



Research Article

An Analytical Review of Sri Lanka's Divisional Secretariat System: From Colonial Administration to Decentralized Governance

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Abstract

Sri Lanka's divisional secretariat system stands as the backbone of ground-level public administration, connecting central government authority to local communities across the island. This paper traces the historical evolution of Sri Lanka's public service from the Ceylon Civil Service of the colonial-era through successive constitutional reforms, lead to the decentralized divisional secretariat model established in 1991. Drawing on secondary sources and published resource profiles, the study examines the organizational structure, internal divisions, and service delivery functions of divisional secretariats. It then reviews existing scholarly literature to assess what has been studied and, more importantly, to identify gaps in the existing body of knowledge. The review reveals that research has mostly concentrated narrowly on service quality dimensions and leadership styles, leaving critical areas such as administrative efficiency, digitalization, regional disparities, and social inclusion largely unexamined. By exploring these gaps, this paper lays a foundation for future empirical work aimed at strengthening public service delivery in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

Public service plays a crucial role in any country in any context. Thus, any developed or developing country has a significant role to play in public service for creating and generating development from various perspectives. New Zealand Legislation argues that the public service is the representation of the public interest and the medium of the implementation of policies. In terms of the Public Service Act 2020 in New Zealand Legislation, "The public service supports constitutional and democratic government, enables both the current government and successive governments to develop and implement their policies, delivers high-quality and efficient public services, supports the Government to pursue the long-term public interest, facilitates active citizenship, and acts in accordance with the law." That's why public service provides integrated political, economic, and legal services across the whole state (New Zealand Legislation, 2020).

More than 90% of the nation's government-related services are provided through these organizations (Wijesekera & Fernando, 2023). This paper focuses on the public service of Sri Lanka from

an evaluation perspective and remarks on the divisional secretariat system in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, by reviewing previous studies related to the divisional secretariat, the paper tries to build a strong literary foundation for further studies in the field. As a desk research study, this paper draws on all available relevant secondary data and synthesized with a view to realizing the following objectives.

1. Mapping the historical evolution and administrative reforms of public service in Sri Lanka
2. Analyzing the structure and working process of the Divisional Secretariat in Sri Lanka
3. To determine the gaps in the existing research on the provincial administrative system in Sri Lanka based on the available literature.

The first objective is to identify the historical pathway and delve into the roots of the public service to distinguish the historical socio-economic background regarding the Divisional Secretariat. The second objective aims to introduce the current structure and

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service process, which is contemporary, providing a drive to the third objective. The third objective focuses on the scholarly research and academic studies that have developed critical ideas on divisional secretariat systems recently.

Research Process

This review adopted elements of the PRISMA 2020 protocol (Page et al., 2021; Trifu et al., 2022) to ensure transparency in identifying, screening, and selecting the literature discussed in this paper. Google Scholar served as the primary database. Search terms included combinations of 'divisional secretariat', 'divisional secretariat office', and 'Sri Lanka', reflecting the core themes addressed in the existing body of research. The search was supplemented by citation chasing, in which the reference lists of relevant studies were examined to identify additional sources not captured through the keyword search.

A total of [n = 241] records were identified through the database search. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts for relevance to Sri Lanka's Divisional Secretariat system, [n = 209] records were excluded for reasons including limited topical relevance, absence of scholarly rigor, or duplication across search terms. Most records were removed because they treated the Divisional Secretariat as an administrative boundary only. Literature regarding the divisional secretariat office and service is limited. The remaining [n = 32] records were assessed in full text for eligibility. At this stage, [n = 2] records were excluded for reasons such as insufficient empirical grounding, lack of direct relevance to the divisional secretariat context, or duplication of findings already captured by an included study. This process yielded a final set of 30 studies. The complete search and selection process is illustrated in Figure 1.

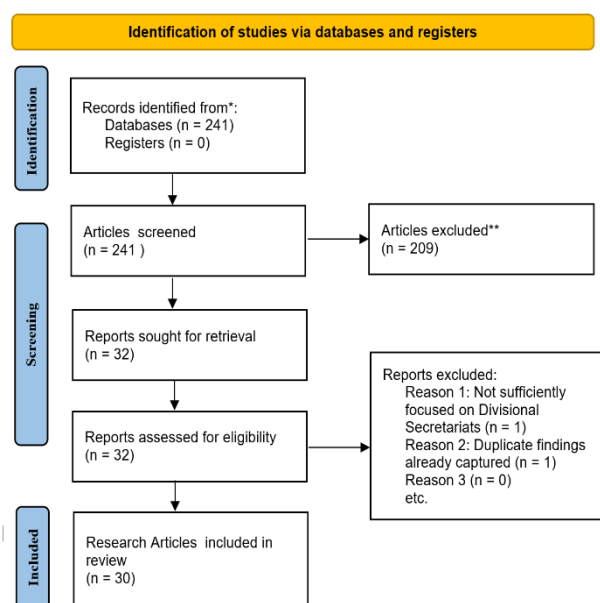


Figure 1: PRISMA 2020 flow diagram illustrating the identification, screening, and inclusion of studies for the literature review

Note: *Consider, if feasible to do so, reporting the number of records identified from each database or register searched (rather than the total number across all databases/registers).

**If automation tools were used, indicate how many records were excluded by a human and how many were excluded by automation tools

Source: Adopted from Page et al., 2021; Trifu et al., 2022

Each of the studies identified through the literature search was read in full and coded according to its primary focus area, such as service quality, leadership behavior, employee motivation, or institutional performance. These codes were then grouped into broader thematic clusters to identify recurring lines of inquiry within the existing body of research on Sri Lanka's Divisional Secretariats. Where multiple studies converged on a similar theme, such as the relationship between service quality dimensions and customer satisfaction, they were synthesized together to highlight patterns of consistency or divergence in their findings. This thematic approach also made it possible to identify areas that remained underexamined, including administrative efficiency, digitalization, and social inclusion, which are discussed as research gaps in Section 5.

Literature Review

This section presents the findings of the literature review and insights gained. It is detailed under three sections, namely, Reforms and Historical Evolution of Public Service in Sri Lanka, Structure and Working Process of Divisional Secretariats and Analysis of Key Articles of the Divisional Secretariat System in Sri Lanka. The discussion is presented next.

Reforms and Historical Evolution of Public Service in Sri Lanka

There have been significant changes to Sri Lanka's administrative system since 1948. First, a British-style Weberian administrative system was constructed, and this became the fundamental structure of the Sri Lankan public service. Since the British took control of the island's coastal regions in 1796, the East India Company's officers operating out of Madras have been in charge of managing Ceylon's coastal regions (Ministry of Public Administration, n.d). Because of these practical concerns, a group of officers was appointed from Great Britain for the administration in 1802.

That marked the start of the nation's civil service, which was later dubbed the Ceylon Civil Service 1833 after being modeled after the British civil service. Divisional Revenue Officers' Service was added, and it was called Ceylon Administrative Service in 1963 (Ministry of Public Administration, n.d). Furthermore, following Sri Lanka's republican transition in 1972, it was founded as the Sri Lanka Administrative Service. Currently, the main civil service in the nation is the Sri Lanka Administrative Service. The Institute of Policy Studies (1999) lists the major developments that have occurred during the last few decades, since starting with the creation of the DS Divisions, in brief below. These key milestones can be defined as policy-level efforts for improving public service efficiency.

1960s

A single Administrative Service replaced the Ceylon Civil Service. Departments were decentralized, and the Government Agent's (district administrator's) coordination role was first reduced before being reinforced again between 1965 and 1970. It was a key change that was made to improve the public service efficiency. Ministers of Parliament from electorates with one-member sub-districts are increasingly challenging the position and authority of Government Agents. The Grama Sevaka (village servant) system took the role of the long-standing Village Headman system. The latter was chosen by a transferable, competitive exam.

1970s

The Public Service Commission was disbanded by the 1972 Constitution. The Cabinet of Ministers was given strict control over the whole administrative apparatus in order to hold it accountable to Parliament. The Decentralized Capital Budget, which they completely controlled, was implemented in 1974, which increased the Minister's of Parliament authority over the Government Agent. The Public Service Commission was reestablished, and some degree of separation of powers was reintroduced under the 1978 Constitution. However, great effort was taken to maintain the latter's agency status to the Cabinet.

1980s

The establishment of District Development Councils in 1991 was an attempt to transfer administrative power to the district level. Due to a combination of financial constraints, the demands of the 1982 presidential election, and the ethnic riots of 1983, this endeavor almost immediately collapsed (de Silva 1993b:114). The Indian government imposed a devolutionary structure in 1987 as a result of pressure from various ethnic groups. According to Wijesinghe (1997), the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution changed 'an explicitly unitary state to an arguably elaborate federal set-up'. Provincial Councils were officially granted direct power over a wide range of topics. The Concurrent List allows the Center and Provincial Councils to share authority over certain topics. At the level of the former Assistant Government Agent's (AGA) Division, a new local government body was formed, the Pradeshiya Sabha (Divisional Council).

1990s

By creating Divisional Secretariats in the previous AGA Divisions, the administration was deconcentrated to the divisional level in 1991. This further marginalized the Government Agent and weakened earlier attempts at political devolution. There was a significant increase in the number of grama sevakas, and their nomenclature was altered to grama niladhari (village official). Since the People's Alliance (Podu Peramuna) Government was elected in 1994, the provinces—or 'regions' have seen a further shift in power delegation. Currently, the constitutional reform agenda is the establishment of an explicit federal structure within an apparently unitary framework. The main goal of these initiatives has been to resolve the separatist dispute and improve efficiency.

The building of Divisional Secretariats has been the key milestone of these public service reforms. It was the main ground-level administration hub in Sri Lanka after the Grama Niladhari Divisions. The present study is based on the Divisional Secretariats of Sri Lanka, and the study area has been selected from the Divisional Secretariats, and efficiency is investigated from the Divisional Secretariat.

Structure and Working Process of Divisional Secretariats

This section is for the study area-related literature review, which is important for the present study, for the depth of analysis of the data, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Mainly, the second objective of the study aligns with the role of the divisions and the service functioning process. This literature review forms the basis of the study, and the qualitative data captured in the study is comparatively analysed between primary and secondary data. Therefore, this literature review mainly seeks data from Kelaniya DS published 'Sampath Pethikada' (Resources Profile). The Resources Profile has been published by every divisional

secretariat in Sri Lanka, and the structure and service process have been explained uniformly. In the first part, discuss the structure and the establishment of the divisional secretariat system, and the rest is about the role and tasks of the divisions.

Establishment of Divisional Secretariats

Under the decentralization of administration and power, the responsibilities and functions that were centered around the district and the governor were decentralized to the local levels in order to make it easier to carry out public tasks. Most of the functions that belonged to it became provincial council functions. The divisional level office that confirms the nature of decentralization of provincial council duties and responsibilities became the Divisional Secretariat.

It is headed by the Divisional Secretary. The title of 'Divisional Deputy Governor' became 'Divisional Secretary' and the area became 'Divisional Secretariat Division' (Statistics Department, 2019). Thus, it was hoped that many of the tasks performed by the district-level governor's offices would be performed at the divisional level, and the divisional secretariat became an institution that catered to public needs and service facilities.

Once again, since the beginning of 1966, the powers of the accounting officer and the duties of accounting affairs, which had been assigned to the Divisional Secretariats, were assigned to the District Secretary/Deputy Governor. As an instance, Gampaha district is that the boundaries of the 13 constituencies of No: 02 Gampaha constituency are the jurisdictional areas of the Divisional Secretariat (Statistics Department, 2019). That is, the Divisional Secretariat Division and the Electoral Division are considered as one jurisdiction.

Hierarchy of Divisional Secretariat

The Hierarchy of Divisional Secretariat is a crucial administrative framework in Sri Lanka that supports grassroots public service delivery and governance. The Divisional Secretary is the highest-ranking official in this hierarchy and is primarily responsible for organizing and managing the division's many administrative tasks. A group of officers in charge of several departments, including finance, planning, health, education, and agriculture, supports the Divisional Secretary. Subordinate to them are Grama Niladharis, who serve as the main point of contact between the local community and the government, guaranteeing that policies and initiatives are carried out effectively. Because of the good management and coordination of resources made possible by this hierarchical structure, the Divisional Secretariat successfully serves the varied demands of its constituents.

As the Divisional Secretariat's main executive officer, the Divisional Secretary plays a crucial role in Sri Lanka's administrative system. In charge of managing daily activities and guaranteeing effective public service provision within their purview, the Divisional Secretary holds a pivotal function in the realm of local governance. They serve as a point of contact for local and federal authorities, carrying out orders, policies, and programs locally. The Divisional Secretary is responsible for managing the division's finances and social welfare. They also strive to advance development, welfare, and sound governance in their division. Their ability to lead and make decisions is crucial in meeting the wants and worries of the people they serve, which in turn advances and prospers the country as a whole.

Figure 2 given below comprehensively shows the structure of the office and the officers in their service hierarchy. The main divisional fragmentation has also been demonstrated.

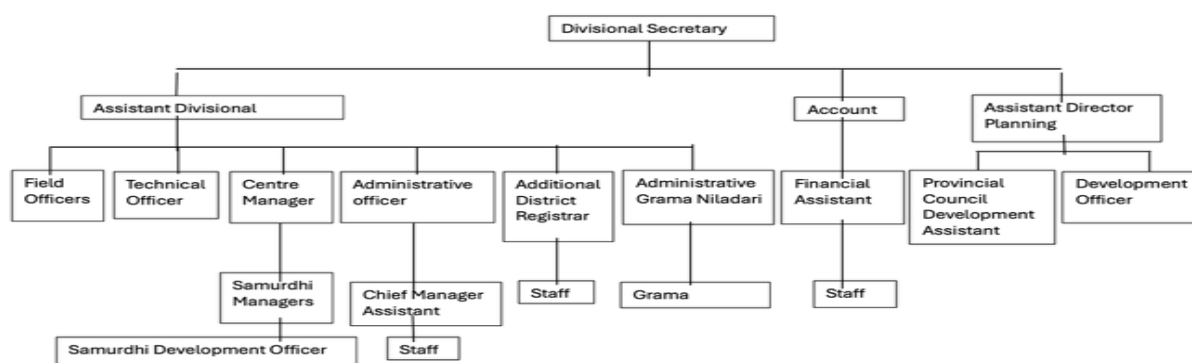


Figure 2: Officials' hierarchy of divisional secretariat

Source: Adapted by the Divisional Secretary's office. (2019). '*Sampath Pethikada*'. Kelaniya: Divisional Secretary office – Kelaniya., P. 323

Sections of the Divisional Secretariat

In addition to the above service structure, the spread of the divisions in the DS office is important. Mainly, all functions of the service and service delivery are done from the following divisions, as given in Figure 2. Figure 3 given below shows all 10 divisions in the office. Institution Division, Planning Division, and Accounts Division have subdivisions which are aggregated due to the services.

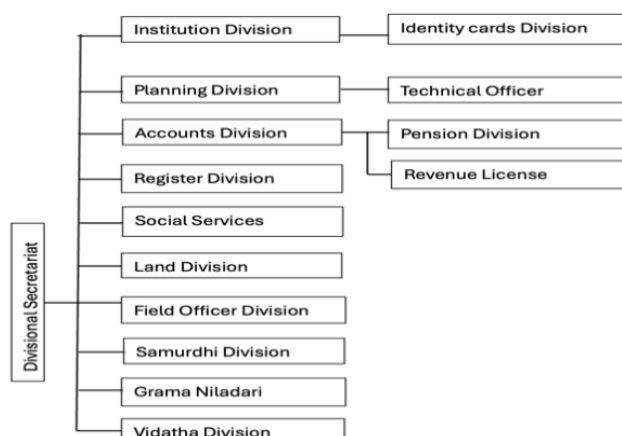


Figure 3 : Divisions of the divisional secretariat office

Source: Adapted by the Divisional Secretary's office. (2019). '*Sampath Pethikada*'. Kelaniya: Divisional Secretary's office – Kelaniya., P. 323

Role of Divisions in Divisional Secretariat

The roles and main services performed by the divisions provide the background for the fragmentation of responsibilities related to the overall services provided by the DS office. One by one, divisions have limited special tasks and roles that must be processed in service provision. Efficiency will be calculated and discussed through these roles in the divisions. Each division of the Divisional Secretariat carries a distinct set of responsibilities that together form the full scope of services delivered to the public at the grassroots level (for more details see Annex).

The Institutional Division handles the broadest range of regulatory and certification tasks. Business name registrations, excise and tavern licenses, timber transport and logging permits, gun license recommendations, and granite quarrying approvals all fall under its purview. It also issues income and value certificates, rental and free assessment reports, and sub-signs residence and character certificates prepared by Grama Niladari Officers. The Identity Cards Division manages the basic processes related to issuing national identity cards. Though limited in scope, this function is of direct and daily significance to citizens.

The Planning Division drives local development. Development officers at the divisional level identify community needs, receive proposals, assess feasibility, and prepare documents for submission to the District Secretary. They implement approved plans, conduct site visits, manage final payments, and present weekly and monthly progress reports. The division also coordinates with the Divisional Coordinating Committee to resolve field-level problems, escalating unresolved matters to the District Coordinating Committee. Maintaining the annual integrated development plan, updating the divisional resource profile, and operating the divisional data room are also central responsibilities.

The Technical Officer Division supports these development programs by ensuring government funds are used efficiently. Officers prepare project estimates, check work quality, process project payments, and follow up on deposits. Correcting technically defective work on site is also part of their role. The Accounts Division maintains all accounting activities of the Divisional Secretariat. It processes payments through the Sarap Division and manages payment acceptance for government competitive examinations when instructed. The Pension Division prepares and revises pensions across three categories: civil, military, and orphan pensions. The Revenue License Division issues motor vehicle revenue licenses.

The Registrar Division records births, marriages, and deaths occurring within the division. It issues certified copies of these records island-wide for the period 1960 to 2014, ensures the security of archives, registers delayed births and deaths, corrects errors in certificates, and handles court-ordered amendments to marriage records. Ceremonial church marriages are registered as legal marriages, and the division also appears in court on behalf of the Registrar General.

The Social Services Division provides targeted support across three groups. For persons with disabilities, it offers monthly allowances, assistive devices such as wheelchairs and hearing aids, vocational training referrals, housing and self-employment loans, and educational allowances. For elderly persons, it issues adult identity cards, provides senior living allowances, supports self-employment, and registers and empowers elderly societies. For patients with serious illnesses, including tuberculosis, leprosy, cancer, and thalassemia, it provides financial assistance for treatment, clinic attendance, and support to widowed and single-parent families.

The Lands Division identifies and documents government lands within the division. It maintains cadastral maps and street line plans, updates the Western Province Land Information System, submits field inspection reports, and forwards progress data to the Divisional Secretary and the Provincial Land Commissioner. The division also identifies infrastructure and livelihood development needs of government lands and represents the Provincial Land Commissioner's Department at divisional development meetings. The Field Officers Division brings together a wide range of specialized officers working at the community level. Among them are officers responsible for agricultural development, foreign employment, child protection, skill development, disaster relief, youth services, sports, housing, and Grama Niladari administration. Each officer carries a distinct role, and together they form the division's collective responsibility for coordinating services between the Divisional Secretariat and village communities.

The Samurdhi Division oversees the implementation of the Samurdhi Development Program. It coordinates with both the Divisional Secretariat and the District Secretariat, administers Samurdhi development officers, runs banking activities including loans and deposits for low-income earners, and conducts social safety and personality development programs. The Grama Niladari Division maintains law and order, protects government and public property, supports infectious disease control, coordinates government development activities, and manages disaster relief and tax collection within the division.

The Vidatha Division promotes rural-level technology and enterprise. It organizes science programs for school children, conducts computer courses, disseminates new scientific knowledge, and identifies innovators for further development. Entrepreneurs operating under the Vidatha name can obtain Sri Lanka Standards Institute certification for their products. The division also arranges financial facilities through state banks and directs technology-related problems to expert panels through the 1966 hotline established by the Ministry of Technology and Research. Thus, functioning can be defined according to the divisions.

Current Situation

Recent developments indicate that Divisional Secretariats are undergoing active digital transformation. The Information and Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA), in partnership with the Ministry of Home Affairs, has identified the digitalization of Divisional Secretariat functions as a priority initiative under its eDivisional Secretariat (eDS) project, aimed at replacing manual service delivery with more citizen-centric, ICT-enabled processes across the country's Divisional Secretariat divisions (ICTA, n.d.). This shift toward digital service delivery has begun to materialize at the operational level: in July 2026, all thirteen Divisional Secretariat offices in the Colombo District introduced credit and debit card payment facilities through point-

of-sale systems, implemented with the support of the Bank of Ceylon and formally launched under the patronage of the Prime Minister (The Island, 2026). A parallel development has taken place in the Southern Province, where the Government Digital Payment Platform, GovPay, was extended to all three District Secretariats and fifty Divisional Secretariats in September 2025, making it the first province in the country to be fully digitally enabled through the platform (GovPay, 2025). These developments suggest that the digitalization gap identified in the existing literature is beginning to narrow in practice, even though scholarly research examining the effectiveness, adoption, and citizen experience of these initiatives at the divisional level remains largely absent.

Analysis of Key Articles of Divisional Secretariat System in Sri Lanka

This section reviews the previous studies and research related to the divisional secretariat divisional offices and public service in Sri Lanka. These studies have provided a background for further studies. Numerous studies demonstrate the importance of Sri Lanka's divisional Secretariats in delivering public services, with a focus on the provision of a range of services to citizens (Abeyasinghe & Karandakatiya, 2020; Wijesekera & Fernando, 2023). Knowing the relationship between customer satisfaction and service quality aspects is essential for evaluating the effectiveness of public service in Divisional Secretariats (Abeyasinghe & Karandakatiya, 2020). Abeyasinghe & Karandakatiya (2020) find that the service quality dimensions that are tangible, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy have an impact on customer satisfaction. The assurance dimension was unable to indicate an impact on customer service satisfaction. Nilwala et al. (2017) conducted a similar study with 520 service recipients from 13 Divisional Secretariats in Colombo. They reveal all the service quality attributes positively related to the satisfaction of the service recipients.

With a particular reference to Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka, Wijesekera & Fernando, explored in 2017 the creation of a 19-item instrument for evaluating customer perceptions of service quality in public service. The studies conducted by Churchill and Parasuraman et al., which aimed to fulfill this demand by creating a 42-item survey that was especially designed to gauge customer service quality, were utilized in the study (Wijesekera & Fernando, 2017). 100 service recipients were interviewed in five Divisional Secretariats within the Gampaha District as part of the study. Eight characteristics that emerged as markers of service quality were found in 42 items. The study suggests 42 items were deduced into 19-items. These items comprised tangibles, accessibility, assurance, responsiveness, consistency, and empathy.

Wijesekera & Fernando (2023) observe service climate in divisional secretariat employees in 83 Divisional Secretariats and service quality of 2500 customers in the same divisional secretariats. They reveal that service climate does not indicate a significant relationship with customer service quality in the context of the Sri Lankan public service. With a reference to Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka, Wijesekera & Fernando (2020) outline the development of a customized scale for assessing staff engagement in public service. They developed a refined new scale based on the existing UWES (Utrecht Work Engagement Scale).

In their 2019 study, Raveendran & Gamage investigate how organizational commitment functions as a mediator in the relationship between transformational leadership style and workers' job performance in Jaffna District Divisional

Secretariats. The results of the study reveal that transformational leadership has a positive impact on job performance and on organizational commitment. Moreover, it finds that organizational commitment doesn't mediate the impact of transformational leadership on employee performance. Moreover, Raveendran (2021) concludes that transformational leadership is not effective in promoting commitment of Development Officers working at District and Divisional Secretariats.

Additionally, Wijesekera & Fernando (2018) describe the development of a 30-item tool to assess ethical leadership in the public sector, specifically focusing on Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka. People orientation, integrity, ethical guidance, and role clarification are mentioned as the final dimensions of the ethical leadership scale. De Silva (2015) examines the impact of innovative measures within the divisional secretariat on service delivery and service innovation. Through her observations, the implementation of innovations in the divisional secretariats in Galle shows catalyzation of a developing service-oriented government agency.

Jabbar & Sajeetha (2015) explore the bureaucracy and its role in rural development. As a mixed-method study, it reveals a key constraint of the Addalaichenai Divisional Secretariat for rural development. Lack of political will and stakeholders' support, insufficient resources and capacity, climate change, absence of rural representation and unequal treatment, lack of community involvement and people's perception, lack of awareness, and traditional society are deviated from the studies and emphasize tackling these factors can empower the divisional secretariat's role in rural development. The same authors Jabbar & Sajeetha (2014), discuss the service delivery issues in a qualitative perspective about the same study area, and they identify key challenges of the offices as unawareness of people, discrimination, delay, lack of modern facilities, and political influence.

Ekanayake et al. (2022) conducted a quantitative study to investigate the relationship between the employees' quality of work life and productivity, and indicated a significant relationship and impact on service productivity by employees' quality of work life. They explained factors in quality of work life, such as the freedom of expression, fair treatment, and focus on social responsibility, which play a vital role in employee productivity. Ithrees et al. (2021) studied the impact of the 5s concept on the Nintavur Divisional Secretariat, and they identified that the 5s concept can improve the office performance at a moderate level. They conducted this quantitative study with 100 employees in the Divisional Secretariat in Nintavur.

Ummah & Mahroof (2018) examine the motivation in the context of divisional secretariats in the Ampara district. They quantitatively assess the impact of the financial and non-financial motivations on worker performance and reveal a significant positive effect of motivation on worker performance. Notably, non-staff grade workers indicate minor worker performance due to the lack of motivations like adequate salary, incentives, and retirement benefits. Priyadarshana & Kularathne (2023) explore a novel area in research and investigate the impact of psychological empowerment on employee commitment in the Divisional Secretariats in the Nuwara-Eliya District. The quantitative sample consisted of 140 officers, and the study confirms that there is a significant impact of psychological empowerment on employee commitment. Furthermore, this study reveals that competence and self-determination does not affect employee commitment in the Divisional Secretariats.

Ummah & Beevi (2016) seek the factors that demonstrate the influence on work performance in divisional secretariats in Ampara district. As a quantitative hypothesis testing, this study explains that factors like past training, satisfaction, value, and knowledge have a significant impact on employee work performance. Therefore, the authors confirm their alternative hypotheses are proven. Sivanenthira & Sabina (2014) quantitatively study the job satisfaction and employee performance in the divisional secretariat. They emphasize the factors, such as promotion, pay, work itself, and working conditions, that influence employee performance. Overall job satisfaction, including promotion, pay, work itself, and working conditions, has a crucial and statistically significant impact on employee performance.

Sivanenthira & Kumar (2014) open a unique discussion in the field of studies about the divisional secretariat. They systematically analyze the financial control systems in the two divisional secretariats, Jaffna and Kilinochchi districts. As a comparative study, this study is a specific study and investigate the effectiveness of the financial control systems in both districts. The findings reveal that the Kilinochchi district performs more effectively in financial control than the Jaffna district. The study suggests a set of recommendations, including auditing, planning, and budgeting mechanisms for an effective financial control system in divisional secretariats. Aroosiya et al. (2023) contribute a study which integrate the gender perspective into institutional service studies. Mainly, they examine the occupational stress of working women in the government schools, hospitals, and divisional secretariat employees. The overall stress of all the categories of occupation, including divisional secretariat employees, is at a moderate level. However, the significant finding that is relevant to the divisional secretariat employees is that management service women officers indicate the highest stress rates compared to other positions, such as teachers, midwives, and nursing officers.

Discussion

The body of research on Divisional Secretariats in Sri Lanka has grown steadily over the past decade, yet it remains uneven in its scope. Most studies cluster around a narrow set of concerns: service quality, customer satisfaction, leadership behavior, and employee performance. These are useful contributions. But taken together, they leave much of the institutional life of divisional secretariats unexplored. Service quality has received the most sustained attention. These studies form a coherent thread, though their focus on perceptions and measurement tools leaves questions about what actually drives service outcomes largely unanswered. Leadership and staff-side factors form a second cluster. A smaller number of studies step outside these dominant themes. The table 1 below summarizes these studies by their core focus areas.

Table 1: Summary of previous studies on divisional secretariats

Author(s) & Year	Key Focus Area	Main Finding
Abeyasinghe & Karandakatiya (2020)	Service quality and customer satisfaction	Tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, and empathy affect satisfaction; assurance does not
Nilwala et al. (2017)	Service quality and satisfaction	All service quality attributes positively related to satisfaction across 13 Divisional Secretariats
Wijsekera & Fernando (2017)	Service quality measurement	Developed a 19-item instrument covering tangibles, accessibility, assurance, responsiveness, consistency, and empathy
Wijsekera & Fernando (2023)	Service climate and service quality	Service climate does not have a significant relationship with customer service quality
Wijsekera & Fernando (2020)	Staff engagement measurement	Developed a customized engagement scale for public service adapted from UWES
Wijsekera & Fernando (2018)	Ethical leadership measurement	Developed a 30-item ethical leadership scale with four dimensions
Raveendran & Gamage (2019)	Transformational leadership and job performance	Transformational leadership positively affects performance and commitment; commitment does not mediate
Raveendran (2021)	Transformational leadership and commitment	Transformational leadership not effective in promoting Development Officers' commitment
Ummah & Mahroof (2018)	Motivation and worker performance	Financial and non-financial motivation significantly affect worker performance
Ekanayake et al. (2022)	Quality of work life and productivity	Significant positive relationship between quality of work life and employee productivity
Priyadarshana & Kularathne (2023)	Psychological empowerment and employee commitment	Psychological empowerment significantly affects commitment; competence and self-determination do not
Ummah & Beevi (2016)	Factors influencing work performance	Training, satisfaction, value, and knowledge significantly affect work performance
Sivanenthira & Sabina (2014)	Job satisfaction and employee performance	Promotion, pay, work itself, and working conditions significantly affect employee performance
Ithrees et al. (2021)	5S concept and office performance	5S concept improves office performance at a moderate level
Sivanenthira & Kumar (2014)	Financial control systems	Kilinochchi performs more effectively in financial control than Jaffna
De Silva (2015)	Service innovation	Innovation catalyzes development of a service-oriented government agency
Jabbar & Sajeetha (2015; 2014)	Rural development and service delivery challenges	Key constraints include lack of political will, resources, and political influence
Aroosiya et al. (2023)	Occupational stress of working women	Management service women officers in divisional secretariats report the highest stress

Source: Own elaboration

Several research gaps stand out from this review. The most obvious is the narrow geographic spread. Many studies are concentrated in selected districts such as Colombo, Gampaha, Jaffna, and Ampara. Rural, estate, conflict-affected, and underdeveloped regions remain largely outside the research frame. Regional disparities and inclusive metrics have not been studied in any systematic way. Comparative studies across rural, urban, estate, conflict-affected, and underdeveloped regions are limited.

Administrative efficiency has received very little direct attention. Overall workflow management, bureaucratic delays, and institutional productivity are not covered in the existing literature. Given that efficiency is central to the public service mandate of Divisional Secretariats, this gap is significant. The hybrid service

models that operate across these offices, combining in-person and administrative delivery, have not been examined in depth. Digitalization is another neglected area. The divisional secretariat's office has gradually incorporated digital systems, yet very few studies investigate the role of e-governance within these institutions. Online public service delivery and the impact of digital transformation on efficiency, accessibility, and transparency remain under-researched.

Most of the existing studies are cross-sectional. They capture conditions at a single point in time, which limits what can be said about change over time. Longitudinal studies examining reforms, leadership transitions, or policy interventions are almost entirely absent. This matters because divisional secretariats have undergone substantial changes since 1991, and much of that

process is undocumented in the research record. Gender and social inclusion perspectives have received only marginal attention. Aroosiya et al. (2023) is the clearest exception, but broader questions about how divisional secretariats serve women, persons with disabilities, elderly citizens, and other vulnerable communities remain unanswered. Existing studies rarely assess the service delivery experience from the perspective of these groups.

The methodological balance is also skewed. The majority of studies are quantitative. Qualitative and mixed-method approaches are limited, which means the lived experiences of service recipients and public officers, the organizational culture within divisional secretariats, and the practical functioning of bureaucratic processes are poorly captured. Interviews, observations, and ethnographic approaches could address these dimensions in ways that survey-based work cannot. Finally, comparative perspectives are largely missing. Sri Lankan Divisional Secretariats have not been systematically compared with similar local administrative institutions in other South Asian or developing countries. Such comparisons could provide valuable insights into what reform strategies have worked elsewhere and what might be applicable to the Sri Lankan context.

Limitations of the Study

This study is subject to several limitations. As a desk-based review, the analysis of the divisional secretariat's structure and functions relied primarily on a limited number of sources, which may not fully capture variations in organizational arrangements across the country's 331 divisional secretariats. The literature search was also confined to peer-reviewed journal and conference publications identified through Google Scholar and supplemented by citation chasing; published memoirs, institutional histories, and government reports by former civil servants were not systematically incorporated, despite offering valuable first-hand administrative insights. Finally, because the review synthesizes existing empirical studies rather than collecting new primary data, its conclusions about research gaps are shaped by what has already been published and may not fully reflect current administrative practice, particularly given the digitalization initiatives now underway that have yet to be studied in the scholarly literature.

Conclusion

The divisional secretariat system occupies a position of fundamental importance in Sri Lanka's public administration landscape. Since its formal establishment in 1991, it has functioned as the primary institutional bridge between state policy and the everyday needs of citizens at the grassroots level. This paper traced that journey from British colonial administration through republican reorganization, demonstrating how successive policy decisions gradually pushed administrative responsibility downward to the divisional level.

The structural review confirmed that divisional secretariats carry a remarkably wide range of responsibilities, from civil registration and pension management to land administration and social welfare provision. This breadth of function reflects both the ambition of decentralization and the practical burden placed on these offices to serve diverse populations with varying needs. The literature review, however, exposed a striking narrowness in how scholars have approached these institutions. Most existing research has focused on service quality perceptions and leadership behavior within selected urban or well-resourced districts. Dimensions such as workflow efficiency, bureaucratic delays, digital service delivery, rural-urban disparities, and the experiences of vulnerable populations remain poorly understood. Longitudinal studies are

almost entirely absent, and comparative perspectives drawing on similar institutions in neighboring countries are rarely attempted.

These gaps are not merely academic concerns. Without a fuller understanding of how divisional secretariats actually function across different geographical, social, and institutional contexts, reform efforts risk being shaped by incomplete evidence. Future research incorporating qualitative methods, mixed approaches, and sustained observation will be necessary to build that understanding. This study contributes a structured foundation from which such work can proceed.

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Annex

Task List of the Divisions at the Divisional Secretariat

(Extracted from the resource profile of Divisional Secretariat)

Role of Institutional Division

- Business Name Registration
- Issuance of Excise Permits
- Issuance of mortgage licenses
- Issuance of logging permits
- Issuance of Timber Transport Permits
- Registration of timber storage
- Issuance of Animal Transport Permits (Elephants and other animals)
- Issuance of Tavern Licenses
- Issue of income certificates and issue of value certificates.
- Granite Quarrying License Recommendation
- Recommending Explosives Permits.
- Making recommendations for gun licenses.
- Issuance of Pensioner and Staff Permits
- Free assessment reports for government officials
- Rental assessment reports
- Sub-signing of Confirmation of Residence Certificates and Character Certificates issued by Grama Niladari Officers.
- Activities related to electricity problems
- Issuance of certificates for contracts
- Other Timely assignment requirements

Role of the Identity Cards Division

- Basic Processes related to issuing identity cards

Role of Planning Division

- In the implementation of projects related to the development programs, the development officers working at the divisional level should identify the development needs of the division, receive proposals, study feasibility, prepare documents and submit them to the district secretary.
- Getting relevant proposals approved, implementing approved plans, conducting site visits, and making final payments.
- Presenting weekly and monthly progress related to development programs.
- Coordinating the relevant project authorities in the implementation of development programs and managing the project activities successfully.
- To resolve the major problems at the level of the Grama Niladari Division by the Divisional Coordination Committee.
- Referral of issues that cannot be resolved by the Divisional Coordinating Committee to the District Coordinating Committees.
- leading the relevant development officers in the Grama Niladari divisional level to coordinate the activities between the Divisional Secretariat Office and the village.
- Preparation and updating of the annual integrated development plan for the development projects implemented under all funding sources in the divisional secretariat division.
- Collecting and updating data information about the division and updating resource profiles.

- Updating and maintaining the operating room where the data information of the division is displayed.
- Providing necessary information about the division to external parties, such as university students, after verifying the identity.
- Implementation of other development activities related to the division assigned by the District Planning Secretariat.
- Implementation of Provincial Council Development Plan

Role of the Technical Officer Division

- In the implementation of development programs in the area, the allocation of government funds to be used for projects with efficiency so as to achieve maximum productivity.
- Preparation of estimates for projects and checking of project works.
- Carrying out related tasks in making payments for projects.
- Follow-up and make payments of deposits.
- In the implementation of the projects, checking that the work is done with the right technology and correcting the faulty places.

Role of Accounts Division

- Maintaining all accounting activities related to the Divisional Secretariat.
- Processing of all payments by the Sarap Division.
- Acceptance of relevant payments in cases where instructions are given to take charge of the payments made in competitive examinations held by the government.

Role of Pension Division

- Preparation of pensions and revisions. (Civil/Military/Orphans)

Role of Revenue License Division

- Issuance of motor vehicle revenue licenses.

Role of Registrar Division

- Registration of life events like births, marriages, and deaths occurring in the division.
- Issuance of copies of marriage, birth, and death certificates island-wide from 1960 to 2014.
- Ensuring the security of marriage, birth, and death records, and their archives.
- Supervision and payment of allowances to Divisional Registrars.
- Issuance of presumptive age certificate to persons whose birth is not registered.
- Registration of unregistered births as delayed births and deaths as delayed deaths.
- Correction of errors, clauses in birth and death certificates, and forwarding the copies to the Central Archive.
- Registration of ceremonial marriages in churches as legal marriages.
- Recording of court orders regarding divorces and amendments to marriage certificates.
- Amendment of names in birth certificates.
- Amendment of Muslim Marriage Certificates.
- Conduct of Marriages in Gampaha District.
- Appearing in court as represented by the Registrar General.

Role of Social Services Division

1. Services provided for the disabled

- Allowance of Rs.5,000/- for persons with disabilities.

- Provide wheelchairs, commode wheelchairs, spectacles, hearing aids, tricycles, handrails, and crutches for disabled people.
- Directing people with special needs to vocational training.
- Providing maintenance allowances to registered disabled households.
- Providing housing loans.
- Providing self-employment loans.
- Improvement of sanitary facilities.
- Grant of educational allowances.

2. Services for Elderly People

- Issuance of Adult Identity Cards.
- Providing senior living allowance and mass subsidy.
- Providing loans for self-employment to the elderly.
- Registration and Empowerment of Elderly Societies.
- Providing care for orphaned adults.
- Providing sanitary facilities for the elderly.
- Providing maintenance allowances for registered nursing homes.
- Providing contact lenses/ hearing aids.

3. Assistance for patients

- Providing allowances to tuberculosis, leprosy, cancer, and thalassemia patients.
- Providing financial assistance in case of surgery, blood transfusion, etc., for specific diseases.
- Providing clinic medical assistance for attending hospital clinics.
- Providing educational assistance to the children of widowed women's families.
- Providing self-employment assistance to single-parent families.
- Registration of Voluntary Organizations.

Role of Lands Division

- Identifying the government lands within the divisional secretariat, documenting the information of the colonies and government lands and reporting the information to the divisional secretary and the provincial land commissioner.
- To maintain up-to-date information and related documents related to Plans/ Street line/ cadastral maps related to the government lands of the division.
- Western Province Land Information System Update.
- Calculating the annual target progress at the end of each quarter.
- Submission of necessary field inspection reports for duties carried out with government lands in the division.
- Collecting, documenting, accounting, and forwarding the information to the Divisional Secretary and Provincial Land Commissioner
- Identifying the infrastructure, social development, and livelihood development needs of the government lands in the division and submitting related development project proposals, monitoring and reporting the progress when those projects are implemented.
- To participate in divisional development meetings held in the division and in other cases where a representative of the Provincial Land Commissioner's Department should be represented and to report related matters with the knowledge of the Provincial Land Commissioner.

Role of the Field Officers Division

Field officers' divisions main task has been created by the roles of each field officer.

- Role of the coordinator of Buddhist affairs
- Role of Productivity Development Officer
- Role of Small Business Development Officer
- Role of Agricultural Development Officers
- Role of Community Corrections Officer
- Role of Human Resource Development Officer
- Role of Foreign Employment Officer
- Role of Enterprise Development Officer
- Role of National Integration Co-ordinating Officer
- Role of Vanita Development Officer
- Role of Counselor role
- Role of the Early Childhood Development Officer
- Role of Child Protection Officer
- Role of Statistical Officer
- Role of Child Rights Promotion Officer
- Role of Skill Development Officer
- Role of Disaster Relief Service Development Officer
- Role of Local Medical Development Officer
- Role of Cultural Officers
- Role of Youth Services Officer
- Role of Land Using Officer
- Role of the Sports Officer
- Role of Grama Niladari
- Role of Housing Officer

Role of the Samurdhi Division

- Reviewing the implementation and progress of the Samurdhi Development Program in coordination with the Divisional Secretariat and the District Secretariat.
- Administering matters related to Samurdhi development officers.
- Running banking activities as providing loans, collecting deposits, and upliftment of low-income earners.
- Social development activities
- Social Safety Affairs
- Implementation of personality development and attitude development programs

Role of Grama Niladari Division

- To maintain law and order in the division.
- Protecting the government and public property.
- Performance of duties assigned by statutory ordinances.
- Carrying out social welfare activities.
- Providing necessary support and control for infectious disease control activities.
- Coordination between the government and the division.
- Carrying out government development activities.
- Disaster relief.
- Proper collection and remittance of taxes due to the government.

Role of Vidatha Division

- Providing the right technology and methods to produce any product from one's own labor at home by utilizing the resources that are widely available at the rural level.
- Organizing various scientific programs for school children.
- Conducting computer courses and providing certificates for them.
- Dissemination of new scientific knowledge.
- Identifying innovators and improving their knowledge.
- By becoming a Vidatha entrepreneur, providing the opportunity to enter the market for products under the name of 'Vidatha'.

- Ability to obtain Vidatha Standard Certificates for Vidatha products given by the Sri Lanka Standards Institute.
- Ability to market security and to succeed in business by that.
- Preparation of programs to provide financial facilities for entrepreneurs by state banks.
- A hotline called 1966 has been installed in the Ministry of Technology and Research to direct the problems of entrepreneurs to a panel of experts to get scientific solutions to science and technology problems, and about Vidatha Programmes.