2.2	31.1	3	2.2	29.0
4	9.5	21.6	6	14.0	30.9	5	5.6	19.0	5	3.7	14.5
18	42.9	34.4	21	48.9	29.7	39	43.3	38.3	60	44.5	45.5
5	11.9	17.3	6	14.0	12.5	18	20.0	24.4	26	19.3	28.2
13	31.0	17.1	15	34.9	17.2	21	23.3	13.9	34	25.2	17.3
19	45.2	8.6	15	34.9	5.0	44	48.9	11.6	67	49.6	11.0
7	16.7	5.5	4	9.3	2.4	23	25.6	7.9	27	20.0	6.7
12	28.6	3.1	11	25.6	2.6	21	23.3	3.7	40	29.6	4.3
42	100.0	100.0	43	100.1	100.0	90	100.0	100.0	135	100.0	100.0

If the information shown in Tables 8 and 9 is juxtaposed, it can be seen that the increasing concentration of population that characterized the large towns during their second phase (1921–53) was a real one and so was the conversely observed decline of the medium and small towns because this period was least confounded by reclassification. If one were to generalize about the growth of town types over the 70-year period on the strength of Tables 8 and 9, one might even state that medium towns and especially small towns needed reclassification to maintain or increase their respective shares of the urban population. During periods when reclassification was conspicuously absent, large towns increased their share of the national urban component.

To explore whether this hypothesis had merit, I analyzed the data for the intercensal periods when reclassification could be regarded as a substantial confounding factor, then attempted to adjust the data for this bias. There are at least two ways of looking at urban growth by town type: (1) One can consider the population of a particular town type at the beginning and end of an intercensal period, regardless of

TABLE 9 Shifts in urban-place size classes during intercensal periods:

Size class	1901-11					1911-21					1921-46	
	Same number	+1	+2	New areas	All shifts	Same number	+1	+2	New areas	All shifts	Same number	+1
≥100,000	1	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	0
50,000-99,999	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	4
20,000-49,999	4	0	0	0	4	4	2	0	0	6	2	2
10,000-19,999	3	1	0	2	6	4	2	0	0	6	4	8
5,000-9,999	6 ^a	6	0	2	14	12	0	0	0	12	3	4
<5,000	7	0	0	5	12	12	0	0	5	17	12	0
All size classes												
Number	21	7	0	9	37	33	4	0	5	42	22	18
Percent	56.8	18.9	0.0	24.3	100.0	78.6	9.5	0.0	11.9	100.0	52.4	42.9

NOTE: Percentages may not sum to 100 because of rounding.

a Included in this number is Trincomalee, which declined by one size class.

b Included in this number is Matton-Dikoya, which declined by one size class.

SOURCES: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 4; 1972: table 4).

whether a particular locality has the same size designation throughout the intercensal period, as long as the locality is defined as urban at both end points. This would yield the "apparent" growth of town type. (2) It is also possible to identify a particular locality at the beginning of an intercensal period and follow it through to the end of the period, regardless of whether it remained in the same town type. Because the focus is on the comparative performance of constant town types over time, this method yields the "real" growth of a town type and is more appropriate for assessing whether medium and small towns would have grown in the absence of reclassification. As Table 10 reveals, with the first procedure it is possible to have a different number of towns at the beginning and end of an intercensal period, whereas the second procedure does not involve this liability. Apparent growth equals real growth only when each locality of a particular town type has remained unchanged and when no additions of locality have occurred during the intercensal period.

Sri Lanka, 1901-71

			1946-53					1955-71				
+2	New areas	All shifts	Same number	+1	+2	New areas	All shifts	Same number	+1	+2	New areas	All shifts
0	0	1	1	0	0	0	1	1	2	0	0	3
0	0	4	4	2	0	0	6	4	1	0	0	5
1	0	5	3	3	0	0	6	3	8	3	12	26
1	0	13	10	5	0	0	15	6	3	1	24	34
0	0	7	2	2	0	0	4	2 ^b	3	0	22	27
0	0	12	9	0	0	2	11	5	0	0	35	40
2	0	42	29	12	0	2	43	21	17	4	93	135
4.8	0.0	100.1	67.4	27.9	0.0	4.7	100.0	15.6	12.6	3.0	68.9	100.1

It becomes evident that the apparent growth measure almost systematically minimizes the growth of small towns while exaggerating the growth of medium towns, owing to the graduation of small towns into medium towns through growth and the accrual of their population to the medium towns. When compared with Table 4, Table 10 shows that only large towns (in this case the primate city of Colombo) exhibited real growth greater than the growth of the national urban population during 1901-11 (36.6 versus 31.1 percent). During 1911-21 and 1953-71, only small towns grew more than the national urban population, which increased by 17.5 percent during 1911-21, 62.7 percent during 1953-63, and 41.0 percent during 1963-71. Since all figures on national urban growth include effects of reclassification, which artificially inflate urban growth, the finding that small towns maintained higher growth during these periods after effects of reclassification are taken into account speaks well for their growth potential. Thus it is incorrect to say that small towns depended on reclassifica-

TABLE 10 Percentage of "real" and "apparent" growth of town types during three intercensal periods: Sri Lanka

Town type and type of growth	1901-11	1911-21	1953-71
Large			
Real	36.6 (1)	15.6 (1)	45.7 (7)
Apparent	(1) 36.6 (1)	(1) 15.6 (1)	(7) 52.8 (8)
Medium			
Real	2.6 (8)	12.9 (10)	54.0 (21)
Apparent	(8) 19.3 (10)	(10) 22.6 (12)	(21) 58.7 (24)
Small			
Real	23.0 (19)	22.6 (26)	99.3 (15)
Apparent	(19) 47.7 (26)	(26) 11.3 (29)	(15) -0.2 (11)

NOTE: Figures in parentheses represent number of towns. Those preceding percentage of apparent growth represent number of towns at the beginning of intercensal period; those following percentages represent number at end of period.

SOURCES: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 4; 1972: table 4).

tion to maintain or increase their share of the national urban component; this appears to be more the case with medium towns.

In the process of urbanization, the contribution of small, medium, and large cities has varied. According to several authorities, medium towns have taken the vanguard in the admittedly slow rate of urbanization that has characterized Sri Lanka during the twentieth century. Gunatilleke (1973:46), for example, states:

On any of these definitions [population size per locality], the rate of urbanization remains low. If the minimum population size of urban units is taken as 2,000 or 5,000, the increase in the share of the urban population has been insignificant. If the dividing line is applied at 10,000 or 20,000, the urban sector shows a faster rate of expansion. *The figures reveal that the most rapid growth has taken place in the towns between 20,000 and 50,000* [emphasis added].

Dias (1977:7), paraphrasing Puvanarajan (1976), asserts that "urbanization in Sri Lanka is characterized by the dominance of medium sized urban units." Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:205) observe that "the outstanding trend is the increase in the share of the urban population living in towns in the 20,000 to 100,000 size range—from 32 percent in 1946 to 43 percent in 1960."

While agreeing with the observation that medium towns have held the lion's share of the national urban component during most of the

period, I submit that the dynamics of the process of urban growth has not been adequately considered by those arriving at this general conclusion. In particular, the performance of the small towns has been neglected by reason of their definitional exclusion from the small town class due to their graduation into medium size towns at the end of the intercensal period. What need to be monitored are whether a particular town type grew, declined, or stagnated during specific periods and the comparative performance of town types. A short time span would have been desirable for this purpose, but I have been obliged by data constraints to use the intercensal period. The evidence, shown up to now from the analysis of published census data, leads me to believe that the growth performance of the small towns was of no mean caliber, even though it accounts for a small part of total urban growth.

I have stressed this point because it generates a series of policy implications having importance to Sri Lankan socioeconomic development. I shall endeavor to show that small towns have demonstrated a momentum for growth. This growth requires a concomitant growth of an infrastructure capable of supporting a burgeoning populace; included in such an infrastructure are growth of employment opportunities, educational and medical services, housing, electrification, and protected water supplies. The more rapid growth of small urban places means of course that urbanization is increasingly decentralized. Having indicated the policy relevance of this discussion, I will next examine additional evidence on the growth rates of town types, then turn to specific policy implications of the growth of small towns.

Except during the period of 1901–11, when large towns exhibited a higher rate of growth than small towns, the latter have consistently maintained a higher growth rate than either medium or large towns during every intercensal period (Table 11). The city of Colombo, the only locality represented in the largest size class, shows once again a secular decline in growth—except for the sudden spurt during 1946–53, which may have been due to Sri Lanka's gaining national independence in 1948 and the ensuing political activity concentrated in Colombo. The 50,000–99,999 class, though not existing in the first three intercensal periods, shows a much higher growth rate during the last two periods than found in Colombo; the three major suburbs of Colombo are included in this size class. Among the medium towns, the 10,000–19,999 size class displays a higher rate of growth than the 20,000–49,999 class over the period 1911–71. Among the small towns, it is the under-5,000 class that exhibits the higher rate of real growth,

TABLE 11 Annual percentage of "real" population change during intercensal periods by town type and size class: Sri Lanka, 1901-71

Town type and size class	1901-11		1911-21		1921-46		1946-53		1953-71	
Large	3.1	(1)	1.4	(1)	1.6	(1)	2.6	(5)	2.1	(7)
≥100,000	3.1	(1)	1.4	(1)	1.6	(1)	2.3	(1)	1.5	(1)
50,000-99,999	0	(0)	0	(0)	0	(0)	3.0	(4)	2.7	(6)
Medium	0.3	(8)	0.8	(10)	1.9	(12)	3.2	(18)	2.7	(21)
20,000-49,999	0.8	(4)	0.4	(4)	1.9	(6)	0.5	(5) ^a	2.2	(6)
10,000-19,999	-1.1	(4) ^b	2.5	(6)	2.0	(6)	3.4	(13)	2.6	(15)
Small	2.1	(19)	2.0	(26)	2.4	(29)	3.4	(18)	3.8	(15)
5,000-9,999	1.7	(6)	2.1	(14)	2.3	(12) ^c	0.7	(7)	2.4	(4)
<5,000	2.5	(13)	1.7	(12)	2.6	(17) ^d	7.4	(11) ^e	4.9	(11) ^f

NOTE: Figures in parentheses represent number of towns at beginning of period.

a Trincomalee declined by 0.8 percent.

b Negambo and Trincomalee declined by 4.2 and 2.5 percent, respectively.

c Trincomalee grew by 5.0 percent.

d Ambalangoda grew by 4.4 and Beruwala by 4.7 percent.

e Minuwangoda Local Board Area is excluded because it had lost its urban status by 1953.

f Ja-ela grew by 9.7 and Awissawella by 7.4 percent.

SOURCES: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1958: table 4; 1972: table 4).

except during 1911-21. This trend is most pronounced during the last quarter century of the 70-year period, denoting perhaps that the trend has still not exhausted itself.

Even during the period from 1921 to 1953, when large towns experienced increased growth and there was a precipitous decline in the small towns' share of national urban growth from 20 to 5 percent (Table 8), the real growth rates maintained by small towns were higher than those of the large or medium towns. Small towns claimed a greater share of the urban population between 1953 and 1971, mainly owing to reclassification; and a similar upsurge is reflected in the real annual growth rates of small towns, even when effects of reclassification are controlled for.

PRIMACY AND METROPOLITANIZATION

In developed nations the distribution of cities by population concentration generally follows the rank-size rule—that is, it possesses a log-

normal distribution. In one of the earliest formulations of the rank-size rule, Auerbach (1913) wrote that "when the largest cities of a country are ranked by size, the product of a city's rank by its size tends to be a constant" (quoted by Shryock and Siegel, 1976:100). A simplified illustration is that when a nation's second largest city is one-half the size of the largest, the third largest one-third the size of the largest city, and the fourth largest one-fourth its size, the cities show conformity to the rank-size rule. The evolution of the rank-size pattern is attributed to the nature of economic growth and is generally considered to have positive effects for the national entity (Berry and Kasarda, 1977:391).

Whenever the rank-size rule is violated and one city grows much faster than the rest of the urban centers, the situation is characterized by primacy. Primacy is indicative of a lopsided growth pattern of urban localities. In most developing countries conformity to the rank-size rule is the exception and primacy is the norm.

Primacy is associated with overurbanization, which is characterized by overutilization of a city's resources owing to an influx of migrants from other parts of the country who cannot be absorbed into the urban economy, growth of a traditional sector in the urban economy, and a transfer of rural misery into the center of the city. After investigating 87 countries, Mehta (1964:147), however, concluded that the "primate city" urban structure does not appear to be a function of the level of economic development, industrialization or urbanization. It is a phenomenon by no means limited to or characteristic of the underdeveloped countries of the world. Primacy appears to be to some extent a function of small areal and population size. To the extent that we were able to explore the hypothesis of the "parasitic" effect of "primate cities," the results do not warrant a clear negative judgment on primacy.

Table 12 shows the proportion of the national urban population concentrated in the capital cities of 11 countries for which data are available for the period around 1970. Although these figures do not test the rank-size rule, they do provide insight into the level of primacy of these cities.

Only two capitals (Manila and Kuala Lumpur) had lower levels of urban concentration than Colombo. It is noteworthy that the Philippines and Malaysia, like Sri Lanka, recently experienced major rural-ward resettlement and land reform either sponsored by the state or undertaken at the population's own initiative (see, for instance, Dobby, 1955, and Pryor, 1972, on Malaysia; Krinks, 1970, and Simkins and Wernstedt, 1971, on the Philippines). Indonesia, however, with its

TABLE 12 Percentage of urban population concentrated in capital cities: selected Asian countries, around 1970

City and country	Percentage of urban population
Bangkok, Thailand	41.0
Kathmandu, Nepal	32.6
Seoul, Republic of Korea	32.3
Baghdad, Iraq	32.2
Teheran, Iran	29.7
Dacca, Bangladesh	27.6
Jakarta, Indonesia	22.2
Karachi, Pakistan	21.1
Colombo, Sri Lanka	19.8
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia	17.9
Manila, Philippines	11.4

SOURCE: United Nations *Demographic Yearbook 1976*, tables 6 and 8.

long-standing transmigration program, still shows a slightly higher level of urban concentration in Jakarta.

The concept of primacy has generally been discussed within the framework of intercity comparisons. Usually the cities are delimited according to their political-administrative boundaries, possibly for the sake of brevity and clarity. The simplicity of using such definitions carries with it the adverse effect of implicitly treating the city as a viable unit in itself. This assumption neglects the high degree of interdependence between the city, its urban fringe, the suburbs that provide services and goods for the upkeep of the city, and also the rural hinterland that supplies goods (mainly food) to the city. Nevertheless, primacy has come to be measured by one criterion, that of population size, which ignores the dependence of the city upon goods and services from the countryside. The issue of labor relations between the city and its suburbs is not easily resolved. A basic question is whether the city should be defined as what it is when it is asleep at night (as most censuses define it) or what it is during the peak hours of a normal working day. The answer to this question is crucial in Sri Lanka, where it is estimated that 45 percent of those who work within the city of Colombo commute daily from outside the city (Dias, 1977:9).

Compared with other cities of Sri Lanka, Colombo has been the primate city with regard to both population concentration and political and economic activity since around the turn of the century. It

was so apparently as far back as the ninth century A.D., when Ibn Batuta, the Arab traveller, referred to Colombo as the “finest town in Serendib” (Kannangara, 1954:13), although the capital city was then Anuradhapura. (A detailed discussion of the evolution of the city of Colombo is found in Kannangara, 1954.) In 1971, Colombo still had the greatest population concentration and volume of political and economic activity of any city in the country, though its relative share of population had declined. From the turn of the century until 1953 Colombo had more than one-third of the country’s urban population; during the next 18 years, because of massive reclassification and diminishing space for further expansion, Colombo’s share of the national urban component declined to just under 20 percent. During the 70-year period under review, however, there was a 44 percent increase in the geographic area of Colombo through annexation; during the last 18 years of the period the increase was a moderate 4 percent. The published census data do not provide sufficient information to decipher the real decline in Colombo’s share of the country’s urban population. In all probability a secular decline would have occurred much earlier than in the 1950s, had it not been for the areal annexations.

A glance at Table 13, which shows the population of 23 principal towns expressed as a proportion of Colombo’s population over the 70-year period, is sufficient to reaffirm the primacy of Colombo. Galle was the second largest town in Sri Lanka at the turn of the century, but Jaffna maintained this position from 1911 to 1953, when it was in turn displaced by Dehiwela-Mt. Lavinia (a suburb of Colombo). Only during 1901 was Jaffna’s population just over one-fifth of Colombo’s (as was the population of Galle); thereafter it declined monotonically until 1953, when it reversed the trend, ending up still less than one-fifth of Colombo’s population in 1971. Since coming into existence in 1911, Dehiwela-Mt. Lavinia, on the other hand, has shown a monotonic improvement of position vis-à-vis Colombo, ending with just over one-quarter of Colombo’s population. With few exceptions,¹ the principal towns have improved their positions with respect to Colombo over the 70-year period. Considering that their relative growth occurred at a time when areal annexations to the city of Colombo were in the order of 11.4 sq. km. (4.4 sq. mi.)—probably an advantage that

¹ The notable exceptions are Kalutara, Matara, Galle, and Hambantota, situated in the southern maritime districts to which they have given their names, and Jaffna, the northern maritime district, all of which have registered net out-migration from their districts during the three intercensal periods between 1946 and 1971 (ESCAP, 1975:32–4).

TABLE 13 Population of principal towns, expressed as a proportion of the population of the city of Colombo: Sri Lanka, census years 1901–71

Principal town	1901	1911	1921	1946	1953	1963	1971
Colombo	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00	1.00
Dehiwela-Mt. Lavinia	na	.087	.104	.157	.184	.217	.275
Jaffna	.219	.191	.174	.173	.183	.185	.192
Moratuwa	.191	.128	.117	.140	.141	.152	.172
Kandy	.171	.142	.133	.142	.134	.133	.167
Kotte	na	.048	.059	.111	.128	.143	.164
Galle	.240	.189	.160	.135	.131	.128	.129
Negambo	.128	.061	.087	.090	.091	.092	.102
Trincomalee	.073	.042	.039	.090	.062	.068	.074
Matara	.077	.066	.068	.063	.065	.064	.065
Batticaloa	.064	.050	.043	.036	.041	.045	.065
Anuradhapura	.024	.025	.032	.034	.043	.058	.062
Badulla	.038	.031	.033	.037	.040	.053	.062
Matale	.032	.027	.032	.039	.040	.050	.055
Ratnapura	.026	.026	.029	.034	.039	.042	.052
Kalutara	.074	.062	.056	.052	.048	.049	.051
Kurunegala	.042	.039	.042	.037	.041	.041	.045
Puttalam	.033	.028	.028	.022	.024	.026	.032
Chilaw	.027	.024	.027	.025	.027	.028	.031
Nuwara Eliya	.032	.035	.031	.030	.034	.030	.029
Vavuniya	.004	.004	.003	u	u	.014	.028
Kegalle	.015	.012	.014	.014	.013	.022	.024
Mannar	.034	.018	.015	u	u	.018	.020
Hambantota	.018	.015	.012	.011	.010	.010	.012

na—not applicable because this town did not exist in 1901.

u—unavailable.

SOURCE: Computed from Department of Census and Statistics (1974: table 26).

none of the other principal towns enjoyed—the growth performance of the other principal towns is impressive. Because continued urban growth is a nearly universal phenomenon and decentralized urbanization is more desirable than a highly concentrated pattern of urban growth, which commonly results in overurbanization and infrastructural breakdowns, the growth of the principal towns of Sri Lanka can be viewed as manifesting a perhaps unintended process of decentral-

ized urbanization resulting from public investment policies (especially in peasant agriculture) and welfare measures pursued by the government.

The intercity comparison does not do justice to the continuous urban sprawl around the city of Colombo. The greater Colombo area, or metropolitan Colombo as this urban sprawl is called, has exhibited higher rates of growth than the restricted area of the city of Colombo. The definition of metropolitan Colombo has changed over time, however. As Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:205) have observed,

the ideal estimates of the growth of the metropolitan population would perhaps require a moving boundary, to incorporate localities into the metropolitan area at the time they reached suburban status in terms of criteria such as density, occupational structure and commuting patterns. Failing this, however, the use of a fixed boundary for the metropolitan area that appropriately defines the metropolitan area as of the terminal point of the study, although it tends to exaggerate the metropolitan population at the beginning of the period and hence to *understate* its rate of growth, brings us a step closer to reality.

The procedure adopted by Jones and Selvaratnam is somewhat similar to the identification of standard urban areas (SUA) used in the Indian census of 1971 (Bose, 1974); but whereas in India the SUA were the projected growth areas of the metropolis from 1971 to 1991, the method adopted by Jones and Selvaratnam is a post hoc operation to define the metropolitan area at a previous time.

Jones and Selvaratnam (1970) made two estimates of the Colombo metropolitan population, one including the Colombo Divisional Revenue Officer's Division only, the other also including "a few adjoining Urban Councils and Town Councils that are in reality, suburban areas of the Colombo metropolis" (p. 205). Table 14, which draws on the spatial units adopted by Jones and Selvaratnam but uses data from ESCAP, reveals that the population of metropolitan Colombo was almost double that of the city in 1971 and that its rates of growth were much higher than that of Colombo City during the period between 1946 and 1971. It also shows that, irrespective of the geographic area considered, the share of the urban population and its rates of growth declined over the period. The growth rate of the metropolitan area (both definitions) was almost equal to the national growth rate during 1953-63 and 1963-71. (In 1953-63 the national rate was 27 per 1,000; in 1963-71, it was 23, as shown in Table 6.) As Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:208) assert, these figures "certainly do not point to any marked 'metropolitanization' of Ceylon's population."

TABLE 14 Estimated population, average annual growth rate per 1,000, percentage of total urban population, and percentage of total national population: city of Colombo and Colombo metropolitan area, census years 1946–71

Measure	City of Colombo	Colombo DRO's Division ^a	Colombo DRO's Division + surrounding towns ^b
Estimated population			
1946	362,074	525,586	614,837
1953	426,127	656,152	783,213
1963	511,644	846,401	1,036,141
1971	562,420	1,002,779	1,239,712
Annual growth rate			
1946–53	24	32	35
1953–63	18	25	28
1963–71	11	21	22
Percentage of total urban population			
1946	35.4	51.4	60.1
1953	34.4	53.0	63.2
1963	25.4	42.0	51.4
1971	19.7	35.0	43.4
Percentage of total national population			
1946	5.4	7.9	9.2
1953	5.3	8.1	9.7
1963	4.8	8.0	9.8
1971	4.4	7.9	9.7

a DRO's (Divisional Revenue Officer's) Division is a subadministrative spatial unit within a district. Colombo DRO's Division is a contiguous area encompassing the whole city of Colombo plus some parts of its suburbs.

b Includes "a few adjoining Urban Councils and Town Councils that are, in reality, suburban areas of the Colombo metropolis" (Jones and Selvaratnam, 1970:205).

SOURCE: ESCAP (1976: table 55).

FACTORS AFFECTING SRI LANKA'S PATTERN OF URBANIZATION

Whatever definition one may use of "urban," what emerges from the foregoing analysis is the slow rate of urbanization in Sri Lanka. The chronic overgrowth of urban localities commonly found in other developing countries is conspicuously absent in Sri Lanka. Examination

of the possible determinants of the slower growth rate and pattern of urbanization is therefore in order.

ESCAP (1976:74–6) has alluded to six major factors that may have influenced the pattern of urbanization in Sri Lanka, mainly during the period following World War II, although they do not constitute an exhaustive list. These conditions are paraphrased and elaborated below because my findings tend to support them.

1. Population concentration in Sri Lanka has resulted mainly from the growth of commerce and trade rather than from industrialization. To this day, Colombo is best characterized as a service center rather than a seat of burgeoning industry. The post World War II period saw a steady worsening of the terms of trade for tea, rubber, and coconut exports, the life-line of the economy. Consequent balance-of-payments problems led to restrictions on trade activities that possibly led to a lower rate of employment generation, which in turn may have stemmed the tide of urbanward migration.

2. Rudimentary processing involved in the exportation of tea and rubber was carried out on the plantations themselves. Sporadic attempts at industrialization occurred almost exclusively under the directive of the government rather than the private sector. In establishing such enterprises as cement, ceramics, paper, and plywood factories, the government pursued a policy of decentralized industrialization, locating the factories in close proximity to raw material resources. The absence of a nucleus of industrial activity may have had a negative effect on the rate of urbanization and influenced the pattern of urbanization.

3. Perhaps the single most pervasive public investment policy pursued by successive governments of post-independent Sri Lanka has been the continued encouragement of peasant agriculture. Ancient irrigation schemes were resuscitated and arable land in the dry zone of the country was colonized and resettled by the land-hungry peasants of the wet zone. The continued stream of lifetime migration that resulted from fairly attractive inducements held out by the government is reflected in interdistrict net migration statistics (Abeysekera, 1979). A few statistics suggest the magnitude of investment, the incentives held out by the government, the response of the peasantry, and the dynamism that was created in the peasant sector. During 1950–51 to 1970–71, just over 300,000 hectares of new land were brought under paddy cultivation, absorbing an additional 291,000 people into the labor force. (Meanwhile tea, rubber, and coconut could not hold on to their existing labor force and had to cut back by about 10,000 people.)

Rice production increased by 200 percent and the productivity per hectare as well as per worker rose by about 70 percent during the period (ESCAP, 1975). Throughout most of this period the government offered farmers a guaranteed price for their produce, approximately 50 percent above the current world market prices. The policy facilitated a major income redistribution as well as helping to reduce the volume of rice importation needed for the heavily government-subsidized rice ration. The net result was to create a viable alternative destination for persons who might have been attracted to urban areas that were not exhibiting major economic expansion.

4. The dynamism experienced in the peasant sector would not have taken place with as much vigor if structural bottlenecks such as insecurity of land tenure, an impoverished landless proletariat, and blatant expropriation by landlords were prevalent in the social and economic relations of landowners and peasants. As Gunatilleke (1973:62) has pointed out, Sri Lanka "did not experience the worst forms of landlordism prevalent in some other Asian countries" and "there has also been no significant capitalist enterprise in this segment of the rural agricultural sector in which peasant farming predominated." The absence of such inhibitive characteristics undoubtedly facilitated the government's successful investment in peasant agriculture, creating the necessary (though perhaps not the sufficient) conditions to stem an exodus of rural population into the already overcrowded cities.

5. It was not only through direct measures like the guaranteed price scheme that the government tried to achieve redistributive justice on a national scale. Commitment to the ideals of progressive direct taxation, subsidization of essential commodity items, and the levy of higher taxes on luxury items saw the burden of public expenditure shifted from the poor to the middle and upper classes. An increasing proportion of public expenditure was directed to investment in peasant agriculture, the establishment and strengthening of free education, and free medical services. These measures had the effect of reducing the difference in living standards between rural and urban areas, and helped to suppress the "push" on rural people to migrate to urban centers.

6. A well-developed network of state-owned roads and railways has made travel within the country convenient as well as inexpensive. Employment seekers from rural areas are able to commute to cities from their homes rather than having to migrate to cities in anticipation of securing jobs. Jones and Selvaratnam (1970:210) have observed that the great bulk of the rural population lives within 30 miles of a town

of 20,000 or more people and has relatively frequent contacts with it. Thus, owing to the proximity of rural and urban areas and to the socioeconomic effects of income redistribution programs and the activities of the welfare state, the rural-urban dichotomy is less sharp in Sri Lanka than in many other countries of Asia.

SOCIOECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT, URBANIZATION, AND SMALL TOWNS

The close association between industrialization and urbanization in the Western experience has given rise to the widespread expectation of a similar association between socioeconomic development and urbanization (Davis and Golden, 1954). Although the initial formulation of this thesis by Davis and Golden has been criticized and modified by others (Schnore, 1961; Sovani, 1964; Kamerschen, 1969; Hill, 1974), the thesis has remained basically unchanged; the relationship between development and urbanization may not be as stable over time as it was originally thought to be, but there is still an unmistakable clustering of development indicators and urbanization. Thus, from a policy point of view, the thesis posits that there is a strong rationale for encouraging urbanization in the less developed countries because development will follow on its heels.

The issue is not so simply resolved, for urbanization manifests itself in different forms and these varying patterns may be determined by, as well as have consequences for, the development of the polity. Two patterns of urbanization have been identified that are not necessarily exclusive of each other. First is the growth of one (or very few) large cities whose primacy towers above the miniature population concentrations. The second pattern has an auxiliary set of urban concentrations scattered throughout the country that possess a growth momentum of their own and inhibit the primacy of one major city. There are advocates of each of these patterns of urbanization; proponents of the first type of polarized growth insist that primacy is a prerequisite for a Rostowian type of economic takeoff which, when reached, will precipitate a process of diffusion from the primate city to areas lagging behind. Brutzkus (1975:644–5), on the other hand, provides a counter-rationale for not fostering a pattern of polarized urbanization that stems from the socioeconomic conditions generally prevailing in less developed countries.

A polarized urban pattern is not favorable to advancement in the most urgent and neglected spheres of development (increasing agricultural production) nor is it favorable for the fuller or better utilization of natural resources. It is not in line

with the development of raw-material-oriented basic heavy industry and probably even not too favorable to labor-oriented manufacturing industry with serious prospects of exports.

Polarized urban growth in less developed countries with domineering primacy has been observed to be closely correlated with overurbanization. As Wellisz (1971:44) has argued, overurbanization "stands for a perverse stream of migration, sapping the economic strength of the hinterland, without correspondingly large benefits to urban production. Instead of being a sign of development, overurbanization is a sign of economic illness." Wellisz also points out that the policies pursued by governments of the less developed countries have an inherent bias in favor of urban areas while neglecting the hinterland and so generate an uneconomically fast rate of urbanization.

Brutzkus (1975) emphasizes that polarized urban growth is almost a natural form of urbanization, that anything short of a determined effort on the part of the government to decentralize urbanization will result in enhancing primacy. He agrees with Myrdal's "postulate of perpetuating and self-increasing regional disparities under a regime close to 'laissez faire, laissez passer' in regional policy" (638-9).

If, as Brutzkus strives to establish, decentralized urbanization is a better option for the less developed countries, what is capable of generating such a process? Well-intended policies can be ineffective in yielding the results aimed for. The focus therefore should be on both the intent of the policies pursued and their effects as manifested in socioeconomic reality. According to Desmond (1971:69-70),

the key questions then are which policies and decisions have the strongest effect on investment, employment, and incomes, and what can be said about the current development policies of countries in the region [Asia] with regard to probable distribution of income opportunities. A final question is whether decision-makers are likely to be responsive to locational policies which stem from a conscious desire to control the rate and structure of urban growth if these policies are felt to be inconsistent with income-maximizing objectives.

I have already alluded to the role played by the Sri Lankan government's investment policy in the peasant sector and need not reiterate it here. However, lest the investment policy be construed as a purely magnanimous gesture on the part of the political elite, emanating from fortuitous circumstances, some elaboration of the historical, topographical, political, and economic intricacies that gave rise to the policy is in order.

Historically, Sri Lanka has been a hydraulic society par excellence,

peasant agriculture being the predominant mode of livelihood of the people. The state of disrepair in which the irrigation schemes of the dry zone lay for centuries had clustered the populace into the climatically more viable wet zone, causing demographic pressure on its resource structure; and, in the absence of significant inputs of improved technology and agricultural practices, the resource structure of the wet zone tended to be stagnant. The situation at the turn of the century was essentially one of uncombined resources and the need for a rationale for combining them. Arable land was available in the dry zone, but there were no people to cultivate it and not enough irrigation. As long as tea and rubber exports were capable of creating the foreign exchange needed to import enough food to keep the country fed, the Ricardian theory of comparative advantage was demonstrated to perfection. Convulsions in the economy were first felt when World War I broke out and interrupted the food importation; these events challenged British naval hegemony and threatened to plunge the country into starvation.

During this period Ceylonese nationalism was gathering momentum, fanned by liberal ideologies adopted by the "England returneds" who sought self-government. In search of an economic and cultural ideology counter to that of the British, they turned to the heritage of the "glorious hydraulic past" for legitimacy. With the advent of limited self-government under the Donoughmore Constitution, the national political elite increasingly assumed the role of Robin Hood, clamoring for concessions for the people. World War II saw *Pax Britannica* seriously challenged, further disruptions in food imports, and the establishment of a legitimate rationale for the welfare state. Free education, free medical care, and subsidized food were its main features.

The issue of the food subsidy has, from the time of independence in 1948, been in the limelight of the political arena; any threat to its continuance has been intimately connected with political catastrophe. With the secular decline in the terms of trade from tea, rubber, and coconut exports, each successive government has had to resort to deficit financing to import rice for distribution to the people at prices well below cost, thus ensuring eventual bankruptcy. This unfortunate situation provides the background for the government's continued policy in peasant agriculture, a policy shaped by the political elites' accountability to the electorate. Although articulate and militant, the numerically smaller urban working class and the middle class have much less political clout than the peasantry in the general elections. The maintenance of direct or indirect income-transference programs benefiting the peasantry has been the *sine qua non* of political viability.

It is within this briefly sketched context that the process of urbanization in Sri Lanka has to be viewed. The decentralized pattern of urbanization entailing the growth of small towns is a joint result of the political accountability of the elite to the masses, adverse terms of trade, and an impressive response on the part of the peasantry to market incentives. It is possible that enhanced trading activity that took place because of dynamism generated in the peasant sector, coupled with such welfare measures as the establishment of schools, dispensaries, post offices, and police stations in central villages, may have contributed to the growth of small towns that were gradually granted urban status. In the absence of more detailed information on the environmental conditions of the small towns, it is not possible to test this hypothesis.

It must be noted, however, that not all small towns granted urban status by ministerial decree exhibited similar growth potential; in fact, some remained stagnant. Kadugannawa Urban Council, with 1,562 people in 1971, is such an extreme case. In formulating urban policies for the future, it might be pertinent to examine the historical, economic, communication, and political configuration that inhibits or enhances population concentration. Perhaps one covariant of the degree of population concentration that is likely to display great predictive potential is the changing occupational and industrial composition of the population in an urbanizing locality. Although there have been changes in the definition of "economically active population" from 1946 onward, as well as confusion arising from the use of different classification systems, it would be productive to monitor the changes in occupational and industrial composition along with changes in population concentration over time. To the extent that data on economic activity have been collected, the period of comparison may profitably be extended to cover the 1901, 1911, and 1921 censuses.

Although I have presented some evidence to demonstrate that small towns in Sri Lanka have grown as much or more than the medium and large towns, this analysis stops with urban areas as defined in 1953. Published data were not available for 1963 to follow the growth performance of nearly 50 newly reclassified urban localities, most of which presumably started as small towns. Furthermore, I have not systematically taken into account the effects of annexations and deletions, although I have tried to control for effects of reclassification. Decomposition of urban growth into its components of natural increase and net migration, with definitional and classification changes controlled for, would provide further insights into the patterns of

growth associated with town types. Possible influences of the age-sex structure of town types should also be brought into the analysis.

Sri Lanka probably has not had a deliberate policy of decentralized urbanization. But the incipient pattern of decentralized urbanization that has materialized on the national canvas does reflect a public investment policy that has striven to reach the rural hinterland rather than exhaust itself in serving the primate city and its suburbs. It is difficult to predict how long this trend can be sustained on continued investment in agriculture alone. Given a basic level of prosperity of the peasantry through increased agricultural productivity, perhaps the next step is a gradual diversification into cottage and light industries at the grass-roots level and on a concerted scale. Such diversification will necessitate the creation of a domestic market and possibly foreign markets which were not required in the case of agriculture because it has operated within the context of an unsaturated domestic market.

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