

Indigenous practices of work management in ancient Sri Lanka (with special reference to Nuwarakalaviya)

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Abstract:

Concept of management is acknowledged around the world as a means of achieving effectiveness and efficiency with scarce resources. Despite the universal acceptability of the concept of management on "what" to do, the successful applicability of identical management practices is frequently questioned. The argument on practices of management which explain "how" to do is often supported by the distinctive socio-cultural backgrounds which prefer unique ways of doing things. As such, exploring indigenous knowledge to utilize the local wisdom in present systems has become an emerging interest around the world. With a heritage of great civilization full of rich principles and practices of management, Sri Lanka possesses unique practices of management in her indigenous work culture. Yet a considerable gap can be noticed in relation to the knowledge of Sri Lankan indigenous practices of management derived from ancient systems. Thus, the aim of this study was to do a deep investigation on indigenous aspects of work management in ancient Sri Lanka, with special reference to Nuwarakalaviya area, identifying the indigenous practices of work management system and discussing its outcomes in a management point of view. Method adopted in this study, associates with comprehensive review of primary and secondary data. Work management system of ancient Nuwarakalaviya could be identified as a combination of three interrelated constructs i.e. work environment, work culture and work content, featured with unique characteristics. Both positive and negative outcomes could be identified with regard to this mechanism in management point of view. Contemporary managers can seek possibilities of developing new strategies, incorporating this traditional tacit knowledge to utilize the human resource in Sri Lanka through work management practices.

Key words: Indigenous Management, Work Management, Sri Lanka

Introduction

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. But 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.

Tayeb¹ suggested that the "what" question in Human Resource Management (HRM) might be universal (e.g., employee selection), but the "how" question is culture-specific (e.g., relying on in-group networks vs. standardized tests). People in western industrialized countries have totally different cultures, life styles, working and thinking patterns compared to people in Asian countries. Sethi, Namiki and Swanson² argued that the effectiveness of any management style, particularly

one that is being considered for adoption in an alien environment, can be understood only within the cultural, socio-political and economic framework of the people who are managing or are being managed.

Accepting western solutions non critically to fill the void, often result in a crude reflection of the interests of owners, shareholders, or other vested interests and will not take a wider stakeholder view³. Kanungo and Jaegar⁴ argue that the non critical adaptation of western HRM strategies is neither necessary nor desirable for managing organizations in developing and other undeveloped countries.

Sri Lanka is a country with a heritage of a great civilization, full of rich principles and practices of management. Only some of these ancient concepts are alive at present, which has come into operation in the form of customs and rituals. Although there is a considerable possibility of utilizing this tacit knowledge to a great extent in the present organizations, it is used to tightly adhere to the concepts introduced by the outsiders.

Some important areas of Sri Lankan tacit knowledge, such as indigenous medicine, irrigation, architecture, arts and rituals, have been deeply explored by researchers. But it is very rare to find that kind of an investigation in relation to the field of management. Only a few studies have been conducted in Sri Lanka on indigenous management practices. 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.

This study is an effort of exploring the indigenous practices of work management in Nuwarakalaviya, in Anuradhapura district, and in analyzing the outcomes of these practices in a management point of view. Further, the study attempts to discuss the implications of such management practices in the present context.

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 work activities of the society. Still, the remains and shadows of the ancient traditional systems of managing work activities can be seen in rural areas of Nuwarakalaviya.

Materials and Methods

Since this is totally an exploratory type of research, a pilot study was carried out to identify the dimensions which explained the nature of work management practices in ancient society. Along with the findings, professional work and communal work were identified as the basic factors which covered the scope. Data were gathered with regard to these aspects from both primary and secondary sources. The population for the study can be referred to as all the people in Nuwarakalaviya who are well aware of the indigenous practices and systems. Since it is impossible to interview the entire population in a single effort, data collection was started from the areas which represented the ancient headman divisions under the reorganization of 1938.

Accordingly 16 initial data collection points, representing the ancient Headmen Divisions were recognized as shown in Figure 1 and sample was expanded with the use of snowball method, identifying more and more knowledgeable persons whenever possible and required. 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.

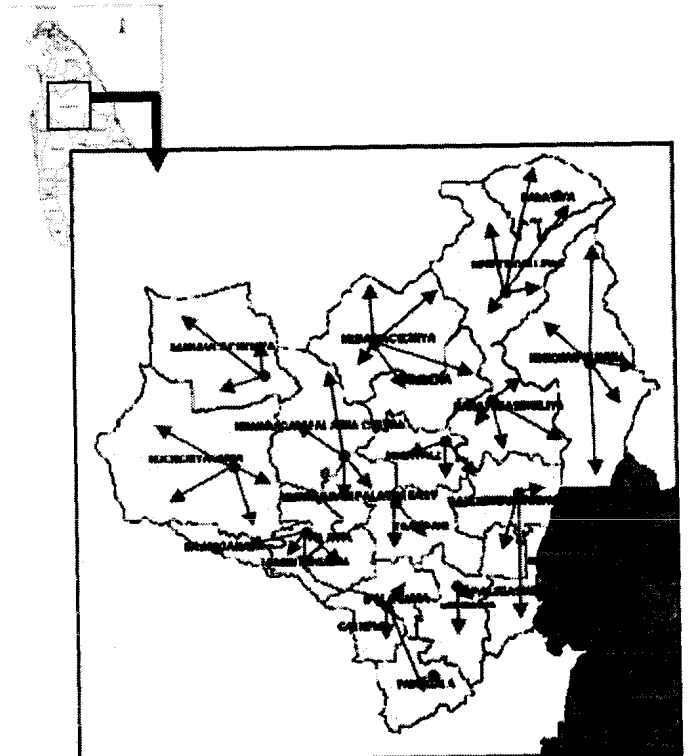


Figure 1. Map of Data Collection Paths and Initiating Points

The interviews were based on a set of guide lines which were focused to reveal the nature of work arrangements within the ancient context. Text books, articles, reports, research publications and unpublished records provided the secondary data for the study. Method adopted in this study to capture the findings and arrive into conclusions, associates with comprehensive review of collected data through categorization, coding and memoing. Three major categories developed considering the information on work arrangement that is being gathered as professional work and communal work. The context was mainly identified under system features, organizational characteristics and organizational culture.

Results and Discussion

The society of ancient Nuwarakalaviya

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.

The caste system was found as the basic statute which developed the systematic organization of the society. This system was strongly attached with the shared values of the society and voluntarily accepted by the members. Further it was recognized by the formal governing bodies that existed at the time.

In caste based system mechanism, the first and most important determinant of assigning and performing tasks, duties and responsibilities was the 'caste'. Different caste groups were responsible to perform functions with regard to particular occupations as assigned by the traditional system.

People performed caste bound duties where they shared and exchanged the outcomes produced by the different stake holders of the society. To assure the proper functioning of the entire society, the contribution of all the groups were needed. The work activities were managed in a way which utilized the human efforts and performances towards a self sufficient society.

Agriculture was a caste free occupation. A member of any caste could involve in agriculture in addition to the caste bound duty assigned to them. But a higher importance was given to the professional work because the required technical skills are not commonly available within the society.

In the area, generally, villages consisted of people belonging to one particular caste. Several villages occupied by different caste groups were located closely forming a cluster of villages. They fulfilled their economic and social requirements through interactions between the groups within the cluster. Number of such communities existed in the area which can be considered as mini states. In each of this mini state there were superiors and subordinating groups.

respective of the position held in the caste

hierarchy, every caste was given the opportunity to develop and operate their own controlling system, making independent decisions to solve the problems within the boundary of caste. But at the same time this autonomy was mediated by the common values of the overall system.

Practices of work management in ancient Nuwarakalaviya

Practices of work management that existed in ancient Nuwarakalaviya could be identified under two basic perspectives. The key foundation of arranging professional work activities of the society was the caste system. In addition there was a conventional system of managing communal work related to agriculture; the caste free occupation and irrigation.

Practices of Managing Professional Work Activities

In the caste based system, people were assigned to perform specific functions according to their castes. Every individual of the society had a definite identity of caste from birth, with a responsibility of performing a set of particular duties.

Table 1 summarizes the castes identified in the ancient society with the precise tasks, duties and responsibilities, associated with each.

The caste based system had produced occupational niches where there were strong limitations of access and transfer of information and involvement. These occupational niches practiced, sustained and developed the knowledge regarding their own professions and as a result a higher degree of specialization was achieved.

The noticeable factor was that no caste was dishonored on the basis of the relative position of the caste in social hierarchy. Each caste had a certain position in the social hierarchy with a definite identity where the role of every person and his state of affairs appeared within the boundaries of this identity. Also every person was very careful not to exceed the boundaries of social identity of each caste. In every action and movement they ensured that the due recognition was offered and conveyed. Although friendly and caring in nature, the closer personal interactions between families belonging to different castes laid between these frames of identity.

Table 1. Traditional castes and the assigned duties in Nuwarakalaviya area in Anuradhapura

Caste	Traditional duties assigned
Vanni/ Radala	Management of Nindagam lands, working as the officers of the government, involve in civil jurisdiction, handling grievances of the subordinates, facilitating the government officers, teaching and learning
Govigama/ Ratakorale	Cultivation, dairy farming, assisting the regional chieftains in administration, rendering services in security forces
Rada/ Rajaka/ Peedi	Laundry or cleaning service, decorating at the ceremonial events, assisting the administrators, representing ceremonial events as a figure head, providing cloths and dressing, performing rituals, collecting taxes
Hakuru/ Kanda/ Vahumpura	Carrying pingo, lighting the religious and customary events, blowing conch
Berawa/ Panikki	Drumming, entertainment
Dura	Construction and rehabilitation work of tanks, hunting, fishing and distilling toddy, assisting superiors in hard work, rendering services in security forces
Kumbal	Producing earthenware
Achiri/ Nawandanna Achiri	Performing the services of blacksmiths and goldsmiths Performing the services of blacksmiths
Badahela	Performing the services of goldsmiths, art works of painting and drawing, collecting and handing over Kottal badu
Rodee	Not assigned to perform any specific task

Both high and low caste people needed the support and assistance of each other. Most of the inferior caste people were experts in technical services which were essential for the proper performance of the village life. People of the upper strata of the social hierarchy were well contented with wealth and power. To carry out the routine life smoothly each caste needed the support and assistance of the others. The entire system consisted of elements which were interdependent on each other.

Those who received the traditional caste bound services had to remunerate the service providers in the form of money, goods or other privileges. Inferior caste people lived in Nindagam lands and received their benefits through the privilege of occupying the lands where as others received their benefits

in money or in kind. Therefore these relationships can be interpreted as mutually beneficial ones. Although the services were rewarded with money, materials and other privileges the system did not entirely depend on money. People had moral obligations to perform the duties assigned to them by the traditional system. The strength of the relationships between castes was decided by the obligatory nature of the duties performed by each party. Both parties to the relationship had an emotional bond to perform the assigned task to the benefit of the other party.

Practices of Managing Communal Work

In addition to the activities directly associated with a particular occupation, all the members of the village community were assigned the duties and

responsibilities of performing public services, with regard to agricultural and irrigation activities, where the entire system was based on allocation of lands and therefore can be called 'pangu system'. According to Karunananda⁵ a panguwa (share) is the ownership of an extent of two 'pelas' of mud-land. The effective member of the village community was the pangukaraya⁶. These members own cultivation lands which are irrigable within the village boundaries and they were responsible in performing a certain part of community work proportionately to the size of their land.

The ancient society that continued to be operated in this area was totally based on agriculture, where both paddy and chena cultivation were taking place at respective times. Some caste related duties were not full time and such occupations were not sufficient as means to earn an adequate living.

'Ande' is a system used in ancient Nuwarakalaviya to outsource the work of paddy cultivation. When a person is incapable of cultivating the whole land owned by him, may be due to lack of capacity or unavoidable circumstances, another with a sufficient availability of resources like time and energy will undertake the job of cultivating the land.

The maintenance of the tank was also the common responsibility of the village where the ideology that prompted all the members of the tank village to share the rights, duties and obligations of the village was the idea that the tank, the village and the jungle beyond it are the common property of people⁷. Traditionally much of the maintenance work on the tanks was carried out during the Rajakariya, the forty day period when every Sinhala villager was required to work free for the king.

Outcomes of indigenous work management practices

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. As such a considerable power distance had been created among the layers of the social structure, with a high group identity, where each group was recognized with its professional performances. 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. 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.

The above circumstances lead to a strong mutual trust and mutual benefits among the stake holders of the society. The performance of work was mainly based on group thinking with collective responsibility and accountability. Thus, in light of above facet, 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. Figure 2 summarizes the nature of work management practices in ancient Nuwarakalaviya.

Conclusion

In a broader sense, the work management system that existed in ancient Nuwarakalaviya could be identified as a mechanism that consisted of three strongly inter-related components; work environment, work culture and work content which consisted of professional and communal work. The work environment featured with, strong shared values, common resource pool with collective ownership, well established structure consisting of occupational niches, power distance, balanced autonomy, and group identity and role clarity. The prominent facets held by work culture which stemmed within this environment included mutual trust and benefits, group thinking and performances, collective responsibility and accountability and obligatory performances. Content of professional work could be identified as a result of division of labour, specialization, task identity, task significance, low skill/ task variety, less complexity and task interdependence where collective efforts, personal commitment and value to tradition created the design of communal work.

With the traditional knowledge of work management practices, managers can develop more appropriate strategies to match the personal value systems of members with organizational requirements in contemporary organizations. They can incorporate balanced autonomy, participatory decision making, mutual trust and cooperativeness into their organizational work management

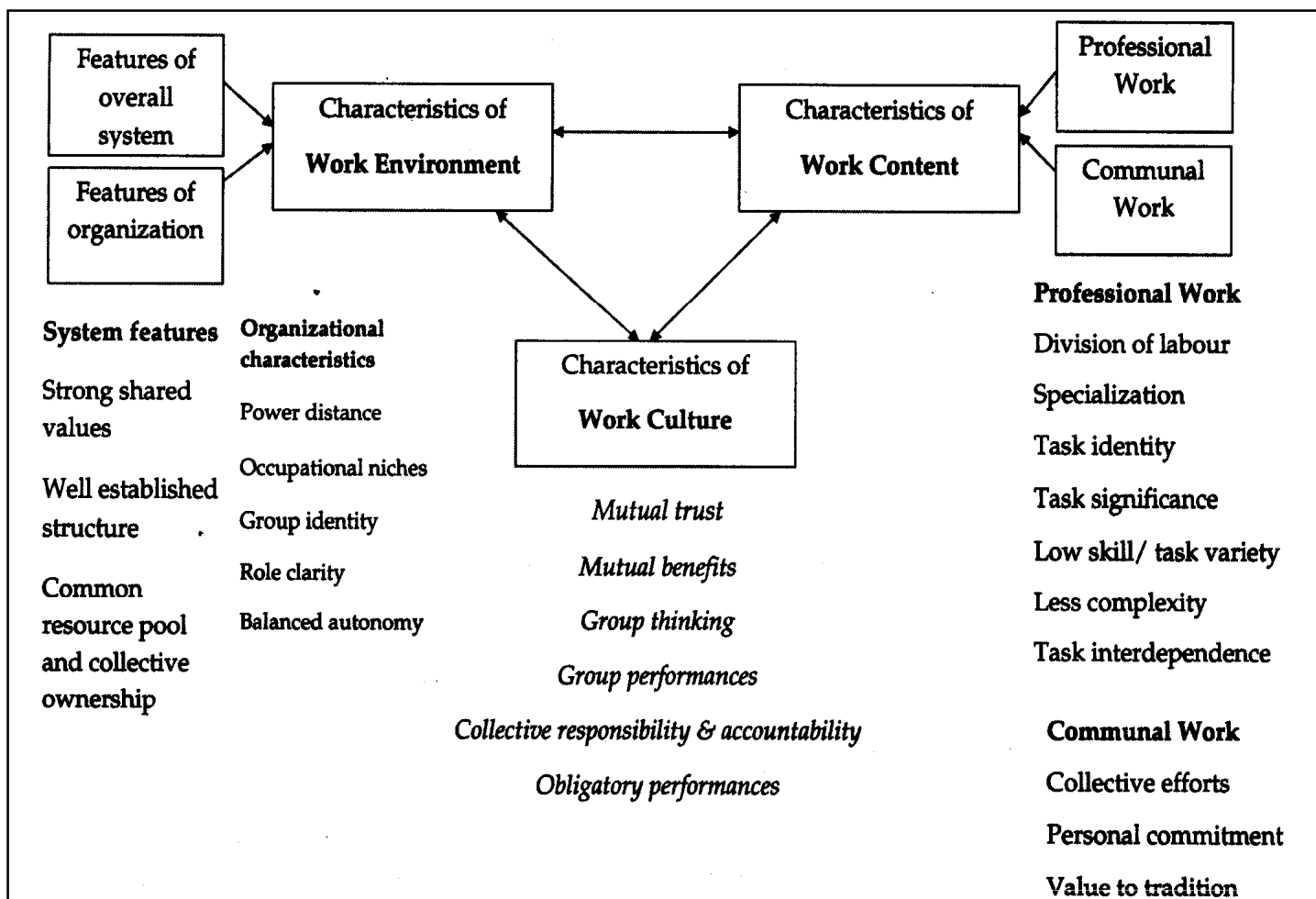


Figure 2: Summary of the nature of work management practices in ancient Nuwarakalaviya.

systems, establishing a strong set of shared values accordingly. Managers can consider the inherited talents of employees, utilizing the caste as a source of specialization instead of a ground for discrimination.

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