



“WE BUILD THE TANK AND THE TANK BUILDS US”: THE ROLE OF SHRAMADANA IN PARTICIPATORY IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT IN SRI LANKA

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The practice of shramadana is so widely defused in Sri Lanka nowadays that it is often used as a synonym for voluntary community action of any kind². Not many people realize that it is indeed the Sarvodaya Movement led by Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne that introduced this development practice in Sri Lanka. While he emulated “Shramadan campaigns” by Mahatma Gandhi and his followers in India, the specific contribution of Dr. Ariyaratne lied in adapting it to the Sri Lankan context building it on certain customary self-help mechanisms firmly rooted in rural Sri Lanka. While shramadana is a new practice its long-term continuity and effectiveness have a lot to do with its affinities with customary labour sharing practices in paddy cultivation and irrigation systems that sustained paddy cultivation for many centuries. Dr. Ariyaratne developed shramadana as a central component of the Sarvodaya development strategy and demonstrated its relevance and applicability in community development in a wide variety of settings in Sri Lanka. The continued popularity of Shramadana in rural as well as urban Sri Lanka within and outside the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, so named because of the central importance of shramadana as a hallmark of this social movement that began as a campaign for involving school children and youth from the capital city in voluntary service in disadvantaged communities in rural Sri Lanka, in spite of many changes in the country over the past five decades must be seen as a major tribute to the ingenuity, adaptability as well as cultural rootedness of ideas and practices introduced by this pioneer development worker.

As understood in the Sarvodaya Movement in essence sharmadana involves collective mobilization of voluntary labour of a varying number of committed individuals towards building or renovating a tank, road, a well, a community hall or any such facility beneficial to the whole of a segment of a community. “Shramadana” literally means “donation of labour” (shrama=labour, dana=giving, donation). Since “dana” (giving, donation) is a fundamental aspect of Buddhist moral code, participation in shramadana is understood not only as a communitarian act expressing one’s dedication towards collective goals and concerns but also a meritorious act. Through contribution of one’s own physical labour towards meeting a felt need in the community a person expresses one’s community spirit, fellowship and dedication towards achieving collective goals.

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As implied in the well known and highly evocative statement of Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne, “We build the tank and the tank builds us”, in the Sarvodaya Movement Shramadana is not just a means of mobilizing free labour for development of physical infrastructure but also a means of promoting community spirit and social harmony.

This paper seeks to trace the origin and development of shramadana in Sri Lanka, its continuity and, at the same time, discontinuity with traditional mutual help mechanisms in rural Sri Lanka and critically assess the significance of shramadana from the angles of participatory development in general and participatory irrigation management in particular.

THE ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SHRAMADANA

The campaigns by Gandhiji and its ideological heir the Sarvodaya movement of India organized “Shramadan” as a means of mobilizing voluntary labour for community service. Under the inspiration of Gandhian ideas and practices the Sarvodaya Movement of Sri Lanka, at its inception in 1958, took large groups of students from leading schools in Colombo and other cities to work side by side with local volunteers in “Shramadana Camps” organized in poor and depressed villages in remote areas. The shramadana approach quickly spread to other organizations and programmes because of its mass appeal, utility as a community based strategy for getting some public works done and association with the ideals of social harmony, dignity of labour, mutual help, self reliance and “sacrifice of time and energy for the benefit of the poor and underprivileged”.

The Sarvodaya’s role in introducing Shramadana in Sri Lanka is acknowledged in Dr. Ariyaratne’s writings.

“The Shramadana concept was introduced to this country by the Sarvodaya Shramadana workers of Sri Lanka with the above perspective of removing social and economic injustices, ensuring increased economic growth, freeing society of all forms of exploitation of man by man, establishing an equitable distribution system of goods and services, liberating the human being so that he may be able to participate in decision making as a person and a subject in such a development process in which he is the master and not the slave” (Ariyaratne 1980b: 42).

While admitting its pioneering role in diffusion of Shramadana in Sri Lanka, Sarvodaya clearly acknowledges that the practice is firmly grounded in local culture.

“The Sarvodaya concept and Shramadana action are a living philosophy and a concrete practical programme with which the people are already familiar by their cultural conditioning and traditional co-operative way of living” (Ariyaratne 1980b: 42).

“The most outstanding contribution that the Movement has made to the social development of Sri Lanka, in my opinion, is the re-introduction of the technique of Shramadana, or the mutual sharing of labour, which in the pre-colonial days was an essential aspect of the cooperative way of life of our people. The Movement built on this heritage when it organized camps throughout the rural areas, providing an opportunity for people to think, plan and work together, and then evaluate their efforts. In other words, Shramadana was not just a labour

camp, where a useful physical objective was to be achieved. It was a revolutionary technique, to awaken people to their own potential based on their own culture and innovative abilities” (Ariyaratne 1980a: 26-27).

Thus the Sarvodaya movement became synonymous with Shramadana in its formative period.

HOW FAR IS SHRAMADANA CULTURALLY GROUNDED?

As noted earlier, the Sarvodaya Movement argued that shramadana merely represents an extension of a co-operative cultural practice already well established in Sri Lanka. Dr. Ariyaratne expressed this view as follows:

“Paddy agriculture practised by the Sinhala people is an excellent example of the application of the concept of sharing.... Priority was given to the construction of tanks and irrigation systems.... All stages of paddy farming such as ploughing, sowing, weeding, manuring, harvesting and threshing were done on the principle of shared labour. This form of sharing of labour by all was called ‘samudan’ by the ancient Sinhala. ‘Samu’ means collection of people and Dana means sharing. Later it was called Kayya. In 1958 our movement introduced the word ‘Shramadana’.” (Ariyaratne 1980a: 52).

In order to understand its continuity with and distinction from preexisting cultural practices, we compare shramadana with four customary mechanisms whereby collective labour was routinely mobilized for various purposes, namely rajakariya, kayya, attam and nikam.

RAJAKARIYA

Under rajakariya (lit” service to the king”) each person was required to pay certain periodic dues and provide periodic service towards maintenance of state machinery, public works, including irrigation works, and religious institutions. This practice became highly elaborate during the Kandyan period (1500-1815), but following the overthrow of the Kandyan kingdom by the British rajakariya was gradually abolished as an instrument of the state. Some categories of peasants held land subject to fulfillment of rajakaruya services which typically took the form of fulfilling caste obligations. Other rajakariya duties such as participation in warfare, clearing of irrigation canals and road work were stipulated for all citizens for a fixed number of days assigned by the local officials (Pieris 1956). Rajakariya was by its very nature compulsory and obligatory. In contrast, one’s participation in shramadana is expected to be a purely voluntary activity. Unlike shramadana which is responsive to situational needs identified locally, rajakariya services were fixed and standardized, e.g. Five person days per year per family cultivating an acre of irrigated paddy land for renovating the bund of the local tank.

KAYYA

There was some variation in the practice of kayya in different regions of Sri Lanka. However, under the kayya system like in rajakariya the peasants typically provided free labour to a community. Kayya differed from rajakariya in that participation in kayya was voluntary rather compulsory and that the recipient of labour typically treated the workers with food and snacks. From the angle of the peasants the main objective of a kayya was to fulfill obligations to a community leader. The idea of mobilizing collective labour for the purpose of fulfilling a felt need in the whole community as in modern shramadana was foreign to the practice of kayya.

ATTAM

The reciprocal exchange of labour among peasants typically in various stages of rice cultivation is known as the attam system. Each unit of labour received from an attam partner must be reciprocated by the recipient or some one nominated by him within the same crop season typically in the same farming activity. When necessary the attam system enabled the peasants to recruit a work gang bigger than the one available within one's own household. Gunasinghe (1976) found that while the attam system operated on the basis of some social norms, economic calculations too influenced the choice of attam partners, their number and the farming activities in which attam labour was used.

NIKAM

In contrast to attam which involved a form of contractual reciprocity, donation of labour for the benefit of a kinsmen, neighbor or a friend specially at a time of distress like sickness, death or a natural calamity was called nikam (i.e. free of charge or obligation). As Robinson (1975) elaborated this form of non-reciprocal labour was based on social obligations towards known persons within one's own community. Under this system there was no immediate obligation of the part of the recipient of labour to reciprocate the help received from others. This was a social mechanism that enabled an odd family in distress in a community to carry out their subsistence activities in spite of any special hardship it encountered.

The shramadana system has some affinity with these traditional forms of labour mobilization in rural Sri Lanka. It builds on the notions of mutual help evident in nikam, attam and, to a lesser extent, kayya. It mobilizes gangs of rural labour for the maintenance and upgrading of public works somewhat in the style of rajakariya even though the element of compulsion and legal enforcement intrinsic to rajakariya is entirely foreign to the idea of shramadana. Shramadana is conceptualized as a "donation of labour" somewhat in the style of nikam even though in shramadana one's labour is 'donated' for fulfilling a collective goal rather than helping and persons or individuals in distress.

The practice of shramadana however differs from the traditional systems of labour mobilization in the following ways.

01. In shramadana collective labour is mobilized entirely on a voluntary basis. The practice of shramadana does not rest on either legal sanctions or any informal community sanctions against those not participating in a shramadana.
02. Shramadana labour is mobilized purely for the purpose of fulfilling a community need rather than a private need of any individuals. In this respect shramadana differs from kayya where the beneficiary is a respected community leader and nikam where the beneficiary may be someone in distress of some kind and, therefore, warrants help by others on sympathetic grounds.
03. In shramadana as will be elaborated later economic calculations like number of labour units needed for building a road of a certain length, for instance, or relative cost of building a road with light machinery as against use of manual labour is typically not done as a part of the project design.

In contrast, some of the traditional forms of mobilization of labour such as attam and even rajakariya were based on a clear conception of the number of labour units needed for accomplishing particular task.

In summary, while shramadana is guided mainly by a presumed cultural logic of selfless sacrifice of labour for the benefit of community as a whole and the poorer sections of the community in particular, the traditional cultural practices in labour mobilization involved a greater degree of economic calculation of labour time and of direct or indirect returns from labour.

SHRAMADANA AS A DEVELOPMENT TOOL

Here we discuss two instances where shramadana concept has been mobilized on a large scale in recent development activities in Sri Lanka. As noted earlier the Sarvodaya Movement not only introduced this form of labour mobilization in Sri Lanka but also played a leading role in popularizing it as a developmental practice. Second we will discuss the use of shramadana as a part of the Janasaviya programme conducted by the state from 1989 to 1994.

In the Sarvodaya Movement the normative, integrative and psychological functions of shramadana took precedence over any instrumental value attached to this form of labour mobilization.

“The literal meaning of the word Shramadana is sharing of one’s time, thought and energy for the **welfare of all**. For the founders of this Movement, Shramadana was only a medium of constructive action to bring about a **non-violent total revolution in man and society to build up a new social order.**” (emphasis added) (Ariyaratne 1980b: 41).

In the Sarvodaya approach to development a shramadana campaign was typically the first step in mobilizing people in a village. A shramadana was seen as the beginning of a process leading to an “awakening” of individuals for their duties and responsibilities vis-à-vis the society at large and the resultant community mobilization for development. Through a shramadana effective functional leadership in a village was identified and mobilized for rural development. It was expected that a correctly organized shramadana

would lead to further collective action and a lasting framework for self-help promotion and social development attuned to an indigenous cultural logic.

Sarvodaya Movement did not emphasize any economic rationale of mobilizing collective labour for infrastructural development in the countryside. Moreover, it was opposed to treating shramadana within a dominant economic logic.

“The effectiveness of Shramadana is bound to be lost if this form of action is used only as **a money saving process** to realize **a physical objective**. In the recent past more damage than good has been done in many areas by some people, who knowingly or unknowingly, equated Shramadana to **some form of free labour movement**. They desired to create **non-monetized capital** to compensate for the serious lack of capital needed for national development ... Shramadana to us has had a more profound meaning and significance. To us it is a positive force for the total liberation of man and society... The **bureaucratization of Shramadana**, we maintained, defeated the very object of founding the Shramadana Movement.” (emphasis added) (Ariyaratne 1980b: 41).

While the Sarvodaya’s approach to development had the effect of promoting cultural acceptance of shramadana integrating it with a harmonious model of social development, it lacked the pragmatism and economic rationality contained in most of the traditional methods of labour mobilization. On some special occasions it was not difficult to organize a shramadana based on the principle of **voluntary** gift of labour for **the welfare of all**, but such a principle could not provide the basis for a lasting arrangement for mobilization of sufficient labour for construction and routine maintenance of any infrastructural facilities. While interpersonal obligations of a contractual nature and a direct return for every labour unit offered to another party were involved in attam partnerships, in shramadana labour was realized in the form of an unquantified and abundant supply of free labour operating outside the market logic. Once labour was understood as a highest form of gift to be evaluated on the basis of its cultural worth and dedication towards collective goals, the economic value of labour in terms of its efficiency, productive capacity and output was likely to take a lesser significance. On the whole while the Sarvodaya’s conception of shramadana made good cultural sense it did not always make good economic sense in so far as it rested on a principle of voluntary gift of labour for the welfare of all. Despite Sarvodaya’s long-standing involvement in shramadana it is not possible to evaluate its contribution to permanent improvement in rural infrastructure and the productivity of shramadana labour vis-à-vis any alternative forms of labour mobilization.

Even though shramadana may not be the most efficient form of labour mobilization for all types of community needs, it may be argued that it involves a high level of community participation and promotes self reliance in the development process. One of Sarvodaya’s major contributions towards social mobilization has been the active participation of large numbers of men and women in grass root level development activities and the training of a new generation of community leaders who are committed to the goals of participatory development. While in its early stage Sarvodaya relied heavily on the voluntary labour of school children and other motivated individuals from urban centers in projects conducted in the so-called depressed villages in remote parts of Sri Lanka using a somewhat paternalistic model of gift of labour form outside (shramadana “camps”) as a catalyst for mobilizing the poor and underprivileged in rural

communities, a more community- based approach to shramadana using a higher proportion of local volunteers evolved later. The widespread diffusion of shramadana to other organizations and programmes itself may be seen as a triumph of the participatory approach and an index of viability and sustainability of this technique outside the ideological parameters set by the Sarvodaya Movement.

The free labour mobilized under the Janasaviya programme in the name of shramadana was more compulsory rather than voluntary. The recipients of Janasaviya (consumption aid of the state accompanied by some help towards development of income earning activities) were required to provide a fixed quantity of free labour towards fulfillment of collectively identified urgent infrastructural needs such as rehabilitation of a local irrigation tank or improving road access to a remote part of the village (Mendis 1992). The voluntarism typically associated with Sarvodaya style shramadana activity was entirely absent in the Janasaviya programme. On the other hand the Janasaviya programme involved a fixed commitment of labour on the part of the beneficiaries of the programme somewhat in the style of rajakariya. While the Janasaviya programme recognized the economic value of labour more directly than the Sarvodaya programme, any state compulsion for provision of communal labour was likely to undermine self-help participatory principles contained in shramadana and its long-term viability as a spontaneous community response towards fulfilling urgent felt needs in the community.

SHRAMADANA AND PARTICIPATORY IRRIGATION MANAGEMENT

From the angle of participatory irrigation management, shramadana is useful for mobilizing voluntary labour for occasional repairs in village level irrigation tanks and related canal systems. Sarvodaya movement and many other grass root level development programmes have effectively utilized the shramadana strategy for renovating abandoned or neglected ancient irrigation works in remote dry zone and intermediate zone areas in Sri Lanka. Shramadana is also employed from time to time for clearing of canals in major irrigation systems such as Mahaweli and Gal Oya schemes. Given the economic as well as cultural and symbolic significance of irrigation tanks as collectively owned community resources in arid regions in Sri Lanka, mobilization of voluntary labour for this purpose has not been so difficult. However, it is different from customary rajakariya labour in that the obligation is neither enforced by the state nor proportional to the benefits derived by the workers from the irrigation systems. Where element of compulsion is used to extract shramadana labour its participatory qualities may suffer as often pointed out by the Sarvodaya Movement. While shramadana may be an effective means of mobilizing a large volume of unpaid voluntary labour in one off renovation efforts with corresponding broad based community involvement in the affair, shramadana may not be an efficient or reliable way of mobilizing labour for periodic maintenance work in a routine manner. This is particularly the case where the market economy has deeply penetrated into the countryside. Sustainable participatory irrigation management must rely on cost sharing mechanisms whereby there is no room for free riders and relevant community organizations can enforce routine contributions, including any contributions of labour, by beneficiaries of irrigation systems in keeping with the extent of land cultivated under the irrigation systems and benefits derived by them.

CONCLUSION

An active engagement and a compromise between social and economic goals of shramadana may be necessary if it is to be sustained as a viable development practice in keeping with the principles of participatory development. A greater sensitivity towards economizing labour and improving its productivity can improve the results of Sarvodaya style shramadana typically focusing on integrative social functions of shramadana rather than its efficiency towards achieving given economic outcomes. On the other hand, one sided concern with the fruits of free communal labour to the neglect of the process of social mobilization involved can lead to a situation where shramadana is equated with forced labour. Under such circumstances the so-called shramadana will be an obstacle to participatory development rather than a means to achieve it. More participatory forms of shramadana could be encouraged through external aid to local communication and a realistically valued component of shramadana labour may be treated as a local contribution in an externally funded programme of community development, inclusive of irrigation development. Economic and technical aid in such a programme may be designed in a way that integrates an estimated and regulated supply of voluntary shramadana labour from the direct beneficiaries when needed. Finally the productivity and efficiency of shramadana work must be evaluated on the basis of the standards decided by the local people themselves side by side with its significance for social mobilization of underserved communities in particular.

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