

Politics and Power in a Market Economy

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The purpose of this paper is to provide a framework to understand how politics and power operate within the market oriented economy of Sri Lanka. The paper consists of four sections. The first section creates the background for the discussion the follows by analysing the social composition of the political class that rules us today. It discusses how the political power enjoyed by the English educated, westernised colonial elite was diluted due to the impact of electoral politics. It also shows how their influence continues through the control of key levers of power.

This second section focuses on the political management of liberal economic reforms begun in 1977. Given the social composition of the political class, the key issue was how to manage those social groups within the political class who were not direct beneficiaries of liberalised policies. This section elaborates on three mechanisms – institutional design, patronage and coercion-that have been used to overcome this political problem.

The third section focuses on the fate of the poor in this context, and the existing social relations that conspire to keep them in poverty. On the basis of findings from available literature, this section identifies social groups that can be categorised as the poor. This is followed by an analysis of structural factors that keep them in conditions of poverty. Three factors – access to assets, powerlessness and vulnerability/security form the focus of this analysis.

The final section tries to link this debate with the politics of the peace process, through a discussion on inequality or relative poverty. It focuses on the importance of paying attention to inequality in order to ensure political support for the peace process. It makes the point that if an economic reform programme either generates inequality, or is seen to be insensitive to inequality, it can easily precipitate social discontent, which in turn can undermine political support for the peace process.

Political Class of Sri Lanka

The political impact of the establishment of universal adult franchise in 1931 is a critical event that we need to take into account in order to understand power and politics even in contemporary Sri Lanka. Universal adult franchise was established in Sri Lanka 17 years before independence, and only three years after Britain extended universal franchise to her own citizens. The colonial elite actually opposed the establishment of universal franchise. For the Sinhala elite, the masses were not yet ready to exercise universal franchise. The Tamil elite had a genuine worry of what would happen to their rights once Sinhala masses begin to exercise electoral power. Universal franchise was established despite this opposition. The liberal attitudes of the British commissioners, who were definitely influenced by debates going on in Britain at that time and representations by certain sections of Sri Lankans such as labour leaders prevailed.¹

¹ See De Silva K.M. (1981) for an account of this interesting history.

The dominant representation in the 1947 parliament, the first parliament after independence, came from the elite classes that benefited from the colonial economy and opportunities of social mobility during the colonial period. Characterising this elite Moore (1990) points out,

‘An important societal pillar of the Sri Lankan polity has been the indigenous elite which grew up in the colonial period around commercial and capitalist enterprise, the white collar professions and the early and thorough indigenization of the state bureaucracy. Socialized around attendance at a few British-model public schools in Colombo and residence in Colombo Cinnamon Gardens area, this elite developed a coherent consciousness which partly transcended caste, ethnic and religious identities. With roots in most ethnic, caste, regional and religious groups, the elite developed on the basis of individual or family participation in a wide range of occupations: commerce, capitalist enterprise (especially plantation ownership), Urban land lordship, the professions, public service and electoral politics. This was not a ‘national bourgeoisie’ in the sense in which this term is usually used – i.e. a conscious and active opponent of imperialism/metropolitan capital. It was however, a single, national elite marked by relative coherence, self-consciousness and capacity for co-ordinated, self-interested action. It continues to occupy almost all significant positions of political leadership.’

Quite a number of studies have covered the emergence of these elites, their family connections, social life and role in politics. There are also two political biographies of representatives of these elites. Lifestyles and intrigues within these families have also been tackled in a number of literary works. (De Silva, and Howard Wriggins 1994, Jayawardena 2000, Roberts 1979, Peebles 1995 Jiggins 1979, Jupp 1978 Manor 1989)

What is important to note for our discussion is that during the period of domination of the legislature by these elites, there was a strong correspondence between economic power and political power. Politics was dominated by those who benefited from the capital accumulation of the colonial economy and those who came from elite professions. In the 1947 parliament the major departure from this pattern was provided by those who came into parliament with the support of the plantation working class and the left movement.

The key to understanding the power structure in contemporary politics of Sri Lanka is the continuity and discontinuity of the power of the colonial elite. There is a consensus in literature that the electoral politics has resulted in a broadening of the social base of the political class. Perhaps the election of President Premadasa as executive president in 1989 was the most significant factor signifying the broadening of the social composition of the political class. However the available literature also argues that there is a continuity of the influence of the colonial elite because of the control of key positions.

There are two conceptual frameworks that have been used to understand the changing social composition of the political class. The first is based on studying sociological characteristics of the political elites. The second trend, broadly within a Marxian

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framework, tries to characterise the new entrants on the basis of their relationship to the overall social structure of a capitalist economy.

One of the earliest studies in the first tradition was by Marshall R. Singer, a scholar from the US. He studied the social background of the members of the following legislative chambers – 1924 Legislative Council, 1931 First State Council, 1936 Second State Council, 1947 First Parliament, 1952 Second Parliament, 1956 Third Parliament, 1960 Fourth Parliament and 1960 Fifth Parliament. What is important for our discussion is his comparison of the social base of representation beginning from the 1947 parliament onwards. During the pre-independence period only those who could read and write in English could become members of the legislatures, even though the franchise was universal.

Singer's conclusions captured what have been termed the post '56 changes within the Sri Lankan political class. The 1956 election, which defeated the UNP that inherited power from the colonial masters, has been a significant landmark in political transformations of Sri Lanka. The most important conclusion that Singer arrives at is the entry of 'middle level' landowners from a rural background as a part of the political elite. As stated by Singer,

'A new type of landowner has merged within the political elite. Neither extremely wealthy (as were British or the earlier Ceylonese counterparts) nor relatively poor (as are the overwhelming majority of landowning peasants), the landowning members of the emerging elite are again, in the broadest sense, "in the middle"' (Singer 1964).

Tara Coomaraswamy's unpublished Ph.D. thesis titled 'Parliamentary representation in Sri Lanka 1931-1986' is a more recent study within the same tradition. She compares the composition of the legislature in 1931 state councils, 1947 parliament and parliament in 1986. The 1986 parliament was during the second J.R. Jayawardena regime. Hence it covers a parliament during the post liberalisation period. Coomaraswamy comes to similar conclusions to Singer although using different social categories in her analysis. She concludes,

'Between 1931 and 1986 considerable changes have taken place in the composition of the legislature. Middle class and lower class MPs of more rural origin predominate, in place of Westernised upper class. The relatively unified 'national' political elite of 1931 and 1947 has been replaced by more heterogeneous and regionally based elites, with property, connections in towns and villages around the country' (Coomaraswamy 1988)

Commenting on the occupational background of the members of the legislature, she points out,

'The greater occupational diversity of parliament also reflects the rise of new occupational categories among the population since 1931 and 1947. Two categories which have expanded rapidly since independence, teachers and lower level government servants, have gradually achieved a larger presence in parliament, especially under SLFP governments. Another increasingly important group since independence, small town swabasha-speaking businessmen (mudalalis), are also represented.'

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The debate among those scholars who have utilised Marxian class analysis has been about the entry of intermediate classes into the ruling block. (Shastri 1983, Gunasinghe 1996, Uyangoda 1999) Intermediate classes are those social groups that occupy an intermediate position to the capitalist class and working class which form the principal classes of capitalism. These intermediate classes included middle level landowners, sections of the trading classes, those employed in minor positions within government employment and vernacular intelligentsia. A large section of these intermediate classes came from rural areas.

Once intermediate classes became a strong force in the legislature their interests became a dominant factor in economic policy making. They point out the strong link between the increased influence of intermediate classes within the state and the growth of state dominated development policies. State capitalist policies provide new avenues for social mobility to the intermediate classes. Access to state resources is also a major avenue of capital accumulation for the representatives of intermediate classes. In the case of Sri Lanka, a large section of these intermediate classes came from the rural areas.

Broadening the social base of the political class is the discontinuity part of the composition of the political class. The continuity part comes from the persistence of the power of the colonial elite or their progeny though the influence of the important levers of state power.

There has been a certain degree of debate and disagreement in literature on this issue. While the earlier writers like Singer, who were probably influenced by the changes that were taking place after 1956, emphasised the discontinuity part, the other writers (Jupp 1977, Oberst 1985) have pointed out how the westernised elite continued to control the key nodes of power.

Commarasway in her study of the 1986 cabinet points out to the presence of an ‘outer circle’ and an ‘inner circle’ of cabinet ministers in the second Jayawardena regime. The ‘outer circle’ of cabinet ministers was primarily from Sinhala speaking members who were not from elite occupational categories. They attended less elite schools and wealth wise belonged to middle classes. On the other hand the ‘inner circle’ of ministers came from English speaking background. Many of them were linked by family to other social elites. They came from a wealthy background and was cosmopolitan in their outlook. They also tended to control some of the key ministries.

Commaraswamy’s study seems to capture the discontinuity and continuity in a much more nuanced fashion. After all, the ministers of the ‘outer circle’ that come from less elite background are still cabinet ministers. This means the broadening of the social composition of the political class has reached this level. But still sections of the older elite still dominate the inner circle and the levers of power.

Findings of these studies are relevant for understanding the nature of the political class even today. Sri Lankan political class consists of two principal groups – a group that has a link to the elite that emerged during the colonial period, and a middle layers which is less westernised and has their social origins in the periphery. In winning elections and maintaining ruling regimes each of these groups play different roles.

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Moore, in an analysis of the victory of the PA government in 1994, provides an interesting picture of how these two groups combine to ensure an electoral victory, while ensuring the party that wins adapts to a new situation as far as development policies are concerned (Moore 1997)

By the time the 1994 election was held the UNP had been in power for 17 years. During these 17 years the UNP established the broad policy framework to shift the economic policies in the direction of liberal market oriented policies with a greater integration with global capitalism. However the orientation of the constituent parties of the PA was for a greater role for the state. Hence an important political task for the new leadership of the PA led by Chandrika Kumaranatunge was to shift party policies away from their old statist orientation, while maintaining the electoral base in order to win elections. Moore analyses how this happened.

He points out that the PA at the time of the victory consisted of two distinct components, confirming our earlier analysis of the social composition of the political class. ‘A rural-based “peripheral” component, and a modern-sector based “metropolitan” component. These two components perform different functions. The peripheral component mainly delivers electoral support and has a special concern with patronage resources. The metropolitan component, comprising in part directly organized interest groups’. (Moore 1997) In this election what happened was while the “metropolitan group” backed up technocrats shifted its ideology towards a pro-liberal orientation, the electoral support was delivered by the peripheral. However in order that the peripheral groups could mobilise electoral support the metropolitan group had to agree to certain populist measures – in this instance the Samurdhi programme which continues up to now. (Moore 1997)

Given this social composition of the political class a central issue of the economic reform programme is its political management. Diverse social composition of regimes coupled with electoral politics is always going to be a source of social pressures and populist demands. Hence economic reforms are never going to be smooth one. There are ups and downs. Politics and power analysis is a central part of understanding how these dynamics operate. This is the subject of the next section.

Politics of market reforms

Much of the mainstream discussion on policy reforms in Sri Lanka, especially in agencies such as the World Bank, is technocratic. It assumes that what needs to be done in order to develop an efficient market economy is by and large known. The problem is in implementation. Shortcomings in implementation are explained by “(a) weakness in policy design (b) poor implementation capacity (c) disruptive power of short term transition problems (social costs of adjustment) and (d) the lack of “political will”. Failure was frequently seen to be result of weak institutions, for which the typical remedy (of donors in particular) was to strengthen the institutional capacity of the implementing agency and to encourage “good governance” (in the technical sense of co-ordination, accountability and managerial propriety). Stronger institutions, it was argued would lead to more robust policy analysis, technically sound policy and more effective implementation (Lamb 1987)” (Dunham 2000)

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The second approach in explaining how the reform process is progressing came to the fore in the second half of the 1980s. 'It was part of what came to be known as 'the political economy of reform' in which emphasis shifted to the government's ability to anticipate and manage social and political response to reform initiatives. In this view politics is central. The lack of 'political will' (or of political commitment to reform) is interpreted not as slippage so much as calculated response to local political realities – as probably the wisest course of action given the particular circumstances (Bery 1990). Economic reform is no longer a technical exercise – an order progression from analysis to policy formulation, to decisive and authoritative decision making and to the mundane, but less contentious issue of policy implementation. It is a bargaining process in which the necessary support for reform has to be consciously marshalled and sustained and where powerful vested interests have to be out manoeuvred, co-opted or in some way accommodated (Grindle and Thomas 1991; Lamb and Weaving 1992)' (Dunham 2000)

This section is based on this second approach in understanding the reform process in the economy begun in 1977. The focus on politics as a central concern provides us a better framework for understanding how power and politics are played out within these reforms. The objective of this section is to provide the outline of a framework which can throw light on politics of market oriented reforms.

In Sri Lanka implementing policies to liberalise the economy faces two key political issues. Given the social composition of the political class, a key concern is how to manage reform when the ruling regimes overseeing the reform process has a multi-class composition. The direct beneficiaries of both external (liberation of the flow of goods and services) and internal (removal of state control in the economy and allowing prices to function) deregulation in the economy are classes that have assets to benefit from a market economy. The emphasis of the private sector, both local and foreign, has the same immediate results. Even the proponents of market economies would argue that the others would benefit in the long run with the trickle down. While this happens there has to be social costs. The sum total of both external and internal deregulation is the reduction of the role of the state both in the economy and welfare sector. This has direct negative impact on those who benefited from the growth of a state economy.

The intermediate classes and rural middle classes who have entered into the ruling block are not direct beneficiaries of these reforms. On the country they would loose out from the reduced role of the state. However, as we have seen above, they are important for electoral politics. The critical question regarding the political management of reforms is how to deal with this class.

The ruling elite, principally led by what Moore calls the 'metropolitan' section of the political class, has adopted three key strategies to deal with this question. These are a) Design of new institutions b) Opening up avenues of patronage through access to state power c) Use of coercive powers of the state. Making use of new institutions to manage this politics is a more acceptable legal way of doing things. Patronage secures loyalty by ensuring reciprocal benefits. Coercion depends on the repressive powers of the state machinery. In short they either control, buy or punish those who can become a problem for the reform agenda.

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If we begin with institutional design to manage the politics of economic reforms the key institutions are the presidential form of government and a proportional system of elections for choosing the legislature. The essence of both the presidential system and the PR system is the introduction of a new set of institutions that can better manage the legislature and the social forces represented in it. The presidency creates an institution that can have relative independence of the legislature. PR is an electoral system where parties can have a greater control over the individual members and, through that, the legislature.

Both these institutions were introduced by the 1978 constitution. The ‘metropolitan’ sections of the ruling elite made use of the controlling power over the legislature that they enjoyed in 1977 to introduce these institutions. In the parliament elected in 1977, 140 out of a total of 168 members belonged to the governing UNP. The centre-left opposition alliance, which ruled the country prior to 1977, was decimated. Its leading party, the SLFP, won only 8 seats, and for the first time after independence there were no representatives of the left parties.

Making use of this legislative power Jayawardene moved swiftly to enact the institutional design that the UNP had planned.² Just three months after being elected to power, the government put through an amendment to the 1972 constitution in order to establish a directly elected president. Although it brought about a fundamental change in the existing constitution, the bill was not even discussed by the government parliamentary group. ‘It was only taken up at Cabinet level, duly approved, and in addition certified by the Cabinet as a bill that was “urgent in national interest.”’ (Wilson 1980), and sent to the Constitutional Court for its approval. Under the provisions of the 1972 constitution, the Constitutional Court had to give its verdict within twenty-four hours for bills that are ‘urgent in national interest’. The Constitutional Court duly certified the bill. ‘It was then adopted by the National State Assembly and certified by the Speaker on 20 October 1977’ (Wilson 1980).

The rest of the constitutional structure was drafted through a Select Committee in the parliament appointed in October 1977. ‘The Select Committee held 16 meetings in all and based its findings on a questionnaire that had been issued to the general public and the evidence, oral and written, it obtained from various political, economic, social and religious organisations’ (Wilson 1980). The response to this was extremely limited. ‘Only 281 responses to the questionnaire were received and sixteen organisations and a Buddhist priest presented evidence before the Committee’ (Wilson 1980).

This was the manner in which these institutions were created. It was a process tightly controlled by the UNP leadership. There was very little debate or consultation. Participation of any section of civil society was unheard of. No doubt the economic agenda was the key reason why there was this hurry to introduce the new institutions without allowing much of a debate.

The 1978 constitution created a powerful, directly-elected president. The president was the head of state, head of the executive and the commander of armed forces. The

² Jayawardena first talked about the need for these institution long before 1977. He first proposed them in 1966 in an address to the annual sessions of the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science. (De Silva, and Howard Wriggins 1994)

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president was given powers to take over any number of ministries. The president could not be challenged through a court of law. If there was any controversy between the president and the government, the president had powers to dismiss the government. Although the principal opposition party was critical of this institution when it was first proposed, this criticism was forgotten once they assumed power. From 1994 onwards the opposition has been enjoying the power of the presidency. Although there has been lot of talk of reforming or altogether getting rid of the presidency this has not happened.

The power of the presidency has been used to promote market oriented reforms. Often the important ministries in charge of economic policy have been under the president. From the time of President Premadasa, the all important Finance Ministry has come under the president. The president always brings with him a group of advisors or political appointees loyal to him who are given key positions in the decision making structure related to the economy.

The original proposal for establishing a PR system, the other key institution, had elements to ensure control over parliament by the two major political parties, and to bring MPs totally under the control of party hierarchy. The intention was to control the MPs, and through them the legislature, through the party hierarchy. These elements were the twelve and half per cent of the valid votes to be eligible for seats, and an automatic dismissal of members from parliament if they crossed over to a party other than that from which they were elected.

The twelve and a half per cent cut-off point would have made it extremely difficult for smaller parties to have a say in politics without coming into coalition arrangements with larger parties. It would have ensured the dominance of the two parties in parliament. The original proposals gave party hierarchy authority to determine the names as well as the order of the names in the list submitted to the electorate for elections. Depending on the percentage of votes each party received those at the top of the order had a greater chance to get into parliament. These provisions, coupled with the power given to removing members if they crossed over to other parties, would have given the party hierarchy total control over the MPs.

However this was an institutional design that did not go unchallenged. Both these provisions had to be changed in the final design. As a result, the cut off point was reduced to five per cent and a Select Committee appointed in 1983 introduced a system of preference votes. In this system, the voters and not the order in the list put forward by the party, determined who got into parliament.

These changes to the original institutional design complicated the process of political management of economic reforms. The lower cut-off point has resulted in an era where smaller parties have become important for the stability of regimes. It has introduced an era of coalition politics. Given this context the president and key ministers cannot have their own way when it comes to reforms. There is constant bargaining with smaller parties.³

³ In this regard, current discussions on electoral reforms and discussion between the UNP and SLFP to arrive at consensus politics is important. It is quite possible the two major parties will arrive at an agreement on both these issues so as to overcome the difficulties posed by the PR system operating at present.

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This discussion on the electoral system takes us directly to the second element of politics of economic reforms – patronage. Coalition politics and the instability of regimes due to the political outcome of the PR system has transformed an old mechanism of maintaining regime stability into new heights. Most politics in any country involves a process of ensuring loyalty of various political fractions through various mechanisms. One of these mechanisms is handing over the control of key ministries to political fractions in return for loyalty to the regime. If coalition politics dominate, this mechanism tends to be even more important.

In Sri Lanka this has reached new heights. What has happened is palming off various parts of the state has become a principal mechanism to ensure stability of regimes. Coalition politics of Sri Lanka is characterised by bargaining for various parts of the state machinery with every cross-over. In order to satisfy these political demands, the structure of the state is constantly altered either by breaking existing institutions into smaller parts or by creating new ones. The process began under President Jayawardena. Under him there were close 40 members occupying various ministerial posts, although all of them were not cabinet ministers. There were cabinet ministers, junior ministers, ministers in charge of specific subjects and district ministers. Apart from a short period during the first Chandrika Kumaratunge regime, the phenomenon of large cabinets and proliferation of ministries has continued. The final result is not only utter confusion of who is in charge of what, but undermining of state capacity to a great extent.

Institutionalisation of a system of patronage is the most significant aspect of how politics has been reconstituted in the context of liberal economic policies. As a result of dominance of liberal economic regimes, ideological debates about economic policies have vanished from politics. Instead, politicians enter politics principally to enjoy power and control various parts of the state machinery. The system also has to ensure patronage in order to ensure regime, stability. Both aspects feed into making patronage politics a key feature of Sri Lanka's political scene.⁴

In addition to designing institutions and doling out patronage, those who inaugurated liberal market policies did not shy away from using authoritarian methods to ensure continuity of these policies. Although there need not be any structural linkages between authoritarianism and market oriented policies, ruling elites in certain historical contexts can resort to coercive methods in ensuring continuation of these policies. This is what happened in Sri Lanka.

The tradition was begun by the UNP of 1977. The UNP was ready to meet any opposition to its policies through repression and authoritarian politics. The main targets were the leadership of the principal opposition party, students, the intelligentsia and the working class. Any type of protest or agitation against new policies was met with violence and the repressive power of the state. There were a number of incidents when the police, as well as thugs supported by the government, were unleashed against this opposition. Members of the UNP-sponsored trade union Jathika Sevaka Sangamaya (JSS) played a special part in this violence. Special mention should be made of the 1980 general strike called by left wing political parties

⁴ There is hardly any research on patronage politics in Sri Lanka. This is an aspect that needs to be given greater prominence in future political economy research.

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and trade unions against new development policies. The government mobilised a massive force against the strikers. Thugs supported by the government attacked pickets killing a trade union activist. Close to 40,000 strikers were sacked.

In 1978, making use of the power of a Presidential Commission, the main opposition candidate was removed from the impending presidential election. Immediately after that making use of a fraudulent referendum the general election due in 1983 was postponed. There is no doubt that the principal reason for these authoritarian trends was to maintain the parliamentary majority that the UNP enjoyed from 1977 in order to continue with liberal market oriented policies. This was the beginning of a long period of electoral violence that plagues the political system even today.

The next president of the UNP was elected in an atmosphere of violence and intimidation. The voter turn-out in the 1988 presidential elections dropped dramatically, indicating how democratic institutions had been battered during the post '77 period. The overall turn out was only 55 per cent, compared to 81 per cent during the previous presidential election (average turn out for all general elections held up to that point was 78.1 per cent). The end result was that the second executive president of Sri Lanka was elected with the support of a mere 27.4 per cent of the total electorate.

Making use of this authoritarian climate the Premadasa regime inaugurated major privatisation programmes. This was just after the period of headless corpses and disappearances. It was extremely difficult to mount any political opposition to these policies.

By the time the PA came to power electoral violence was endemic to the system. Electoral violence included murder, attempted murder, hurt, grievous hurt, assault, threat and intimidation, robbery and arson. At this time violence was less connected with the economic reform agenda. The motivation was much more continuation of fruits of office and patronage by any means. Therefore a principal mechanism introduced to politically manage the reform process has become an end in itself.

These three mechanisms of control through institutions, patronage and use of authoritarian means provide us a framework to understand how power and politics are played out in economic reforms. It can be used to throw light on specific instances of policy reforms either at macro level or at the level of specific policies. In each instance these factors operate in different combinations.

Although designing of new institutions, institutionalisation of patronage politics and authoritarian tendencies have been analysed above as a framework for understanding politics of the economic reform process, one must not forget they also contribute to a reconstitution of politics in Sri Lanka during the period of liberal economic policies. Today, the dominant orthodoxy in development policy discussions is how to liberalise the economy more and more and how to strengthen market mechanisms. Sri Lankan state is trapped in this ideology both due to nature of the internal political forces and external pressures. As a result ideological debates on development policies have disappeared. This is especially true of the two main political parties. What dominates in them is how to get into power and benefit from patronage mechanisms. The politicians are also ready to use authoritarian means to ensure continuation in power

so that they have access to patronage. For the poor people of the electorate, whose livelihoods have been dismantled through liberal economic policies and who have not benefited from new opportunities that a liberal economy provides, whatever benefits that they can get through the recipient end of the patronage mechanism is a principal means of maintaining at least a subsistence level of living. This also makes them go along with politicians whether they are engaged in violence or not. Some of them who are close to politicians will be the agents of this violence. The final outcome is undermining of democratic institutions and prevalence of violence in the political culture.

How about the poor?

In trying to bring in politics and power to throw light on the fate of the poor, it is important to begin with a clarification on how we understand the notion of poverty. In the most common approach, especially by those who make use of statistical indicators, poverty is some kind of cut off point dividing poor and not poor. Hence the eternal search for this magic line. In terms of policy debates, the focus is how to get more and more people above this magic line. If current policies reduce the percentage of people below this line there is satisfaction all round. Such conclusions strengthen an ideology of gradualism, and support the argument that there is nothing radically wrong with the current order. All we have to do is carry on as before and let time take care of this problem. The only issue is for some sections of society, this has been a really long wait.⁵

The second approach to analysing poverty has focused on the characteristics of the population that live below the poverty line. This had led to a recognition that poverty means much more than just lack of monetary income. Poor people suffer from a large array of deprivations. This has certainly enriched our understanding of what it means to be poor and we have developed many indicators to measure these deprivations. But how much this has added to identifying mechanisms in society which keep some people poor is debatable.

The third approach to understanding poverty is to view this condition as a product of existing social relationships in society. There are structures and institutions in society which produce and reproduce these relationships and maintain some people in conditions of poverty. In this approach focusing on what goes to reproduce these mechanisms is as equally important as what maintains them at present. The existing power relations which maintain this social order ensure the continuity of these structures and institutions. It is not that these structures cannot be changed. But that demands a significant reform in these structures.

Since this approach to poverty focuses on a social system there is a link between why some people are poor and others not. If I am to use the jargon used by those who use statistical data, absolute poverty and relative poverty are linked. They are two sides of the same coin. This paper is biased towards this third approach for understanding poverty, because this allows us to bring power and politics into understanding poverty.

⁵ During a recent consultancy I happened to interview a family in an estate close to the Kandy town. I was quite surprised to hear that this family has been in that same line room for three generations.

Most of the Sri Lankan literature on poverty is based on the first approach. Hence we have to start with them and try to move into the social relationship approach which is essential for our purposes. This literature has tried to determine the poverty line and identify what proportion of the population is under this cut off line. Much of this literature got bogged down in discussions on how to determine the poverty line. This is an interesting debate, but there is no room in this article to go into it. It raises serious interesting issues about politics of knowledge.

W.D.Lakshman in a seminal article published in 1997 summarised the findings on poverty on the basis of available literature up to that point (Lakshman 1997). He covered literature published from 1970 to 1990. The data collected by him shows, depending on the method used, the extent of poverty ranged from 11.2% of the population to 50.5%. This huge divergence is simply because of methodological issues.

Most policy documents use the data provided by the Department of Census and Statistics, which seems to be less inclined to indulge in methodological or ideological debates. Their data is quoted often as the official poverty line. Thus a recent briefing note on poverty published by a non-governmental organisation states ‘According to the official poverty line released by the DCS the incidence of poverty in 1990/91 was 26.1%, and 28.8% in 1995/96. In the year 2002 it declined to 22.7%, however this translated into more than 4 million people living below poverty line’(CEPA 2004). This is the figure that is usually quoted in policy debates. This data does not cover the entirety of the Northern and Eastern provinces. Therefore poverty should be much higher. This means despite the fact that Sri Lanka is now classified as a low middle income country on the basis of per capita income data, at least quarter of the population is below the official poverty line.

For the purpose of understanding how politics and power work in order to keep this group of people in poverty, it is more important is to understand what type of social groups belong to this category of people below poverty line. Laksman in his article identifies these groups from available literature (Alailima 1986, Marga 1981, Bhalla & Glewwe 1985, Edirisinghe 1990) and characterises them as follows;

- ‘(i) landless agricultural workers,
- (ii) small land-owning peasants cultivating food crops using family labour,
- (iii) fishing and animal husbandry
- (iv) workers in small scale, often cottage type, rural industry,
- (v) small traders and self employed persons in personal and other activities and,
- (iv) individually operated craftsman like masons and carpenters’ (Lakshman 2000)

In the case of categories (iii) to (iv) it is those engaged in these occupations at a smaller scale that have been included in poor social groups.⁶

⁶ Quite a lot of studies on poverty in Sri Lanka have focused on rural areas. This has been because of the perception of Sri Lanka as an agrarian society. Poverty in urban areas has entered the discussion through studies on the working class in the organised sector. Certainly this is inadequate to understand the current situation. Semi-urban conditions have spread to what were once classified as rural sector. Poverty in this setting is largely a phenomenon associated with casual labour and small scale self employment.

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The real debate about this list is the exclusion of plantation workers. Citing factors such as availability of regular employment, welfare facilities provided and the presence of unions he has excluded them from the list. However certain sections of the plantation workers have to be included because of the recent findings of the Consumer Finance Survey of the Central Bank which showed an increase of the incidence of poverty in the estate sector.

An important dimension that can be added is remoteness from urbanised centres. Mick Moore, in his study on State and Peasant Politics, gives a prominent place to this factor. The further the people are located from what he calls core areas of the country, the greater the chances of being poor (Moore 1985). Thus, for example, people belonging to the category of small land owning peasantry identified above but living in remote areas has a greater chance of falling into the poor category. There is also an indication to show in these remote areas that there is a correlation between poverty and caste background.

In order to understand how politics and power conspire to keep these social categories in poverty, we can make use of the framework utilised in the last World Bank Report on poverty produced at the turn of century. This interesting but quickly forgotten report of the World Bank identified causes of poverty making use of three variables – Assets, power and vulnerability/security. It argued that,

‘One route for investigating the causes of poverty is to examine the dimensions highlighted by poor people:

- Lack of income and assets to attain basic necessities – food, shelter, clothing and acceptable level of health and education.⁷
- Sense of voicelessness and powerlessness in the institutions of state and society.
- Vulnerability to adverse shocks, linked to an inability to cope with them.’ (World Bank 2001)

All social groups mentioned above lack the assets to have an adequate income in a market economy. However the central issue is what determines this asset ownership and mechanisms that deprive a certain section of these assets for a long time. As the authors of the World Bank Report argue, this is fundamentally determined by the existing social and political forces. ‘Access to assets depends on a legal structure that defines and enforces private property rights or on customary norms that define common property resources (World Bank 2001)’. Therefore unless there are some reforms in this property rights regime poor people will remain poor. This in turn depends on politics and power.

If we take the example of small holder peasantry, there are numerous studies on peasantry carried out in Sri Lanka which show how the existing property regime confines this population to small, uneconomical plots. Those in remote parts actually do not legally own these plots. They are the so-called encroachers living on state land. They have not benefited from all these years of state investment on irrigation. Small

⁷ The World Bank report expands assets into different categories such as Human Assets, Natural Assets, Physical Assets, Financial Assets and Social Assets.

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holder peasants cannot afford to hire labour to cultivate their land, and therefore depend on family labour. They produce very little marketable surplus. They are burdened by debts. The existing social relations and property rights regime keep on reproducing these conditions.

A distinguishing feature of almost all the social groups mentioned above is the lack of any organised representations on their behalf. The exception is the plantation workers which we shall discuss below. Unlike the modern sectors like the industries or the state, where there are trade unions to make their voices heard, none of the above mentioned categories have organisations that are organically linked to these social groups. If we go by sectors, fishing is the only sector that has recognisable organisation. But a closer examination of the membership shows that they really represent much wealthier fishermen, who are usually the owners of larger boats.

The absence of these organisations means a lack of means of influencing the state and state decision making. Certainly most of the representatives of these social groups will be ritually taking part in elections. Quite a part from that, they hardly have any means of influencing the decision making process. It is in this context the linkage to political leadership primarily through the agents of politicians who operate at rural level comes into play. As a result, trying to get their needs satisfied by making use of these political networks has become a permanent feature of the lives of the poor sections.⁸

Plantation workers can be taken as one of the social groups in poverty, where the importance of organisations representing them can be illustrated. The plantation sector is highly organised. There is solidarity not only on the basis of common working and living conditions, but also because of ethnicity. However for a long time they stood out as a group with the worst social indicators. In the early seventies while development literature was celebrating Sri Lanka as a model with high social development in spite of low per capita income, the plantation workers who produced the surplus for these welfare policies, suffered from famine conditions. The majority of them did not even enjoy basic rights as citizens. Their social indicators were relatively low. Therefore despite being organised very little change took place in their conditions.

However from the beginning of eighties something began to change. The key was their trade unions began to be important in national politics. This paved the way for increased influence in decision making within the state. Legislative enactments were also carried out to solve the citizenship problem. This resulted in more and more of them becoming voters. In short, their capacity to influence power relations and politics improved. This has certainly had a positive impact on the conditions of the workers. This is not to argue that all problems have been solved or there are no problems in plantation politics. But it shows how politics and the ability to influence power is important for sustaining conditions of poverty.

⁸ As we have mentioned political patronage is an area that is under researched both at macro and micro levels. But it is important to get away from highly normative and moralistic discussions on patronage. In literature studying feudal societies patron-client relationships has been recognised as a regular feature which fulfilled certain social function. Somewhat similar situation seem to exist at present. While patronage politics has its negative predatory side, I have been to remote low caste villages of Sri Lanka where nothing would have come to the village without the intervention of a political patron.

Vulnerability and insecurity is the third aspect of their lives. Vulnerability and insecurity can come into the lives of these social groups in various forms. Sudden fluctuations in prices and markets can affect their precarious conditions. Natural disasters and conflicts can undermine even the little security that they have.

These aspects are important in a country which has been affected by a tsunami as well as a civil war which is more than two decades old. Unfortunately most of the Tsunami literature still concentrates on the degree of success in recovery. By recovery what is meant is an attempt to restore the conditions before the tsunami. Numerous reports and documents are full of numbers and percentages trying to prove the status of recovery. While those who engage in recovery try to use these figures to prove things are not bad, the critics use the same logic to demonstrate limitations. In this process all who suffered from the tsunami are lumped together into a single category as if a natural disaster has obliterated deep seated structural inequalities. Therefore it is difficult to unpack how this recovery process is affecting different social groups. The most likely scenario is that among the victims of the tsunami there are those who belong to the above social categories. Probably they have the greatest difficulty in getting back to their feet. If we come back to these areas once the funds are over and all agencies that came to help us have gone, we might find that these groups still remain in vulnerable conditions.

The situation is even worse in the case of the victims of the conflicts. Aid agencies have created a term – Internally Displaced People (IDPs)-that has robbed this people of their social characteristics. This convenient term, used for raising funds and planning projects all over the world where there are conflicts, once again removes all social distinctions. Hence any meaningful social analysis in order to understand how the impact of the conflict mediates through the social structure is difficult. But definitely this is the case. When it comes to the Tamil population, a large section of the middle or upper middle class that lived in the North/East have escaped from these areas. Many of the people found in camps (sorry welfare centres!!) for a long time are from the poorer social groups. In addition they are the majority living in LTTE controlled areas. Every escalation of the war makes their conditions precarious. In addition it is their sons and daughters who have to become the child soldiers of LTTE. In remote areas of the war zone you will find representatives of the above social groups. They belong to all three ethnic groups. Insecurity and vulnerability have become their daily companion.

Politics of market reforms and the peace process

The politics of market reforms is linked to the peace process through the social inequality that the economic reform process can generate. Class inequality has been a central concern of Sri Lanka's electoral politics. In the first section of this paper we have focused on how institutionalisation of electoral politics led to a break in the monopoly of power held by the colonial elite. Although members of this class still enjoy considerable influence by controlling key positions in cabinets, the break in the monopoly of political power of English educated, westernised colonial elite had far reaching repercussions in many aspects of the economy and society. The sum total of

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these developments was an attack on inequality getting established as a central plank in Sri Lanka's political debates.

No political party or any individual hoping have a future in politics can go against this ethos. On the contrary, everybody will argue that they are for breaking existing barriers towards a more egalitarian society. The attack on inequality features not only in policy debates, but also in other spheres like media, novels, cinema, etc. Unlike some other societies we never had any intellectual tradition that has defended inequality.

When an ideology towards equality and social justice gets hold of a society, perceptions of equality and inequality becomes as important as the actual presence of these features. Hence politicians should not only support policies that support equality, but should be seen to be against social inequality. Politicians have to play the role of being close to the 'common man' in their interaction with society. This has given rise to a range of practices within the ruling elite.

Inequality is a critical factor in understanding the rise of political parties like the JVP. For a long time in Sri Lankan literature the JVP was seen as the representative of poorer social groups identified in the previous section. However more recent studies have shown the importance of inequality for the rise of the JVP. David Rampton one of the few researchers who has focused on JVP for his Ph.D. work, has argued that the JVP 'must be understood against a background of "relative poverty" or exclusions that exist in the vast disparity perceived between the elites and masses, the capital and provinces, the urban and the rural and the centre and the periphery' (Rampton 2003). The JVP has cleverly combined inequality and Sinahala nationalism to become the third largest party.

In the case of specific political tasks like regime stability or managing an economic reform agenda, the key issue is not inequality in general terms, which is the normal subject of economists who uses the Gini coefficient to measure inequality, but the gap between the upper classes or the bourgeoisie and the intermediate classes. As we have argued in the first section, the social impact of the break in the monopoly of the power of the colonial elite was the reduction of the gap between these two groups. If development policies threaten to widen this gap there are likely to be political repercussions.

This discussion on the politics of inequality is linked with the peace process through the social impact of economic reforms. An economic agenda which either creates more inequality, or is seen to be insensitive to existing inequality can undermine the support from the majority of the population for a peace process. The regime responsible for such policies will alienate a large section of the politically powerful intermediate class, because these economic policies threaten to increase the gap between them and the upper classes. They can easily mobilise a large section of the population which includes the poor against these policies. Those opposed to the peace process can easily capitalise on this discontent and combine this with nationalism.

This is actually what happened with the unsuccessful peace process led by the UNF between 2002 and 2004. UNF signed a cease-fire agreement in a country that has been subjected to a quarter century of liberal economic policies. Implementation of

these policies would not have followed the text book version of liberalisation usually propagated by aid agencies.⁹ In the eyes of these agencies Sri Lanka still has to implement some of the reforms. Whether they will be completed or not is a different issue. It will depend very much on the balance of political forces. Nevertheless from 1977 onwards Sri Lanka has moved away from the state centric capitalism that dominated the period before. Since 1977 basic objectives of development policies have been liberalisation, reduction of the role of the state and promotion of the private sector. They have had an impact on many areas of social life. Any detailed study comparing the situation in 1977 and now can bear this out. One outcome of these developments has been growth of inequality.

The UNF strategy between 2002 and 2004 consisting of three elements – a ceasefire agreement and negotiations with the LTTE, an extensive economic reform programme and a conscious attempt to mobilise international support for both these elements.

The economic agenda of the UNF was spelt out in the document ‘Regaining Sri Lanka’. The thinking behind the UNF’s economic agenda was dominated by the traditional pre-occupation with growth figures. There is a lot of evidence to show that this was a document drawn up by backroom consultants without any clue of the politics that it entailed. It was done without much of consideration of the politics of the peace process either. During the negotiations the LTTE made the accusation that ‘Regaining Sri Lanka’ did not have anything to say about the war torn area. Hence the agenda was reviving the economy to help the ‘South’. Subsequent political developments showed that it did not have any credible political vision to manage the political fall out in the ‘South’

The specific policies in the economic plan included the usual mix from the Washington Consensus. There were the stabilisation measures to curtail expenditure and bring about fiscal control. New laws such as Fiscal Management (Responsibility) Act (FMRA) and Welfare Benefit Law were enacted for this purpose. On the structural side the goals were extensive. State-owned assets that were earmarked for privatisation included the Sri Lankan Insurance Corporation, 100 petrol stations belonging to the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, the trading venture Co-operative Wholesale Establishment and leases of an oil tank farm. Plans were also drawn up to totally privatise Regional Transport Boards. According to the 2003 Central Bank Report the government had plans to merge four enterprises, restructure and reform 51 more and liquidate 15.¹⁰ Apart from this, the government took steps to restructure major state owned institutions like the Ceylon Electricity Board, Railways, and to establish a Revenue Authority.

What is amazing is all these politically difficult reforms were attempted by a regime that was simultaneously embarking on negotiations with the LTTE after signing a ceasefire which virtually accepted the presence of two armies and territories controlled by two armies, and internationalised the Sri Lankan conflict resolution process to an unprecedented level. All these steps were politically controversial and demanded a great deal of political acumen to carry them through. What more, all this was tried by a regime that did not even control the presidency.

⁹ This rarely happens in any country. Always policy prescriptions interact with various interest groups in society. The outcome is the result of this interaction.

¹⁰ Central Bank of Sri Lanka, *Annual Report 2003*

Coming back to our focus on inequality, the UNF embarked on this agenda in a society that had become highly unequal both in social and spatial terms. Preliminary data of the Central Bank Consumer Finance and Socio-Economic survey for 2003/2004 shows that ‘the share of the highest income decile in total income, at 38.6 per cent, is about twenty three times as high as the share of the lowest decile (1.7 per cent) indicating highly unequal income distribution. Similarly the highest two deciles together account for more than half of the total income (53.7 per cent), while the lowest five deciles (i.e., the lower half of the total income deciles) account for only about one fifth (19.6 per cent) of the total income.’¹¹

This inequality has a regional dimension as well. With close to 50% of the GDP concentrated in the Western Province, the other regions are neglected. This is reflected in the figures for the share of households in poverty. This figure is 12.2% of households for the Western Province but goes up to 40% of households in Sabaragamuwa, the worst-off province.

Hence Sri Lanka shows classic features of a market economy without effective policies to take care of social issues. We have respectable growth figures, which the politicians and planners keep on flaunting. But nearly a quarter of the population are in abject poverty, and inequality is rising.¹²

The economic agenda of the UNF did not have any serious answers to these social aspects. There was the usual belief in growth and trickle down, and some notion of ‘connecting the poor’ to the growth process. It never gave any impression that it cared about the social inequality or the poor. It quickly alienated important political groups, especially the intermediate classes. The UNF was soundly defeated in the general election of 2004.

This experience shows that the focus on politics as elaborated in section three is a central issue that we need to focus on. In a society like Sri Lanka, with a strong ethos of social equality and in the midst of searching for peace, the economic reform programme has to be driven by a broader vision than a mere search for growth figures. This calls for a) a much better understanding of the politics of economic reforms; b) strategies for building political support for reform while not undermining support for the peace process; c) greater focus on timing and sequence of reforms so that both economic agenda and peace can be pursued.

¹¹ Central Bank of Sri Lanka, *Annual Report 2003*. This survey also did not cover Killinochchi, Mannar and Mullativu districts. Hence the income distribution picture will be worse both socially and regionally.

¹² What is interesting to note despite this reality and after all these years of questioning policy making on the basis of growth figures and per capita income figures donors seem to have concluded that Sri Lanka is no longer a country that needs aid on the basis of poverty criteria. Even the Nobel Prize of Amartya Sen has not made a difference to orthodox thinking.

Recommendations

The final section of the paper focuses on recommendations to Sida in the light of the above discussion. It concentrates on the question of poverty alleviation. Of all the questions tackled in the paper this is the most important one for the Sida policies on global development.

Since these are recommendations for a future process of developing a country strategy, they may sound far too broad. This is what is possible at this stage. If any of these are accepted they have to be concretised in the course of developing the country strategy.

Recommendations are under five headings. The rest of the paper elaborates each of them.

- Evaluating the participatory orthodoxy

With the inauguration of market oriented development policies, the discourse surrounding poverty and poverty alleviation also underwent changes. First to appear on the scene was the notion of 'safety nets'. The World Bank annual report published in 1990 laid the foundation for this discourse. The principal idea was how to protect the poor through safety nets while market oriented policies generate growth and the poor benefits through trickle down.

Pretty soon the discourse of safety nets was replaced by the more ambitious notion of participation. Under the notion of participation the principal answer to poverty was how to provide space for the 'poor' to take care of their own lives. It assumed that the poor themselves have answers and capabilities about how to improve their own conditions. Therefore all we need to do is to provide space for this initiative and capacity to emerge. Translated into development projects, this discourse ended up developing elaborate mechanisms and procedures to ensure participation.

The participatory discourse spread very fast, principally through donor funded projects implemented by government and non-governmental agencies. In Sri Lanka it displaced all other ideas such as universal subsidies, land and tenure reforms, protection of organised labour, etc. These were some of the ideas behind the project of developing a welfare state in Sri Lanka. The participatory discourse fitted very well with the critique of an interventionist state which generally began to dominate development policies during this period.

The participatory discourse has been subject to criticism both in Sri Lanka and internationally.¹³ Criticisms have been about some of the fundamental conceptual assumptions of the participatory discourse and its effectiveness in alleviating poverty. The former points out that it is based on many untenable assumptions about societies, and the latter points out that it does not tackle key issues like assets and power, which are essential for understanding poverty in a market economy.

¹³ See Lakshman W.D (1994), Gunatilake R.(1997), Bastian Sunil and Nicola Bastian (ed) (1996) for a critical discussion in Sri Lanka. W.D.Lakshman paper is an evaluation of the Sida funded Matara IRDP which was a pioneer participatory project in Sri Lanka.

Despite this criticism, participation still dominates in the debates about poverty. Donors still fund projects with these assumptions. This makes it extremely difficult to influence the policy debates through new ideas. Since donors were mostly responsible for the proliferation of these ideas, donors need to think of activities that can review this orthodoxy. This at least can help to open up the debate on poverty alleviation.

- There is no one category of 'poor'

Most interventions on poverty alleviation programmes assume that there is one category called 'poor'. This is a result of intellectual paucity of analysis, or a convenient ploy which makes it unnecessary to understand the society that the donors are working with in a little more detail.¹⁴ As this paper tries to show there is no one single category of poor. But there are different social groups with varied combinations of assets, powerlessness and vulnerability. On page 12 we have identified these social groups on the basis of available literature. More work can be done to refine this and bring it up to date.

As soon as we recognise that there are different social categories of 'poor', strategies dealing with their problems have to differ. These strategies have to take into account both existing characteristics of these social groups as well as potential for making a change. The latter is determined by many other contextual factors within which these social groups survive. For example, in the case of Sri Lanka, a donor supported project which exists for a limited period of time might find it easier to rectify the worst situations in the case of plantation labour than in the case of casual agricultural workers living in remote parts of the country. The former lives in a context where there are institutions as well a tradition of lobbying and organising. In the latter case we still have to establish the importance of this social category in policy debates. Even if an intervention decides to focus on the latter group, a more focused assessment of the situation of the social group and the context can provide realistic objectives.

- Governance, legal reform and the poor

Governance and legal reforms have become a dominant focus among donors. However the efforts that dominate today seem to be based on two political agendas. The objectives are either promoting a liberal democratic state or depoliticising the state so that the economic reform programme can continue. The implicit agenda is a minimalist state that can facilitate further market reforms.

It is not clear how this agenda can help the poor. Contrary to what is believed in mainstream literature, Asian capitalism has been able to grow as well as bring about a significant impact on social development through an effective state which has

¹⁴ There is widespread criticism in literature on this count. Some would argue that the present day world shows the twin characteristics of globalisation and differentiation. This demands a more nuanced understanding of societies and doing away with huge generalisations like 'third world', 'developing countries', etc. See Bayart Jean-Francois (1991) *Finishing with the Idea of the Third World: The Concept of Political Trajectory*, In James Manor (ed), *Rethinking Third World Politics*, London, Longman

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intervened judiciously. We need to introduce these kind of debates into the discussion on governance and legal reforms. Specifically, when it comes to poverty alleviation, the most important issue is how to ensure that the interests of the poor form a cornerstone within the agenda on governance and legal reforms.

There are specific examples in the world where legal institutions and legality have been used in project planning in order to ensure that the poor gets their due. An example that is widely discussed in literature is the public works programmes in India. The programme is designed in such a way that the rights of the poor within the programme are enshrined in law. The poor and organisations of the poor have been using these legal provisions in order to ensure that they get what is due to them.¹⁵

- Empowerment of the poor

The other side of this strategy is how to improve the capacity of the poor and organisations so that they are capable of demanding what is due to them. In this area Sri Lanka presents a complex picture. On one hand, there are organisations such as trade unions that represent certain sections of the population, especially those in the organised sector. They are powerful and can even influence ruling regimes. However they speak for a particular group and sometimes they can be defending the indefensible. On the other side there are large sections of the population whose voice is not heard in an organised form. In recent times lot of hope was placed on NGOs and civil society organisations as a channel of voicing concerns of the poor. But it is clear now that there are limitations in this strategy. Many of these organisations are more bent on maintaining their organisations and implementing projects rather than playing a political role of voicing the concerns of the poor.

Hence there is a need for a search for new strategies of empowerment. Once again one must remember these strategies can be diverse depending on social groups and contextual factors. As much there is no one group called the 'poor', there is no big answer for empowerment in the current context.

- Building pro-poor coalitions

As the historical experience, shows the emancipation of the poor cannot happen solely through the activities of the poor themselves. For example, many of the social reform movements have been initiated by the middle class. The poor need allies in society in order to improve their conditions.

It is recognition of this fact that brought the notion of 'pro-poor coalitions' into development studies literature. We need to find ways and means of concretising this idea. In Sri Lanka it is not politically difficult to lobby for the poor. This politics has legitimacy and very few would dare to oppose. Very many actors are involved in activities focusing on the poor. However there are no strategies to coalesce this interests on the basis of concrete policy reforms. Exploring the possibility of building such coalitions is an important strategy that deserves attention.

¹⁵ See Mick Moore and Anuradha Joshi (1999) for a discussion of the Employment Guarantee Scheme of Maharashtra as an example of this approach

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