

Emergent Leadership at the Village Level

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An attempt will be made in this paper to identify the focal points of leadership at the village level and to suggest the basis for a strategy of communication which would enable the projection of desirable goals to a village population.

One of the obvious sources of leadership at the village level is the existing bureaucracy and it would be fruitful to look in that direction initially. It is customary today to talk about the three levels of bureaucracy in district administration.

- (1) the village level,
- (2) the divisional level,
- (3) the district level.

From colonial times functionaries were appointed at each of these levels with duties and responsibilities so as to achieve a highly centralized chain of command which could ensure that any decision taken at the centre would be communicated and implemented without delay at the village level. In the chain of officials each understood precisely his responsibilities and extent of power. To take the example of the Home Ministry, the line of command was fairly clear and obvious: the Minister of Home Affairs - Permanent Secretary—Government Agent (at district level)—D.R.O. (at divisional level)—and the Village Headman (at village level). Today, ministries and functional departments operate on this three-tiered system and have their officials at these three levels. E.g. the Agricultural Department will have the D.A.E.O. at the district level, the A.I. at the divisional level and the Krushikarma Viyapthi Sevaka at the village level. The Land Commissioner's Department would have the District Land Officer at the district level and the S.L.D.O. at the divisional level and the O.L.D.O. at the village level.

Is the "village level" commonly regarded as such by Government, in fact the level of the village proper.

In fact, the village level officers we have been talking about earlier like the Grama Sevaka, K.V.S. and O.L.D.O. serve a group of villages, called the Grama Sevaka Division, rather than a village itself. A Grama Sevaka in a Wet Zone district may have from 2500 to 4000 people in his division. His area may vary from one square mile in the more densely populated parts of the country to 8-10 square miles in the outlying districts. The villages within his *asama* may be contiguous or separated by miles of jungle, or undeveloped land. Therefore, although in the official mind these officers are regarded as village level officers they may not be so in the minds of the villagers themselves. Even in the Wet Zone where the villages nestle together one finds that identification is much more with the *gangoda* or locality, rather than with the Grama Sevaka division which, officials are apt to think of as the village. For example the Grama Sevaka Division of Ihala Lelwala is popularly considered to be a village and the Grama Sevaka is deemed to be the village level officer. But if you ask a man from Ihala Lelwala where he comes from he will tell you that he comes from either Kokawala, Panwila, Bera-wagoda, Hindapathdeniya, Kumbula-malahena or Radagoda all of which are clusters of houses on various *godas* within the broad area of Ihala Lelwala Grama Sevaka Division. Roughly, about 5 identifiable villages make up 1 Grama Sevaka Division. So we will arbitrarily define a 'village level officer' as an official who works at the level which is commonly referred to in government terminology as the village, i.e. officials like Grama Sevakas, K.V.S.S. Midwives, Overseers of the Land Development Department, etc.

There is also the question of who is an officer? Are they only those who are paid salaries out of monies provided in the Budget and who fall under the general definition of "State Officers"? Are we to include all those persons who hold office, whether paid or honorary, and are entrusted with duties, and responsibilities under some Ordinance or Government circular.

It is possible to distinguish between:

- (a) the bureaucracy proper who are appointed and paid by Government;
- (b) persons like Co-operative Store Managers, Directors of Co-operative Boards, officials of Janavasas, Chairman and members of Cultivation Committees and Agricultural Productivity Committees, V.C. Chairmen and Ward Members;
- (c) people who hold honorary positions in voluntary organizations such as the Rural Development Societies, Death Donation Societies, Thrift and Credit Societies, Sasana Arakshaka Mandalayas, etc.

There is also a category of persons who would not fall into any of the categories listed above but who possess power and influence particularly as opinion creators such as the village priest, the ayurvedic physician and the retired school teacher, the Registrar of Marriages, Births and Deaths and perhaps the young Sarvodaya worker.

The word officer is here defined broadly to include almost all of the categories referred to above. Office, therefore, would not relate to holding letters of appointment or being paid salaries from the state, but would include any position which is identified in the public mind as possessing specific powers, duties and responsibilities which have been laid down or acknowledged by the state.

There is general agreement today that one of the aspects of the village which has undergone rapid social change is the area of its power structure. The old pattern of authority in the village has broken down and positions of power derived by birth have given place to positions of power based on merit and achievement. The

reasons appear to be the spread of literacy and education, the dissemination of egalitarian attitudes and the political awareness of village people.

The picture of the official as a patriarchal father figure has given way to that of a more efficient and accessible functionary appointed through the process of a competitive examination. In recent times, an added dimension has been introduced of political loyalty. This is a key qualification and appointments of village level officials are invariably done after consultation with the local Political Authorities. In the case of non paid 'officers' it is now the accepted procedure that these persons would be appointed by Executive Authority rather than by a process of election.

The traditional village leaders came generally from those in the upper strata of village society like the school teacher, the ayurvedic physician, the monk of the Raja Maha Vihara, the village mudalali and from the official world of the Village Headman. Recent changes in village society have resulted in the erosion of the power and influence of these personalities and new leaders are rising. It is our purpose to identify these new leaders and examine their utility as agencies for the introduction of socially desirable ideas. What would be the likely characteristics of a village leader, would be one of the pertinent questions we should address our minds to. Some of the more obvious qualities would be that he should be from the locality, and he should have kinsman in the area. He need not necessarily belong to the propertied group and it might be a barrier if he did. Above all he would be young, and would also certainly have to be backed by the Political Authority. A local leader derives much of his authority by his knowledge of, and accessibility to other important leaders, and certainly it would be true to say that no person at village level who does not have the blessings and backing of the Member of Parliament of the Government Party could be an effective local leader.

Since the classic case of the village level officer is the Grama Sevaka we can do no better than examine his post and role in some detail.

The Village Headman the fore-runner of the present Grama Sevaka would have had his counterpart from the time that orderly civil administration was first introduced in the country, by the Sinhalese kings. The Village Headman of colonial times combined a large number of functions and was the principal government authority in the area. Nothing, in fact, could be done without his knowledge and he was supposed to be capable through his power and influence of getting anything done in the village. The procedures of

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choosing a Village Headman would supply some clues as to the kind of role he was eventually expected to play. In colonial times the G.A. advertised vacancies, interviewed candidates and based his recommendations on the social standing, position and wealth of the candidates.

The very criteria for selection tried to ensure that a person who was already exercising a fair amount of influence in the village would be given the office of Headman. This meant that in addition to the personal and social characteristics which he possessed he would now be formally invested with legal powers of a very wide and comprehensive nature and would therefore be fully equipped to deal with the situations which he would have to face as the chief government functionary in the area.

In 1963, the Headman system was abolished for a variety of reasons. Primarily it was held that it perpetuated a stratification of village society that was considered obnoxious in the light of the egalitarian and progressive measures that government was introducing and that the system helped the entrenchment of privilege and social oppression by the wealthier classes.

It was said that it had opened the way for great corruption at the village level. In its place was introduced the Grama Sevaka system and the new term itself gave an indication of the value which the State and society in general were to expect from this position. Instead of the Headman there was to be a "servant of the village". His appointment was to be by competitive examination while the Headman's had been chiefly by interview. While good behaviour and character was a necessary condition, respectability of family and tradition of Government Service were not regarded as important. Since he was chosen by objective criteria and appointed in an impersonal way, it was held that the corruption which came out of association with locally vested interest groups would not arise in his case.

In 1971, the Competitive Examination for entry to the Grama Sevaka Service was done away with and recruitment for vacancies was done on the basis of a candidate's rating on his educational qualifications already achieved, plus his showing at an interview. The points to be taken into consideration at the interview were appearance, personality, qualities of leadership, character and intelligence as well as his knowledge of local conditions generally. One important change that has been introduced is that the Member of Parliament is now consulted by the G.A. before the vacancy is filled so that a person whose loyalties are beyond reproach, and who can be relied upon to implement government policies to the full, are chosen from the list of available persons. By therefore making certain that the Grama Sevaka has contact with the M.P. and enjoys his confidence the holder of the post acquired a power position that he would not have normally had if he had been merely another cog in the administrative machine. The Grama

Sevaka of today has to this extent recovered some of the status and power which the Village Headman of old would have carried with him as part of his hereditary apparatus.

In the area of the non-paid officials the recent institution which holds great promise for throwing up new leadership is the Agricultural Productivity Committee and its field level constituent the Cultivation Committee. It must be stated that the Agricultural Productivity Committee operating as it does at the area of the local authority cannot in fact be regarded as a village level institution.

It would really fall into the category of a divisional level body but since persons who serve in the A.P.C. would be prominent individuals in the village it would be helpful, I think, in an examination of new leadership patterns in rural areas to look into its composition too.

The A.P.C.C. were set up by the Agricultural Productivity Law No. 2 of 1972. The law gives power to the Minister to determine the area which shall have an Agricultural Productivity Committee. Generally, it would be true to say that each local authority area, particularly V.C. areas have A.P.C.C. The members of the A.P.C. are appointed by the Minister on the recommendation of the Member of Parliament within whose electorate the A.P.C. is located and consists of not more than 10 persons who represent the interests of persons engaged in agriculture. The Law specifies that even such other persons that the Minister may think necessary, could be appointed. The members hold office for three years but their appointment may be terminated if the Minister considers that any member is unsuited to continue to discharge his duties. One of the members is designated as Chairman and the other Vice Chairman by the Minister. The A.P.C.C. is generally charged with the duty of promotion, co-ordination and development of agriculture within its area of authority and is endowed with special powers to call for information from any persons having interests in any land and inspect deeds, documents, etc. relating to that land. During the period of their operation many A.P.C.C. have taken unto themselves the task of investigating land disputes and bringing

about amicable settlements. They thus constitute a body of considerable importance and power in the rural areas and a member of the A.P.C. both by virtue of the magnitude of his powers and the fact that he has the backing of both the Member of Parliament and the Minister can be regarded as commanding considerable influence in the area.

The institution at the village level concerned with agricultural operations is the Cultivation Committee whose present composition and functions are laid down in the Agricultural Lands Law No. 42 of 1973.

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The old Cultivation Committee which had been constituted under the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 has been replaced through the Act of 1973 by a Cultivation Committee which is appointed by the Minister on the recommendation of the Member of Parliament. A Cultivation Committee generally covers the area of the ward of a local authority. The term of office of the members of the Cultivation Committee are three years and the Cultivation Committee usually consist of not less than 10 persons to represent the interests of persons engaged in agriculture. The member's appointment could be terminated by the Minister if he is unsuited for his job. In the performance of its functions, the Cultivation Committee is subject to the control and direction of the Agricultural Productivity Committee within whose area it lies. An important difference vis-a-vis the former Cultivation Committees in regard to the extent of powers, is the fact that the new Cultivation Committees deal with *all* agricultural lands including crops grown in highlands. The former Cultivation Committees dealt only with paddy lands. As a result, members of Cultivation Committees today have power over more

persons than was the case earlier. Almost all villagers own agricultural land of some kind or other and the local Cultivation Committee member can potentially be a very influential person.

The Land Reform Law which brought about sweeping changes in ownership patterns did not disturb the village power structure in the manner it might have done had the land owners been of and resident in the village itself. Generally in the low-country wet-zone, those land owners who found themselves dispossessed of large extents of land as a result of the Land Reform Law were absentee landlords and their power and influence in the village was generally marginal. Very often their influence did not extend beyond the ambit of the labour which worked for them on the estate. However, the psychological effect of land coming back to the people would have had a great impact on the values placed by village society on the accumulation of property.

Land Reform has, by the setting up of new institutions, the Janavasa, created the opportunity for capable workers on the plantations to rise to power positions within it. The influence they will exert on the village community would depend on the place which the plantation occupies in the economy of the village. In some cases, the Janavasa activities may dominate the entire socio-economic picture of the village community, while elsewhere its effects may be peripheral.

This picture of the place that officials occupy in village life would be incomplete without some mention of the roles which village level officers of other functional departments play in the community. These persons belong to departments like Agriculture, where the Agricultural Extension Officers (K.V.S.) provide extension services to farmers; the Agrarian Services Department where the Food Production Overseers attend to matters connected with the Paddy Lands Act; the Land Commissioner's Department where the overseer attends to the needs of allottees of crown land, and officials like the Co-operative Inspector and Marketing Officer who make regular contacts by periodic inspections and visits.

Special mention must be made of the Rural Development Officer of the Rural Development Department who, though not a village level officer strictly, works closely with the Rural Development Society which is an important body in the village community. The R.D.O. works under the personal supervision of the D.R.O. His range is the D.R.O.'s division and his chief contact is with the Rural Development Societies within the division. He works with the R.D.S. in the village in three main areas:—

- (a) Construction works which the R.D.S. may take up on the basis of the 75% government subsidy. These works could include road works, culverts, community wells and multi-purpose buildings. 75% of the value of the work is paid up in instalments as work progresses the rest being self help labour contributed by the R.D.S. members.
- (b) Shramadana activities where the R.D.O. would assist the R.D.S. in organizing the shramadana.
- (c) Work in the special villages selected for intensive and co-ordinated development—these selected villages would have very active R.D.S.s, and a hand picked officer, a village youth called Samaja Sevaka/Sevika who would be paid an allowance by the Rural Development Department.

There are also specialist officers who come to the village as and when the need arises like the Anti Malaria and Filaria spraying teams, Soil Conservation Officers, Tea, Coconut or Rubber Extension Officers who make a greater or less impact on the village depending on their personal characteristics and interests. The Health Department officials like the Apothecary (A.M.P.) and the Public Health Midwife are often required, and their opinions carry weight, in the village while a school teacher of the Primary or Secondary Vidyalaya is also a person of considerable influence. He has the opportunity of going directly into the home via his pupils or through the Parent/Teacher Association. The fact that a large

number of government officials do operate in specific fields on a functional basis within the village has eroded to a great extent the monopolistic position of authority which the former Village Headman enjoyed. The Grama Sevaka is no more the focal point of formal government authority in the village. With functional departments at the centre delegating duties directly to their specialist staff at village level, the Grama Sevaka has been by-passed and to that extent his former power has been reduced.

The problem here is of course whether the villager himself will have any reservations about the power position held by an official if that power derives from a political source which in his mind may be temporary.

There are a large number of voluntary organisations which exist at the village level. The most important of these are the Rural Development Society, the Cultivation Committee, the local branch of the Primary M.P.C.S. and the Village Council. As a result of recent reforms these organisations have become more viable economically and politically stable.

Their powers have increased and enjoying as they do the fullest confidence of the Member of Parliament, the holders of office in these institutions now command real influence and standing in the community. The Village Council whose functions have become increasingly regulatory, owing to the competition that other functional departments gave it, cannot strictly in fact be termed a village level institution. They more closely resemble the second tier of divisional level agencies, but the ward member, who again represents more than one village, can be a person of some consequence.

One other institution that was recently established, the Divisional Development Council, deserves some mention.

As the name itself implies it is a body at the second tier or divisional level but the projects which it initiates are located in village areas. These projects are usually managed by Development Assistants, young graduates attached to the Ministry of Planning. Depending on the size of the project, the number of persons it employs, its importance to the economic well-being of the community, and the personality of the Development Assistant, those posts are capable of wielding considerable power.

It would appear therefore that there are a great many positions in the village community, both among officials and non officials from which leadership could emerge.

It has been said that the growing politicalization of the official enables "value congruence" and that thereby the attitudes and values of the officials coincide with that of the politician. The problem here is of course whether the villager himself will have any reservations about the power position held by an official if that power derives from a political source which in his mind may be temporary. 'Would these leaders be regarded only as temporary leaders to be followed for material benefits alone? How good would such leaders be in influencing persons towards change in more basic and fundamental issues?'

The other general conclusion that can be drawn is that among the ranks of village level officials there is no hierarchial rating and that all stand equal in their areas of activity. Perhaps one response to this situation may be to treat all holders of office as leaders and to hope that each patron will, in turn, influence his particular client audience.

In suggesting a strategy of communication at the village level, this approach would seem safer than leaving out of reckoning any of the potential leaders mentioned above. Students of village society who have examined the divisions and splintering of groups in the society, have implied that opposition to an issue sometimes rises only because a particular group feels left out or ignored and because its support has not been asked for in the first instance.