

Book Review

DRO: Man for All Seasons

Authors: L.M. Samarasinghe, Dhammike Amerasinghe, Jayatissa Bandaragoda

Publishers: Sanasa, the Federation of Thrift and Credit Cooperative Societies Limited.

Reviewed by V.K. Nanayakkara

SLJDA 2015 (5): 125-128

The days of the Divisional Revenue Officers (DROs) service (1939-1963) have already faded into the past. Fifty years after the service ceased to exist, its features have been the subject of a thorough analysis by three former DROs who authored a book titled *DRO: Man for All Seasons*. The book was launched at the Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration on 20 June 2013 presided over by the Chief Guest, Dr. Sarath Amunugama, Senior Minister for International Monetary Cooperation.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one has 8 chapters which can be categorized into two distinct sections. Its first section comprising five chapters delineates the evolution of regional administration. Its second section consisting of three chapters deals with the DRO's service. Part two comprises fascinating reminiscences by 11 DROs who blazed the trail.

A useful list of references and three appendices follow the final chapter of the book. The three appendices contain valuable information not easily found anywhere else. Appendix I lists the DRO divisions that existed in 1963 by districts and provinces with the area of each revenue division in square miles. Appendix II lists the names of 169 successful candidates at the competitive examinations held in the relevant years between 1939 and 1962. Appendix III enumerates the high positions attained by ex-DROs as Cabinet Ministers, Deputy Ministers, MPs, Governors, Ambassadors, Ministry Secretaries, State Secretaries, Heads of Departments, Chief Secretaries, Provincial Secretaries, Government Agents and Chairmen of State Corporations.

After fifty years, the authors are able to see the wood for the trees and sift and interpret the happenings from a more distant angle of time.

Chapter 1 titled 'Early History' opens with an overview of the regional administration in the ancient period. The second chapter named 'End of the Glory' is devoted to its evolution under Portuguese and Dutch times. Chapter 3 examines the resistance to invaders by the Kandyan and Jaffna Kingdoms. Chapter 4 called 'Arrival of the British' highlights the consolidation of British rule, central and regional administration and the continuance of a restructured feudal system of administration.

Chapter Five titled 'Search for Reforms in the Regional Administration' traces the backdrop to the evolution of the DROs service arising from the recommendations of the Headmen's Commission of 1920. Pages 35-36 recount how village lands were plundered with the collusion of *Rate Mahattayas* and planters.

Chapter Six titled 'Establishment of the DRO Service' presents information on the Second Headmen's Commission of 1934 which established the service. The main finding of the Commission as stated on page 38 was that many of the Chief Headmen were corrupt, with extortion of illegal fees of various sorts. The Executive Committee of Home Affairs of the State Council recommended the creation of a probationary service on an improved method of recruitment by examination to replace the Chief Headmen's Service on the basis of 3 geographical areas. The chapter also gives excerpts from the speeches of members in the State Council where the majority of speakers bitterly denounced the Headmen system. In a startling revelation it states that D.S. Senanayake and John Kotelawala voted against the motion to replace the Headmen System! The introduction of a merit system made it incongruent to continue to adopt the paternalistic and ascriptive criteria for the appointment of Headmen. This chapter also includes information regarding the educational qualifications and the nature of the competitive examination. Why was the DROs service an all male service? The required qualifications do not reveal whether females were specifically debarred or whether women opted out of contention.

The same comment applies with respect to the recruitment to the Ceylon Civil Service (CCS). Perhaps, the age of feminism had not dawned by the mid-thirties despite universal adult franchise which preceded the establishment of the DRO's service. So we can say there were no women in the DRO's service although there had been women DROs after the service ceased to exist.

Chapter Seven outlines the DRO service in operation. If we were to sum up in one word the responsibilities of a DRO, it was its multi functionality. How does the chapter classify the DRO's functions? They are revenue

functions, law and order functions, regulatory functions, social welfare functions, facilitatory functions and development functions. It goes on to record licensing which includes gemming licences, timber transport, covering unpoliced areas, distribution of food rations, State lands, valuation certificates, public assistance and poor relief, disaster relief etc.

These are just a few instances of the long list of duties of a DRO in contrast to other similar placed departmental functionaries. To cite P. Weerasekera on page 170 a DRO is a kind of *kokatath thailaya*- an all purpose oil!

Chapter Eight provides a self assessment of the DRO service. What was the state of the feudal chieftains whom the DROs replaced? For this purpose, let us consider how Leonard Wolff describes the behaviour of the *Mudliyors* in 1910. There in his novel *Village in the Jungle* we get a vivid account of Silindu, the rustic villager subjected to the machinations of a vile *Mudliyar* and a Headman. The unforgivable offence was Silindu's daughter's refusal to share sexual favours with them. Wolff laments he could not do justice but was forced to convict Silindu despite his innocence. The DROs service replaced such feudal overlords.

DRO was the precursor of the Development Administrator of today. He was a revenue officer only in official parlance. He was by far the most popular official the country had known. He was sought after by political parties often as their candidate. Unlike his predecessor, the Chief Headman who instilled a fear psychosis in the village mind, the DRO endeared himself to the people. With the absorption of the service into the CAS in 1963, the DROs commenced their upward mobility and ended up as Government Agents (GAs), Heads of Departments and Ministry Secretaries. Otherwise a DRO was doomed to end up his career as a DRO while the clerk under him could end up as a Permanent Secretary!

Framed in a crispy, accessible style, Part two of the book comprising reminiscences of 11 ex-DROs offers a range of illuminating socio-cultural and historical accounts and anecdotes of issues that faced the DROs through their careers. A common thread that a reader discerns through these varied experiences is the demonstrated concern for the people he was serving. The material is made up of nostalgic recollections of events from the length and breadth of the country. Amongst the multifarious activities described vividly in the reminiscences are the following:

- organizing elephant drives, *kasippu* (illicit liquor) raids,
- sending messages via pigeons- far better than trunk calls
- erection of *Kadawara Devale*, *Ayyanayake devale* and *Pillayar devale*
- Tracing the place where Keppetipola was captured and erecting memorials
- dispensing justice as Magistrate,
- conflicts with local politicians, ,
- dealing with encroachers on forest reserves, stream and road reservations,
- relief work in respect of cyclones, floods or droughts, earth slips, landslides or forest fires,
- conducting *Kanna* meetings,
- election of *Vel Vidanes*

What about a DRO's paternalistic role? P. Weerasekera describes an encounter that he had in the backwoods of Hinidum Pattu. (p. 171):

“An elderly female appeared before me with tear filled eyes and almost in a whispering tone stated that her school going daughter has had an illicit amorous adventure and had apparently tasted the forbidden fruit and was developing early signs of attaining motherhood. Her request was simple - a letter from me to the local hospital recommending an abortion of the foetus before the hawk eyed fellow village ladies specializing in gossipy tales become aware of it.”

The reader is advised to find out what the bachelor DRO did.

The unmistakable political transfer affected the DRO more than any other public official signifying the importance and power attached to the office. The reminiscences are replete with such anecdotes where either the DRO was successful in retaining his position or where the politician succeeded in transferring him out. Limitations of space preclude the reviewer from doing justice to the writers of reminiscences.

“*DRO: Man for all seasons*” is a concise and eminently readable book. The authors should be commended for their diligence in crafting this stimulating and insightful volume. It is a lasting contribution to the literature on political science and public administration in Sri Lanka of a bygone era.