

# INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND VALUES OF ORGANIZATIONAL MANAGEMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA

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## Abstract

Utilization of Indigenous Knowledge as a source of sustainable development has become an increasingly discussed topic in past couple of years. Among many areas of indigenous knowledge, the attention given to "Organizational Management" is considerably low, even though the concept of management is acknowledged around the world as a means of achieving efficiency and effectiveness with scarce resources. Despite the Universal acceptability of the concept of management on "What" to do, the distinction of practices based on unique circumstances of different socio cultural backgrounds or "How" to do is strongly recognized in the contemporary management field. Being a developing country, Sri Lanka also needs a closer attention on sustainability of its development investments. With a heritage of a strong culture and deeply rooted shared values, there will be a potential of utilizing indigenous values of organizational management in ensuring a sustainable rural development. Thus, the aim of this study is to do a deep investigation on indigenous values embedded in organizational management practices existed in ancient Sri Lanka, with special reference to the geographical area of Nuwarakalaviya. Method adopted in this study associates with comprehensive review of primary and secondary data with qualitative data analysis tools. Strong and unique set of shared values could be identified with regard to work management, authority discharge and resource deployment; the main elements considered under organizational management. With the findings, some implications are proposed as appropriate to consider in contemporary rural development efforts for assuring sustainability through managing organizations successfully.

**Keywords:** *Indigenous Knowledge, Organizational Management, Sustainable Development*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Utilization of Indigenous knowledge as a source of sustainable development has become an increasingly discussed topic during the last couple of years. Researchers and scholars have begun arguing that indigenous and local

knowledge should constitute the core of development models in the third world (Gegeo, 1998). According to Nazarpour and Sadighi (2011), the principle of sustainable development can be summarized so that development should be consistent with desired society from aspects of sustainable

environment, fair social aspect and from economic efficiency and cultural view point. Utilizing indigenous knowledge helps to increase the sustainability of development efforts because the indigenous knowledge integration process provides for mutual learning and adaptation, which in turn contributes to the empowerment of local communities (Gorjestani, 2011). As viewed by Karami and Moradi (2003), sustainable development would not be able to be success without identifying people's indigenous knowledge, role and its position and also without protecting knowledge and indigenous people's rights, because indigenous knowledge has most consistency with principle of sustainable development.

Sri Lanka has achieved considerable success in its development efforts. According to the UN Human Development Report 2012, the Sri Lankan economy maintained an average economic growth rate above 6 percent from 2003 to 2010. But the growth was, however, not uniform across the country.

Sri Lanka is country with a rich heritage of a well developed civilization which is evident in its recorded history that goes back more than 2500 years. Knowledge embedded in its indigenous practices and systems still play a considerable role in shaping the thinking patterns and behaviours of the people in local communities. Ulluwishewa (1997) suggests that the indigenous knowledge which had been accumulated over centuries has the potential value for sustainable development.

Although several Sri Lankan indigenous knowledge fields were touched by researchers in the recent past, the contribution of organizational management to in the ground seems insufficient. The concept of management is acknowledged around the world as a means of achieving efficiency and effectiveness by utilizing scarce resources. In the field of management also the uniqueness of preferred and appropriate applications of management concepts in different social cultural background has been recognized largely.

Since the native management practices are more familiar within the socio-cultural environment of the country, utilizing appropriate indigenous concepts will give us a reliable sustainability in successful management.

Thus, the aim of this study is to do an in-depth investigation on indigenous knowledge and values embedded in organizational management practices existed in ancient Sri Lanka, with special reference to the geographical area of Nuwarakalaviya.

Generally Nuwarakalaviya is known as the area within the triangle between Nuwarawewa, Kalawewa and Padaviyawewa; the giant water reservoirs in the dry zone of Sri Lanka. This area was one of the earliest Aryan settlements in Sri Lanka established in 3BC. The area is located in the dry zone of Sri Lanka, where most of the people were involved in agriculture. Evidences prove that even earlier, there were

regular structures, systems and mechanisms which governed the activities of the society as an organization. Still, the remains and shadows of the ancient traditional systems of managing organizations can be seen in rural areas of Nuwarakalaviya.

### **Concepts of Development and Sustainable Development**

Rist (2003) summarizes the essence of 'development' as the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations in order to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by means of market exchange, to effective demand. The UN report on Migration (2009) defines human development as "the expansion of people's freedoms to live their lives as they choose.

Sustainable Development is defined in the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report; 'Our Common Future', as meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs and adoption of a more ecologically sound lifestyle by affluent.

Further it mentions that sustainable development is not a fixed state of harmony, but rather a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development and institutional changes are made consistent with future as well as present needs.

According to the definition of World Business Council on Sustainable Development, sustainable development

involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic prosperity, environmental quality and social equity. Companies aiming for sustainability need to perform not against a single, financial bottom line but against the triple bottom line.

### **Development in Contemporary Sri Lanka**

According to the UN Human Development Report 2012, Sri Lanka is at present in a new phase of development, facing a different set of challenges, compared to several years ago, entering the league of middle income countries and is set to achieve nearly all the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

With economic growth, per capita income of Sri Lanka has been increased, reaching US \$2,400 in 2010 from US \$981 in 2003. A general improvement in living standards meant the number of people living below the official poverty line declined from 4.3 million in 2002 to 1.8 million in 2009-2010, a reduction of close to 58 percent.

Despite the results of many development attempts, all the Provinces of Sri Lanka other than Western Province contributed together only for a half of the sectoral GDPs of both services (48.9 percent) and industrial output (51.4 percent) approximately (UN Human Development Report 2012). Further the UN Report on Human Development comments that, development opportunities are skewed towards a few urban centers, resulting in migration to cities and poor living standards in several rural provinces where prevailing inequalities and disparities have adversely

impacted the growth potential as well as the equitable human development of all people living in the country. It is suggested that despite good national averages, sub-national disparities need urgent attention; overall improvements will partly depend on closing differences across regions and sectors.

### **Organizational Management for Development**

In any civilization, management is not a totally strange practice since everywhere different methods and techniques were practiced in order to handle the resources to get the required results. Planning, organizing, leading and controlling are accepted as the fundamental functions of management in the contemporary context.

A recent development of management thought; the systems theory specifies an organization as a collection of entities, for example, inputs, transformational process, outputs, feedback and the environment (Daft, 2009). It was followed by the contingency view of management where it is believed that every situation is unique and the best management practices can be formed only depending on the situation.

For any organization, management is essential for achieving efficiency and effectiveness in its operations. In development efforts synergies can be created through organizing people into institutions.

### **Utilizing Indigenous Knowledge in Development Efforts**

Because of the successful achievements acquired by the industrialized countries, many developing countries tend to use those concepts, which are alien to them, in applying management practices in their countries without considering the unique environmental conditions. According to Mariappanadar (2005) many developing countries choose to use these western practices of managing the human resource grossly disregarding the fundamental differences in socio cultural constraints, local conditions and circumstances. Kanungo and Jaegar (1993) argue that the uncritical adaptation of western HRM strategies is neither necessary nor desirable for managing organizations in developing and other countries.

Many countries have been experiencing successful results of exploring the root values, practices and principles of management. Japan was a pioneering country which formulates alternate management concepts and techniques based on their indigenous tacit knowledge. Management concepts like Kanban, 5S, Ringi and Nemawashi are largely popularized around the world, through the demonstration effect of their success (Gopinath, 2005). South Africa has developed a management philosophy called Ubuntu, which is derived from African culture, beliefs, values and behaviours. (Inyang, 2006).

In the light of above discussion, it is clear that utilization of home-grown strategies has the ability of producing better results in management of organizations.

Sri Lanka possesses the heritage of a great civilization. Though there are rich management practices in Sri Lankan indigenous systems, still modern management styles keep adherence to the concepts coming from the west and try to use them as they are.

This study focuses attention on discovering the indigenous organizational management practices existed in ancient Nuwarakalaviya with a view to identify appropriate practices to be developed in contemporary development efforts.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

In accordance with the findings of the literature review the main elements of organizing as a management function were considered in developing a basis for data collection. Accordingly a pilot study was carried out taking these three dimensions i.e. arrangement of work, execution of authority and allocation of resources, into consideration. Being well complied with the initial assumption the results of the pilot study proved that the indigenous organizational management practices could be identified on the same basic elements. Upon this ground the scope of data collection was decided considering those three dimensions; arrangement of work, execution of authority and allocation of resources.

The population for the study consisted of all the people in Nuwarakalaviya who are well aware of the indigenous practices and systems existed in ancient area of Nuwarakalaviya. Since it is impossible to interview the entire population in a single effort, 16 initial data collection points, representing the ancient Headmen Divisions were recognized as shown in annex 1. Accordingly data collection was started with an initial sample of 16 such persons each represented the ancient headman divisions under the reorganization of 1938 and sample was expanded with the use of snowball method, identifying more and more knowledgeable persons whenever possible and required. Data were gathered with regard to three identified dimensions from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data were collected from the final sample which consisted of 152 persons who represented the 16 Korals of the area, through informal interviews in a field survey. Books, journal articles, reports and unpublished records were used as sources of secondary data. Method adopted in this study to analyze data for capturing the findings and arriving into conclusions, associates with comprehensive review of collected data through categorization, coding and memoing.

## **3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

In the time period considered, the society was structured well and it had performed as the base institution for all operations. Both social and economic activities were organized within unique structural arrangements and tightly attached to the provisions of the structure.

## **Work Norms**

Arrangement of work could be identified under two basic aspects as performance of professional work and communal work. Professional work was directly related with the caste bound duties where communal work associates with agriculture, irrigation and other public services.

Performance of professional work in ancient Nuwarakalaviya was primarily based on caste system but supported by the traditional conventions voluntarily accepted by the members of the society. Every person in the society belonged to a particular caste where his social status, occupation, social interactions and duties were determined by the caste where villages were occupied by the members of a same caste. Villages belonged to different castes which were assigned for performing different occupational duties were clustered forming small self sufficient units headed by the Radala people or the superiors of the caste hierarchy. Every member of the community was assigned with a clear role in both social and economic activities. Due to strict boundaries of these occupational niches, the interdependence between groups was essential for the proper performance of work.

The base for work management mechanism in the ancient society of Nuwarakalaviya could be identified as a combination of strong shared values, well established structure, and the common resource pool associated with collective ownership. At the same time, even with the high power distance, owing to the considerable autonomy given to member

groups of the society, the independence experienced by these groups was also identified as high.

Accordingly, the features of work management system could be identified as division of labour and resulting specialization, task identity and significance, low variety of skill and task, less complexity and task interdependence. Mutual trust, Mutual benefits, Group thinking. Group performances, Collective responsibility & accountability and Obligatory performances were the significantly noticed values associated with the work arrangement.

## **Authority, Leadership and Supervision Imperatives**

During the time period considered, the area was regulated by two streams of authority; the formal government of the King and the informal control of petty chieftains. The governance of these petty chieftains was recognized by the King where only a nominal authority was held by the King's government. The regulating mechanism operated by the petty chieftains allowed the functioning of informal bodies of decision making with the participation of natural leaders. Variga sabha or Rata Sabha, Gam Sabha and the gatherings organized at special events could be identified as the main decision making bodies which regulated the behaviour of people in the respective community. Variga Sabha was a caste based organization where decisions were made with regard to the social matters within the boundary of a particular caste or a clan. Irrespective of the position a caste having in the social hierarchy, every caste had the permission to operate this kind of a decision making entity. Jurisdiction of Gam

Sabha covered the social and economic matters aroused within villages. Especially matters related with occupational performances, agriculture and irrigation were discussed and settled here.

In these bodies decisions were made in a participatory approach. The entire governance structure was based on a set of commonly agreed standards and values which made the functioning of all the decision making entities uniform. A high power and status distance was maintained between the castes positioned in different layers of the social hierarchy. But a considerable delegation of authority could be noticed where each group was given the opportunity to make their own decisions independently. This situation was identified as a ground for a balanced autonomy.

In the society as a whole, the leadership was commonly entrusted on higher caste people, subject to the control of petty chieftains who represent the same layer of the caste hierarchy and bear the office of formal government. In addition natural leaders in every caste and village had to perform a significant role in managing the social organization. Leaders and subordinates mutually trusted each other. Members expected a caring leadership style and the leaders were highly concerned and committed in facilitating and protecting their subordinates.

### **Resource Deployment**

Two major types of resources were identified in the ancient social organization of Nuwarakalaviya as Land and Water. Generally, both land and water were common resources. But in certain instances, there were lands called "Nindagam", owned by top superiors of the caste hierarchy. The

possession of these lands was given to the people belonged to different castes where in turn they compensated through provision of their profession services.

Although sufficient amount of lands were available for living and cultivation purposes, as a result of locating in the dry zone of the country the inhabitants of the area frequently faced shortages of lands with enough water. Therefore always the distribution of land was indivisibly attached with availability of water.

Since this area is located in the dry zone of the country water had become an important resource. It was preserved and managed carefully in order to get the maximum use. Small tank irrigation system was mainly based on the concept of cascades or "Ellanga" where a large area was irrigated by linking several small tanks through channels. A cascade of tanks is made up of 4 to 10 individual small tanks, with each tank having its own micro-catchment, but where all of the tanks are situated within a single meso-catchment basin (Panabokke, 2007). A network of individual cascades can be seen in the area. This system interlinks the village entities hydrologically as well as socio economically.

There were separate methods of dividing land for paddy cultivation and chena cultivation. The capacity area of the tank was allocated for the paddy cultivation. The total area was systematically divided into parts and distributed among the members of the village, based on traditional conventions. Chena cultivation was done by clearing the jungle. Allocation of land for Chena cultivation was also based on several concerns like security, mutual assistance and environmental friendliness, rather than title.

Such techniques assured the optimum utilization of land while preserving sustainability of related resources.

Since the resource allocation was primarily based on teams, people had collective ownership as well, a collective responsibility and accountability towards the common resource pool.

Figure 1 shows a summary of findings on indigenous practices of organizational management in work, authority and resource allocation.

### **Implications for sustainable development in Sri Lanka**

In Sri Lanka mainly the development programmes and projects are implemented by the government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally in most of the instances the participation of Community Based Organizations (CBOs) can be seen. Contribution and involvement of beneficiaries ensure the sustainability of acquired development status. Generally in all most all development efforts, an associated organization either formal or informal operates as a major stake holder, representing the community of beneficiaries. There is a potential of utilizing appropriate indigenous values in managing these organizations for achieving a sustainable rural development through community participation. Especially the rural development projects and programmes can incorporate such knowledge and values to their governance concerns.

Organizational management practices based on delegation of authority with balanced autonomy, collective ownership, responsibility and accountability

can be identified as appropriate strategies to consider in forming organizational structures and authority relationships of the organizational entities relevant to development activities. Recognition for informal groups and natural leaders, where participatory decision making taking place will be an effective way of assuring beneficiaries' support and community acceptance for such efforts. Developing mutual trust and benefits based on strong shared values will further ensure the sustainability of development outcomes, together with the other practices.

### **4. CONCLUSION**

Main purpose of this study was discovering and documenting the indigenous practices and values of organizational management, discussing their implications on current management of organizations in rural development efforts. Suitability of such traditional value based knowledge in ensuring sustainability was a profound concern in drawing implications through the findings.

Work, authority and resource allocation in the social organization of ancient Nuwarakalaviya were identified as the major components of organizational management, where distinctive conventions and shared values associated with the practices of organizational management could be identified as the base of management.

It is suggested that the potential ability of ensuring sustainability of rural development outcomes through appropriate applications of such tacit traditional knowledge and values should be further discussed and studied in Sri Lankan context.