

CONTROL OVER RURAL ORGANISATIONS

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The post-1956 period in Sri Lanka witnessed two processes of government integration of traditional village communities into one political system. The first is the proliferation of rural organisations through which the government distributed various benefits to the villagers. The second is the politicisation which altered the criteria by which the government decides who should be in charge of the distribution of such benefits and who should receive them.

The second process, although apparent even in the 1950s became more prominent in the 1970s.

Both of these processes were mainly an outcome of the economic and social development plans carried out by the national political leaders in their nation-building exercises. The integration of village communities with the national socio-economic and political systems has brought many changes to the village power structure. The transformation of the "natural village" into a divisional, electoral or district-level administrative systems has changed its internal organisation. The villagers who make up a numerical majority in such units, sometimes irrespective of their lower economic and social status in the traditional "natural village", have managed to elect leaders in various rural organisations. A good example is the election of the non-goigama poor villagers of Nuwaragama as the office-bearers of the CC in the 1960s. They manipulated their numerical strength in the area to obtain the maximum advantage from the principle of election of the leaders by popular vote.

Such changes of leadership did not at first challenge the traditional power structure as many of the rural organisations brought hardly any benefits to the villages until the 1970s. Furthermore, only a part of agricultural inputs needed for cultivation came from the rural organisations, which left the land-based village leaders in a comfortable position, as they could obtain their requirements from the private sector.

But,

- (a) the political appointment of office bearers of rural organisations,
- (b) the nomination of such organisa-

tions as the sole channels for distributing scarce resources such as fertiliser, agro-chemicals, agricultural equipment and credit, and,
(c) the increasingly open use of political loyalty as a criterion for allocating benefits through these rural organisations, have increased the importance of such organisations as new power bases in rural areas.

One of the outcomes of the politicisation of rural leadership is the emergence of local leaders from various previously under-privileged economic and social groups. They come from landowners as well as from landless groups and from high caste goigama as well as from low-caste groups. Their base of power and authority mainly depends on their ability to mobilise votes for the MP or their links with the outside influentials such as government officials or both. These changes have affected the social and economic hierarchies in Wewagama and Nuwaragama in different ways. In Wewagama, political power is now occupied by the 'outsiders' from the LDO schemes because of their ability to mobilise voters for elections and their urban links. Thus the purana villagers have now become a secondary group in receiving benefits from the rural organisations controlled by the 'outsiders'. But in Nuwaragama, although the traditional land-based leaders lost their political power, their primordial links with divisional political patrons still allow them to channel at least some of the state benefits towards themselves. Many of the goigama as well as vahumpura families deliberately divided their loyalties between the main political parties—some joined the UNP and some the SLFP. Thus when both factional loyalty and kinship loyalty operate, families which deliberately divide loyalties gain continuously irrespective of the political party in power.

In the 1950s and to some extent in the 1960s, party affiliations generally followed the pre-existing village cleavages. For example, the purana settlements of Wewagama supported the SLFP while the 'outsiders' supported the UNP. But at present, such relationships between a political party and social groups in a village is a dynamic

one, subject to change over a short period of time. This is especially true of the political leaders. Jayaratne's political power and popularity for example, became eroded in his own purana village, allowing room to the emergence of Sugath, although he was an outsider. In Nuwaragama, Wije now identifies himself more with the non-goigama than with his own rich goigama relatives.

The gradual disappearance of village identity as an 'organic' whole is one of the major outcomes of politicisation. The history of the Nuwaragama village-road is a good example of this process. Between 1940 and 1970, the road was a common concern of the whole village, irrespective of caste, wealth or residential differences among the villagers. Although decision-making powers vested in the hands of the rich goigama households, the whole village stood as a group vis-a-vis the state in demanding various forms of aid. As the RDS records show, the discussions of the RDS always concentrated on village development and on how to obtain outside help. Shramadanas, the donation of land and the satisfactory participation of villagers in the RDS's activities show their identity as one group. But with the division of the villagers between the UNP and the SLFP, village development work has become a political group affair, which always draws opposition and sabotage from the rival political groups. Such activities became ground for prestige battles between rival political leaders. Both getting things done and stopping opponents from getting something done have become equally important in the competition for power.

The new political leaders are radically different from the traditional village leaders. The new leaders are younger, more educated and poorer than the traditional leaders. Furthermore, many of them are notorious for thuggery in their villages. They are short-lived leaders who are vulnerable to their own colleagues intrigues, and at best, their tenure of leadership is limited to the period in which the political party they support holds power. Therefore, they do their best to gain maximum advantage through their power and sometimes engage in corrupt practices. But the lingering values of human decency, bureaucratic ethos and legal rules still set limits to such attempts.

"New Dimensions of Social Stratification in Rural Sri Lanka".