

LEADERS IN CHANGING RURAL SRI LANKA — A TYPOLOGY *

BY

U. L. JAYANTHA PERERA

Agrarian Research and Training Institute

ABSTRACT

This paper suggests a typology of leaders—traditional, elected and politically appointed—to facilitate the study of changing patterns of rural leadership in Sri Lanka. It is argued that changes in the sources of rural leadership during the last half century were mainly an outcome of the expansion of state activities into rural areas and its concomitant process of politicisation of rural communities.

INTRODUCTION

The study of leadership in small communities is often concerned with the identification of leaders, relations between leaders and non-leaders, and with the ways in which power is distributed between these two categories. Leaders are those who exercise power or influence in social collectivities; in other words, they 'make things happen' through others. Thus, a leader of a community plays several roles—he may coordinate, control, direct, guide or mobilise the efforts of others. Quite often, a leader is considered to be a person who can clearly be distinguished from others in terms of power, status and a number of personality traits such as courage, honesty and intelligence. This approach is dominant in studies of rural leadership in Sri Lanka which tend to focus attention on the socio-economic characteristics of leaders and their role in promoting the well-being of those whom they lead (Goonearatne *et al.* 1974; Robinson 1975; Weerakoon 1976; Krause and Perera 1977; Lebbe *et al.* 1977; Wanigaratne 1977; Narayanasamy *et al.* 1977; and Uphoff 1979).

In this paper I shall discuss a different aspect of leadership. By examining the recent political history of Sri Lanka I shall bring attention to bear upon the changing bases of rural leadership. My contention is that during the last three decades, traditional leadership in Sri Lanka, which is characterised by ascriptive and generalised authority, has changed into one which de-emphasises ascription, stresses achievement and merit, and encompasses a more precisely defined range of activities. I shall also argue that changes in the bases of rural leadership are mainly an outcome of the changes in the wider society, i.e. the rapid expansion of state activities into rural areas and a concomitant process of politicisation of rural communities. This paper comprises three sections: an attempt to define the concept of 'leader' in the context of rural Sri Lanka, a typology of rural leadership and conclusions.

Leaders in Rural Sri Lanka—A Definition

Leadership connotes politics, that is, how power and influence are distributed in public life. In any community, two categories of people can be identified—leaders (those who wield power) and non-leaders (those who do not wield power). Sources

* I thank P. J. Gunawardena, Jacob Black-Michaud, and Ariyapala Siriwardena for their valuable comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

of power are numerous and tend to change with time. For example, in traditional Sri Lankan village, land ownership was the main source of power. During the last half century government activities penetrated rural areas rapidly. In this process the need for 'qualified' leaders who could handle various development and bureaucratic activities also increased. Education and acquired skills were more emphasised than caste, family links and land ownership in selecting such leaders. This has brought the hitherto powerless to compete for leadership provided they possess suitable qualification.

In the study of leadership in rural Sri Lanka, the most difficult question is 'who is a leader'. For many students of leadership in rural Sri Lanka, all the government officials who work at village level and office bearers of both statutory and informal rural organisations are rural leaders. Weerakoon (1976) for example, uses the term 'officers' to mean leaders. He lists four categories of 'officers' (leaders) in rural Sri Lanka:

- (a) the bureaucracy proper whose members are appointed and paid by the state;
- (b) the office bearers of various rural organisations—the Cultivation Committees, the Village Council and the Cooperative Societies. They do not receive salaries from the state, but hold office in organisations set up as a result of Ordinances and Acts of Parliament;
- (c) Persons who hold honorary positions in voluntary organisations which are set up under the patronage and, in some instances, under direct control of government departments such as Rural Development Societies, Funeral Aid and Temple Societies; and
- (d) other persons of influence such as the Buddhist Priest, ayurvedic (indigenous) physician and retired school teachers (Weerakoon, 1976:11).

In this approach to identify rural leaders, an important aspect, namely, the relationship between leaders and non-leaders is omitted. This relationship can be posed as the question of legitimacy: how far do the latter accept the former as 'legitimate' leaders? In other words, what sort of social approval and confidence do the followers bestow upon their leaders? This question does not arise in traditional agrarian communities "where the superior in one sphere of life is the superior in all...the dominance of man over man tends to most complete" (Dore, 1975:11). For example, in traditional Sri Lanka, the Village Headman and the Village Irrigation Headman were hereditary leaders. They were of highest caste status and were the biggest landlords in their villages. They in addition controlled different routes of access to the outside world (Robinson 1975; Perera 1981).

With the process of political modernisation, particularistic criteria of legitimacy of leaders, e.g. land ownership and high social status, tend to give way to the universalistic criteria such as academic qualifications and other acquired abilities. But the former erodes very slowly compared with the advancement of the latter. Thus these two sets of criteria exist side by side in a given community and may clash with each other. Robinson (1975) vividly describes this conflict between the professed universalistic values of the state and bureaucracy and the traditional values and sentiments in a Sri Lankan village.

In 1963, the colonial hereditary post of Village Headman was abolished by the state and a new post called *Grama Sevake* (village servant) was established in its place. The *Grama Sevake* has better defined powers and duties than his predecessor and is selected through a competitive examination. However, *Grama Sevake* has never been regarded by the villagers as their leader, nor does he wish them to consider him so. Quite often he is an outsider in the village and is liable to be transferred. Property, high social standing in the village and experience in village administration were not considered in his selection, as was the case for the Village Headman. Thus from the villagers' viewpoint, the *Grama Sevake* could not represent the village to the outside world the way in which the Village Headman did in the past.

But this uncertainty over the status of the *Grama Sevake* was a temporary phenomenon. In 1971, the competitive examination held to select the *Grama Sevake* was abolished. Government Agents¹ were empowered to select suitable candidates for the posts mainly on the strength of an interview. The interview was supplemented by an official requirement for the candidate to produce a certificate from the Member of Parliament (MP) of the electorate, in which the candidate lived certifying his suitability for appointment as a *Grama Sevake*. "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 if chosen..." (Weerakoon 1976:14). The MP's choice of *Grama Sevake* was not influenced by the factors that influenced the Government Agent in selecting the Village Headman. The MP is concerned about the ability of the candidate as an organiser of voters loyal to him and as a supporter of his action in the area. As the government became the largest employer and the universal dispenser of various benefits, such recruiting criteria of leaders became acceptable to the villagers as they had to depend on such new leaders to obtain some state benefits for themselves. Thus the *Grama Sevake* gained the confidence and approval of the villagers as a leader which "the Village Headman of old would have carried with him as part of his hereditary apparatus" (Weerakoon 1976:15).

A Typology of Rural Leaders in Sri Lanka

In post-independent rural Sri Lanka, it is possible to identify three successive periods, each of which is characterised by a distinct type of leadership. The first is the period before the 1956 general elections, the second is between the 1956 and the 1970 general elections and the third starts after those of 1970.

The first period was characterised by the traditional leaders whose higher social status and family links and ownership of land allowed them to exercise power over others. In the second period, the leaders of the villages were the rural intelligentsia, office bearers of rural organisations, vernacular school teachers, Buddhist monks and indigenous physicians. The third period is dominated by those who maintain links with national politicians and act as the agents of those politicians at the village level.

In formulating this typology more emphasis is placed on the differences between the three categories than on their common denominators. Such commonalities might to some extent permit the regrouping of all three categories into one. For

1 The chief administrative officer in charge of a district.

example, it could well be argued that high caste land owners as a class have remained dominant despite the ebb and flow of various changes during the last three decades. But such an analysis would ignore the main trends of social change in rural Sri Lanka. Moreover, it would not help to understand the varying emphases successive governments have placed on different sources of leadership, in recruiting leaders to oversee and direct rural development programmes. The merit of this typology is that it helps to identify several types of rural leadership which seem to be applicable to a variety of situations, thus allowing to generalise.

Type I Leaders

Type I leaders were landlords who occupied the top position in the traditional status system and held important offices such as that of Village Headman or Village Irrigation Headman. Generally, within a traditional village the same individuals occupied positions more or less of similar rank in the economic, social and political stratification systems. Thus, the bulk of the tenants and labourers were economically subject to the domination of a small group of their better off landlord neighbours. Landlords' domination often extended to the social and political fields as well. They had several things in their favour: experience in administrative affairs which assured confidence in the exercise of authority in the village; generally they were better educated and better off than others. Traditional attitudes of loyalty and respect led others to accept landlords' leadership as right and proper. The range of social connections they had outside the village tended also to be greater through contacts and marriage alliances.

This group effectively controlled the few offices in the village—Village Headman, Village Irrigation Headman, and chief lay incumbent of the temple. Such posts were not salaried but honorary. Those who held these posts derived their authority and honour both from the traditional status system and the powers they received from the state. As long as they kept good relations with higher officialdom at supra village level their positions were secure. Being of higher social standing and representatives of the state in rural areas, they often became very powerful in their villages. They could not be criticised openly as they had more resources with which to protect themselves when accused of bad conduct. Long histories of their families as the rulers of the villages enabled them to maintain such behaviour. The dependence of the higher officials upon them to do anything including the investigation of alleged misdemeanours perpetrated by the latter in the villages, placed them in a very secure and powerful position. Even if they were found guilty of an act of misconduct they had enough influence and prestige already accumulated to neutralise the guilt incurred.

Type II Leaders

The 1930s witnessed a rapid expansion of government activities in rural areas as a result of the devolution of legislative and executive powers on the local politicians elected on universal franchise. This was reflected in the establishment of new government departments as the functions coming within the ambit of the central government continued to grow. The gradual development of the administration, communications, the school system and new market networks from the 1930s onward, gave rise to a new elite group consisting of vernacular teachers, lower grade government officials, ayurvedic physicians and *mudalalis* (rural entrepreneurs). They

were mainly those who were successful in new economic pursuits, entrepreneurial skills and educational attainment. They were more ambitious and mobile than the Type I leaders and looked for their power positions beyond their native villages. But they were not recognised by the national level politicians as an important group who could take part in administration. Soon after independence, the Type I leaders became the core supporters of the ruling United National Party (UNP) and thereby the political leaders in their villages leaving the new elite weak in terms of power on the look out for an occasion to assert itself in national and village level politics.

In Ceylon, the leadership was English-speaking, often English educated, similar to the liberal nationalist leadership in India in the late nineteenth century. The second ranking, vernacular-speaking politician who played such an important part in the nationalist movement in India, ... did not emerge in Ceylon until the 1950s. In fact, not until the 1956 elections was the monopoly of the English-speaking, higher income classes broken in Ceylon (Weiner 1970:204).

The late S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, leader of Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), understood this antagonism between the land-based traditional elite and the new rural elite and exploited it to his political advantage. His political promises such as the revival of Sinhala as the official language led the latter to support him. The coalition headed by the SLFP defeated the UNP in the 1956 general elections.

The Sri Lanka Freedom Party, led by the late S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, successfully appealed to a developing Sinhalese-speaking, rural-based leadership. Some members of the Buddhist Sangha, or priesthood, teachers in Sinhalese Schools, Ayurvedic doctors, minor officials, shopkeepers, and in general, members of the lower middle classes rallied behind the Sri Lanka Freedom Party (Weiner 1970:204).

The year 1956 was a landmark in political history of Sri Lanka as it marked a popular reaction against the westernised upper middle class with which the UNP had come to be identified in the public mind. The SLFP victory expressed the triumph of the rural intelligensia who had suffered from a sense of deprivation and felt independence has brought little change for them (Leitan 1979). The victory of the SLFP enhanced villagers' interest in national politics in two ways. Firstly, it demonstrated that powerful governments could be toppled by the secret ballot. Secondly, it gave them a first taste of participation in the national political system (Farmer 1963).

The switch of general development policies from a near *laissez-faire* economic system to direct intervention in agricultural development under the new government increased state activity in rural areas and demonstrated to villagers that involvement in national politics could be a means of obtaining concrete benefits for themselves (Wilson 1975). Thus, post-1956 Sri Lanka witnessed the rapid integration of traditional village communities into the wider national political and administrative system.

The acceleration of state activity in rural areas after 1956 was combined with a policy of giving respectable status and more responsibilities in government machinery to the new rural elite. The most important avenue for providing them with responsibilities and power was the establishment of rural organisations and

political branches at the village level through which the government distributed various benefits. The government encouraged the rural intelligensia to contest for various positions in these organisations. The colonial village level offices such as the Village Headman and the Village Irrigation Headman were abolished. The Village Headman was replaced by the *Grama Sevake* selected on educational qualifications (see p. 3). The newly established Cultivation Committee took over the duties of the Village Irrigation Headman.

The 1950s and 1960s witnessed the gradual increase of the inflow of government benefits to the villages through various rural organisations. Resources coming through these organisations to the village provided office bearers with a new source of patronage: the latter were placed in charge of the distribution of benefits. The rural intelligensia was thus motivated to aspire to the higher positions in the rural organisations.

The area of operation of each rural organisation was demarcated to include several villages. This allowed in some instances the disadvantaged groups to elect their own candidates to rural organisations by using their numerical strength (see Perera 1981). The importance of numerical strength in the procedure of electing office bearers by secret ballot radically challenged the power of the Type I leadership.

Several other factors were also to the disadvantage of the Type I leaders. Fragmentation of land due to rapid population growth in the mid 20th century reduced the ability of landlords to continue as land-based patrons in villages. Furthermore, some of them sold out their land to educate their children. The enactment of the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 (Ceylon 1958) created a feeling among them that the government would be more sympathetic towards the tenants and labourers than to landlords in carrying out its development policies. The abolition of the Village Headman and the Village Irrigation Headman posts, through which the Type I leaders exhibited their power in administrative matters, crushed their hereditary claims for village leadership. The political rhetoric of the time such as the depiction of the post-1956 as the "era of common man" boosted the morale of the new rural elite who were supposed to assume a role of leadership in the countryside. This environment allowed members of the new power group to organise their followers against the UNP hierarchy at the national level and the pro-UNP traditional leaders at the village level.

Although the office bearers of new rural organisations enjoyed a measure of popular support, they were faced with several difficulties as village leaders. They lacked experience in rural administration and had difficulty in interpreting various complicated legislative enactments of the government which began to influence village level activities. For example, the complicated clauses of the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 under which the Cultivation Committee system was established were not easily comprehensible to most of the Committee members. In fact, a Sinhalese translation of the Act was not available until 1969. The persistence of traditional caste ideology which awarded higher status to *goigama* (farmers) people was also the source of major hindrance met with by the non-*goigama* office bearers who had come to occupy leadership positions mainly by sheer numerical strength during the elections. Type I leaders often completely withdrew from participation in the new organisations and, in several places, they attempted to sabotage activi-

ties. Both Gold (1977) and Perera (1981) reported how the ex-Village Irrigation Headmen persuaded farmers not to pay the 'acreage levy' stipulated in the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 by claiming that it was a new government tax.

Type III Leaders

The victory of the United Left Front (ULF) led by the SLFP in the 1970 general elections marked a new era of rural leadership in Sri Lanka. The post-1970 period was characterised by increasing party political intervention in rural organisations. A clear indication of this process was the preference given to the nominative principle over the elective principle in choosing office bearers for various rural organisations. The old Cultivation Committee system established under the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 was abolished in 1972. In its place a new system was established. Agricultural Productivity Committees were set up in each administrative division to organise farming activities. The office bearers of these organisations were nominated by the Member of Parliament of the electorate and appointed by the Minister of Agriculture and Lands (Sri Lanka 1973).

The link-up between party politics and the public service increased as the public sector became the largest employer in the island. The gradual articulation of the demands of electorates through the Members of Parliament for a share in state benefits increased the political control of the public administration.² The Member of Parliament became the intermediary between the state and the electorate which transformed his role into a universal dispenser of favours. This process of politicisation of public service altered radically the criteria by which the government decides who should receive its benefits, away from universalistic principles of need, merit, or developmental potential to particularistic criteria of factional loyalty.

In the early 1970s, the amount of state benefits distributed through rural organisations increased rapidly as the government decided to use such organisations as official channels for this purpose. This in turn increased the importance of such organisations and the powers of their office bearers. Villagers now had to develop close relations with village level political leaders in order to satisfy their need for fertilizer, agro-chemicals and agricultural equipments. In the early 1970s, access to employment opportunities in the public sector became fully politicised and this completed the ascendancy of political power over land-based power in the countryside.

This modification in the power base gave rise to a new type of leaders (Type III). The ability to deliver votes to higher level politicians and the amount of state benefits controlled at the village level have become the most important source of power and authority in the village. As new leaders are appointed by the politicians they are not responsible to their fellow villagers. Their power remains legitimate as long as their political patrons wish to keep them as their agents. By 1977, these new leaders had acquired their own autonomy and new levels of manipulative ability,

² The abortive insurrection of 1971 also hastened the politicisation of public administration. It provided the ruling political party with a legitimate excuse to scrutinise the political loyalties of all state employees as well as that of new job applicants. In rural areas, SLFP organisers not only screened the "undesirable" elements but also used this opportunity to harass their political and personal opponents (Perera 1981).

i. e. skills that are specific to the emerging political system. The characteristics of representative politics, e.g. the dependence of the Members of Parliament on their village political agents for winning elections made the latter very powerful in their own environment. The UNP government, which came into power in 1977, drastically reduced the number of rural organisations which overlapped with each other in functions, composition, jurisdiction and powers. These reforms have led to concentrating powers in the hands of those individuals who contributed significantly in the 1977 general elections to the victory of the UNP.

The new village leadership is deeply politicised. The leaders come from different socio-economic backgrounds. New leaders include the sons of old traditional land-based leaders, members of the new elite families, outsiders who moved into villages in recent times and showed their organisational abilities as solicitors of votes for the MP, and those who are known as interesting speakers or sometimes as hard core thugs who used to extort *kappan* (protection money) from traders in the bazaars. Their power in the village is temporary and unstable as they are vulnerable to national level political changes, to their rivals' intrigues and to their own colleagues' cut-throat competition for power.

CONCLUSIONS

The proliferation of special purpose rural organisations, each with its own leaders elected by secret ballot or appointed by the politicians, has destroyed the generalised authority of traditional leaders who constituted a narrowly defined group of people in their villages. The appointment of office bearers to rural organisations on party political lines, especially after 1971, has changed the character of rural leadership in Sri Lanka in several ways:

- (a) The increasing role of rural organisations at the village level and the intensification of political conflict between rival political groups have thrown up a new stratum of rural leaders. Their ability to gain nomination to offices rests more on their links with outside political leaders and on their role as purveyors of votes than on factors which made traditional leaders popular and accepted. This shows the rapid integration of the village into wider society.
- (b) Jurisdictions of rural organisations are often divisional (i.e. extend over a collection of several villages). This provides the leaders with wider reference groups and makes it easy for them to find excuses for not performing specific services for their own villages or granting favours to their friends and supporters—they have to look after a whole division, not a village.
- (c) The politically appointed leaders fall with defeat of the political party they support. Since independence, in every general election the ruling party has been defeated by the opposition. Instability of the base of power often encourages the leaders to gain maximum benefits for themselves from the organisations they control during the short period they are in office. The combination of unstable authority, scarce resources, circumvention of rules and a lack of sanctioned control often gives rise to corruption.

A cynical view of contemporary village leaders might be that they exploit village resources through their control over various administrative and political links the villages have with the outside world. Politics at the village level is at present a paying job. Office bearers of rural organisations can divert a proportion of the funds and grants of the organisations they control for their personal use. Discretionary powers in the distribution of such benefits allow some measure of freedom in getting those benefits to themselves. On the other hand, they have to distribute most of the benefits coming from outside among the villagers, especially among their followers, in order to obtain their support to win the next election. Furthermore, many of the benefits that come in the form of community facilities such as public wells, roads and weaving mills are to be distributed among the villagers, irrespective of the criteria used by the leaders in favouring some and harming others in such distribution. All such benefits ultimately add to the gross village income.

REFERENCES

- CEYLON (1958). *The Paddy Lands Act. No. 1*. Colombo: Ceylon Government Press.
- DORE, R.P. (1975). Land reform and Japan's economic development—a reactionary thesis. (In) SHANIN, T. (ed.). *Peasant and peasant societies*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, p. 377-388.
- FARMER, B. H. (1963). Politics in Ceylon. (In) ROSE, S. (ed.). *Politics in Southern Asia*. London: Macmillan & Co., p. 52-74.
- GOLD, Martin E. (1977). *Law and social change: a study of land reforms in Sri Lanka*. New York: Nellen, 252p.
- GOONERATNE, W. et al. (1974). *The role of cultivation committees in agricultural planning at village level*. Colombo: ARTI, 31p. (Occasional Publication No. 3).
- LEBBE, Ishak et al. (1977). *The role of local groups in rural development: Mawegama Village*. Colombo: ARTI, 40p. (Research study No. 22).
- LEITAN, G. R. Tressie (1979). *Local government and decentralised administration in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Lake House Investments, 279p.
- NARAYANASAMY, C. et al. (1977). *The role of rural organisations in rural development in Sri Lanka*. Colombo: ARTI, 71p. (Research Study No 19).
- KRAUSE, Georg and PERERA, Jayantha (1977). *The role of local groups in rural development: a case study of a village in the class II coconut area*. Colombo: ARTI, 33p. (Research Study No. 20).
- PERERA, U. L. J. (1981). *Social change and class relations in rural Sri Lanka*. Unpublished D. Phil. thesis, University of Sussex, U. K. 228 p.
- ROBINSON, Marguerite S. (1975). *Political structure in a changing village*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 376p.
- SRI LANKA (1973). *Agricultural Lands Law, No. 42 of 1973*. Colombo: Government Press.
- UPHOFF, Norman (1979). Assessing the possibilities for organized "development from below". *Ceylon Studies Seminar Series No. 5 (80)*. (mimeo).

- WANIGARATNE, R. D. (1977). *Family dominance in a village society: the Mahantegama village*. Colombo: ARTI, 27p. (Research Study No. 21).
- WEERAKOON, Bradman (1976). Village level officers and emergent new leaders. (In) *Village in transition*. Colombo: FPCSP, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, p.9-20.
- WEINER, Myron (1970). The politics of South Asia. (In) ALMOND, G. A. and COLEMAN, J. S. (ed.). *The politics of the developing areas*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 183-246.
- WILSON, A. Jeyaratnam (1975). *Electoral politics in an emergent state: the Ceylon general elections of May 1970*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 240 p.