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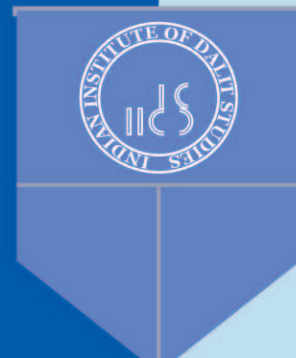
Devoted to Studies on Social Exclusion, Marginalized Social Groups and Inclusive Policies

Caste Discrimination and Social Justice in Sri Lanka: An Overview

Kalinga Tudor Silva
P.P. Sivapragasam
Paramsothy Thanges

Working Paper Series

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Foreword

Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) has been amongst the first research organisations in India to focus exclusively on development concerns of the marginalised groups and socially excluded communities. Over the last six years, IIDS has carried-out several studies on different aspects of social exclusion and discrimination of the historically marginalised social groups, such as the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and Religious Minorities in India and other parts of the sub-continent. The Working Paper Series disseminates empirical findings of the ongoing research and conceptual development on issues pertaining to the forms and nature of social exclusion and discrimination. Some of our papers also critically examine inclusive policies for the marginalised social groups.

This Working Paper "**Caste Discrimination and Social Justice in Sri Lank: An Overview"** has been taken out from our report on Caste Based Discrimination (CBD) in South Asia. Drawn form the country report on Sri Lanka, the paper brings out the historical silence on caste discrimination and its local/regional specificities. It examines the patterns of CBD in Sri Lanka in a range of domains that include basic services, education, employment, land, markets, and political participation. The paper also reveals the complex relationship of caste and ethnicity, identifying the interlocking character of discrimination. It concludes that Sri Lankan society by no means is casteless as it is commonly assumed and the caste-blind policies of the state and non-state actors do not adequately deal with the continuing and emerging forms of CBD in various spheres of the society.

Indian Institute of Dalit Studies gratefully acknowledges IDSN and DANIDA for funding this study. We hope our Working Papers will be helpful to academics, students, activists, civil society organisations and policymaking bodies.

Surinder S. Jodhka
Director, IIDS

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1. Introduction

Although caste is in many respects less significant and less visible in Sri Lanka, compared to India, some 90 per cent of the population in Sri Lanka recognises it for some purposes at least (Thorat and Shah, 2007). There are three parallel caste systems in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil and Indian Tamil. While there is no uniform notion of untouchability in these three caste systems, caste discrimination of some kind is found in each one. Academic anthropological research on caste was popular in Sri Lanka in the 1950s and 1960s (Leach 1960, 1961, Ryan 1993, Jayaraman 1975). Most of these studies focused on positive functions of caste towards establishing a unified social system to the neglect of any consideration of caste discrimination, social injustices and human right violations involved, including the plight of the bottom layers in society.

Conducted under auspices of the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) and the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS), this paper examines the patterns of caste-based discrimination (CBD) in Sri Lanka in a range of domains that include denial of human dignity, denial of access to drinking water, education, employment, land markets and economic opportunities, and restrictions on political participation and social welfare. It seeks to identify the nature, extent and mechanisms of CBD and exclusion in Sri Lanka to assess and document any activities and programmes for addressing CBD; identify ways and means for eliminating or at least reducing CBD; identify underprivileged 'low caste' groups in Sri Lanka with a focus on their human rights, poverty situation and trends, political participation, gender relations; and foster advocacy, networking and research and analytical capacities in Sri Lanka on the subject of CBD.

The study employed a range of methodologies for identifying and assessing CBD, including literature review, analysis of secondary data, interviews with community leaders and representatives of non-governmental organistions (NGOs) from relevant locations, focus group discussions with some of the affected groups, and rapid ethnographic research on the selected backward or depressed communities. Table 1 lists study locations covered in rapid ethnographic research conducted under this paper.

Table 1: Locations Covered in Ethnographic Research on CBD

Study Location	District	Ethnic Group	Depressed Castes
Mahaiyawa	Kandy	Indian Tamil	Chakkiliyar, Parayar
Welivita	Kandy	Sinhala	Drummer
Henawala	Kandy	Sinhala	Kinnara
Kuragala	Kandy	Sinhala	Rodi
Mallakam	Jaffna	SL Tamil	Nalavar, Pallar
Rozzela Estate	Nuwara Eliya	Indian Tamil	Pallar, Parayar, Chakkiliyar
Opata Estate	Ratnapura	Indian Tamil	Pallar, Parayar, Chakkiliyar
Templestowe estate	Nuwara Eliya	Indian Tamil	Pallar, Parayar, Chakkiliyar
Mocha Estate	Nuwara Eliya	Indian Tamil	Pallar, Parayar, Chakkiliyar

On the basis of limited data available, this study estimated that about 20 to 30 per cent people in Sri Lanka are victims of CBD of one kind or another (Silva, Sivapragasam & Thanges 2009). The proportion of people affected may be the highest among the Indian Tamils, a majority of whom belonging to the lowest strata of the Hindu caste hierarchy followed by Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese. While the overall importance of caste has diminished since the colonial era, caste discrimination has survived, and at the same time, certain new forms of caste discrimination have emerged within the context of the plantation economy, sanitary and scavenging services established with the formation of municipal and urban councils during the colonial era and the disproportionately high negative impact of civil war, ethnic riots and *tsunami* on those at the bottom of the caste hierarchies in recent times.

The pre-colonial Sri Lanka was built around caste-based privileges for the ruling elite *vis-à-vis* hereditary and mandatory caste services for those at the bottom layers of the society. Unlike the Hindu caste system founded on religious notions of purity and pollution, caste systems in Sri Lanka have relied more on a kind of secular ranking upheld by the state, plantation economy, land ownership and tenure, religious organisations and rituals, and firmly-rooted

notions of inherent superiority and inferiority. Much of the official backing for the caste systems has gradually eroded and instead the state has increasingly turned a blind eye towards caste since the latter part of colonial rule. Even though caste-based service tenure system (rajakariya) was abolished as a means of revenue generation for the state and state officials through Colebrook-Cameron reforms of the 1830s, its operation in temple administration and ritual domain was left untouched due to the hands-off policy *vis-à-vis* religious institutions.

Caste was not included as a category in population censuses since 1911: personal identity documents such as birth certificates ceased to register the caste background of persons concerned from early 20th century. The ethno-nationalist mobilisations among the Sinhalese and Tamils that gained momentum since 1930s identified caste as a potentially divisive force within each ethnic group and also saw it as a backward social institution that would have a natural death during the course of time. The post-colonial state committed to a universal social welfare regime inclusive of free education and health care, turned a blind eye towards caste assuming that universal coverage policies will benefit all groups irrespective of caste, creed, gender and ethnicity. Moreover, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE), which has established a military control over pockets of north-east Sri Lanka, has imposed a kind of censorship on the caste system, identifying it as an obstacle to a unified Tamil ethnic homeland it seeks to establish in this part of Sri Lanka.

These developments have made the caste system very much a hidden entity, not openly addressed by society, policy and social analysis. This has, however, not eliminated caste discrimination altogether. Rather caste discrimination has become underground, surreptitious and socially explosive and politically manipulable in some instances. The ongoing nationalist mobilisations of society and the resulting Sinhala-Tamil divide merely serve to mask forms of gender, caste and class inequalities widespread and entrenched in Sri Lankan society.

2. Caste Discrimination in Sinhala Society

In Sinhala society, the pre-British Kandyan Kingdom organised a feudal social order accompanying political system, ritual order, land tenure and extraction of services around the institution of caste as meticulously elaborated by Ralph Peiris (1956). Since the Radala ruling elite was identified as a "born to rule" social formation was limited to a privileged few. The lower orders of society consisted of a Goigama, i.e. "independent" peasantry comprising the bulk of

Sinhala population, coastal caste groups who were somewhat outside the indigenous caste system, a range of service castes with hereditary rajakariya ("service to the king") services assigned to them with access to land tied to delivery of these services. Besides, some caste groups expected to perform "menial" and "unclean" services such as removal of dead animals and dirt (Rodi), public execution of criminals (Gahala) and manufacture and supply of mats and other useful artifacts using raw material collected from the jungle, considered outside the pale of human civilisation (Kinnara).

In Sinhala society, the lower the caste status the more excluded they were from power, land ownership and sources of honour and human dignity (Silva 1982, 1992, 2006). Those with so-called menial services assigned to them were less than one percent of the total Sinhala population, who often lived in isolated but congested villages usually hidden in the jungle. Caste discrimination, however, was not limited to bearers of so-called menial services but included groups like Vahumpura (domestic servants of Goigama), Padu (farm workers of Goigama), Kumbal (potters), Berava (drummers and dancers), Rada (washermen) and Nawandanna (smiths) (Jiggins 1979). All these groups combined probably constituted as many as 20-30 per cent of the Sinhala population.

For these low-caste groups, the lower status was upheld by overlapping conditions such as landlessness, caste-specific family and personal names, service obligations towards higher orders in society, forms of dress and patterns of deference and demeanor built into inter-caste relations of all kinds. Unlike Hinduism, Buddhism, the predominant religion among Sinhalese, had an ambiguous relationship with caste. While the Buddhist doctrine strongly condemned caste, Buddhist organisations in Sri Lanka had adopted caste as a principle of social set up among Buddhist monks and exploited it for mobilising ritual services and extracting surplus from temple property. The popular annual religious rituals and cultural pageantries such as the Kandy Perahara conducted in honour of sacred tooth relic in the Temple of the Tooth where the four guardian deities were displayed the caste order in society was celebrated in some ways (Seneviratne 1978).

Many of the underprivileged caste groups in Sinhala society have gradually managed to uplift their status and living conditions using opportunities offered by the Sri Lankan welfare state, including free education and opportunities offered by patronage politics and market mechanisms. These opportunities, however, have not evenly benefited all such caste groups or all members within

a specific caste group, and there are many depressed caste pockets where poverty, landlessness, low human dignity, unemployment and poor living conditions in general exist side by side with continued discrimination on the part of surrounding communities as well as government institutions such as schools in some instances at least. Many of the depressed caste Sinhala communities studied under this project revealed low educational achievement, extreme poverty, over-crowdedness, poor asset ownership, continued pressure to pursue hereditary caste occupations in spite of the marked dislike for such occupations among the younger generations and manifestations of social marginalisation such as alcoholism and other social pathologies.

This situation was clearly manifest in the Kinnara village of Henawala in Kandy district, where the educational achievement was low and, therefore, the bulk of population was engaged in traditional craft occupations (mat weaving and manufacture of dusters and Kandyan ornaments with limited income and limited avenues for advancement (see Table 2).

Table 2: Adult Population in Henawala by Level of Education, 2007

Educational Level	Number	Percentage
Illiterate	21	10.1
Passed 5th standard	91	44.0
Passed 8th standard	80	38.6
GCE OL	11	5.3
GCE AL	4	0.2
Total	**207**	**100.0**

Interestingly, many women in this community had resorted to overseas employment as domestic servants in Middle-east countries using a new opportunity opened up due to globalisation in an obvious attempt to escape caste discrimination prevalent within the local social structure (see Table 3).

Table 3: Distribution of Households in Henawala by Main Occupation, 2007

Main Occupation	No. of Households	Percentage
Government or private sector paid employment	6	5.3
Traditional craft	80	70.2
Overseas employment as domestic helpers	33	28.9
Casual wage labour	8	7.0
Total	**114**	**100.0**

This, in turn, points to the limitation of the caste-blind policy that has been pursued lately in Sri Lanka and the need for special measures for addressing poverty and social exclusion in such settings.

3. Caste Discrimination among Sri Lanka Tamils

The caste system among Sri Lankan Tamils in Jaffna can be seen as the most rigid and the one with clearly defined patterns of inequality, discrimination and social rejection driven by a religiously articulated notion of untouchability. The power, influence and high status in Jaffna society have been held by the land-owning Vellâlar caste, considered as the dominant caste for all intensions and purposes (Pfaffenberger 1982, Siddarthan 2003, Mahroof 2000). The bottom layer of the Jaffna caste system is collectively referred to as "Panchamar", consisting of Vannâr (Dhoby, i.e. Washerman), Ampattar (Barber), Pallar (Landless labourers), Nalavar (Toddy tappers) and Parayar (Funeral drummers) traditionally accorded untouchable status in Jaffna society. Traditionally, they made up about 18 per cent of the Jaffna population as compared to nearly 50 per cent of the Vellâlar population in the peninsula in the pre-war period.

In between Vellalars and Panchamars, there were several intermediary caste groups who also experienced discrimination from the dominant caste in matters such as temple administration, education, employment and land market. There were many forms of discrimination against the Panchamar "outcasts" ranging from prohibitions against any kind of respectable clothing to denial of access to public transport, drinking water, temples, tea shops and the like. Ragunathan (2002) listed 24 specific prohibitions imposed by Vellalar elite on Panchamers in the 1950s that covered all aspects of their life though the agitations of Panchamar against human rights violations had begun in 1920s. The protests culminated into the "campaign for equality in seating and eating for school children" in the 1920s, Teashop Entry Movement in the 1950s and Temple Entry Movement in the 1960s. These campaigns, which sometimes led to violent clashes between Vellâlars and Panchamars, achieved a measure of success in reducing manifest forms of caste discrimination but by 1970s, these struggles were aborted due to the rise of Tamil identity politics that sought to unify all Tamils irrespective of caste, class and other divisions in a struggle against Sinhala dominated state.

The rise of Tamil militancy in 1980s enabled the non-Vellâlar groups in Jaffna society to assert themselves politically but the Eelam struggle has served to silence the caste struggle in the interest of what they see as a more urgent

national liberation struggle where caste is officially banned and muted but caste discrimination as such is not recognised and not addressed even as an undercurrent in the Eelam campaign (Schalk 1992, 1997, Ravikumar 2006). On the other hand, some Panchamar groups appear to be among the worst victims of the war in that they are apparently overrepresented among the long-term Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) remaining in camps even during ceasefire as discovered in the current study.

There are several reasons for the predominance and long-term presence of Panchamer people in the IDP camps in Jaffna Peninsula (see Table 4). First, the 'low caste' people did not own much land other than their ancestral landholdings of miniscule size, as a result of which once displaced they become absolutely landless having nowhere else to go except the Welfare Centres maintained by the state for IDPs. The IDPs displaced *en mass* from high security zones occupied by the Sri Lanka security forces are particularly vulnerable as they cannot return to their original villages due to the restrictions imposed by the security forces. Second, the people of untouchable caste background do not have adequate social networks outside their own communities restricting their capacity to move out of the Welfare Centres, where they are dependent on state subsidies. Third, most of the low caste people do not have enough resources to purchase new land or build separate shelter on their own. Fourth, even if they have enough savings, they find it difficult to purchase land from those of other castes due to the continuing practices of caste discrimination and unwillingness on the part of other castes to accept Panchamers as their immediate neighbours. Fifth, for a variety of reasons, such as security and mutual support mechanisms, Panchamers may prefer to live together in their own caste communities in or outside the IDP camps (Sivathamby, 2005).

Table 4: Distribution of IDP Population in Welfare Centres in Mallakam by Caste (as of 31-10-2007)

Name of Welfare Centre	Caste Composition	Number of Families	Population
Coir Industry Centre	Nalavar & Pallar	16	71
Neethavan Welfare Centre	Nalavar	79	274
Oorani Welfare Centre	Nalavar	30	114
Konatpulam Welfare Centre	Nalavar	122	415
Total		247	874

Moreover, these IDP communities (Mukâm) experienced a degree of caste discrimination from surrounding communities in matters such as access to water and education. This shows that despite common Eelam struggle, common

war-torn ravage and a ban on caste imposed by the LTTE, some new forms of caste discrimination have emerged in the war-torn Jaffna society (Daniel and Thangaraj 1994). As a dispossessed and hereditarily disadvantaged caste minority within an ethnic minority, the IDPs in Jaffna also experienced dual discrimination: they were frequently subjected to the gaze and checking of Sri Lankan security forces and the recruitment drives of the LTTE because of their concentration in IDP camps, euphemistically called "Welfare Centres"; and relative inability to move to safer areas or overseas destinations outside the war zone. This indicates that the long-term IDPs in Jaffna were simultaneously subjected to caste, class and ethnic pressures of various kinds.

In war and tsunami affected areas of Eastern Sri Lanka too, caste appears to be of considerable importance in identity formation, local politics as well as in processes of social discrimination. As pointed out by McGilvray (2008), the Tamil high caste alliance in Eastern Sri Lanka comprising Mukkuvar, Vellalar and Kurukkal have traditionally controlled land ownership, office, administration of high caste temples and extracted services of household service (kutimai) castes such as washermen, barbers and drummers. These castes also provided services to other dominant groups in society, including Muslim landlords. On the other hand, the same service caste people have also been some of the main victims of ethnic riots that followed suspected LTTE attacks on Muslims in view of their underdog fringe position in spatial arrangements between Muslim and Tamil population concentrations along ethnically volatile eastern coastal belt (McGilvray 2008: 326).

Elaborating this point McGilvray notes: "Because of the determination of Muslims to reside together in established Muslim enclaves the pressure on adjoining Tamil neighbourhoods has resulted in both irresistible buy-outs and violent eviction of Tamil residents by their Moorish neighbours. For example, lower caste Tamils have been forcibly driven out of their neighbourhoods in the Kalmunai Sammanthurai area and Moors have quickly moved in" (2008: 326). This is another instance where ethnic, caste and possibly class dynamics have merged and fuelled each other in ways that unleash violence against oppressed caste groups within the Sri Lanka Tamil ethnic minority.

4. Ethnic and Caste Discrimination and the Status of Indian Tamils

The bulk of the Indian Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka are drawn from the lowest and most depressed caste groups in South India (Chandrabose 2003, Bhanjee 1999). While this may be an artifact of greater poverty among such

groups at the time when the colonial masters were recruiting such labour (from 1840s onwards), it appears that the colonial masters and the employers of such labour were deliberately looking for those from the relevant caste groups in their search for a pliant work force as well as due to their firm stereotypical views about race and caste of workers (Wickramasinghe 1995). Over 75 per cent of the Indian Tamil workers belonging to Pallan, Parayan and Chakkiliar (PPC) castes represent the lowest levels in the South Indian caste hierarchy, but interestingly those in supervisory grades were selected from among the Kudianavar castes of higher status (Balasumderam 2002, Daniel 1993). Even though we could expect that joining the plantation work force would have produced a levelling influence on people from different caste backgrounds, this has not happened for over 150 years.

The colonial system and the plantations imposed many restrictions on the Indian Tamil plantation workers in order to keep them under harsh living conditions and minimum worker benefits within the plantation workforce. The Sinhala and, to some extent, Tamil nationalists movements in Sri Lanka treated them as an immigrant group with no local roots and mere interlopers brought in by colonial masters. As an ethnic minority in post-independence Sri Lanka, the Indian Tamils lost their citizenship rights and a programme for repatriation of a significant number of them back to India was initiated in the 1960s. One could argue that the "Untouchables" became "Touchable" within the plantation economy as members of PPC castes worked and lived side by side with Kudiyanavar people within the plantations. There was however some degree of replication of caste or even "an invention of caste" (Dirk, 1997 & 2001) within the plantation economy in so far as worker hierarchy broadly conformed to the caste system and some services (e.g. sanitary work, washing of cloths) were extracted on the caste basis.

The system of bonded labour that evolved in the plantations shared many features with the caste system in so far as mobility of labour was restricted, *kanganis* and other higher ranks came from more respected castes and chances of moving up or moving out were extremely limited (Hullop 1993, 1994, de Silva 1962, de Silva 1982). While ethnic barriers (language, citizenship rights, and poor education) served to keep them within the plantation system, caste, class and, to some extent, gender barriers reinforced their position as manual workers with limited rights and low dignity. The bulk of the tea pickers were women who had limited agency at home as well as in work place. As a cumulative outcome of these circumstances, Indian Tamil plantation workers recorded the lowest educational levels and life expectancy, the poorest quality of life and

the highest mortality levels in independent Sri Lanka in spite of the widely acclaimed beneficial outcomes of the Sri Lankan welfare state.

In addition, there are serious social problems such as alcoholism, domestic violence, poor housing, lack of support in old age and widespread poverty in many of these communities, adding to their social marginality. From a purely demographic viewpoint in Sri Lanka the prospects for development of a Dalit movement were the greatest among the Indian Tamils with over 75 per cent of the population belonging to the Dalit category and continuing linkages with India. The Kudianavar presence in the estate population has been further reduced in recent years due to their greater tendency towards outmigration using their social networks spreading to South India. However, the political mobilisation of the community took a distinctly ethnic form particularly since 1940s, with a Kudianavar leadership in control of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), representing Indian Tamil interests in Sri Lanka.

In spite of its seemingly working class orientation, the CWC is an upper caste-led organisation that has been part of the ruling governments in Sri Lanka without interruption since the 1970s. As in the case of Sinhalese and Sri Lanka Tamils, increased ethnic mobilisation has served to silence caste in public domain and political articulation among the Indian Tamils too. The complex interplay between outcaste status and ethnic and class marginalisation in urban Sri Lanka is demonstrated by sanitary labour communities of Indian origin present in Kandy, Colombo, Gampola and various other places. Often employed by the municipal or urban councils in the area, these communities were established during the British period in a clear manifestation of "invention of caste" by the colonial system. The cleaning of public latrines and sweeping of streets in urban centres were made the responsibility of persons of appropriate caste status brought in from South India for the purpose and settled in ghetto-like urban neighbourhoods established by municipal or urban council administrations.

There is a clear convergence of outcaste, underclass and ethnic ghetto characteristics in these urban communities evolved over the past century. The ethnic and caste composition in Mahaiyawa Municipal Council community established by the Kandy Municipal Council for urban sanitary workers in close proximity to the main cemetery in Kandy, itself seen as a distinct source of ritual pollution, indicate a clear pattern (see Table 5 and 6).

As regards employment pattern , apart from employment as sanitary workers in KMC, other categories of manual work and casual employment in the city

comprise the main sources of employment for men and women in Mahaiyawa MC, with a high rate of unemployment particularly among youth.

Table 5: Percentage Distribution of Households by Ethnicity in Mahaiyawa and Kandy City

Ethnic Group	MC*	MT*	Kandy City**
Sinhala	5.3	34.0	70.5
Tamil	93.5	21.7	13.7
Muslim	1.2	42.3	13.5
Other	0	2.1	3.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Based on a sample survey of households, ** Based on KMC records 2005*

Table 6: Percentage Distribution of Population by Caste in Mahaiyawa MC (2007 Estimated Percentages)

Caste	Traditional Occupation	Percentage
Parayan	Drummer, Street sweepers, Garbage collectors	45
Chakkiliyan	Toilet cleaning	30
Thelingu	Work supervisors	2
Reddi	Religious functionaries	3
Chetti	Funeral drummers	5
Vannar	Washing of cloths	2
Caste not known		13
Total		100

As members of an urban outcaste underclass community also considered as an ethnic enclave of some kind, people of Mahaiyawa experienced a number of hereditary disadvantages. First, the children from this community are often not admitted to good schools in Kandy due to the deep-seated prejudices of relevant school authorities, absence of Tamil medium in many of the better schools in Kandy, lack of funds, lack of social networks and lack of motivation among many of the parents and educational ambitions among the children themselves. With limited education and access to capital, members of this community has had limited success in securing white collar employment or taking up profitable business in town (see Table 7). In effect, they have been compelled to continue to work in KMC, primarily as sanitary workers even though there is a clear dislike towards such employment among younger generations in particular.

Table 7: Distribution of Population in Mahaiyawa MC and MT by Gender and Employment, 2007

Employment Category	Mahaiyawa MC			Mahaiyawa MT		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
KMC laborer	15.2%	1.1%	8.4%	6.8%	.0%	3.4%
Urban services	.4%	.4%	.4%	.4%	.0%	.2%
Petty trade	6.6%	.2%	3.5%	6.3%	2.1%	4.2%
shop assistant	6.4%	1.3%	3.9%	.4%	.0%	.2%
Business	2.5%	.2%	1.4%	3.0%	1.3%	2.1%
casual labor	4.1%	.0%	2.1%	1.3%	.9%	1.1%
skilled worker	1.0%	.0%	.5%	.8%	.0%	.4%
Clerical	3.1%	.9%	2.0%	4.6%	1.7%	3.2%
blue collar worker	4.5%	.9%	2.8%	3.4%	.0%	1.7%
Housewife	.2%	30.3%	14.6%	4.2%	40.9%	22.5%
overseas work	.6%	2.4%	1.5%	3.4%	2.1%	2.8%
self employment	1.4%	2.9%	2.1%	.4%	.4%	.4%
transport worker/driver	.8%	.0%	.4%	2.1%	.0%	1.1%
Security forces	0%	0%	0%	1.3%	O%	.6%
other employment	5.3%	1.3%	3.4%	11.4%	3.8%	7.6%
Pensioner	2.7%	1.1%	1.9%	3.4%	.0%	1.7%
Dependent child	31.4%	32.3%	31.8%	29.5%	27.7%	28.6%
Dependent elderly	4.1%	8.5%	6.2%	5.9%	7.2%	6.6%
Unemployed	9.8%	16.0%	12.8%	11.4%	3.8%	7.6%
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Other casual employment open to them in the town include carrying loads (natami), shoe repair, petty trade, driving three-wheelers and petty crime including prostitution. Members of the Mahaiyawa community experienced several inhibitions in the past, including a ban on admission to some high caste Hindu kovils in town and denial of entry to some hotels and tea boutiques. However, these restrictions have been gradually relaxed during the past several decades due to protests by certain community leaders. To borrow some expressions from Beall (2006), "dealing with dirt" as well as coping with "disorder of development" however remains a primary preoccupation of people of Mahaiyawa MC in view of poor and highly congested housing in the community, limited land rights, heavy reliance on common latrines erected and (poorly) maintained by the KMC, inadequate sewerage and other urban services in spite of its linkages with KMC and close proximity to the cemetery haunted by evil spirits and other potential disorders.

On the whole, the Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka whether they were in plantations or in urban sanitary worker communities were a creation of the British colonial regime. These communities were clearly established in the caste, class and racial/ ethnic imaginations of the colonial masters. Nearly two centuries after the influx of the first group of indentured workers from South India, the status, conditions of employment and perception about them as "outsiders" with lower dignity and their destiny as manual workers remain unchanged in spite of Sri Lanka's transition from a colony to a post-colonial society increasingly committed to neo-liberal economic and cultural globalisation. Certain parallel processes and continuities in caste, class, gender and ethnic dynamics have served to retard their social development and make Indian Tamils one of the most disadvantaged and politically the least articulated among the various ethnic groups in the country. Due to multiple inherited disadvantages stemming from ethnic marginalisation and underclass and outcaste statuses, they have remained at the bottom of the Sri Lanka society who are unable to benefit adequately from either the Sri Lankan welfare state or the economic globalisation processes that gained momentum since 1977 (Silva & Atukorala 1996).

5. Casteless or Caste-Blind?

The image of Sri Lanka as a casteless society stems from certain socialist imaginations (e.g. notion of equal society "samasamajaya") and certain nationalist imaginations representing the nation as a "deep horizontal comradeship" (Anderson 1991). The rejection of caste by Buddhist doctrine, limited evidence of the phenomenon of untouchability and relative invisibility of caste-based discrimination as such also contributed to the image of Sri Lanka as a casteless society (Silva, Sivapragasam & Thanges 2009). Some social scientists too viewed caste as an essentially declining or disintegrating phenomenon stemming from the past as compared to class differentiation and class formation identified as an "emerging phenomenon" in colonial and post-colonial contexts (Jayawardena 1983, Gunasinghe 1975). The absence of any open discussion on caste and total ignorance of state policies and programmes on caste to the non-government actors and the imposition of a ban on caste in Sri Lanka Tamil society by the LTTE are certain other manifestations of this view in contemporary Sri Lanka society. It is also important to point out that a political and social movement among underprivileged caste groups similar to the Dalit Movement in India has not emerged in Sri Lanka in spite of early stirrings against caste oppression particularly in Jaffna society (Pfaffenberger 1990).

This study however contends that Sri Lankan society is caste-blind rather than casteless for a number of reasons. First, certain depressed caste communities continue to exist and continue to experience caste-based discriminations in areas such as education, land market, access to resources, and access to social welfare and obstacles to upward social mobility often in combination with exclusionary dynamics such as class, ethnicity and gender.

Second, universal coverage policies of the Sri Lankan welfare state, however comprehensive they have been and however effective they have been in improving quality of life of the population at large, have not been able to eliminate or even curtail caste and ethnic barriers as evident from ethnographic research in specific communities covered by this study. In some instances, caste, class, ethnic and gender barriers have reinforced each other in ways that sustain hereditary disadvantages generation after generation. Official indifference towards caste-based discrimination has clearly proved to be ineffective in addressing social justice issues in specific contexts. It is quite possible that lower caste populations in minority ethnic groups have experienced "double discrimination" by virtue of being most disempowered social layers within minority ethnic groups in a Sinhala dominated state. The low educational achievement in Sinhala depressed caste villages however clearly indicates that caste has interfered with access to education in the majority ethnic group too.

Third, in meta-narratives such as JVP uprising in Southern Sri Lanka and LTTE uprising in Northern Sri Lanka unresolved and unaddressed grievances of youth in certain low caste communities among the Sinhalese and Tamils appear to be one of the hidden motives of the insurgents even though it was one among many and it was not necessarily the driving force of these large-scale radical mobilisations. While the stated political agenda of these movements shaped by ethno-nationalist ideologies did not have any caste content as such compared to explicit class or militant ethno-nationalist statements, the sociological analysis of the movements must pay some attention to the caste backgrounds of the participants as well ((Jiggins 1979, Chandraprema 1991, Moore 1997, Moore and Perera 1978, Roberts 1995, Fuglerud 1999). While Sinhala and Tamil nationalist movements have been more or less caste-blind, the vision of a classless and casteless nation devoid of inequality and discrimination appear to have been a powerful force driving these excluded groups (Silva 1999, 2001).

Fourth, even though caste is typically and silently invoked in private affairs such as marriage and interpersonal alliances, it can trigger group mobilisations from time to time in events such as elections, inter- or intra-village rivalries and political alliances. This may or may not reflect exploitation of caste

sentiments by interested parties for private gain. However, the fact is that caste can be mobilised for certain political ends indicate that at least some people continue to have deep-seated caste sentiments.

Finally, certain Panchamer and Kuttimai caste groups in Northern and Eastern Sri Lanka appear to be some of the worst victims of war, so-called "ethnic riots" and even natural disasters in view of their greater vulnerability and lack of coping abilities and limited economic and social capital. The state and non-state actors responding to relevant humanitarian concerns appear to be unaware of caste dimensions involved even though they have serious implications for access to resources and services among the affected people.

6. Legal and Policy Framework for Dealing with Caste

The Constitution of Sri Lanka (1978), under Article 12 (2), prohibits discrimination against persons by reason of his/her caste, work or decent to any disadvantage with regard to access to shops, public restaurants and places of public worship of his/her own religion. Partly influenced by the temple entry struggles by Panchmar castes in Jaffna, the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act was passed by the Colombo Government in 1957. This Act made it an offence for any person to discriminate against another on the ground of his/her caste in the matter of access to places of worship, shops, public eating houses and hostels, public wells, hairdressing salons, laundries, and cemeteries or for purposes of education and employment. In 1971, the Act was amended to strengthen its effectiveness and impose heavier punishment. Initially, there were some prosecutions under this Act in the Northern Sri Lanka but there was a tendency for the police not to take action against violations and it is said to have had limited impact in terms of safeguarding the rights of depressed caste communities (Silva and Hettihewage 2001).

The welfare state policies of the Sri Lankan state from 1930s onwards have assumed that universal coverage in providing free education, free health care and subsidised food rations would serve all deserving communities irrespective of caste, ethnicity, religion and gender. The Government has thus showed a considerable amount of resistance against any form of reservation policy favouring the traditionally underprivileged caste groups in contemporary Sri Lanka as a result of which no reservations of any kind have been introduced by the state in order to address hereditary disadvantages of deprived caste groups. While Sri Lanka has made undeniable gains in health and social sectors through universal coverage policies and programmes, the findings of the current study indicate that descriptive social parameters such as ethnicity and caste have

sometimes served to dilute and distort the effect of these policies *vis-à-vis* some specific disadvantaged groups who are prevented from participating in such programmes through a variety of exclusionary social mechanisms.

For instance, the children from these communities are often prevented from education in good schools owing to discriminations they experience in school admission as well as in school performance due to continuing prejudices against such children among school authorities, teachers and fellow students. It must be noted here that problems are caused not by universal coverage policies themselves but discriminations at the point of delivery of services. It appears that the existing policy framework and legal measures are not adequate to tackle any discrimination based on work and descent at the point of delivery of services.

7. Role of Civil Society

Even though Sri Lanka has a wide spectrum of civil society organisations (CSOs), including many human rights organisations, caste-based discrimination has not received sufficient attention (Jayawickrama 1976). Organisations like the *Sarvodaya Movement* in Sri Lanka identified in its formative years underserved depressed caste communities such as Rodiya villages for community-based development initiatives beginning with mobilisation of voluntary Sharamadana labour from outside including bands of volunteer school children from Colombo (Ratnapala 1979). This had the effect of drawing public attention to the plight of the Rodiyas, but these initiatives have not led to any serious advocacy efforts or public debate concerning discrimination on the basis of caste and descent as such.

Some NGOs working with groups such as potter communities have sought to mobilise these communities for self-help livelihood development activities, but they show a surprising neglect of the caste dimension (e.g. Rupasinghe 2000). Similarly, even though there is a plethora of NGOs working among war and tsunami IDPs in Sri Lanka, none has addressed the issue of caste in any significant way even though higher "low caste" presence in long-term IDP camps as well as caste discrimination they experience appears to be important factors to reckon with.

Human Development Organisation in Kandy is one of the few NGOs that have explicitly addressed the issue of caste in its activities in the plantation communities and urban low-income communities. It has focused its efforts on

awareness raising, networking among relevant communities and organisations representing such communities and advocacy efforts targeting other CSOs. It has initiated a useful dialogue with other agencies that need to be mainstreamed in time to come.

8. Caste Discrimination in Sri Lanka and International Conventions

At international level, the Government of Sri Lanka is bound by a number of international treaties that prohibit work, decent and caste-based discrimination including the International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD). In 1996, CERD made its first reference to caste-based discrimination stating that the term 'descent' mentioned in article 1 of the Convention does not solely refer to race but also to caste and analogous systems of inherited status. In CERD General Recommendation No. XXIX, the committee affirmed that this form of discrimination falls within the scope of 'descent-based discrimination' in the Convention. The Government of Sri Lanka should follow and enforce its legal provisions effectively at the domestic level in compliance with the general and special measures contained in CERD General Recommendation No. XXIX in its national policy framework. However, Sri Lanka is yet to undergo a full scale review of its human rights record in relation to caste-based discrimination

9. Conclusions

This study revealed several parameters of caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka.

First, in varying degrees there is a denial of dignity and social recognition for all deprived caste groups in Sri Lanka society. This is tied up with a notion of untouchability in the case of Jaffna society, ideas such as hereditary servitude in the case of Kandyan Sinhala society and notions of degraded and unclean work in the case of Mahaiyawa, sanitary worker community in Kandy, etc. Even where notion of ritual pollution does not exist, more secular ideas of condemnation have taken its place in perpetuation of social injustices in the name of caste. The hold of caste ideology has certainly become weaker, but this has not eliminated caste discrimination altogether. Instead, these developments have made caste discrimination underground, doxic and altogether unmanageable.

Second, discrimination experienced by underprivileged caste groups in the religious and ritual spheres include limited access to Kovils (e.g.Mallaham,

Mahaiyawa) and Buddhist temples (e.g. Kuragala), mandatory services in religious institutions (e.g. Welivita), denial of religious services (e.g. Kuragala) and restrictions on "low-caste people" acquiring priesthood.

Third, all the communities studied indicated certain economic disadvantages. Access to capital assets such as land remains a problem partly due to historical circumstances but also due to discrimination in land market as evident in the case of difficulty experienced by Panchamar IDPs in Jaffna to secure land from high caste land owners in the area. Even though comparable data for all the study community are not available, poverty and landlessness are high as evident in over-crowdedness, congestion, poor housing, whether in "line rooms" in plantations, slum-like urban environment in Mahaiyawa, IDP camps in Mallaham or Gubbayama settlements in 'low-caste' craft villages like Henawala.

Fourth, access to services such as water and sanitation facilities remains poor in plantation communities, urban Mahaiyawa as well as in rural IDP camps in Mallaham. This also reflects lack of power and influence *vis-à-vis* decision makers at higher levels in relevant government and local government agencies.

Fifth, the support of these communities may be mobilized by outside politicians for establishing vote banks at election times or for recruiting cadres in the case of LTTE or JVP, but no such efforts have been made to mobilise these communities around their common grievances in the form of mass movements. The CWC that represents the Indian Tamil community is not particularly representative of PPC castes that comprise the bulk of the Indian Tamil population. As in the case of LTTE, in CWC too recent political developments along ethnic lines have had the effect of silencing caste and not necessarily eliminating caste-based social discrimination.

Sixth, this study also revealed that underprivileged caste groups such as Panchmar in Jaffna society and kutamai castes in east coast are often the hardest hit by civil war, ethnic riots and natural disasters like tsunami (see Gill 2007). There were also instances where Chakkiliar sanitary worker settlements in the midst of Sinhala dominant areas were the worst victims of anti-Tamil ethnic riots that broke out in central and southern Sri Lanka in spite of the fact that they are by no means part of mainstream Tamil society.

Seventh, in Sri Lanka caste is often fused with other variables such as ethnicity and social class in ways that defy a simplistic and one dimensional analysis of social injustice. The underprivileged caste groups in minority ethnic groups are often the victims of "double discrimination" in so far as they may be

victims of both ethnic and caste discrimination at one and the same time. For instance, in the case of Mahaiyawa social exclusion is driven by overlapping and mutually reinforcing categories of caste, class and ethnicity. All the so-called depressed communities studied with the possible exception of Kuragala, are at the bottom rung of both social class and caste hierarchies making it difficult to treat caste in isolation. On the other hand, those who seek to push ethnic (e.g. ethno-nationalist political actors) or class (e.g. Marxist scholars and social actors) identity over and above all other identities, see caste as an insignificant epi-phenomenon of declining importance that need not be addressed in its own right. All these point to the importance of treating caste as one among several factors that simultaneously impact on the lives of the affected people. As also highlighted in a recent ILO report, work and decent-based discrimination often goes hand in hand (ILO 2007).

Eighth, problems such as alcoholism may be more widespread in some of these communities as evident in Kuragala, Mahaiyawa, some of the IDP camps and, to some extent, in many of the plantation communities. While this may be seen as a symptom of their social marginality rather than a root cause and a coping mechanism on the part of some of the affected people, it also tends to perpetuate their condition and enhance their vulnerability. In so far as alcoholism affects illness, domestic violence, earning capacity and a distorted consumption pattern at the household level, it may be seen as a factor in a chain of causation affecting poverty and disadvantage.

Ninth, the women in these communities may be seen as especially vulnerable group with ethnic, caste, class and gender discriminations simultaneously impacting on them. As evident from Mahaiyawa, unemployment rates are particularly high among women and some have responded to this situation by joining the stream of migration to the Middle East. Women in IDP communities too have shown remarkable ingenuity and resilience in dealing with their difficult circumstances complicated by war, repeated displacements and loss of family members due to war and related disasters (see Coomaraswamy 1997, Siddartan 2003, Goodhand, Hulme & Lewer 2000). Women also carry the burden of maintaining and preserving the purity of caste and ethnicity and taking part in the liberation struggles, particularly in the eyes of militant nationalist groups such as LTTE. In this context, the problematic notion of "armed virgins" has been attributed to the LTTE by some observers (Coomaraswamy 1997).

Finally, there have been instances of upward mobility from these communities through education, trade, overseas employment and other avenues. However, such upwardly mobile people typically move out of these communities when

they have the means to do so and sever all ties with these communities as a means of escaping low social esteem associated with them. In effect, the social status and backwardness of these communities have remained unchanged in spite of personal success of some individuals. The dominant ethos among many members of these communities is to seek individual rather than collective remedies for their problems thorough privately pursued exit strategies such as internal or overseas migration. In most instances, the remaining depressed caste communities tend to deny, ignore and sweep under the carpet the problems they face rather than recognising them and dealing with them in an open manner. Strategies such as name change clearly evident in the case of Welivita, outward migration and strategic marriages with those from superior caste status are used to "pass off" and hide their caste identity within an environment where open discussion about caste is discouraged.

10. Recommendations

In order to mitigate and finally eliminate CBD in Sri Lanka the following measures are proposed.

1. The Government of Sri Lanka, CSOs, including human right actors and international donors supporting development activities in Sri Lanka should explicitly recognise the existence of caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka and develop social policies and legislative and administrative measures that aim to prohibit work and descent-based discrimination and involve affected communities in their implementation. The constitutional and legal measures currently available for prevention of CDB must be reviewed and strengthened where necessary and used for the intended purpose. At the international level, the Government of Sri Lanka is expected to honour its human rights obligations and report on measures and progress to the UN treaty bodies on a regular basis.

2. On the part of the state and non-state development actors, it is not advisable to follow caste-blind policies particularly in spheres such as relief and rehabilitation, resettlement, poverty reduction, rural and urban development and community participation in general. It is important to recognise that universal coverage and free of charge public educational facilities is not an effective guarantee against perpetuation of discrimination on the basis of gender, caste, ethnicity and other such inherited identities. While there is a strong view in Sri Lanka that it is best to ignore caste altogether and "let it have a

natural death" as is often claimed by social activists, several considerations including prevailing pockets of CBD elaborated in this study make it necessary for us to regard caste as an important policy issue in contemporary Sri Lanka (Thorat and Shah 2007, Beall 2006).

3. There is considerable resistance against any form of reservation policy favouring the traditionally underprivileged caste groups in contemporary Sri Lanka. Such a policy may not be in agreement with universal coverage policies in education, health and other social services followed in Sri Lanka. There is also a strong view in the country that any kind of reservation policy will revive unnecessary caste consciousness and related conflicts in a country already divided along ethnic lines. In the light of these considerations, reservations may not be advisable or feasible at least in the short run, but alternative means of addressing existing gaps through targeted interventions must be explored. For instance, school admission policies must be revised in order to open up opportunities for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Alternatively particular attention may be paid to upgrade the quality of education in schools catering to children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

4. Along with other social variables such as gender, ethnicity, social class and poverty, caste must be explicitly addressed in social impact assessment and monitoring and evaluation of development programmes in Sri Lanka.

5. The National Human Rights Commission in Sri Lanka must pay greater attention on violation of human rights on the basis of caste and related factors, in matters such as school admission, access to resources such as land and drinking water, access to places of worship, and denial of political rights (Jayawickrama 1976).

6. Currently, caste is not included as a variable in any of the official data collection procedures or databases, including census, socio-economic surveys and poverty assessments. As a result there is no way to monitor any progress or adverse outcomes relating to CBD. In the light of widespread denial of caste it may be difficult to introduce caste as a variable and obtain reliable information on the topic in any of the national surveys. For development agencies working in given areas it may be more feasible to secure and utilise caste disaggregated data on key variables that may have a bearing on CBD. Unlike in India

where people are more open about their caste identity, in Sri Lanka asking about caste identity in social surveys may be problematic due to prevailing public attitudes. Agencies working for disadvantaged communities such as depressed caste communities can incorporate caste including CBD in their project monitoring and evaluation.

7. The absence of a common name such as Dalit to refer to all disadvantaged low caste communities across ethnic divide may be one important obstacle to the development of a common identity and an interaction among the affected people in different ethnic communities. However, the term Dalit may not be acceptable to all groups concerned given its external origin and lack of resonance with the local context. The appropriateness of this or any other suitable common identity for the different groups involved must be further explored.

8. The CSOs active for the development of different depressed caste communities in Sri Lanka must share their experiences and explore the possibility of promoting interaction among these communities across the ethnic divide. It may also be useful to promote interaction and exchange of experiences between Dalit activists in India and other South Asian countries including suitable community leaders in Sri Lanka.

9. The local government agencies must be encouraged to take appropriate steps to improve the living and working conditions and dignity of sanitary workers and janitorial workers through adoption of improved technologies, safety measures and development of career paths extending beyond caste specific employment categories. For instance, the development of a proper waste disposal mechanism as anticipated in the proposed Kandy City Waste Water Disposal Project supported by Japanese donors is likely to reduce the need for manual scavenging and with it the demeaning social status traditionally assigned to those engaged in manual scavenging. Similarly, the craft workers in Henawala are likely to benefit from any modernisation of the technology used in their production processes.

10. There is a need for further research on caste-based discrimination focusing on a number of issues. They include a) impact of CBD on poverty and social conflict, b) caste and human right violations as sketched by Goonesekere (2001, 2004) c) the impact of economic liberalisation on patterns of caste inequalities and d) interplay between

caste, gender, class and ethnic identities. This research must inform future policies and programme in relation to CBD.

Finally, the current study found that Sri Lankan society is by no means casteless as is commonly assumed and that the caste-blind policies of the Sri Lanka state and even non-state actors like LTTE and NGOs are not the best approach to deal with the continuing and emerging aspects of caste-based discrimination. Human right instruments, international conventions and universal coverage policies of the Sri Lanka state must be more explicitly used and extended where necessary in order to address the hidden as well as explicit dimensions of social inequality in Sri Lanka. CSOs must seek to identify, organise and empower the victims of caste-based discrimination in the same way they are dealing with other forms of inequality such as gender, social class and ethnicity.

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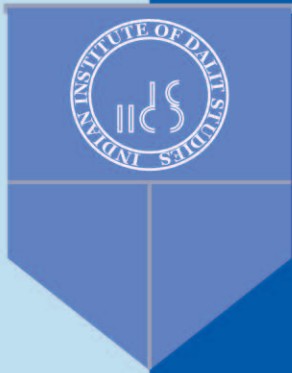- Ambedkar on Caste by Sukhadeo Thorat and Surinder S Jodhka

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