

DYNAMICS OF LOCAL LEVEL POWER

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Introduction

This study is based on fieldwork carried out in two villages- Menikgama and Kurundugama (pseudonyms). In this paper I propose to analyse the nature of the power structure in two villages in the Wet Zone of Sri Lanka. My concern is essentially with the dynamics of power distribution. In such a study, it is necessary to consider the relation between each village and the wider social system of which it forms a part. As the wider social system (Sri Lankan society) is undergoing rapid change this will have its impact on the leadership of village life.

I am therefore concerned with the changes in five main areas:-

1. The resources which support local power;
2. The number of individuals who can compete for power;
3. The nature of the leader/follower relationship;
4. The role played by leaders;
5. The implications of these findings for the likely effectiveness of government policies (working through these structures) to promote development.

Regarding the resources of power, I would like to examine the following specific questions:-

1. Are landownership and wealth necessary criteria to get power?
2. Are they sufficient to retain power?
3. How far do political affiliations help to gain powerful positions in the village?

Setting

The above questions are explored in the light of anthropological field data from two villages in the Wet Zone of Sri Lanka. Menikgama is situated in the Western province in the district of Kalutara. It is about six miles from Kalutara, half way between Kalutara and Horana and about 28 miles from Colombo. Menikgama has a population of 3,322 and 643 households (Householder's List 1971). Menikgama villa-

gers are exclusively Sinhalese Buddhist and the majority belong to Goigama caste. Badahala is the other distinct caste group.

Kurundugama is in the adjoining district of Galle in the Southern province. It is about 12 miles from Ambalangoda which is the closest town to the village. Although Menikgama is closer to a town, Kurundugama villagers have better transport networks. There are several buses plying via the centre of the village towards different towns. Kurundugama has 379 households and a population of 1,759 (Householder's List 1971), and all are Sinhalese Buddhist. But there is a population of Indian Tamil labourers living in the State owned estates; they are Hindu by religion. Although they have been living in the estate for many years, they are not integrated with village life. They do not figure in the Householder's List and they do not belong to any local organization or to any society. Therefore I have excluded this group from my study. The majority of the villagers are of the Karawa caste. The other main caste groups are Goigama and Vahumpura.

Definition of Power

The concept of power has been defined by many social Scientists. In this context Max Weber's definition would be particularly useful. He defines power as-

"the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance- regardless of the basis on which this probability rests" (1947: 152).

Traditional Power Structure

In analysing the power structure of the past, it is useful to refer to Marguerite Robinson's work in Morapitiya village. Robinson in her study says, "when asked, "who are the important people in this village? A Mora-

pitiya usually replies, The village Headman (Aracci), the Priest (Hamuduru) and the School Master (Iskole mahatea). That these people should be considered leaders is a classical Sinhalese norm".

Accordingly, the traditional leaders were deferred to mainly because of three reasons: first they were respected because of the particular role they played in the society. The Headman had considerable power both in external and internal affairs. Therefore through his office he was able to exercise power over villagers. Secondly, traditional leaders were deferred to for their personal qualities, the Priest being a good example. Thirdly, traditional leaders were respected for their economic power. In the case of the Village Headman and School Teacher, although they had achieved positions, wealth was a precondition for achieving them.

Regarding these traditional leaders the following factors are clear:

First, these leaders generally had high economic and caste status. They also represented the dominant lineage (ge) groups in the village; secondly, the alliances formed between leader and the follower were stable. Threats to their powers were few and inconsequential since only a few could become leaders. Consequently because of a stable power base, it was possible to identify leaders in the village as Village Headman, School Teacher and Priest.

However, within the last 20 years or so, Sri Lankan Villages have undergone several changes. The most relevant of these are the expansion of educational opportunities, the expansion of outside avenues for deriving income and changes in the bureaucracy with the process of democratization and decentralization. Also, a high level of politicization has occurred in the countryside. At the same time the image of a leader has changed, as some villagers comments suggest. For example when asked about the qualities one looks for in a leader (nayakaya), meaning a person whom people will listen to and respect, and who can lead them to success; one informant of Menikgama, a 20 year old G.C.E.O'Level educated, emphasised the following criteria:

"It is not necessary for a nayakaya to own land or be a government officer; but he should be educated, have good contacts with outside officers, and be in a position to provide jobs for others and work for the welfare of the village".

This was a common definition given by the villagers about a leader. Thus it is clear that the criteria looked for in a leader has changed from wealth to access to outside jobs.

Present Power Structure

One can categorize leaders into two main groups "Official" and "unofficial". By "Official" I mean, people who exert power by virtue of their office in a village institution or organization. "Unofficial" leaders are individuals who can influence others without holding office. Below, I shall mainly discuss official leaders.

There are many village-level organizations, controlled by the centre which are involved in implementing government policies. Local political party organizations also tend to be controlled from the centre.

Thus the question arises as to who holds these offices. Are today's office holders selected by the same criteria as the village Headman in the past? As I pointed out, wealth formerly was a key instrument for gaining power. Therefore one obvious question arises in this context. Is landownership still necessary to gain office or are there other criteria, other resources which can be tapped?

Before answering these questions it is necessary to say that in Menikgama we still find traditional landowning families with a considerable influence over village affairs. They are respected and subordination to them is accepted. But this may not be for very long, and may apply only to the present adult generation. Furthermore, like many other villages in Sri Lanka, Menikgama is exposed to urban influence and more important, to centrally controlled bureaucratic penetration.

There are several reasons why such land-owning families continue to command respect from villagers. Their present wealth, no doubt is an important one: several villagers depend on them for their basic survival. They

maintain a clientele through dependency relationships. But more than anything, their family backgrounds are responsible for the deference they receive. Inherited wealth helps in many ways to gain prestige and office. First, it gives power to create dependents. Secondly, there is a tendency for traditional landowners to create benevolent images of themselves in the villages by making substantial donations to keep others in subordinate positions. Having wealth also means better access to education which gives respect and the ability to dominate over others.

However, the extensive penetration of the centre into the village has complicated the power structure. More people aspire to leadership roles and the alliances formed between leaders and followers become unstable because they do not rely on a caste, kinship or 'stable' socio-economic relations, but rather on political ties. There is more vertical competition for power. Political allegiances float to the man who seems to offer the best opportunities.

Thus, the study of factional divisions is inseparable from a study of local level power. Political parties differ from political factions as the former are institutionalised with their membership functioning under one ideology. Furthermore, parties influence political life mainly from outside. However at the local level, very often these political parties tend to acquire a local colour, bringing different factional rivalries to the surface.

Two kinds of political factions are to be seen in the village: they are either formed around rivalry within the same political party, or around rivalry between members of different parties. In either case, a bond of the same type seems to operate, the followers are mainly attracted to their factions by the benefits they expect from the factional leader.

Non-office Holders

Apart from office holders there are leaders "behind the scenes" who do not themselves hold office but enjoy respect and exercise influence.

Many researchers have tried to clas-

sify leaders into different categories such as formal, informal, official, unofficial, opinion leaders and so on. Ganewatte (1974) talks about two levels of leaders, namely the "surface level" leadership composed of the traditional leaders, official leaders and sometimes the opinion leaders, and, secondly, the "de facto" leadership who are people with the largest following. The latter are respected for their honesty, integrity, and moral character and above all for their modesty and loyalty to their followers. According to Ganewatte they control the tempo of village life and activity and are the final decision makers and arbiters of community conflicts (1974:4-6).

In view of my findings Ganewatte's observations appear to be rather questionable. He says that the second level leaders control village life, but he also says that the first level leaders get elected for different societies. Evidence, however shows that the officers in societies like political organizations, Rural Development Societies (RDS), Agricultural Productivity Committees (APC), and Cultivation Committees (CC) do enjoy considerable power. They are responsible for village activities and are the real decision-makers.

In both villages, landowners with direct influence through their economic power, have taken office in different societies including even the village priest who takes an interest in village societies.

Interest in holding office is based on several factors. One might say that a landowner with overwhelming power by virtue of wealth and/or personality might prefer, instead of holding office directly, to have the offices occupied by clients who will do nothing without consulting him. But now, nobody enjoys that amount of dominance in the village. Furthermore, diversity of income sources, and the range of external ties which create a multiplicity of the (external) sources of benefits to be distributed as patronage have increased in recent times. Hence, taking office is a way of breeding further power by distribution of some outside benefits to political supporters.

One might therefore conclude, that, today, there is little point in a distinction between official and unofficial

or formal and informal leaders. It may however be said that the penetration of the state bureaucracy has led to a formalization of power. In the new, formalized structure the traditionally powerful are still dominant, but less secure.

Concentration and Diffusion of Local Power

Many of the earlier writings show that village power rested with a few wealthy families, e.g. Wriggs (1960: 42), Yalman (1967:31), and Wanigaratne (1976:24-25).

Today, leadership is more diffuse because of the expansion of leadership opportunities. Power is not consolidated in the hands of a few families and more people aspire for leadership roles.

The expansion of leadership opportunities is closely connected with the deep penetration of the bureaucracy and of party politics into local life. As a result, one finds more local organizations with an elected or a nominated leadership. In both cases, politics has an important role to play. Also, the role of forceful persuasion and intimidation in elections (post-election arson and attacks of houses of leading losers are not uncommon) provides a new basis for gaining power.

Leadership opportunities were also enlarged by the alternation in brokerage roles. A change in power at the centre results in corresponding changes in the local power structure. This was clearly evident in both villages.

Specificity of Leadership Functions

The penetration of the centre into the village has its effect not only in reducing the concentration of leadership roles, but also making these roles more specific.

In the past, the leaders played three important functions:-

- (a) settling village disputes or acting as mediators in these disputes.
- (b) mobilizing internal resources for collective village purposes.
- (c) representing the village to the outside.

With regard to the first function, namely, that of settling disputes, the present leaders play an insignificant role. If the villagers are unable to settle their disputes among themselves, then the Grama Sevaka is informed. Being a government officer he obviously will tackle the matter in a bureaucratic manner by reporting to the Police who will ask the disputants to take the matter before a court of law. At this stage the leaders may be approached for relief, first in getting bail if a disputant has been placed in police custody and then at the court case.

The second function of mobilising internal resources has been taken over by formal organization such as RDS. For example organising Sharmadanas, supposedly based on self-help and self-realization, have become the main activity of the RDS which is part of the state framework. Therefore even activities such as clearing irrigation canals, graveyards and roads, falls within the purview of these organizations.

Even spontaneous activities (i.e. those not dependent on orders from the centre, such as, temple and cultural activities) involve to some extent a reliance on external forces. These social events are used by the local power holders to strengthen their patron-client relationships at a higher level, e.g. with the MP and Government Officers.

Partly as a result of these patron-client networks, the present leaders have assumed the role of brokers. Whereas a traditional leader such as the Village Headman when dealing with the colonial bureaucracy had used only his persuasive power, his sincerity and his strength of personality as weapons in gaining benefits for his village; whereas new leaders are brokers offering a trade in votes. The centre provides jobs, subsidies, aid etc, which the local leaders extract and distribute among the villagers, in exchange for votes at the time of elections.

The villagers support a certain party with the hope of getting benefits from it's leaders. Leaders who are able to provide these benefits to the villagers are the local patrons. At this stage, the local patrons become brokers as they in turn act as clients to the national poli-

ticians and bureaucrats.

Therefore, the brokers, rather than closing the gap between the village and the outer world, polarize the two by seeing that they command the road across the gap. In both villages the brokers gave less chances for the clients to make acquaintances with outsiders. This was evident at Menikgama, at the time of the visit of the MP and the Officials of the Department of Education who came to inaugurate the new school building. This was the MP's first visit to the village and it was a great day for the villagers, who worked hard to make the occasion a success. But when the MP and Officers arrived the local patrons took command over the situation.

In Kurundugama too, when ever the MP or AGA and other bureaucrats visit the village they are entertained by the local politicians and they compete to show deference.

Leadership and Development

The new patterns of brokerage grow out of welfare and development schemes ostensibly designed to improve living conditions and productivity in the villages. I have indicated how these schemes affect leadership patterns. An equally interesting question is-how the power structure affects welfare and development schemes?

The range of rural development measures designed to raise the level of productivity and welfare is very wide: the distribution of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides through cooperative societies, the provision of crop insurance and loan facilities, extension services offering advice on new technology etc. There are also consumer subsidies, health and educational facilities, land provided for the landless etc.

However, it appears that the implementation of these policies must be and sometimes ostensibly is affected by the brokerage system. Many respondents expressed dissatisfaction about the distribution of land under the village expansion scheme, since most recipients of land were clients of the local leaders.

Besides their manifest function of promoting development, these schemes also have a latent function of consolidating the power base of leaders. At times the two types of functions get in each other's way. Although the desire to take development initiatives is not wholly absent, it is combined with political ambitions which are dominant enough to thwart the good intentions.

But the question arises whether these leaders are completely indifferent to the need to keep their clients happy. Since leaders do have to think about mobilizing votes at elections, they cannot completely ignore the welfare of villagers. As a result they try to render benefits to the villagers, if they do not hinder their own vested interests.

Providing personal benefits such as giving jobs and distributing land has become the prime function of the leader. When the political leaders were questioned about their commitments to village development, they gave more importance to this particular task of providing jobs than any more general benefits which the whole community can enjoy.

Conclusions

This study has discussed the dynamics of local level power in two Sri Lankan villages. In traditional Sinhalese society, power was concentrated among a few wealthy families of the dominant lineage(ge) group. The traditional leaders enjoyed a stable power base for generations. Today, leadership is more diffuse and not concentrated among a few families. This diffusion is due to two main factors:

- (a) emergence of goal specificity in leadership roles, and
- (b) recruitment of leaders from a variety of social strata of the village.

The present leaders are the office

The present village leaders are the office holders of rural organizations. The qualification necessary to gain office is the right political affiliation. Political alliances with national-level politicians are created by the ability to muster village support which can be

used by politicians at times of elections. Village support can be achieved through several means-

- (a) by creating or maintaining economic dependencies;
- (b) by preserving powers of influence derived from ascribed status;
- (c) by strong personality;
- (d) through force or thuggery;
- (e) through promising benefits by the virtue of having outside connections. Thus, ownership of land is not sufficient to gain power.

The functions of the leaders have also changed. Today a village leader does not have the authority to settle village disputes. But the present leaders have a more significant part to play in village development. Since Government policies are implemented through rural organizations, their success depends on the leader- their commitment and efficiency.

One can see many dysfunctions in this new system. First, many leakages

are evident in the brokerage system. Therefore, it is not wrong to say that the brokerage system does not promote modernization but thwarts modern forms of rational and equitable distribution of goods and services. Thus if patron-clientelism continues, its particularistic and personalistic values will continue to take precedence over universalistic interests. Secondly, very often these leaders become mere instruments in the hands of the national politicians and bureaucrats because of their vested interest in sustaining their positions. Thirdly, political competition sometimes leads to disruptions in village development. This can be seen when there is a change in the political power base in the village.

In fine, although in the traditional system, village development depended entirely on the genuine interest of the village leaders, in the present system, the leaders cannot completely ignore the welfare of the villagers, because of the need to get votes at elections.

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