

# Casteless or Caste-blind?

**Dynamics of Concealed Caste Discrimination,  
Social Exclusion and Protest in Sri Lanka**



**Kalinga Tudor Silva  
P.P. Sivapragasam  
Paramsothy Thanges**

International Dalit Solidarity Network  
Indian Institute of Dalit Studies  
Kumaran Book House

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*Editors*

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## Preface

This study was conducted as part of a larger study on caste-based discrimination in South Asia supported by the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) and co-ordinated and facilitated by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS). As the term “Dalit” is not widely accepted in Sri Lanka, we have used that term sparingly in this publication. Instead, terms such as “depressed castes”, Panchamar, ‘Pallan, Parayan and Chakkilian (PPC) castes’ are used to refer to the lowest strata of the different caste systems in the country. This also points to special difficulties in understanding and addressing caste-based discrimination and social exclusion in Sri Lanka.

This study was expected to cover caste-based discrimination in varied settings, including the conflict-affected NorthEast Sri Lanka. However, a comprehensive coverage of caste-based discrimination in the Northern and Eastern parts of Sri Lanka was not possible due to the adverse security situation that prevailed in the relevant regions throughout the study period. The study focuses on caste-based discrimination in Central and Southern Sri Lanka with a limited assessment of caste discrimination in Jaffna society.

The research team takes this opportunity to thank Ms. Rikke Nohrlind of ISDN, Dr. Chittaranjan Senapati of IIDS and many co-researchers and civil society actors in Sri Lanka for supporting this study in various ways. Special thanks are due to Dr. Ram Alagan of the Department of Geography, University of Peradeniya for preparation of maps; Mr. E de Alwis, Deputy Librarian of the University Library for his assistance in literature survey; the Kandy Municipal Council for sharing information about one of the urban low-income communities in Kandy and last but not least, all the community members and community leaders in the various study locations for sharing their knowledge and personal experiences with us during field research.

It is our sincere hope that this study will not only create widespread awareness about patterns of caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka but also guide future policies and programmes addressing the relevant issues.

Prof. K. Tudor Silva  
P.P. Sivapragasam  
Paramsothy Thanges

## Foreword

The Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) has been among the first research organizations to undertake detailed research on marginalized and socially excluded groups in South Asian societies. Over the last five years IIDS has carried out a large number of studies on different aspects of social exclusion and discrimination of the historically marginalized social groups such as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and religious minorities in India and neighbouring countries.

This publication is a product of a regional research project on caste-based discrimination in South Asia. For the first time researchers from South Asia have worked together to unravel aspects of caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. This comparative research has helped us identify structural foundations of caste-based discrimination in South Asia as well as important differences in varied social environments influenced by Hinduism, Islamism, Buddhism and other religions. We hope this series of studies will open new spaces for state policy, political activism and civil society interventions for making South Asia a just, humane and democratic region committed to human rights.

In this particular publication a team of researchers from Sri Lanka has taken the lead in exploring the issue of caste-based discrimination in Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil communities in Sri Lanka. Dr. Chittaranjan Senapati co-ordinated the larger research programme on behalf of IIDS. A team of consultants from IIDS, comprising Prof. Ganashiyam Shah, Sukhadeo Thorat and Mr. Martin Macwan, shaped and guided the research process in all four countries covered by the larger project. We would like to acknowledge financial support for this project from DANIDA, Government of Denmark and International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN). We are particularly grateful to Ms. Rikke Nohrlind of IDSN for facilitating this research programme and taking the initiative towards disseminating its results at all levels.

We do hope that this publication will reach a wider audience including policy makers, researchers, Dalit activists and civil society organizations.

Prof. Surinder S. Jodhka  
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## Contributors

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**P.P. Sivapragasam**, Director, Human Development Organization, Kandy. He holds BA honours degree in Management from University of Peradeniya. He is a leading social and human rights activist particularly concerned with problems of plantation workers in Sri Lanka. He is an advisor to the International Dalit Solidarity Network and several other international activist groups.

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## **Abbreviations**

CBD	–	Caste-based Discrimination
CDO	–	Community Development Officer
DMK	–	Dravida Munetak Kalakam
GO	–	Government Organization
GOSL	–	Government of Sri Lanka
IDP	–	Internally Displaced People
IOT	–	Indian Origin Tamils
JVP	–	Janatha Vimukti Peramuna
KMC	–	Kandy Municipal Council
LTTE	–	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MC	–	Municipal Council Quarters
MT	–	Model Tenement
NGO	–	Non-government Organization
NHDA	–	National Housing Development Authority
PPC	–	Pallan, Parayan and Chakkilian
UDA	–	Urban Development Authority
UNICEF	–	United Nations Children's Education Fund
VVT	–	Valvedditurai

# **Casteless or Caste-blind?**

## **Dynamics of Concealed Caste Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Protest in Sri Lanka**

### **Executive Summary**

There are three parallel caste systems in Sri Lanka, Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil. There is no uniform notion of untouchability in the three caste systems, but each involves caste discrimination of some kind. The academic research on caste was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of these studies focused on functions of caste in forming a unified social system to the neglect of any consideration of caste discrimination, social injustices and human right violations involved and the plight of the bottom layers in society. Conducted with financial support from the International Dalit Solidarity Network (ISDN) and technical support from the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS), the current study examines patterns of caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka in a range of domains, including human dignity, access to education, access to water, work and employment, economic processes, political participation and social welfare. The study employed a range of methodologies for identifying and assessing caste-based discrimination, including literature review, analysis of secondary data, key informant interviews with community leaders and NGO and GO representatives in the relevant locations, focus group discussions with some of the affected population groups and ethnographic research in selected backward or depressed caste communities.

On the basis of the limited data available, this study estimates that 20 to 30 percent of the population in Sri Lanka is affected by caste discrimination of one kind or another. While the importance of caste has diminished over time since the colonial era, certain pockets of caste discrimination have survived and certain new forms of caste discrimination have emerged within the context of plantation economy, sanitary and scavenging services established with the formation of municipal and urban councils during the colonial era and civil war and the tsunami in more recent periods. The pre-colonial Sri Lankan state was built around caste-based privileges of the ruling elite and hereditary and mandatory caste services of the bottom layers in society. Unlike the Hindu caste system founded on religiously inscribed notions of purity and pollution, the caste systems in Sri Lanka have relied more on a kind of secular ranking upheld by the state, land ownership and tenure, religious organizations and rituals and firmly-rooted notions of inherent superiority and inferiority. Much of the official backing of 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. Moreover, the LTTE, that has established military control over pockets of NorthEast Sri Lanka, has imposed a ban and a kind of censorship on the caste system identifying it as an obstacle to a unified Tamil ethnic homeland it seeks to establish in the relevant parts of Sri Lanka. These developments have made caste 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 manipulatable in some instances. The ongoing nationalist mobilizations of society and the resulting Sinhala-Tamil divide merely serve to mask forms of gender, caste and class inequalities widespread and entrenched in society.

In Sinhala society, the pre-British Kandyan Kingdom organized a feudal social order as well as the accompanying political system, ritual order, land tenure and extraction of services around the

institution of caste as meticulously elaborated by Ralph Peiris (1956). The *radala* ruling elite was identified as a 'born to rule' social formation limited to a privileged few. The lower orders of society consisted of a Goigama "independent" peasantry comprising the bulk of Sinhala population, coastal low-country caste groups who were somewhat outside the indigenous caste system, a range of service castes with hereditary *rajakariya* (lit. "service to the king") services assigned to them with access to land tied to delivery of their services and some caste groups expected to perform "menial" 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 (*Kinnara*). In Sinhala society, the lower the caste status the more removed they were from land ownership though not necessarily from cultivation. Those with so-called menial services assigned to them were less than 1 percent of the total Sinhala population and often they 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 *Wahumpura* (domestic servants of Goigama), *Padu* (farm workers of Goigama), *Kumbal* (potters), *Berawa* (drummers and dancers), *Rada* (washermen) and *Nawandanna* (smiths). All these groups combined probably constituted as many as 30% of the Sinhala population. Their lower status was upheld by overlapping variables such as landlessness, caste specific family and personal names, service obligations towards higher orders in society, forms of dress and patterns of deference and demeanour built into inter-caste relations of all kinds. 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 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. 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.

The caste system among Sri Lanka 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 defined notion of untouchability. Power, influence and high status in Jaffna society have been held by the land-owning Vellālar caste, considered the dominant caste for all intentions and purposes. The bottom layer of the Jaffna caste system is collectively referred to as “Panchamar”, consisting of Vannār (dhoby), Ampattar (barber), Pallar (landless labourers), Nalavar (toddy tappers) and Parayar (funeral drummer) traditionally accorded untouchable status in Jaffna society. Traditionally they made up about 18% of the Jaffna population as compared to nearly 50% Vellālar population in the peninsula in the pre-war period. 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 houses and the like. Panchamar agitations against these violations of human rights began as far back as in the 1920s. These protests culminated in 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 Vellālar and Panchamars achieved a measure of success in reducing manifest forms of caste discrimination, but by 1970s these struggles were aborted by the rise of Tamil identity politics that sought to unify all Tamils irrespective of caste, class and other divisions in a struggle against the Sinhala dominated state. The rise of Tamil militancy since the 1980s enabled non-Vellālar groups in Jaffna society to assert themselves politically but the Eelam struggle has served to silence 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 recognized and not addressed even as an undercurrent in the Eelam campaign. On the other hand, some Panchamar groups appear to be among the worst victims of the war in that they are apparently over represented among the long-term IDPs remaining in camps even during ceasefire as revealed in the current study. Moreover, they have also experienced a degree of caste discrimination from surrounding communities in matters such as access to water, access to Hindu temples, particularly village level Hindu temples and access to land. This shows that despite the common Eelam struggle, common devastation caused by the war and a ban on caste imposed by the LTTE, some new forms of caste discrimination have emerged in the war-torn Jaffna society.

The bulk of the Indian Tamil plantation workers and many of the Indian Tamil sanitary workers employed by Municipal and Urban Councils in Sri Lanka are drawn from the lowest and most depressed caste groups in South India. While this may be an artifact of greater poverty among such groups at the time the colonial masters were recruiting for 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 faith in certain stereotypes of workers. Over 75% of the Indian Tamil workers belong to Pallan, Parayan and Chakkilian (PPC) castes representing the lowest levels in the South Indian caste hierarchy, but interestingly those in supervisory grades were selected from among Kudiyanavar castes of higher status. Even though we could expect that joining the plantation work force would have a levelling influence on people from different caste backgrounds, this has not happened for over 150 years. The indentured system of labour established in the plantations also acquired features of ethnicity and caste-based bonded labour whereby vertical and horizontal mobility of labour was restricted (Houlop 1994, de Silva 1962). While untouchability ceased to operate within the plantation system based

on super exploitation of labour (de Silva 1982), the low status and poor living conditions of the bottom layer of plantation workers were continued through overlapping categories of caste, class and ethnicity. In the case of secluded settlements of urban sanitary workers employed by local government agencies also established in the colonial era some aspects of untouchability continued side by side with ethnic marginality and underclass status. Social exclusion that continues to affect these communities cannot be understood purely in class or ethnic terms.

Finally the study concludes that Sri Lanka 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 the LTTE and NGOs are not the best approach for dealing with continuing and emerging aspects of caste-based discrimination. Human Rights 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. Civil society organizations must seek to identify, organize and empower victims of caste-based discrimination in the same way they are dealing with other forms of inequality such as gender, social class and ethnicity.

## Chapter One

### **Introduction**

*Kalinga Tudor Silva*  
*Paramsothy Thanges*  
*P.P. Sivapragasam*

#### **Background**

In comparison to India, the caste system in Sri Lanka is considered to be mild. Three parallel and more or less independent caste systems prevail in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil. Each caste system involves some forms of caste-based discrimination. The academic research on caste was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of these studies focused on functions of caste within a system of organic solidarity to the neglect of any consideration of caste discrimination and the plight of the bottom layers in the society.

Caste is a tabooed subject in contemporary Sri Lanka. Caste was a primary category that was used in all regional censuses before 1871. In the first countrywide census held in 1871, population was classified on the basis of race and nationalities and caste ceased to be a census category since then. As a result, no reliable information can be found in the current time about the size of population in each caste. Social policies and even human rights discourses rarely address the issue of caste. The colonial regimes in Sri Lanka did not approve caste, but nevertheless they utilized caste for various

purposes, including selecting suitable officials for administration of countryside, tax collection, and even in recruiting and managing workers in the plantation economy developed by them.

The welfare state policies of the Sri Lankan government from 1930s onwards assumed that universal coverage in providing free education, free health care and subsidized food rations will serve all deserving individuals irrespective of caste, ethnicity, religion and gender. No reservations of any kind have been introduced by the state to address the hereditary disadvantages of the deprived caste groups.

The caste systems in Sri Lanka can be considered less rigid compared to the Hindu caste system in India because of the secular nature of the hierarchy, a critical doctrinal perspective relating to caste in Buddhism, the predominant religion in Sinhala society, a relatively weak notion of untouchability in caste systems in Sri Lanka and relatively small size of the bottom layer of society. The pre-British Kandyan state was organized according to the principles of caste, with land ownership, power and authority and superior status mainly concentrated in the aristocratic layer society. There were four clearly separate layers in the Kandyan caste system with Goigama (farming) caste at the top, coastal caste groups as the next layer, artisan service castes and three highly despised and ostracized groups (Kinnara, Gahala and Rodi) at the bottom. The latter groups, who never comprised more than 1 percent of the total Sinhala population, continue to experience a degree of discrimination in private life (interpersonal relations) as well as in public domains. Social grievances among some of the middle level caste groups (Karawa, Bathgama and Wahumpura) have been responsible for political radicalism and anti-establishment mobilizations in the political movements such as the JVP. However, a complete silence about caste and considerable resistance against any open discussion of caste in general reign in society (Stirrat 1982). The caste sentiments, however, are mobilized often surreptitiously for electoral purposes in all national elections.

As regards caste discrimination in Jaffna society, a religiously sanctioned notion of untouchability similar to the Indian model prevailed in relation to Panchamar caste groups comprising about 18% of the population in Jaffna society as of 1957 (no macro data on caste composition in Jaffna available since then). Discriminations imposed upon the Panchamar included 24 prohibitions covering all aspects of life. Campaigns against the caste system in Jaffna began in the 1920s and included campaigns for equality in seating and eating in schools, tea shop and temple entry. Some of these campaigns took a violent form and set the stage for a violent Tamil liberation struggle which, however, had the effect of silencing caste struggle in the interest of a unified Tamil struggle against the Sinhala dominated state. Many of the explicit caste discriminations disappeared by the 1980s as a result of Panchamar struggles in the preceding period, population displacement caused by civil war and many other factors. However, a bulk of the IDPs taking long-term shelter in IDP camps in Jaffna is of Panchamar background. They are staying in the camps because of factors including lack of alternative housing, deep-rooted poverty, lack of social assets, deprivation or exclusion from the local land market and security and welfare considerations of the affected people.

Caste-based discrimination among the Indian Tamil plantation workers and others in Sri Lanka evolved as an aspect of the plantation economy developed during the British period. The bulk of plantation workers came from three depressed caste communities in South India, namely Pallan, Parayan and Chakkilian (PPC castes). While the plantation economy in some ways had a levelling working class influence on plantation workers, the plantation economy in other ways reproduced the caste system for its own advantage. For instance, initially most Kanganies (labour supervisors) were selected from the 'higher caste' people who came with these labourers. Similarly, some of the caste occupations such as sanitary labour and washing of cloths were reproduced within the plantations. Thirdly, ritual systems which were popular in the estates recognized and operated

on the basis of caste distinctions. The study, however, found that caste-based discrimination has progressively weakened among the plantation workers. There are two sectors where elements of caste-based discrimination continued. As at present the Trade Union movement is largely controlled by high castes in the plantation community in spite of the work force being predominantly of PPC background. There are also urban communities of sanitary labourers of Indian Tamil origin who continue to experience a degree of social exclusion due to a combination of factors including their ethnic, caste and occupational backgrounds and existence in ghetto-like crowded urban communities.

Even though some state policies and programmes (e.g. “Gam Udawa” or village reawakening programme), and some political actors and certain civil society actors (e.g. the Sarvodaya Movement, Gandhian Movement) have taken the initiative to enhance the socio-economic status and self esteem of the so-called depressed castes from time to time. Caste has never been openly addressed in social policy and public action of any kind. Members of the relevant caste groups have not come forward to challenge the caste systems in an organized manner. The term “Dalit” is not used in Sri Lanka either as a means of self identification or as a descriptive label adopted by analysts or political actors.

### **Objectives of the Present Study**

1. To identify the nature, extent and mechanisms of caste-based discrimination (CBD) and exclusion in Sri Lanka.
2. To identify, assess and document any activities and programmes for addressing CBD.
3. To identify ways and means of eliminating or at least reducing CBD.
4. To produce information about the condition of underprivileged ‘low caste’ groups in Sri Lanka with a focus on their human rights, poverty situation and trends, political participation, gender relations and share this information with relevant parties, including policy makers, development actors

and social activists, including leaders of the affected communities.

5. To identify follow-up research and action needed to promote advocacy, networking and research and analytical capacities in Sri Lanka on the subject of CBD.

## **Methodology**

This study has employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative research techniques. In view of the difficulty in securing valid and reliable information on the sensitive subject of caste, given the public denial of even the existence of caste in many situations and the tendency to avoid the topic in day-to-day communication as much as possible and given the limited time available for this study, a household survey was not attempted. Instead, the following procedures were used to generate information relating to CBD in the sectors covered.

1. A comprehensive literature review covering both English language literature and Sinhala and Tamil publications.
2. Secondary data analysis covering census information, socio-economic surveys, information generated by NGOs and research organizations.
3. Key Informant Interviews with selected community leaders and political actors representative of so-called 'lowest caste' communities in Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil communities.
4. Key Informant Interviews with relevant officials in government organizations and non-government organizations seeking to promote and advance the interests, capabilities, socio-economic status and human rights of the marginalized 'low caste' communities.
5. Ethnographic research was conducted in 9 depressed caste communities representative of CBD in Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil populations in different parts of the country (See Table 1.1 and Map 1). The aim of the

ethnographic research was to understand the mechanisms of caste-based discrimination and validate and understand the wider context of information gathered in previous steps.

6. Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted in selected deprived 'low caste' communities, IDP camps and war and disaster affected communities with a view to elicit community perspectives and experiences relating to CBD in complex humanitarian emergencies.
7. A national level dissemination workshop was conducted to disseminate the findings of this study, promote advocacy and follow up action and secure feedback from the key players at the national and regional levels before finalizing the Sri Lanka report on this topic.

**Table 1.1**

Study Locations Covered in Ethnographic Research on  
Caste-based Discrimination

<b>Study Location</b>	<b>District</b>	<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Depressed Castes</b>
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

The field research was undertaken by a team of researchers attached to the Department of Sociology at the University of Peradeniya in collaboration with the Human Development Organization in Kandy. The research team included both men and women and scholars representing different ethnic and caste backgrounds in order to

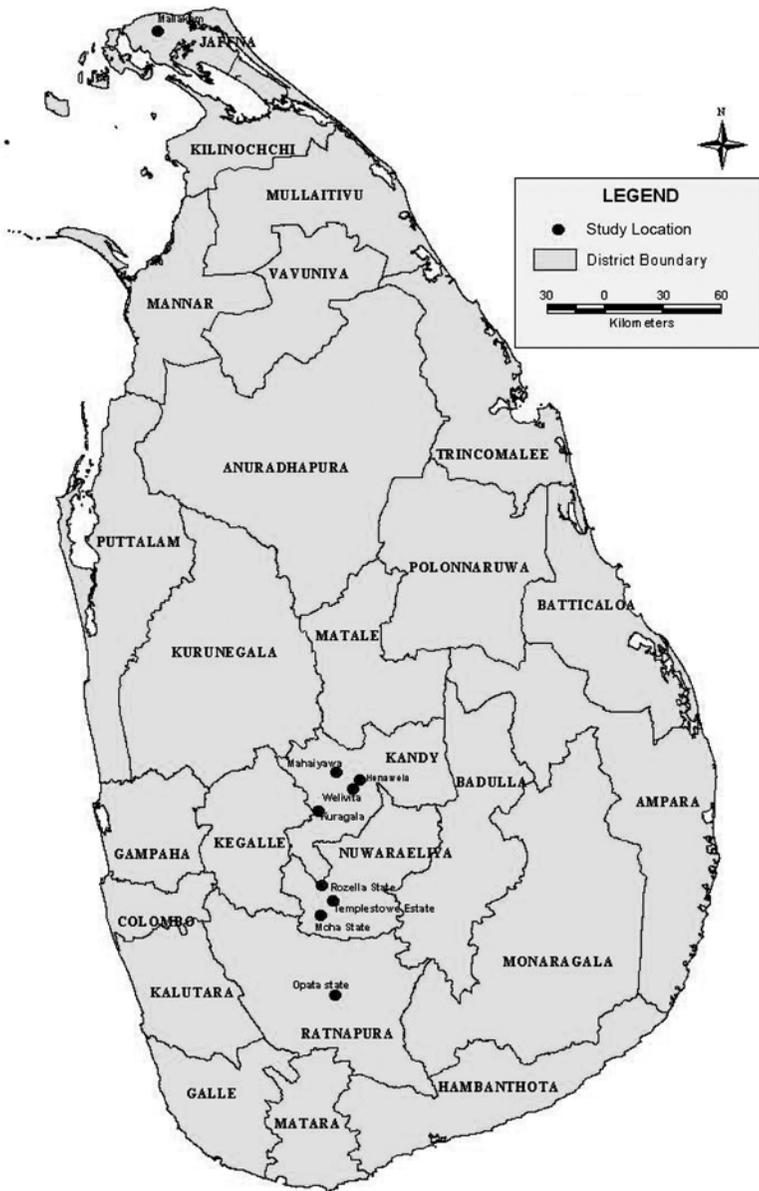
facilitate rapport building in data gathering. While identifying and selecting field researchers, priority was given to those already with substantial field experience in the relevant communities. Ethnographic research was conducted by suitable post-graduate students attached to the University of Peradeniya, who developed their capacities for research, consultancy and advocacy relating to prevention of CBD as an outcome of this project.

The National Consultation Workshop on Caste-Based Discrimination in Sri Lanka was held on May 27, 2007 at the University of Peradeniya with the following specific objectives: (See Annexure 3).

- to share the finding of the Sri Lanka study with key stakeholders;
- to validate the information acquired through various sources;
- to get necessary feedback from experts, researchers, activists and key actors of governmental as well as non-governmental agencies to enrich the report; and
- to promote networking and dissemination of findings among all relevant parties.

A total of 40 stakeholders representing researchers, social activists, NGO personnel, human rights specialists, students and trade union personnel, participated in this national workshop. Prof. Ghanshyam Shah represented IIDS, New Delhi and Ms Rikke Nohrlind represented the International Dalit Solidarity Network in this workshop.

Map 1: Map of Sri Lanka showing study locations



## Chapter Two

### **Caste Discrimination in Sri Lanka: An Overview**

*Kalinga Tudor Silva  
Paramsothy Thanges*

#### **Background**

Although caste is in many respects less significant and less visible in Sri Lanka, compared to India, some 90% of the population in Sri Lanka recognizes caste for some purposes at least (See for comparison Thorat and Shah 2007). Actually, there are three parallel caste systems among different communities in Sri Lanka<sup>11</sup>. Variants of the Hindu caste system prevail among two groups of Tamil speaking Hindus living in different parts of the country. The caste system appears to be strongest among Jaffna Tamils and their descendants in various parts of the country. In spite of nearly two decades of war and related population displacements, a growing sense of minority consciousness and an ethnic solidarity cutting across caste among all Tamils and an official ban on caste imposed

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11 In addition to the three caste systems discussed in this book, there may be a fourth one among Tamil speaking people in the East Coast of Sri Lanka. However, we see it as a variant of the Hindu caste system prevalent in Jaffna society. Even though we sought to cover one depressed caste community in ethnographic research conducted, we failed to do so due to the security situation prevailing in the area during the study period. For details about caste system in Eastern Sri Lanka see (McGilvray 2008, 1982, 1983).

by the LTTE, caste distinctions continue to exist and affect day-to-day life, particularly in the Jaffna Peninsula<sup>12</sup>. A variant of the Hindu caste system has also survived among the descendants of indentured plantation labour of Indian origin dating back to the 19th century. As distinct from “Sri Lanka Tamils” concentrated in NorthEast Sri Lanka and some suburbs of Colombo and with much stronger and deeper historical roots in Sri Lanka, “Indian Tamils” evolved as a separate ethnic group closely associated with the plantation economy with their geographical concentration in vast tea plantations in the hilly regions of Central Sri Lanka. As of 2005, the Tamil population in Sri Lanka consisted of 2.4 million Sri Lankan Tamils and 1.2 million Indian Tamils, comprising 12 and 6 percent of the total population in the country, respectively. Even though some authors refer to a breakdown or a gradual relaxation of the caste system among Indian Tamils due to the process of migration from mostly depressed caste backgrounds in South India and the levelling influence of working class experience in the plantations for one and a half centuries, others refer to the resilience and continuity of caste and its mobilization by the plantation management for recruitment of workers, organization of the labour force and development and preservation of a semi-feudal social order in the plantations (Jayaraman 1975, Hullop 1993, 1994, de Silva 1982 ).

The Sinhalese, comprising 74% of the country’s population, have evolved their own caste system at least from the medieval period onwards in spite of their culture and world view heavily influenced by Buddhism, advocating heretical views on caste. Thus among the Hindus and Buddhists as well as among Sinhala

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12 Apart from our own research in Jaffna society, the work of two recent ethnographers, namely Siddhartan Maunaguru and Bahirathy confirm our findings relating to the continuing significance of caste among Sri Lanka Tamils. Bahirathy conducted her doctoral research on caste in Jaffna society and in his PhD research Siddartan worked on kinship and marriage among Sri Lanka Tamil refugees in Tamil Nadu and members of the Sri Lanka Tamil diaspora in Canada. The results of these two important ethnographic researches will be published in due course.

or Tamil speaking Christians, some ideas and practices relating to caste have continued, even though the significance of caste in social life is by no means constant among the different groups. As caste is considered a taboo subject in Sri Lanka, open discussion about the topic or any policy debates concerning how to deal with the phenomenon have been absent.

Caste however was an important topic of sociological and anthropological research in Sri Lanka during the 1960s and 1970s (e.g. Banks 1957, 1960, Leach 1960, 1961, Yalman 1967, Silva 1982, 1992, Roberts 1984, Ryan 1993). These academic research did not pay a great deal of attention on aspects of social exclusion and discrimination, rather examined the caste as an important social institution determining social order and patterns of social interaction. Edmond Leach (1960), for instance, argued that in Sinhalese society, caste provides for organic solidarity within a hierarchical social order and that, side by side with hereditary privileges for those at the top, the caste system provided an element of social protection and economic security for those at the lower end of the hierarchy in so far as they enjoyed a monopoly over certain hereditary occupations or services considered to be essential for the upkeep and honour of those at the top. Similarly, in “Handsome Beggars”, the Indian Anthropologist Raghavan (1957) highlighted the carefree life of the lowest caste in Sinhala society, namely the Rodiyas. This kind of functionalist interpretations of caste had the effect of diverting attention away from the exploitative and problematic features of caste. Caste, however, ceased to be a popular subject for research in Sri Lanka in the 1980s when attention shifted to ethnicity, nationalism and their relation to dynamics of social conflict and civil war.

While there are elements of social exclusion and discrimination targeting those at the bottom of the hierarchy in all three caste systems in Sri Lanka, a religiously defined notion of pollution and untouchability is lacking in the Sinhala caste system. In his monograph on the Sinhala caste system, Ryan (first published in 1957 and reprinted without revision in 1993), for instance, noted

“Perhaps the most notable feature of Sinhalese stratification, in contrast with the Indian, is the absence of “untouchables” in the Hindu sense. In Buddhism, no man is “unclean” in the sacred meaning of the concept. While there is an “outcaste untouchable” group, its untouchability rests more on the secular taboo than in religious proscription. The absence of the Hindu concept has rendered the Sinhalese caste system mild and humanitarian when judged by Indian standards” (Ryan 1993: 16-17).

While caste took a secular form in Sinhala society in comparison to Hindu society, the caste organization in the pre-British Kandyan kingdom took a distinctly feudal character with an aristocracy (Radala), peasantry (Goigama), artisan/service castes (*sevakula*) and those expected to provide menial services (*nicha kula*) making up distinct social layers defined by the caste system. There were parallel and interconnected systems of land tenure and caste-based services organized as essential aspects of the state machinery (Pieris 1956). Leach (1960) referred to the exclusive and unalienable “rights” of “low castes” to practise certain hereditary occupations and, hence, remain essential to those above them in caste hierarchy, giving the “low castes” a degree of social protection within the prevailing social order. However, this was only part of the story since the same caste occupations gave them lower dignity and made them vulnerable to maltreatment, abuse, compulsions and discriminations of all kinds.

Within each caste system, there are certain caste groups which have been historically treated as outcastes or “those beyond the pale of unhindered social contact” (Ryan 1993). The term “depressed castes” has been typically used to refer to such castes in the English language accounts of Sri Lankan society. Among the Sri Lankan Tamils, a religiously sanctioned notion of untouchability has prevailed and the bottom layers of the caste system is collectively referred to as “Panchamar” castes, namely Vannār (dhoby), Ampattar (barber), Pallar (landless labourers), Nalavar (toddy tappers) and Parayar (funeral drummers). These castes have been traditionally accorded untouchable status in Jaffna society. According to Banks (1957) and

David (1974a), they comprise about 18% of the total population in Jaffna. Rangunathan (2002) listed a series of 24 prohibitions applicable to Panchamar during the 1950s, ranging from dress code, access to drinking water and access to public spaces and services.<sup>13</sup>

The bulk of the Indian Tamil plantation workforce belongs to the three lowest caste groups, namely Pallan (menial workers), Parayan (drummers) and Chakkiliyan (toilet cleaners), all of whom have traditionally experienced certain amount of discrimination within the plantation communities despite their numerical strength (Jayaraman 1975, Hullop 1994). The sanitary labourers and street sweepers in several towns belonging to the Chakkilian caste (Sakkili in Sinhala) continue to occupy an outcaste status, ever since the British established them in these occupations when they set up the municipal and urban councils in the 19th century.

In the Sinhalese caste hierarchy, three numerically small caste groups namely, Rodiya (beggars), Kinnara (mat weavers) and Gahala (executioners) were seen as outcastes by virtue of their descent, demeaning occupations, human qualities attributed to them and legends of origin. Their numbers are very small and they often live in isolated villages located in the periphery of human settlements. Certain other caste groups too, including Padu/Bathgama (manual labourers), Berawa (drummers), Wahumpura (jaggery makers) and Kumbal (potters) were also subjected to many restrictions and prohibitions imposed by upper castes (Goigama and Radala), particularly in Kandyan areas in Central Sri Lanka (Ryan 1993, Silva 1982, 1992). An estimated 20% to 30% of the Sinhala population belong to these “depressed caste groups”.

There is no accurate information available about the caste-wise distribution of Sri Lankan population due to the non-inclusion of caste as a demographic category in the contemporary population censuses or in any of the socio-economic surveys routinely conducted in Sri Lanka. The British included caste in the early population censuses, but later they dropped it from census enumerations for some indefinite reasons. One opinion prevalent at the time was that

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13 These prohibitions are discussed in Chapter Four.

collection of caste information in official censuses would formalize caste distinctions that may otherwise disappear in time to come (Ryan 1993, Goonesekere 2001).

### **Historical Overview**

As caste-based service tenure (Rajakariya<sup>14</sup>) operative in the Kandyan kingdom was abolished by the British under the Colebrook Cameron Reforms introduced in the year 1833, caste ceased to be a legally binding institution at least for official secular purposes. The economic and social opportunities opened up under the colonial regime were not confined to the highest castes in Sinhala and Tamil societies, even though initially at least those at the top of the caste hierarchy tended to benefit more from such opportunities. In the Sinhala society, however, certain caste groups in the coastal regions such as Karawa, Salagama and Durawa, moved up in the social ladder relative to the traditional Radala aristocracy, deriving educational, commercial and employment opportunities newly opened up due to the plantation economy (Roberts 1984, Kannangara 1993). For certain underprivileged caste groups in both the Sinhala and Tamil societies, conversion to Christianity was an important means to escape caste oppression and challenge or at least evade the prevailing caste ideology from the Portuguese period onwards (Stirrat 1983). This, however, did not mean that the caste hierarchy was totally undermined during the colonial era. As the civil administration below the level of Government Agents continued to rely on hereditary officials, some aspects of the caste system continued in both the Sinhala and Tamil communities. Furthermore, among the indentured Indian Tamil labourers employed in the plantations, labour recruitment as well as mobilization of labour continued along caste principles with the labour supervisors (Kanganies) being selected from those superior to the field labourers in caste terms (Hullop 1993, 1994). In

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14 'Rajakariya' literally means 'service to the king'. Apart from actual services to the royal family, it included **corvee** labour for public work organized by the state as well as customary caste services to Buddhist temples, Hindu shrines and aristocratic land owning families.

the establishment of sanitary workers and garbage collectors in the newly established urban and municipal councils, the appropriate caste groups in South India were once again recruited and employed, thereby giving rise to the phenomenon of urban untouchability in Sri Lanka, elaborated in Chapter Six. Thus, while colonialism weakened the caste system in some respects, it also reinforced and even “reinvented” caste in other respects.

The post-colonial developments in Sri Lanka did away with any kind of official support for or even official recognition of caste. Discrimination of people on the basis of caste was outlawed by the constitution of the country. Creation of a casteless and classless society became the official vision of some leftist parties such as the Samasamaja (equal society) Party, formed in the 1930s (Silva 2005)<sup>15</sup>. The welfare state policies of independent Ceylon such as the policy of free education, free health care, and free rice rations were intended to benefit every one, including those at the bottom of the caste hierarchies. Unlike the political leadership in India, the political leadership in Sri Lanka did not consider it necessary to provide reservations for the benefit of underprivileged caste groups assuming that the welfare state with universal free education and other such policies side by side with emerging processes of social change would eliminate the existing caste inequalities. In Jaffna society, most of the opportunities in education and public sector employment were monopolized by the dominant Vellālar caste with resulting limitation of opportunities for advancement, particularly for the Panchamar castes. The temple entry campaigns carried out by the Panchamar castes in the 1960s signified a resistance against Vellālar domination and oppression in Jaffna society. As Pfaffenberger (1990) has elaborated, violent Tamil nationalism culminating in the rise of the LTTE emerged in the subsequent era as a “defensive nationalism” that sought to heal the wounds of caste and class tension within Jaffna society and turned it against the

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15 Jiggins (1979), however, argued that contrary to this ideology, Samasamaja Party and other leftist parties themselves utilized caste and kinship in their real politics within the parliamentary framework.

Sinhala dominated state. It is important to note that Prabhākaran, the leader of the LTTE, came from the Karaiyār (fishermen) caste instead of the dominant Vellālar caste in Jaffna society, indicating a certain rupture in the traditional social order. Free education has brought out wider egalitarian impact in Sinhala society, but this has not eliminated the caste inequality altogether. Rather caste has been made an underground phenomenon rarely discussed in public, but remained bottled up within the individuals and local communities only to be rekindled from time to time in the caste inspired political loyalties during the time of elections, social conflicts and social uprisings (Jiggins 1979, Chandraprema 1991). The JVP of 1971 and 1987-89 certainly exploited the unresolved caste as well as the class grievances in Sinhala society even though it never identified itself as a “low caste” movement as such (Moore 1993, Chandraprema 1993). It is, however, significant that the leader of the JVP, Rohana Wijeweera as well as many of his core group of political actors came from the Karawa (fishermen) caste in Sinhala society in place of traditional Goigama leadership entrenched in most other political organizations, which also indicates a certain amount of rupture in the traditional social order in Sinhala society.

### **Caste Discrimination in Jaffna Society**

Caste oppression has been more severe in Jaffna society with the dominant Vellālars controlling land, administrative and political offices, ritual activities and educational and lucrative employment opportunities. The Panchamars are treated as menial servants who are kept at a distance and, at the same time, made obliged to render hereditary services, including farm labour for the benefit of upper layers in society (Pfaffenberger 1982, 1990). The Saivite religion practised in Jaffna served to reinforce the caste order and define and perpetuate the untouchability of the Panchamars. Even the highly respected early 19th century leader of Hindu revival, Arumuga Navalar, strongly upheld the caste order. In a highly conservative typical caste-based and sexist statement, he declared that the “parai” (drum beaten by the paraiyar caste), the women

and the Panchamar “are all born to get beaten” (Ravikumar 2005). The social etiquette enforced by the dominant caste included many kinds of prohibitions imposed upon the Panchamars. According to Rangunathan (2002), such prohibitions applicable to Panchamar were of many kinds as elaborated elsewhere in this report.

Prohibitions imposed against the Panchamar in Jaffna were quite extensive. Other caste-based constraints too were imposed in specific situations. For instance, though there was a tradition that women would cry together at funeral houses by hugging each other, the low caste women could not join the high caste women in this expressive moment. At a high caste funeral, a separate place was allocated for the low caste women to cry together.

The Panchamar agitations against these prohibitions began as far back as the 1920s. The Forum for Depressed Class Tamil Labourers was formed in Jaffna in 1927 to protest against the prohibitions imposed on the Panchamars. In 1928 this forum launched a campaign for ‘equality in seating and equality in eating’ among school children in protest against caste discrimination in enforcing different seating and dining arrangements for Panchamar and higher caste children in schools. Due to sustained efforts over a period of two years, an administrative order was issued in government aided schools for allowing low caste children to sit on benches along with other students instead of requiring the former to sit on the floor. Following this order, the high caste Hindus retaliated by burning down some 15 schools that implemented the new regulation. In 1930 the political elite of high castes petitioned the school authorities to withdraw its order for equal seating arrangement but they were not able to succeed in turning back the trend (Vegujanam & Ravana 2007).

When universal franchise was introduced in 1931 under the Donoughmore Constitution, key political leaders representing the interests of ‘upper caste’ Vellalar, such as S. Natesan agitated against granting of franchise to underprivileged caste groups. The former went to the extent of giving up their own voting rights to prevent granting of voting rights to the subordinate castes claiming that universal franchise would lead to transfer of power to wrong hands.

Once the universal franchise was established rejecting the demands of Vellālar leaders, the latter retaliated by imposing even more strict prohibitions against the Panchamars. Such anti-Panchmar measures, in turn, led to the formation of the Northern Sri Lanka Minority Tamils Mahasaba<sup>16</sup> in 1943. This organization launched a number of campaigns for advancing the rights of outcastes, including a demand of reservations for 'low castes' in legislature. Given the tight grip the Vellālar had on Jaffna society, their economic, political, ritual and ideological control, it was not easy for Panchamars to assert themselves. By the 1950s, many of the Panchamars had joined the Tamilarasu Party, which opposed the Tamil Congress controlled by more conservative high castes. The Tamil Congress was instrumental in having the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act in 1957 that made caste-based discrimination in public institutions punishable offences. In October 1958, the Minority Tamil Mahasaba launched a 'Teashop Entry Movement' in collaboration with the Tamilarasu Party. By November, they had some success in getting some Muslim tea shop owners to admit Panchamars and many other tea shops too followed suit in time to come.

Supported by the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the 'Temple Entry Movement' among Panchamars<sup>17</sup> gained momentum in 1968 (Vegujan & Ravana 2007). This, in turn, led to a split between Tamilarasu and Panchamars as many of the upper caste leaders in Tamilarasu did not support the temple entry campaign. This campaign as well as the upper caste reaction against it turned violent leading to physical aggression, arson and even assassinations on the part of both groups. As Pfaffenberger (1990) has convincingly argued it is at this point the Tamil nationalism gradually took the shape of a defensive nationalism seeking to heal the caste wounds within the Tamil community and at the same time addressing the

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16 The name, Northern Sri Lanka Minority Tamils Mahasaba was changed as All Ceylon Minority Tamils Mahasaba in 1944 (Vegujan & Ravana 2007:107).

17 As spelt out in Chapter Four, the term Panchmar refers to five caste groups considered under untouchable category in the Jaffna caste system.

greater threat from the Sinhala dominated state. The Temple Entry Campaign registered only a partial success while in response to this campaign, major Hindu temples such as Maviddapuram gradually allowed the Panchamar to enter the outer chambers of these temples for their religious practices. The inner chambers remained prohibited for them due to the concern about preserving the purity of these institutions.

Many of the customary prohibitions imposed against Panchamars gradually disappeared following the agitations on the part of the Panchamars, interventions by the state and civil society and spread of education. The ban imposed by the LTTE against caste discrimination since 1980 further eliminated the explicit acts of caste discrimination, particularly in the LTTE-strongholds.

The civil war that broke out in NorthEast Sri Lanka in the 1980s has caused multiple impacts on the Tamil caste system in general and caste-based discrimination in particular. First, a unified ethnic consciousness among all groups of Tamils irrespective of their caste has increased due to the campaigns carried out by Tamil militants as well as the oppression and military interventions by the state targeting all Tamils. Second, due to the mass displacement of people as in the long march from Jaffna to Vanni in 1995, people of different castes had to intermingle and interact with each other in emergency situations of all kinds, making it difficult to sustain untouchability and caste-based social distance on a systematic footing. Third, while the LTTE more or less eliminated the traditional Vellālar political leadership in Jaffna through terrorism and deliberate elimination of such leaders, it led to selective out-migration of high caste and high class Vellālar families from Jaffna. It left a social and political vacuum in Jaffna society and enabled the downtrodden to assert themselves like never before. Finally, with the rise of the LTTE with many of its leaders and cadres drawn from lower castes in society, explicit disregard for caste in mobilization and training of LTTE troops and campaigns and explicit ban on caste, caste hierarchy has ceased to be a powerful force in society. However, there is lack of evidence as to how far these developments have led to actual

disregard for caste in the minds of people and in practices such as marriage, rituals and permanent social unions. Given the current atmosphere in Jaffna society, it is difficult to undertake any systematic research on caste due to the widely imposed silence on caste and the tendency to sweep it under the carpet because of social and political pressures. The Jaffna University, the premier academic institution in Jaffna, has followed a policy of discouraging any research on caste in Jaffna society reflecting these widespread trends.

However, there is some evidence that among those remaining in IDP camps in certain parts of Jaffna peninsula, certain Pancharmar caste groups are prominent. Thanges (2006), for instance, found that in four IDP camps in Mallakam, Nalavar and Pallar were predominant. Most of them had been displaced from high security zones established by the military in the 1990s. It appears that the Sri Lankan military prevented the return of these IDPs to their original lands by the continuation of high security zones. On the other hand, they have not been able to move out of IDP camps due to land scarcity in Jaffna, lack of employment opportunities and possible difficulties in purchasing land due to poverty and hesitation on the part of higher caste landowners to sell land to the Pancharmars due to the fear of intermingling with them. While these IDP camps receive basic amenities from the state and NGOs, they remain isolated from the neighbouring communities and have sometimes experienced difficulties in utilizing public amenities such as schooling for their children, drinking water from public wells and entry to local temples controlled by upper castes (Thanges 2006, Human Right Watch quoted in Goonesekere 2001, Vegujanam & Ravana 2007). This seems an important feature of sustained caste-based discrimination in Jaffna society in spite of widespread and more or less irreversible changes noted earlier. Reactivation of caste-based discrimination in disaster situations has been reported in the Gujarat earthquake and other disasters in South Asia as well (Goonesekere 2001, Gill 2007).

In recent years, fairly active caste organizations have emerged among Ambattar (barbers) and Vannār (dhoby) in Jaffna society.

Partly supported by the LTTE, they have banned customary practices such as house visits by barbers and dhobies to Vellālar houses within the deferential caste idiom considering them to be demeaning and unacceptable. Further, these organizations have tried to professionalize these occupations by determining a standard fee structure and making it necessary for all clients irrespective of their castes to visit business establishments and secure these services in an impersonal and business like manner rather than in a customary hierarchical idiom. How far this has actually eliminated the caste discrimination is yet to be ascertained, but it shows that in Jaffna society, at least some inter-caste relations are being redefined and becoming stripped of hierarchical connotations.

### **Caste Discrimination in Sinhala Society**

The Sinhala caste system consisted of roughly about 15 caste groups ranging from a ruling aristocratic caste (Radala) to a servile beggar (Rodi) caste. A vast majority of population (roughly about 50% of all Sinhala people) belonged to the Goigama (lit. farmer) caste, a peasant group with independent land holding and broadly defined as worthy recipients of services of all caste groups below them in terms of caste hierarchy. All other caste groups had some specific occupations, services, or functions assigned to them. Some like Karawa (fishermen), Durawa (toddy tappers) and Salagama (cinnamon workers) held economically lucrative but socially less prestigious occupations of hereditary nature. As these occupations gained considerable economic prominence in the colonial era, their relative status within the hierarchy too seems to have improved. Below them were the service castes, which were expected to render specific services within a hierarchical framework to those above them in the caste hierarchy. The service castes were Nawandanna (smiths), Hena (washer men), Kumbal (potters), Wahumpura (jaggery makers), Bathgama (manual workers), Berawa (drummers) and the like. Some caste services such as washing of clothes for others were considered to be particularly demeaning but the relevant castes were not socially ostracized but rather offered a lower rank in the social hierarchy as manifested in seating arrangements for them.

Among the service castes, Wahumpura (jaggery makers) and Bathgama (manual labourers), who together comprised of about 15% to 20% of the Sinhala population according to some estimates, were often economically and socially underprivileged due to the consideration of a combined hereditary status, landlessness and unemployment. Both these castes have been traditionally dependent on Radala and Goigama families for land and livelihood. In some instances, at least they were like bonded servants of Goigama or Radala households. Both the Bathgama men and the Wahumpura women often served as outdoor workers and domestic servants of high caste landlords, respectively. Often these relationships were very hierarchical as expressed in honorific or derogatory forms of address used in relevant interpersonal communications. Gradually, these feudal relationships have undergone erosion in recent times, with educated younger generations in service caste families refusing to show traditional deference and demeanour, and their relationships with high caste families have characterized by avoidance, resentment and open hostilities in some instances. At the same time the growing numbers of impoverished members in these low caste communities have turned to casual wage labour, political patronage, land distributed under state sponsored colonization schemes and village expansion schemes, and crime, violence and illegal operations for their livelihoods (Moore and Perera 1978). They have not been able to articulate their grievances politically within the existing political parties often controlled by high caste families, and within the existing electoral systems and arrangements (e.g. delimitation of electorates) splitting low caste concentrations and low caste votes (Jiggins 1979). The emergence of the JVP among the Wahumpura and Bathgama youth from these communities in 1971 and 1987-89 reported by many authors (Jiggins 1979, Chandraprema 1991, Ivan 1993) must be understood in this context.

In the traditional Sinhala caste system, the Wahumpura and Bathgama castes held a low status but they were by no means outcasts socially ostracized by others. Below them were several smaller

socially ostracized caste groups. Among them three relatively small caste groups, namely Gahala (executioners), Kinnara (mat weavers) and Rodi (beggars), were traditionally seen as outcaste. These three “lowest caste groups” in Sinhala society, together making up less than 1% of the total Sinhala population, used to live in separate and isolated villages usually in the periphery of human settlements. These socially ostracized castes were to some extent similar to “untouchable castes” in Hindu society, but the Sinhala caste system did not have a religiously articulated notion of untouchability as such. Instead, these lowest status Sinhala castes were placed at the bottom of the social order due to derogatory status attached to their occupations, their legendary origin and behaviours attributed to them. For instance, as executioners employed by king to execute criminals, the Gahala were involved in killing, which is considered an inherently sinful occupation according to the Buddhist cosmology. The main Gahala community situated in the northern border of Kandy city had limited social contact with their surrounding communities. Over the years, the women in this community had been notorious for prostitution and men for alcoholism, crime and violence.

The Kinnaras were famous for the beauty of the mats they manufactured, but they were also identified as wild and tribal like because of their proximity to jungles from where they extracted raw materials needed for their industry. They also had a reputation for occult practices, including their ability to harm people with sorcery. The Rodiyas (the root word ‘rodda’ lit. filthy) were considered unclean, because removal of dead animals and processing their skins for leather products as well as making of brooms, and hairwigs were identified as part of their hereditary occupations (Weeratunga 1988, Raghavan 1957). They live in secluded but thickly populated areas called ‘gubbayama’ characterized by substandard and congested housing. Further, they were expected to be respectful and highly deferential to every body because of their main hereditary occupation, namely begging. They were also considered dangerous to associate with and antagonize because of their assumed ability to cast bad spells

and cause misfortunes to others through magical means. All three of these 'outcast' communities had some assumed commonalities such as ability to cause harm to others, legendary associations with sinful actions in the past, connections with wilderness, promiscuity and lack of inclination for civilized life.

Traditionally, the Rodyyas and Kinnarayas experienced many inhibitions, social rejections and exclusions in their interactions with higher caste communities. The Rodyya men were not expected to wear any clothes covering the upper part of their body. While visiting others' homes for begging, the Rodyyas were expected to plead at the gate instead of entering the compound. They were quickly sent away after giving them some money or rice. They were not welcome in shops or tea shop run by those outside the caste. If at all they visited tea boutiques, they were served tea in coconut shells rather than in cups or other utensils. Their children were not welcome in local schools. And if they managed to enter these schools with some effort or through mediation of some sympathizers, they experienced discriminations from teachers as well as classmates of higher castes. The explicit discriminations targeting members of the relevant caste groups have gradually disappeared through social changes, spread of egalitarian ideologies and gradual improvement in the status of relevant groups. Few members of these caste groups are willing to admit their caste status to any outsiders. The younger generations in particular are reluctant to take up any occupations even distantly related to their hereditary caste occupations. Many have migrated to other areas and changed their identities. Migration to the Middle East for work as domestic servants has been quite popular among women in these communities, clearly identifying it as a means to escape the stigma associated with the hereditary social hierarchy at least temporarily.

Organized resistance by the depressed castes against caste oppression in Sinhala society has been rather limited in comparison to developments in Jaffna society. Even where descent and hereditary work-based discriminations have been present, the tendency in

Sinhala society has been to deny or escape rather than confront caste barriers. This may be attributed to relative mildness of the Sinhala caste system compared to the Hindu caste system, absence of numerically large outcaste categories, competition rather than cooperation among numerically small depressed caste communities, indirect expression of grievances against caste system through radical youth politics and gradual erosion of the caste system in many ways.

### **Caste Discrimination in Indian Tamil Society**

The caste system in Southern India has been in some ways reproduced in the Indian Tamil community in Sri Lanka. It is important that even though a vast majority of the plantation workers belong to the “lowest caste groups” in Hindu society, the rank and file of the plantation work force, including Kanganies and many leaders of the powerful trade union movement in the plantations, have come from the “higher castes” such as Mottai Vellalan (Hullop 1993, Jayaraman 1975). This indicates that the planters and the plantation economy have somehow assimilated, appropriated and manipulated the caste system in their efforts to domesticate the immigrant workers. During the development of the plantation system in Sri Lanka, leaders of the plantation community have successfully silenced the caste issues and privileged the ethnic mobilization in their political and trade union campaigns, to some extent preceding parallel developments in the Sinhala and Sri Lanka Tamil communities. Some leaders of the plantation community, however, have recently sought to challenge the high caste dominated Ceylon Workers Congress by appealing to caste sentiments among numerically predominant lower caste communities in the plantations (Muthulingam, Institute of Social Development, Kandy, pers.com, 2007).

While people engaged in plantation activities as a whole have secured a marginalized position in Sri Lanka society by virtue of their immigrant status and disintegration with the surrounding communities, there is evidence that a pattern of ‘internal colonialism’

has continued as far as economic and social position of workers of the lower castes are concerned (Hullop 1993, 1994). This, however, cannot be understood through caste dynamics alone as the sector as a whole remained intact and poorly connected to the economic and social opportunities in a larger Sri Lanka society.

Branches of the Indian Tamil community connected with sanitary activities in selected towns in Sri Lanka, including Kandy, Colombo, Gampola, Matale and Nuwara Eliya, indicate descent and hereditary occupation based discrimination and social ostracisation significantly. These communities have experienced difficulties due to their Sakkiliar (Chakkiliyan) status, identification with latrine cleaning and scavenging and presence in ghetto like inner-city urban communities also identified with many vices such as drug addiction, prostitution and over-crowdedness. In the same way plantations have served to reproduce and retain caste-based organizations in plantations, while the Municipal and Urban Councils have served to establish and retain an “outcast community” identified with sanitary labour in the middle of urban centres. Despite significant improvement in their status in recent years, following diversification of employment, education of children, improvement in housing, migration to the Middle East for employment as domestic workers and the like, they continue to be seen as polluted and polluting in terms of caste and occupation among the city dwellers and within the larger Indian Tamil community. However, there are marriages and other social relations among Indian Tamil sanitary labourer communities in different towns in Central Sri Lanka. To the extent their “outcast” status is continued, it may be seen as a combined effect of caste and ethnic marginalization, employment history and association with certain urban vices such as alcoholism, drugs and violence.

Some Rodi caste people in some towns of Central Sri Lanka work as sanitary labourers side by side with the Chakkiliyan of Indian Tamil origin, which indicates a certain degree of convergence among different caste systems in the country where hereditary “outcast occupations” are concerned.

## **Conclusions**

For the most part, explicit caste discriminations among all the three relevant ethnic groups seem to have gradually eroded in Sri Lanka, but there are continuing pockets of “outcast” population in diverse places such as Mahaiyawa in Kandy and IDP camps in Jaffna. The relative significance of certain depressed caste communities in IDP camps in the Jaffna Peninsula suggests that caste discrimination is by no means a dead issue in contemporary Sri Lanka.

There is more or less complete silence about caste on the part of the state, political parties and even among civil society organizations. Only a few NGOs appear to be sensitive to and concerned about the issue. Legal measures against caste discrimination were introduced by the state in the form of the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act in 1957, but it has had limited impact in terms of safeguarding the rights of the depressed caste communities.

Even though some state policies and programmes (e.g. “Gam Udawa” village reawakening programme), some political actors and certain civil society agencies (e.g. the Sarvodaya Movement of Sri Lanka) have taken some initiatives to enhance the socio-economic status and self esteem of the so-called depressed castes from time to time, members of the relevant caste groups have not come forward to assert their rights and challenge the caste system in an organized manner. The term “Dalit” is not used in Sri Lanka either as a means of self identification or a descriptive label adopted by analysts or political actors.

As of now, there are no active organizations among the depressed caste communities in any of the three ethnic groups. The Minority Tamils Mahasabha was active during the period from 1930 to 1960, but it became defunct gradually. A few caste specific organizations similar to trade unions, however, have sprung up particularly in the Jaffna Peninsula.

In most instances, the remaining “depressed caste” communities tend to deny, ignore and sweep under the carpet the problems they face, rather than recognizing and dealing with them in an open

manner. Strategies such as overseas migration, migration to cities or new settlements within Sri Lanka, giving up caste occupations and change of name with a view to denying “outcast status” are pursued at the individual and household level in order to evade the hereditary caste discrimination among selected communities.

## Chapter Three

### **Caste Discrimination in Sinhala Society**

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#### **Background**

Many observers have described the Sinhala caste system as mild in comparison to the Hindu caste systems in India and Sri Lanka. This mildness is attributed to the lack of a strong religious justification for the Sinhala caste system from Buddhism, the predominant religion among the Sinhalese (Gombrich 1991). The absence of a clearly defined notion of untouchability and the relatively small numbers in the lowest segment of the population are seen as elements of the relative mildness of the Sinhala caste system. However, caste was recognized, upheld and even mobilized by the pre-colonial state for its own administrative and governance purposes, resulting in “secularization of caste” among the Sinhalese as understood by Pieris (1956). The land tenure in the pre-British Kandyan Kingdom as well as the extraction of human services by the state were organized along caste lines within the framework of what Leach described as “caste feudalism” (Leach 1959). While the ruling families rewarded various groups for their services, the rulers also dishonoured or downgraded (*gattara kirima*) some families when they were guilty of anti-social conduct, treason, or other vices (Knox 1911). This chapter examines the key divisions in the Sinhala caste system,

the specific nature of the lowest layer in society and presents the problems faced by some of the 'lower caste' groups in society based on findings of ethnographic research.

### **The Nature of Caste in Sinhala Society**

The Sinhala caste system consists of some fifteen caste groups with varying degrees of assertiveness regarding their uniqueness and distinctive status. There are some differences in the formation of castes in Kandyan and low-country areas due to their separate histories, but these differences have decreased over the years due to intermixture and frequent interaction leading to development of a common Sinhala identity under the influence of Sinhala nationalism (Parakrama 1998). Ryan (1993) described the Sinhala caste system as a "self-contained emergent arising from diffuse Indian influences and historically unique situations". The Sinhala caste system cannot be understood from the angle of the four-fold Varna model of Hindu caste in India without seriously misrepresenting the actual situation (Kannangara 1993). There is evidence that some castes originated from immigrant groups but the entire caste system is by no means an imported one. There are diverse claims as to how many distinct castes are there in Sinhala society and the numerical strength of different groups. In the absence of any kind of caste related census in Sri Lanka in recent years whatever statistical information presented must be crude estimates. Very few people openly talk about their caste status in day-to-day communication process and the topic of caste is only broached in private communication among closely related people or in verbal abuses against people in interpersonal conflicts or in political campaigns against each other.

In traditional village settings caste identities are well known to each other. Even in villages caste names are rarely used in public. Often terms such as "our one" (*ape ekkenek*) or "an outsider" (*pita minihēk, pita minissu*) used to convey caste identities. Caste becomes an important issue mostly in arranging marriages for young people or even in establishing romantic relationships among young people as inter-caste marriages though not uncommon are still avoided as far as possible. Caste identities of people in public

life are usually known and there are times when members of the same caste may seek to exploit these identities for favours of one kind or another. Politicians and even political parties may seek to mobilize caste sentiments for electoral purposes from time to time (Jiggins 1979).

In many situations any kind of open recognition of status differences among people of different castes is resented. Traditionally, the names of individuals have been an important means of establishing caste identity of unknown people, but this has more or less disappeared during the past two to three decades due to frequent name changing and acquisition of more prestigious names and pedigrees by the so-called 'low caste' people (Silva, 2005, 2006). Caste-based occupations are generally on the decline with educated young people not at all interested in taking on such employment. Demarcation of statuses along feudal lines and ideas about prerogatives of certain castes over others, however, have persisted in some ways, side by side with hereditary distinctions and inherited advantages and disadvantages. More on this point will be taken up when we consider specific ethnographic situations.

The Goigama caste is the largest and in many respects the highest in status in Sinhala society (see Table 3.1). Its highest sub-caste, Radala, forms a thin upper layer of aristocratic families who are closely interconnected with each other through marriage alliances, control of hereditary ancestral land holdings and control of powerful positions in the state, bureaucracy, business and ritual centres like Temple of the Tooth (Moore 1985, Seneviratne 1978). As you go down the caste hierarchy, the status tends to be lower and lower but many disputes are there among castes as to who is superior to whom. Each of the fifteen caste groups has one or more distinctive names, some are more respectable than others. For instance, for the tom-tom beater caste, Nakati is a more respectable name and Berawa is less so. There is no reliable information available about the actual size of each caste but it is commonly held that while Goigama accounts for roughly 50% of the Sinhala population, only two other castes, Bathgama and Wahumpura, have significant numbers to

be a powerful force on their own. Traditionally, the powerful and dignified positions in society were held by Goigama, especially its Radala sub-caste with others merely playing a supportive role under the hegemony of this “upper-caste” elite. The situation, however, changed during the colonial era with Goigama still holding on to much of its power and influence but some of the smaller and more dynamic caste groups taking advantage of the new educational, commercial and employment opportunities opened up under the colonial regimes.

**Table 3.1**  
Caste Composition in Sinhala Society

Rank (contested)	Caste Name	Caste Occupation	Est. Share of Pop(%)
1	Goigama i. Radala ii. Goigama iii. Patti	Aristocracy Free peasants Herdsman	0.001 49.000 0.001
2	Karawa	Fishing	5.000
3	Salagama	Cinnamon work	3.000
4	Durawa	Liquor making	2.000
5	Hunu	Limestone work	0.002
6	Achari/Galladu/ Navandanna	Smiths	0.500
7	Hena/Rada	Dhobi work	3.000
8	Wahumpura/Hakuru	Sweet/Jaggery	12.500
9	Kumbal/Badahala	Pottery	2.500
10	Dura i. Vella Durai/Bodhi ii. Panna Durai	Guardian of Bo Tree Royal herdsman/Mahouts	0.001
11	Nakati/Berawa	Drumming/Dancing	3.000
12	Bathgama/Padu	Servants/Porters	18.000
13	Gahala	Executioner/Funeral Work	0.001
14	Kinnara	Mat weaving	0.300
15	Rodi	Begging/Brooms	0.001
	Other*		1.193
	TOTAL		100.000

\* Other smaller and geographically scattered Sinhala castes include Porowakara, Oli, Pali, Hinna, Barber and Demala Gattara.

Source: Jiggins (1979), Ryan (1993), Pieris (2001), Silva (2002)

Table 3.2

## Classification of Sinhala Castes by Service and Overall Status

Caste Name	Service		
	Rajakariya/Badda	Ritual	Occupation
<b>Category 1: Goigama</b>			
<b>Goigama</b> iv. Radala v. Goigama vi. Patti	Aristocracy Military Military	Official Priests	Landlord Cultivator Herdsman
<b>Category 2: Low Country Castes</b>			
<b>Karawa</b>	Madigebadda/ transport		Fishing
<b>Salagama</b>	Maha badda		Cinnamon work
<b>Durawa</b>			Liquor making
<b>Hunu</b>	Hunu badda		Limestone work
<b>Category 3: Service Castes</b>			
<b>Achari/Galladu/ Navandanna</b>	Kottal badda	Sittaru	Iron/gold/brass/ lacquer/ ivory/ wood work
<b>Hena/Rada</b>	Rada badda	Puberty/ Wedding/Funeral	Dhoby
<b>Wahumpura/Hakuru</b>		Wedding	Sweet/Jaggery
<b>Kumbal/Badahala</b>	Badahala badda	Supply of clay lamps	Pottery
<b>Dura</b> iii. Vella Durai/ Bodhi iv. Panna Durai	Kuruve badda	Guardian of Bo Tree	Elephants catchers & keepers
<b>Nakati/Berawa</b>	Berawa badda	Temple drumming/Bali	Astrology/ Drumming/ Weaving
<b>Bathgama/Padu</b>	Palanquin bearers/ Soldiers		Servants/Porters
<b>Category 4: Depressed Castes</b>			
<b>Gahala</b>	Executioner		Funeral drumming
<b>Kinnara</b>	Kinnara badda		Mat weaving
<b>Rodi</b>		Magic/Charms	Begging/Brooms/ making of drums using leather

Broadly speaking, the caste in the Sinhala society can be classified into four categories: Goigama, low-country castes, service castes and depressed castes as elaborated in Table 3.2. As Wickramasekara (1961) has characterized it, the Sinhala caste system is “a sophisticated system of labour specialization”. Depending on its overall position in the hierarchy, each of the caste groups held certain service obligations to the state and the higher orders in society, certain ritual obligations and certain economic activities. As the largest and the most prestigious caste, Goigama and its sub-castes held most powerful administrative and ritual positions, controlled much of the land and enjoyed many of the privileges of the caste system, whether honorific titles, entitlement for services from other castes or fruits of the landholdings.

The low-country caste groups whose caste occupations were connected to coastal economic activities such as fishing or extracting of limestone, considered themselves relatively free of any hereditary services to those above them but rather producers (of fish, cinnamon, alcohol and limestone) for a market in return for money. Conversion to Christianity among some coastal inhabitants did not necessarily lead to an erosion of caste among them (Stirrat 1982). The service castes held a hereditary obligation to serve castes above them in return for a payment in kind or right to cultivate land in some instances. Some of the service castes were assigned to gabadagam (royal villages), viharagam (temple villages), devalegam (shrine villages) or koralegam (villages held by local chiefs) and held land in such villages subject to delivery of specified service to the relevant overlords.

The Bathgama and Wahumpura are relatively large disadvantaged caste groups found mostly in interior parts of the country, including Central and Sabaragamuwa Provinces. They are typically characterized by landlessness, poverty, youth unemployment, and a high degree of lawlessness and aggression as revealed by several studies (Jiggins 1979, Moore and Perera 1978, Perera 1985). Historically, they were economically dependent and deferential towards landed Goigama

families for whom they served as domestic servants (considered as a preserve of Wahumpura) and agricultural workers (considered as a preserve of Bathgama or Padu). The high degree of poverty currently evident in these service castes is due to a combination of factors, including breakdown of traditional patron-client relations, limited rights and access to land in the traditional systems of land tenure and rapid population growth in these communities following the eradication of epidemic diseases since the 1940s.

The 'lowest' in the Sinhala caste system somewhat similar to Dalits or 'untouchables' in the Hindu caste system was the category referred to as depressed castes. They were considered as outcastes in that they were assigned most menial services or tasks such as begging or executioners' service and close contact with them was to be avoided by those above them in the caste hierarchy. They were considered 'unclean' in some sense. For instance, the 'lowest' Sinhala caste Rodiya, literally meant as one associated with filth (*rodu*). Similarly, the executioners were seen as blood stained people, blood being identified as a source of pollution.

It must be mentioned here that in the Sinhala caste system, impurity was seen more as physical rather than physiological or ritual, not necessarily implying a permanent state of pollution. The higher castes were expected to avoid contact with these 'outcast' groups not so much because of untouchability but because of possible reprisals in the form of magic and witchcraft in the case of Rodiya, for instance. These 'outcast groups' were also seen as 'wild' and 'uncivilized' and almost tribal in their origin, with resulting unpredictability, possible aggressiveness and the need to treat them with required social distance (Knox 1911, Denham 1912). It is also important to point out that together these three groups made up less than 1 % of the total Sinhala population with corresponding limitation of their overall significance in the Sinhala caste system. They live in isolated rural communities in close proximity to the jungles, cemeteries and the like with limited contact with those above them in the caste hierarchy.

These caste groups would be the closest approximation to the Dalits in India<sup>11</sup>. But they do not identify themselves as Dalits and they are by no means numerically large even if we treat them collectively as outcastes in Sinhala society. On the other hand, the service castes in Sinhala society too had certain hereditary disadvantages, and therefore, can be treated as victims of caste-based discrimination in some ways.

We discuss below the findings of ethnographic research in certain selected villages with service caste or 'outcaste' inhabitants.

### **Welivita: Caste Discrimination in a Predominantly Drummer Caste Village**

Welivita is located within what used to be the heartland of Kandyan feudalism. It lies at the bottom of a fairly insulated valley situated some ten miles South East of the historic Kandy town, which as the capital city of the pre-British Kandyan Kingdom, served as the hub of political and social relations in the area. Prior to 1815, Welivita and some of its neighbouring villages in the valley constituted a royal village (*gabadagama*), which produced an agricultural surplus and provided certain services needed by the royal family in Kandy under the service tenure system. Following the takeover of the Kandyan Kingdom by the British in 1815, the service tenure (*rajakariya*) was abolished in 1932 and, thereafter, Welivita ceased to be a service village with service obligations to a specified feudal authority. The changes brought about by the colonial rule, however, led to the reorganization of the social structure of the village along semi-feudal lines rather than a complete dissolution of the feudal system. Land ownership in the village, for instance, remained in the hands of a few 'high caste' families, who had aristocratic pretensions vis-à-vis largely service caste population in the village (for details, see Silva 1986, 1992).

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8 In addition to these three 'depressed caste groups', another very small caste group called 'Demala Gattara' were seen as an outcaste group particularly in some low-country areas. It is believed that Demala Gattara descend from high caste people condemned to outcaste status by the king as a punishment for some lowly acts they committed.

The feudal background of Welivita is evident from its caste composition (see Table 3.3). In contrast to many of the so-called 'free villages' where Goigama caste constitutes a majority of the population, the numerical predominance of one or more 'low caste' groups seems to have been a distinctive feature of service villages. Feudal overlords required the services of specific 'low caste' groups in order to sustain their ritual superiority and privileged position in society. As the service castes held a specific caste service assigned to them, they comprised a bulk of the population in service villages expected to serve higher caste overlords who were typically resident in political, administrative and ritual centres like the Kandy city.

**Table 3:3**  
Caste Composition of Welivita, 1979

<b>Caste Name &amp; Service</b>	<b>Relation to rice farming</b>	<b>No of households</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>Population</b>	<b>%</b>
Patti (officials)	Landlord/owner farmer	14	7.0	82	6.7
Nawandanna (smiths)	Owner-farmer	3	1.5	22	1.8
Hena (washermen)	Owner-farmer	18	9.0	94	7.7
Berawa (drummers)	Tenant	161	80.5	1009	82.1
Other		4	2.0	21	1.7
Total		200	100.0	1228	100.0

The three 'lower caste' groups in the village of Welivita belong to the category of service castes, implying that they were at the service of higher caste overlords. This, however, did not mean that the caste distinctions within the village were irrelevant. The Patti, reckoned as a relatively low status sub-caste of Goigama (see Table 3.1), are normally considered as herdsmen by hereditary caste occupation. In the village of Welivita, however, there is no evidence that they practised cattle keeping as such in any historical era. Instead, it is evident that in this former royal village, the administrative elite came from the Patti caste, with its members serving as agents of

higher authorities from outside controlling the service village. The Nawandanna and Hena, comprising less than 10% of the village population, occupied intermediate positions in the local caste hierarchy as reflected in their positions in rice cultivation as well as the primary service obligations to those above them in the caste hierarchy.

The 'lowest caste' in the village, Berawa (also called Nakati) was the numerically largest, indicating that mobilization of the important ritual services of this caste group for various functions in Kandy, the ritual and political centre just outside the valley, was the primary historical function of this service village<sup>12</sup>. Their hereditary role in paddy cultivation as tenant farmers, a feature that was continuing at the time of ethnographic research with some minor changes in the land ownership in recent years, indicates that the caste system in the village is not merely a symbolic phenomenon, but also buttressed by a variety of economic and political structures evolved from the feudal era. As of 1979, the village also had four households set up by immigrants from the low country, with relatively ambiguous caste status.

The village was divided into several named hamlets; each hamlet was identified with a cluster of households belonging to a particular caste group in the village. The Patti households, which were typically located in spacious home gardens situated in central places of the village, had distinctive names with status implications. The paddy fields in the village were divided into several *yaya* (tracks), each named after a nearby hamlet or a specific caste group in some instances. For instance, one *yaya* was called "kammale vala kumbura" (literally 'low-lying paddy field that belongs to the blacksmith's house'). The caste-specific place names in the village were also sometimes replicated in the names of individuals in the villages.

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12 In a majority of villages, Goigama or one of the intermediate low-country caste groups were in an overwhelming majority. The predominance of one or another service caste in Sinhala caste system was seen as a distinctive feature of 'service villages' serving one or another feudal master (See Pieris 1956, Seneviratne 1979).

The three 'lower castes' in this village were expected to be at the service of higher castes in and outside this village. The names of individuals (both family and personal names) conveyed the relative status and service attached to the respective caste group. For instance, the commonest drummer caste family name in the village was "Berakara Gedera" (Lit. "of the drummer's house"), while the Patti names indicated descent from illustrious ancestors (e.g. Rajapakasa Vasala Mudianselage) (For details see Silva 2006). In addition to the respective caste occupations, all the caste groups in Welivita were engaged in paddy cultivation either as owner cultivators or tenants. In the case of the drummer caste, throughout their known history, many of them had served as share-cropping tenants for Patti or Rate Atto (local term for Goigama proper) landlords who owned as their ancestral landholdings much of the paddy land in the valley. The tenants were considered as more or less bonded servants of the landlord families with a range of menial services assigned to them, particularly in domestic rituals such as weddings and funerals. Throughout the British period and in the early years after independence, Patti and Rate Atto families in the local area held high positions in administration (e.g. headman, Korale, registrar), with the result that a small 'upper caste' elite mediated between the ordinary peasants, including 'low caste' service providers, and the state. There was a range of deference and demeanour applicable to 'low caste persons' in their social interaction with 'high caste' people. For examples, forms of address, dress code, seating arrangements, commensality, and household duties all indicated the superiority of the 'higher caste' people vis-à-vis service caste individuals. Those of Patti caste were the first to receive good education in Kandy schools from the 1920s onwards, facilitating their transfer from hereditary positions to coveted positions in the state bureaucracy, resulting in an unusual convergence of high caste privileges and bureaucratic power, a phenomenon well known in Sri Lanka and other countries in South Asia.

None of the caste groups in Welivita was seen as unfit for social or physical contact by any of the 'higher castes' in and outside

the village. Some members of the local landlord families were the first to reap benefits from educational and employment avenues first opened up with the processes of social change. There were, however, many factors that militated against the social mobility of the service caste groups. Being small holders or tenants, they had limited access to land. The Patti caste landlords kept their landholdings intact even when they became absentee landlords as they moved out of the village to accept bureaucratic employment. The education of children from service castes was limited to the village school, staffed mostly by 'high caste' teachers who often showed a prejudice against education of 'low caste' children. The parents of 'low caste' children could not change the names of their children indicative of low status as they wished due to the restraint exercised by 'upper caste' officials, including village headmen. Even though the old gabadagama based on caste principles had been dissolved, caste continued to determine the social life and economic activities in the village until the 1960s and beyond.

Two developments that began in the 1950s helped in weakening the power of 'high caste' landlord families in the area to a considerable extent. One was gradual penetration of electoral politics into the area, particularly with effect from 1956 when there was a significant transition of power at the national level. The drummer caste leadership in the village managed to gain some power and influence independent of the local landlords through supporting the local candidate of the Peoples United Front (Mahajana Eksath Peramuna) that eventually won the 1956 election on a platform of serving the underprivileged in the society.<sup>13</sup> Second, commercial farming of vegetables that spread in the area mostly benefited the 'low caste' cultivators of the soil, including the share tenants. These two parallel developments enabled some of the dynamic groups in

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13 For this reason this important political change at the national level is referred to as the '1956 revolution'. It marked the transition of power from westernized and often higher status elite to the representatives of the masses, including some representatives of underprivileged caste groups. For details, see Roberts 1981, Silva 1982.

service castes to break away from restrictions placed upon them by the caste system and to secure state patronage for enhancing their position in society. Under the Paddy Lands Act of 1958 that was introduced by the new government, some of the drummer caste tenants working for absentee landlords were able to establish their tenancy rights and pay a regulated rent. Besides this, a few 'low caste' commercial farmers were able to purchase land from 'high caste' landlords (mostly absentee landlords) leading to a gradual expansion of their assets and profits. A layer of educated 'low caste' people gradually emerged in the village and they opposed to the 'high caste' landlords and increasingly resented any manifestation of status hierarchy and inherent superiority on the part of 'high castes'. While caste disparities in the village still continue to exist in some ways, it is no longer possible for the upper castes to treat the 'low castes' in an explicitly derogatory manner. While there are many political divisions and rivalries among the 'low castes' themselves, they are easily united against any 'upper caste' interests that seek to reinforce their privileges and prerogatives.

### **Social Exclusion of the Kinnara Caste: Evidence from the Henawala Village**

The Kinnaras come under the outcast category in Sinhala society. To examine the problems faced by the Kinnara caste, we conducted an ethnographic research in a Kinnara village called Henawala located in the Kundasale Division of the Kandy District. As of 2007 this village had a total of 620 people distributed among some 114 households. The village is densely populated with all the households clustered in a limited land area. There is a local belief that the village evolved from some nine closely related Kinnara families settled down in the village during the era of Kandyan kings. The village is known for certain crafts like mat weaving, carpet weaving and making of a category of dusters. All these are manufactured from a fibre of a local plant collected and processed by the local people. According to some ethnographers, the Kinnaras evolved from a tribal origin, which in turn accounts for their lower status in

Sinhala society (Somathilaka 1998, Raghavan 1951). Traditionally, they were required to manufacture and supply to the royal family in Kandy, ropes and mats for various purposes. The technology of making these products has been transmitted from generation to generation and the Kinnaras have established a monopoly over this knowledge. The technology of manufacturing these products have remained more or less unchanged for centuries. The houses they live in are small, congested and lacking any extra space for building any workshop, with the result that the industry also takes place within the housing units.

**Table 3. 4**

Distribution of Households in Henawala by Main Occupation, 2007

<b>Main Occupation</b>	<b>No. of Households</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Government or private sector paid employment	6	4.7
Traditional craft	80	63.0
Overseas employment	33	26.0
Casual wage labour	8	6.3
Total	127	100.0

Evidently, the main source of employment in this village is the manufacture of craft products associated with the caste. There is a division of labour among households. Some engaged in the collection of raw material (a type of plant that is not found in the immediate area is the main raw material), extraction of a fibre from this grass, mat weaving and manufacture of other related products. The ones who turn out the final products get a higher share of the income, but the ones who reap the highest benefits are the middlemen who supply these products to retail and wholesale outlets in Kandy and other towns. The net income from this industry has remained more or less stagnant, largely accounting for widespread poverty in this community. For this industry to continue, the community must live together as there is a degree of specialization among different households involved in the industry. They are unable to move out of the community even if they want to, as the way industry

is organized makes them mutually interdependent. Significantly, overseas work is the second most important source of employment in this community. The relative importance of foreign employment (mostly domestic work in the Middle East) among women in this community is mainly due to the lack of alternative employment. It may also be seen as a means of escaping social marginalization and domestic problems in the relevant households (For a detailed analysis of the role of overseas employment as housemaids in an underprivileged Sri Lankan community, see Gamburd 2000).

The caste occupation of the Kinnara cannot be seen as an unclean occupation from the angle of handling any polluting substances as defined in religion or in any of the local ideologies. They are not dealing with garbage or human waste or any of the bodily substances considered to be impure in the South Asian belief systems. Unlike the Rodiyas, the Kinnaras do not directly handle any dirt, with the exception of collection of *hana* (a local plant like jute) from the forest. The demeaning status attributed to the Kinnara may be more to do with their assumed tribal origin and the related view of them as primitive and therefore uncivilized. Even though their work is artistic in nature, the emphasis is on the primitive existence and somewhat wild lifestyle of these people. In the view of the Sinhalese, the Kinnaras are an aborigine like group with their own ways of life (see Rahgavan 1951). Their caste identity and status is closely connected with their hereditary livelihood, which is firmly rooted in the village and its environment.

The parents in this community, many of whom are illiterate, do not have much faith in giving good education to their children. One parent said “even if our children are given a good education, will they be given government jobs by the influential people in the area?” “Who will give our children good employment even if they are educated?” another parent asked. The parents view that imparting the knowledge of skillful use of the hand (*dathe saviya*) is more important for their survival in the industry. On the other hand, the children from the community are not well received by teachers and peers in the local schools, most of whom come from

higher caste backgrounds. The low educational achievement in the community is reflected in Table 3.5.

**Table 3.5**

Adult Population in Henawala by Level of Education, 2007

<b>Educational Level</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Illiterate	21	10.1
Passed 5th standard	91	44.0
Passed 8th standard	80	38.6
GCE OL	11	5.3
GCE AL	4	2.0
Total	207	100.0

This community showed other manifestations of social marginalization as well. Alcohol consumption was high, particularly among husbands, whose wives were working abroad. It is not clear whether this was an outcome of the migration of their wives or whether this was indeed one factor that may have encouraged their wives to go abroad in search of independent earnings for the family. Loud verbal abuses and fighting are reported to be common. As the entire community was related to each other, kinship is the idiom of all social relations in the community. However, this community lacked any kind of formal organizations acceptable to all parties concerned for representing community interests vis-à-vis the state and any other organizations. The people of Henagama were not welcome in many of the organizations, including the Samurdhi Organization, controlled by nearby villages and expected to serve the poor in the local area. The Small Industries Department had sought to organize the mat weavers and other related craft workers, but it has not made much progress due to infighting and attempts on the part of some local organizers to monopolize the benefits of these initiatives. Most marriages were with people from the same community or with people from other villages belonging to the same caste. Inter-caste marriages were rare. Where they occurred, the outside person almost always came and joined the Kinnara community as his or her own community and severed all ties with his/hers.

The community benefited from the Gam Udawa Programme implemented by the Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) in the 1980s whereby housing improvements were made particularly in socially depressed communities. As one of the steps for improving their social standings, the names of the communities too were changed in ways that remove any stigma associated with their former names. The name of the village was officially changed from “Henawala” (Lit. “pit full of a certain plant needed for their industry”) to “Kalasirigama” (lit. “artistic village”) but the new name did not get accepted with even the Kinnara people opting to use the former name.

### **Social Ostracism of the Rodi Caste: Evidence from the Kuragala Village**

Kuragala is a congested ‘low caste’ village in the Udunuwara Division of the Kandy District. All its 570 inhabitants belong to the Rodi caste, identified as the ‘lowest caste’ in Sinhala society. Kuragala is one of the 48 Rodi caste villages identified through a caste census conducted in 1911 as part of the population census, which reported a total Rodi population of 1,464. (See map 2). The settlement is called a “gubbayama”, a term typically applied to an overcrowded Rodi caste settlement socially cut off from surrounding villages (Weeratunga 1988). A majority of people in the community was engaged in household level manufacture of drums involving treatment and processing of animal skins and wood. A number of households in this community had become successful entrepreneurs through mobile trade of mats, carpets and other commodities. The assets owned by the richer families in the village included 4 trucks, 3 vans and 5 three wheeler vehicles. These families have established long-distance mobile trade as a kind of extension of their hereditary occupations, involving travel to distant places. None of the villagers currently practise socially demeaning occupations like begging, scavenging, handling of dead bodies, making of hair buns or magic and witchcraft, traditionally associated with this caste.

The origin story of the caste recognizes a connection to the royal family and, at the same time, committing the primordial sin of

eating human flesh by an original founder of the race or caste (see Annexure 1). Some of the lowly and socially despised behaviours attributed to the group include eating of flesh of animals like monkeys, squirrels and birds. However, the existing inhabitants of the village completely deny any involvement in such acts. Even though Kuragala now has many contacts with the outside world, the village still experiences a degree of social ostracism. The village school has classes up to grade five and the better schools in the area are reluctant to admit children from the village in spite of an order issued by the Ministry of Education with the intervention of a politician for the admission of the children from the community into local schools. The richer households in the community send their children to Kandy schools where anonymity of the children is ensured. In one nearby local school where a number of children from the village study side by side with those from other villages, the children from Kuragala have very few friends from other villages and they often interact only with each other due to this situation. As a result, the educational achievement in the village was rather limited with as many as 7.5% of the household heads being illiterate and none with educational qualifications above GCE AL. Due to this low educational achievement, only a few members of the community have been able to secure formal sector employment. A limited number of people from the community have managed to secure government employment as hospital attendants or office labourers. This, in turn, has had the effect of encouraging the community members to take up business and domestic employment overseas rather than any other avenues such as education as a pathway to upward social mobility.

Most of the marriages take place within the caste, either within the village or with fellow Rodi caste villages in the area. Some inter-caste marriages, however, have taken place as the mobile traders (young men) from the village established relations with higher caste women from far away areas. Where such affairs led to marriages, the relevant 'high caste' wives (One Goigama, two Bathgama, two caste statuses not known) severed all ties with their original communities having moved into Kuragala. As in all other 'low caste' villages, the

younger generations in Kuragala have adopted names that do not indicate any demeaning caste status.

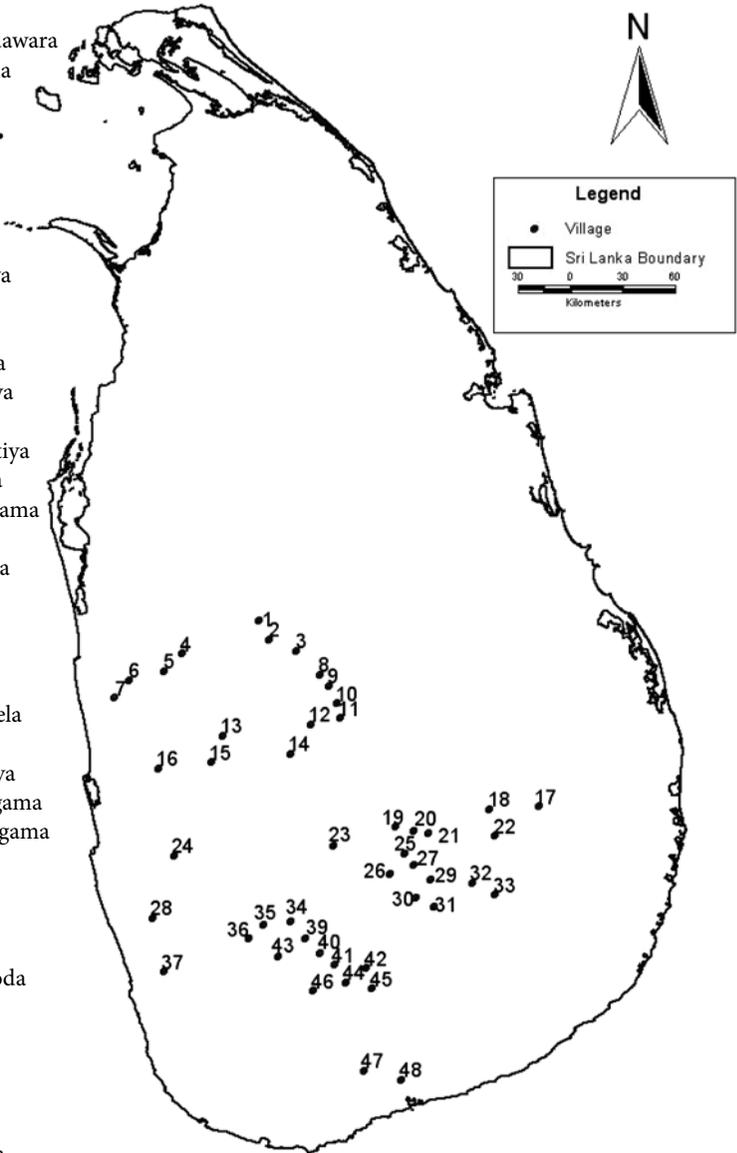
Even though many of the inhabitants of Kuragala consider themselves Buddhists, they have had a tenuous relationship with local Buddhist temples. The monks in nearby Buddhist temples, who are essentially of higher caste background, have refused to participate in the funeral services in the Rodi houses. In fact, the villagers are compelled to bring Buddhist monks from a far away Buddhist temple, not inhibited by caste considerations for this purpose. Similarly, the children from the community have not been accepted for Dhamma Schools (*daham pasal*) in local temples giving various excuses even after the community members made contributions to the building expansions in these temples. Some four households in the village have responded to this situation by converting to Christianity, the relevant Christian organizations being identified as supportive of the downtrodden.

It was also reported that the participation of Kuragala people in weddings or funerals of people in neighbouring villages is quite limited just as much as participation of those from outside in such events in Kuragala are rare. This indicates that social isolation of the 'lowest caste' group in Sinhala society and patterns of social discrimination continue to exist in some forms despite rapid social change during past several decades.

In summary, while the Sinhala caste system does not entail untouchability as such certainly there are underprivileged caste groups in Sinhala society. As a result of historical circumstances, such caste groups often have a higher degree of poverty, limited access to land, limited opportunities for advancement and limited contact with the state apparatuses. They may not be deprived of accessing basic necessities like drinking water, but they are often excluded from the services of the state, including free educational opportunities provided by the state. It is well known that middle level caste groups in Sinhala society, particularly those in the low-country, achieved considerable social mobility through education, professions and business avenues from the colonial era onwards (Roberts 1984, Kulasekera 1984, Kannangara 1993). The current

Map 2: Distribution of Rodi Villages in Sri Lanka 1911

- 1 Maeliya
- 2 Ganegoda
- 3 Kahatawela
- 4 Siyabalakadawara
- 5 Lokurugama
- 6 Panawella
- 7 Diganwela
- 8 Hiruwela
- 9 Kalalpitiya
- 10 Koskote
- 11 Ampitiya
- 12 Udugalpitiya
- 13 Hunuwela
- 14 Kuragala
- 15 Hambuluwa
- 16 Meegaspitiya
- 17 Galmulla
- 18 Kumarapattiya
- 19 Meepanawa
- 20 Maspennagama
- 21 Soranatota
- 22 Kandawinna
- 23 Watagoda
- 24 Kosgama
- 25 Pitadeniya
- 26 Katagoda
- 27 Divithotawela
- 28 Kalapitiya
- 29 Athgalapitiya
- 30 Matipibiyagama
- 31 Kabillawelagama
- 32 Udarawa
- 33 Udagama
- 34 Galboda
- 35 Malwala
- 36 Waraniyagoda
- 37 Talapitiya
- 38 Dippitigala
- 39 Wilhena
- 40 Moratota
- 41 Digadura
- 43 Wathupitiya



study also found that the underprivileged caste groups in Sinhala society have reaped certain benefits from commercialization and market processes, for instance, drummer caste farmers in Welivita taking advantage of commercial farming of vegetables, Kinnara women from Henawala in particular taking part in migration to the Middle East to earn cash income in hard currencies, and menfolk in Kuragala engaging in long distance trade in certain commodities. However, many members of the 'lower caste' groups, including service castes and depressed castes have not benefited from similar opening up of opportunity structures. As revealed in this chapter, the socially excluded Sinhala caste groups are spatially dispersed, often not visible and, as a rule, organizationally weak and poorly articulated at national or regional levels. Less than 1% of the Sinhala population comes under the 'outcast' category, but if we include traditionally disadvantaged service castes too, as many as 30% of the Sinhala population may be experiencing some form of CBD in areas such as education, religious activity and politics. Both, in social policies and public debates, there is more or less a complete silence about the problems or even the survival of these underprivileged social groups. The young people from certain underprivileged caste groups, however, have been actively involved in radical politics of organizations like the Janatha Vimukti Peramuna, which led two aborted youth uprisings in Sinhala dominated parts of Sri Lanka from the 1970s to 1980s (Moore 1993). As pointed out in a number of studies, the militant JVP members found many supporters at the middle level as well as in the depressed caste communities in Sinhala South (Chandraprema 1991, Jiggins 1979). While many analysts tend to see caste as a dead issue, particularly in the Sinhala dominated parts of Sri Lanka, evidence does not necessarily support this view particularly when it comes to simmering social discontent evident on diverse fronts.

## Chapter Four

### **Caste Discrimination in War-affected Jaffna Society**

*Paramsothy Thanges  
Kalinga Tudor Silva*

#### **Background**

Caste has been an important organizing principle of Jaffna society throughout its known history. The caste system in Jaffna has certain features in common with the Sinhala caste system; the land-owning Vellālar caste is the dominant caste in Jaffna in many ways similar to the Goigama caste in Sinhala society; the middle level caste groups like Karaiyār resemble in many respects the Karawa caste in Sinhala society; and a range of service castes with fixed hereditary caste obligations is expected to serve the dominant caste in society. What is different in the Jaffna caste system is that the notion of ritual purity is far more important in the day-to-day Hindu practice and the social and economic hierarchy, with the land-owning Vellālar caste having a hegemonic control over many of the Hindu rituals and the labouring castes in Jaffna society being identified and treated as ritually unclean castes as well. Traditionally, this gave the land-owning Vellālar caste a powerful position in society, agricultural economy and in the ritual order, and the same systems put the dependent 'lower castes' in society at many disadvantages and in a position of servitude. During the colonial period whatever new opportunities opened up for advancement (such as education, business, commercial farming and government employment) were

grabbed by the Vellālar families who were already privileged with a resulting intensification of caste disparities and a solidification of the caste system (Pfaffenberger 1982, 1990). The literature on Jaffna society in the colonial era mostly written by Vellālar authors or European authors informed by the Vellālar voices is more or less silent regarding the plight of the untouchable caste groups.

The first rumblings against the caste system in Jaffna came to the surface somewhere in the 1920s<sup>11</sup>. The underprivileged caste groups in Jaffna society continued many agitations against restrictions imposed upon them by the dominant caste and its agents. As elaborated later in this chapter, these agitations took many forms and proceeded along many fronts (ritual, political and civil society organizations) but the Vellālar leaders resorted to many counter strategies, including violence, to suppress these low caste agitations. Some concessions were granted to the low caste demands but finally it was the rising Tamil nationalism that managed to patch up the differences within the Tamil community and organize and mobilize all the Tamils around the common grievances of Tamils within a Sinhala dominated polity to the relative negligence of caste grievances that had gained momentum until the 1960s. Thus, as Pfaffenberger (1990) has labelled it “a defensive Tamil nationalism” that evolved as a means of subverting Tamil ‘low caste’ agitations on one hand and diverting these agitations towards a larger Tamil struggle vis-à-vis the Sinhala dominated state on the other hand. Initially, this defensive Tamil nationalism was articulated and mobilized by the same Vellālar political leadership within the framework of parliamentary politics and in many ways subverting the caste struggles operating in Jaffna society in the preceding era. This situation, however, gradually changed due to the rise of the Tamil militant groups culminating in the formation of the LTTE as the vanguard of Tamil nationalism. In many respects, this led to a

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11 It is interesting to note that modern agitations against the caste system started in Jaffna even before it started in India. However anti-caste struggles in Jaffna society did not develop beyond a particular point due to factors that will be discussed later in this chapter.

downfall of the Vellālar domination in Jaffna society but how these developments actually respond to the grievances of underprivileged caste groups in Tamil society is yet to be determined. The LTTE seeks to identify with all Tamils irrespective of caste and even though its non-Vellālar leadership is apparent it does not publicly respond to any caste grievances or articulate any caste sentiments as such in an obvious attempt to lead a mass nationalist movement in a caste divided society.<sup>12</sup> This deliberate strategic position may actually conceal the real situation as far as continuing manifestations of caste inequalities are concerned. On the other hand, once peace is restored in Jaffna society if that is ever possible, caste is likely to reappear in the political and social agendas of the new regimes whoever they may be.

In order to identify and assess the nature and extent of caste discrimination in Jaffna society in this complex scenario, the present chapter begins with an analysis of the caste profile in Jaffna society, examines the situation of underprivileged caste groups in the context of war, population displacement and the power of the LTTE over the northern Tamil population. In addressing the issue of caste discrimination in contemporary Jaffna society, we have serious information gaps due to the inability of conducting any kind of serious ethnographic research in the affected populations within the current security environment. What is attempted here is to make sense of the available information complemented by first-hand information gathered in rapid field surveys.

### **Caste Composition of Jaffna Society**

There are several specificities in the Jaffna caste system. First of all, we should clearly understand that the hierarchal order and features

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12 LTTE actors often deny the association of the movement with any 'low-caste' interests. In a seminar held in the Jaffna University somewhere in 2002 when the presenters mentioned the possible 'low caste' roots of the movement, the student LTTE sympathizers violently confronted the presenters and made them publicly withdraw this statement (Personal communication, a leading researcher who participated in the event, 2007).

of the Jaffna caste system are somewhat different from those in South India. The Brahmins are at the highest position in the Indian caste order, whereas the Vellālars are at the top of Jaffna society. The Brahmins were brought from India by the Vellālars to perform ritual and ceremonial functions in their temples. As the Vellālars employed the Brahmins in their temples and the Brahmins worked for the Vellālar landlords, the Brahmins in Jaffna were considered in some sense to be lower than Vellālars (Pfaffenberger 1982).

There was a tradition of “caste within caste” in Jaffna society. In other words, there was a hierarchical difference/order within a single caste group. Each caste group contained a few hierarchical divisions within it. For example, the sub-castes such as Akampadiyār, Madappalli, Thanakārar, local Chettimār, small farmers and Chempu Edā Vellālar were identified within the Vellālar caste in terms of social status. The sub-castes such as Thimilar, Mukkuvar were identified within the Karaiyār caste. The Maramerikal, Cheruppukkaddikal and Verkkuthippallar were identified within the Pallar caste. Inclusive of the sub-castes, the number of castes was large among Sri Lankan Tamils. Simon Casie Chetty (1934) lists more than 65 Sri Lankan Tamil castes in his book, *‘Castes, Customs, Manners and Literature of the Tamils’*. The caste groups declined in number due to the formation of mega caste groups (Sivathamby, 2005). Studies by David (1974a, 1974b) and Pfaffenberger (1982) identified twenty one major castes in Jaffna society. They are Vellālar, Brahman, Śaiva Kurukkal, Pantāram, Cirpacari, Kōviyar, Thattar, Karaiyār, Thachchar, Kollar, Nattuvar, Kaikular, Cāntar, Kucuvar (Kuyavar), Mukkuvar, Vannār, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar and Parayar. These caste groups, their traditional occupations, and their Adimai-Kutimai (respectively domestic servant and slave) status are indicated in Table 4.1.<sup>13</sup>

13 In describing the caste system in Eastern Sri Lanka, McGilvray (2008) identified Barbers, Washermen and Drummers as domestic service (kutimai) castes with specific household responsibilities in ‘upper caste’ homes. These castes were considered different from castes such as toddy tappers who provided a service to all interested clients, irrespective of caste, for a fee.

**Table 4.1**  
The Castes in Jaffna Society

	Tamil Name	English Name	Traditional Occupation	Adimai-Kudimai Status
Touchable Castes	Piraman	Brahman	Temple Priest	-
	Saiva Kurukkal	Saiva Priest	Temple Priest for Non-Brahmin Shrines	-
	Vellälär	-	Landholder, Farmer	-
	Pantāram	Garland Maker	Temple Helper	-
	Cipacari	-	Temple Sculptor	-
	Kōviyar	-	Domestic Servant	Adimai
	Thattār	Goldsmith	Goldsmith	Kudimai
	Karaiyār	-	Deep Sea Fisher	-
	Thachchar	Carpenter	Carpenter	Kudimai
	Kollar	Blacksmith	Blacksmith	Kudimai
	Nattuvar	Musician	Auspicious Music	-
	Kaikular	Weaver	Weaver	-
	Cantar	Oil Monger	Sesame Oil Maker	-
	Kukkuvar/Kuyavar	Potter	Potter	Kudimai
Mukkuvar	-	Lagoon Fisher	-	
Vannār	Dhoby	Washer man	Kudimai	
Untouchables	Ampattar	Barber	Barber	Kudimai
	Pallar	-	Bonded Labour	Adimai
	Nalavar	-	Bonded Labour	Adimai
	Parayar	-	Drummer	Kudimai

Source: Kenneth David, 1974a: 47. (Quoted by Bryan Pfaffenberger 1982: 39)

As elsewhere in Sri Lanka, there is no accurate information about the size of population of each caste in Jaffna society. The highest caste, Vellälär, was estimated to be 50% of the total population within the Jaffna Peninsula in mid-twentieth century research conducted by two anthropologists (Kenneth David and Michael Banks). As for other castes, the Karaiyār were enumerated at 10%, the Kōviyar at 7%, Pallar at 9% and Nalavar at 9%. Thirteen other castes are named, but none made up over 3% of the population in the Peninsula.

Scholars such as David (1973a, 1973b, 1974a, 1974b), Pfaffenberger (1982, 1990), Banks (1960), Arumainayakam (1979, 2000) and Sivathamby (2005) who wrote on Jaffna society classified castes in different ways. For example, David (1973: 36) classified

Jaffna castes into three categories, namely 'High Caste', 'Good Caste' and 'Low Caste'. Sivathamby (2000:10) differentiated among 'High Caste', 'Non-High Caste' (Intermediate caste) and Kudimakkal (Domestic Servant). David included Vellālar, Brahmin, Saiva Kurukkal, Koviya and Saiva Chetty in the category of "high caste", whereas Sivathamby (2005:10) treated only Vellālar and Brahmin as "high caste". There was another important distinction in the Jaffna caste hierarchy between "Kudimakkal" (Domestic Servant) and "Adimaikal" (Slave). Different scholars classified castes as "Kudimakkal" and "Adimaikal" using different criteria. For example, Sivathamby pointed out that according to the assessment of the Dutch government, castes such as Kōviya, Nallavar, Pallar, Cāntar and Chēviar were included under the term "Kudimakkal". On the other hand, according to David (1974a) and Pfaffenberger (1982), Kōviya, Pallar and Nallavar were included under the "Adimaikal" and several other castes, including Thattār, Thachchar, Kollar, Kucubar, Vannār, Ampattar, and Parayar were included under the "Kudimakkal" group. Similarly, distinction between "Touchable" and "Untouchable" castes is important in the case of the Jaffna caste system. According to Table 4.1, the Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar and Parayar were considered as "untouchable". Vannār (washer men) were considered as touchable caste, as this caste was traditionally permitted to enter temples. Banks (1960: 65) pointed out that while the Vannār were treated as "touchable" as they were permitted to enter temples, the barbers (Ampattars) were excluded from temple entry since they were treated as "untouchable". This reverses the normal South Indian pattern, as clearly recognized by the people of Jaffna. It is generally argued that the notion of untouchability does not exist in contemporary Jaffna society. We do agree with the view that the notion of untouchability is neither strong nor openly practised by the Jaffna Tamils as is the case in the present.

Caste in Jaffna society has undergone many changes over the past several decades due to war, large scale population displacement and an LTTE imposed ban against the practice of caste or even an

open discussion about caste in Tamil society in general<sup>14</sup>. At the same time, caste is continuously practiced in one way or another in the social, cultural and economic life of the people.

### **Notions and Practices of Untouchability**

Among the Sri Lanka Tamils, a religiously sanctioned notion of untouchability has prevailed. The bottom layer of the Jaffna caste system is collectively referred to as “Panchamar” castes, consisting of Vannār (dhoby), Ampattar (barbers), Pallar (landless labourers), Nalavar (toddy tappers) and Parayar (funeral drummers), the last four castes being traditionally accorded ‘untouchable’ status in Jaffna society (Raghavan 1953, 1957).<sup>15</sup> According to Banks (1957) and David (1974b), they comprised about 18% of the total population in Jaffna.

Ragunathan (2004: 22-23) listed a series of 24 customary prohibitions enforced by the upper caste elite on Panchamars during the 1950s. These prohibitions were as follows:

1. Males should not wear an upper garment.
2. ‘Verti’ should be tied in such a way that it does not hang below the ankle level.
3. Men should not wear “Shalvei” on the shoulder.
4. Females should not wear an upper garment.
5. Females should not wear the “thaavani” (sari “potta”).

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14 This ban has not been enforced in any rigorous and consistent way by the LTTE. It seems to have led to a reduction in any open recognition of caste far more than reduction of caste disparities as such. This view was confirmed by two independent researchers with recent field research experience in Jaffna society, namely Siddartan Maunaguru and Bahirathy.

15 McGilvray (2008) provides detailed analysis of the continuity of caste in Eastern Sri Lanka with a focus on Akkaraipattu region. While pointing to the low status of Sandar (toddy tappers), Vannār (washermen), Navitar (barbers) and Chakkiliar (sweepers of Indian origin), the aspect of caste discrimination itself has received limited attention in the otherwise rich ethnographic work of McGilvray.

6. The Panchamar should not travel unnecessarily on roads and in public places. When proceeding on permitted paths, they must announce their coming by dragging a “kaavolei” (dried Palmyrah leaf) behind them.
7. Panchamar must not wear any jewellery.
8. The Panchamar cannot tie the “thali” (wedding necklace) at weddings.
9. The Panchamar must not wear white for higher rituals.
10. The Panchamar must not wear white for important/ special rituals.
11. They must bury the dead without cremation.
12. They should not use any musical instruments to rejoice or mourn.
13. They should not play music at auspicious or inauspicious functions.
14. They should not use the ponds of the “high” castes.
15. They must not use umbrellas.
16. They must not wear footwear.
17. They must not study.
18. They must not keep any gods belonging to the “high” castes in their temples.
19. They cannot enter the “high” caste temples.
20. They must not enter tea-shops.
21. They must not draw water from public wells.
22. They cannot either drive or travel in cycles and cars.
23. They cannot sit while travelling in buses.
24. Even after permission was granted to study in schools, they were not allowed to sit on chairs.

Thus, prohibitions imposed against the Panchamar in Jaffna were quite extensive. They ranged from dress code, denial of access to drinking water and denial of access to public spaces and services. Other caste-based constraints too prevailed in specific situations.

For instance, though there was a tradition that women would cry together at a funeral house by hugging each other, the 'low caste' women could not join with the 'high caste' women in this expressive moment. At a 'high caste' funeral a separate place was allocated for the 'low caste' women to cry together. Many of the prohibitions which are listed above are eliminated today through continuous struggles against untouchability, while some are still practised.

### **Struggles against Untouchability in Jaffna Society**

The Panchar agitation against these prohibitions were started in the 1920s. The Forum for Depressed Class Tamil Labourers formed in Jaffna in 1927 was the first organized effort to defy the prohibitions imposed against the Panchar. In 1928, this forum launched a campaign for "equality in seating and equality in eating" in protest against caste discrimination against the Panchar children in schools. Due to the sustained efforts over a period of two years, an administrative order was issued in the government aided schools for allowing children from 'low castes' to sit on benches along with the other students of 'high caste' instead of sitting on the floor, as required previously. With this order, the 'high caste' Hindus retaliated by burning down some 15 schools that implemented the new regulation. In 1930, the 'high caste' political elite petitioned to the school authorities to withdraw the order for equal seating arrangement, but they were not successful in turning back the tide.

When universal franchise was introduced in 1931 under the Donoughmore Constitution, key political leaders representing the interests of the 'upper caste' Vellalar such as S. Natesan agitated against granting of franchise to underprivileged caste groups. The former went to the extent of giving up their own voting rights to prevent granting of voting rights to the subordinate castes, claiming that universal franchise would lead to transfer of power to wrong hands. Once the universal franchise was established rejecting the demands of Vellalar leaders, the latter retaliated by introducing even more strict prohibitions against the Panchar. Such anti-Panchar

measures, in turn, led to the formation of the Northern Sri Lanka Minority Tamils Mahasaba in 1943. This organization launched a number of campaigns for advancing the rights of 'outcasts', including a demand for reservations for 'low castes' in legislature. Given the tight grip the Vellalars had on Jaffna society, their economic, political, ritual and ideological control, it was not easy for the Panchamars to assert themselves. By the 1950s, many of the Panchamars had joined the Tamilarasu Party, which opposed the Tamil Congress controlled by the more conservative 'high castes'. The Tamilarasu Party was instrumental in having the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act passed in 1957, which proclaimed the caste-based discrimination in public institutions a punishable offence (Silva & Hettihewa 2001). In October 1958, the Minority Tamil Mahasaba launched a "Teashop Entry Movement" in collaboration with the Tamilarasu Party. By November 1958, they had some success in getting certain Muslim tea shop owners to admit Panchamars and many other tea shops too followed suit in time to come.

Supported by the Communist Party of Sri Lanka, the "Temple Entry Movement" among the Panchamars gained momentum in 1968 (Vegujanam & Ravana 2007). This, in turn, led to a split between the Tamilarasu and Panchamars as many of the 'upper caste' leaders in the Tamilarasu did not support the temple entry campaign. This campaign as well as the 'upper caste' reaction against it turned violent, leading to physical aggression, arson and even assassination drives on the part of the rival groups. As Pfaffenberger (1990) has convincingly argued, it is at this point, the Tamil nationalism gradually took the shape of a defensive nationalism seeking to "heal caste wounds" within the Tamil community and, at the same time, addressing the greater threat looming from the Sinhala-dominated state. The temple entry campaign only had a partial success in that while in response to this campaign, the major Hindu temples such as Maviddapuram gradually allowed the Panchamar to enter the outer chambers of these temples for their religious practices, but the inner chambers remained still prohibited for them due to the concerns about the preservation of the purity of these institutions.

Many of the customary prohibitions imposed on Panchamars gradually disappeared due to a combination of factors, including agitations on the part of the Panchamars, interventions by the state and civil society and spread of education. A ban imposed against caste discrimination by the LTTE in the 1980s further eliminated the explicit acts of caste discrimination, particularly in the LTTE strongholds.

The civil war that broke out in NorthEast Sri Lanka in the 1980s has had multiple impact on the Tamil caste system in general and caste-based discrimination in particular. First, a unified ethnic consciousness among all groups of Tamils irrespective of caste has increased due to the campaigns led by the Tamil militants as well as the oppression and military actions undertaken by the state targeting all Tamils (Daniel & Thangaraj 1994). Second, due to the mass displacement of people as in the long march from Jaffna to Vanni in 1995, people from different castes had to intermingle and interact with each other in emergency situations of all kinds, making it difficult to sustain untouchability and caste-based social distance on a systematic footing (Hoole et.al. 1990). Third, while the LTTE eliminated more or less the traditional Vellālar political leadership in Jaffna through its campaigns of terror, there were many waves of selective out-migration of 'high caste' and 'high class' Vellālar families from Jaffna, thereby leaving a political and social vacuum in Jaffna society and enabling the downtrodden to assert themselves like never before. Finally, with the rise of the LTTE with many of its leaders and cadres drawn from 'lower and intermediate castes' in society, explicit disregard for caste in the mobilization and training of LTTE troops, campaigns and explicit ban on caste, the caste hierarchy has ceased to be a powerful force in society.

There is, however, a lack of evidence as to how far these developments have led to actual disregard of caste in the minds of people and in practices such as marriage, rituals and permanent social unions. In the current atmosphere in Jaffna society, it is difficult to undertake any empirical research on caste due to politically imposed silence on caste and the tendency to sweep it under the carpet due to social and political pressures. The Jaffna University, the premier academic institution in Jaffna, has followed a policy

of discouraging any research on caste in Jaffna society, reflecting a widespread trend towards denial of caste and ignoring it in the interest of upholding Tamil nationalism. There is, however, an allegation that caste continues to be an important factor in recruiting staff to this academic institution, reportedly controlled by a small Vellālar academic elite (personal communication with an academic in close connection with the University of Jaffna, 2007).

### **The Social Background of the LTTE**

There is limited evidence concerning the social background of the LTTE. According to Michael Roberts (2005), in its formative decades the LTTE was “a Karaiyār-led and dominated group.” There was a stage when Umā Maheswaran (Vellālar) was raised to a leadership position, but sharp personal conflicts between him and Prabhākaran led to his eviction from the LTTE. During the mid-1980s, apart from Ponnammān, Yogi and Rahim, there were relatively few Vellālar in the top rungs of the LTTE. Prabhākaran himself, Mahattayā, Kittu (died in 1993), Charles Anthony (died in 1982), Victor (died in 1985), Kumarappa (died in 1987) and Soosai are believed to be Karaiyār in caste identity (Roberts 2005). Traditionally, the Karaiyār are associated with deep sea fishing, but their own lore points to the engagement as warrior mercenaries and sea captains in the distant past. The Karaiyār “have a general reputation for toughness.”

According to Roberts (2005), a major segment of the LTTE leadership, including Prabhākaran himself, came from the locality of Valvedditurai, widely known as VVT. Located on the northern coast, VVT has a substantial concentration of Karaiyār, including a number of fishing villages. It was also a centre of smuggling operations linking India, Sri Lanka and South-east Asia. Its population is multi-religious with Hindus and Catholics living side by side.

From its inception, the LTTE leadership came from a lower middle class background, usually with white-collar occupational ambitions but vernacular grounded in both education and orientation in contrast to the Western orientation and bilingual skills of the Vellālar elites of the previous decades (Roberts 2005). Prabhākaran’s father was a clerk who became a District Land Officer

and could thus be classified as aspirant middle class. But others such as Mahattayā were from the lower strata of the Karaiyār and poorer in economic background. The lower class and lower caste dimension was accentuated by the presence of a few individuals from the depressed castes, such as Thamil-Chelvan (killed by a Sri Lankan air force attack in 2007) from Ampattar or barber caste, who rose to the powerful position of the deputy leader of the movement. Nevertheless, the LTTE has been careful not to identify with any particular caste configuration and at the same time, not to alienate the Vellālar, the largest caste group in the Sri Lanka Tamil population. It could not have sustained its militant Tamil identity and the claim that they are the sole representative of the Tamil speaking people in Sri Lanka without considerable support from the Vellālar, a caste grouping that has families in all three strata, middle class, lower middle class and working class. Furthermore, there is a significant Christian presence in the movement as reported by Schalk (1997). The vast majority of Christians among the Sri Lankan Tamils, roughly about 90% of the total population, is Catholic and the Karaiyār community, especially in the Mannar region, has a significant proportion of Catholics. Charles Anthony, Victor and perhaps Soosai among the early leaders were Catholic, while the Catholic and Protestant churches in the Tamil areas have generally sympathized with and at times openly and actively supported the cause of Eelam.

It is important to note that the LTTE leadership came from outside the Vellālar caste, the dominant caste in Jaffna society. The LTTE, however, displayed an ambivalent attitude towards exploiting caste for its own political ends, seeing it as a potentially divisive force in the Tamil society that the LTTE seeks to unify and liberate from the Sinhala-dominated Sri Lanka. The struggle against caste discrimination within the Tamil society has never been on the political agenda of the LTTE, sometimes identifying caste as an unnecessary diversion from the larger goal of achieving Tamil Eelam. The leadership of the LTTE, including high ranking positions in the LTTE armed forces, has rested on commitment to the cause and proven skills in the relevant activities rather than on caste background as such. In the LTTE war cemeteries, the movement

has clearly defied the caste system by erecting monuments for all martyrs side by side in common cemeteries irrespective of their caste background. Reportedly, there are many inter-caste marriages within the movement, perhaps indicating a deliberate effort to defy the caste system. Where intercaste conflicts over access to resources (e.g. land) have emerged, the LTTE has typically favoured the claims of the lower caste groups.<sup>16</sup> However, the LTTE has not tried to uplift the conditions of the Panchamars, nor has it mobilized them against caste discrimination as such (Ravikumar 2005). While it has imposed an unspecified and non-descript ban against caste discrimination, the LTTE has not vigorously pursued or enforced this ban with any degree of consistency and perseverance. In some ways, the LTTE and the militant Eelam campaign have silenced a potential Dalit<sup>17</sup> struggle in the interest of a larger ethno-nationalist struggle in Jaffna society (Ravikumar 2005). A similar debate has been going on regarding the LTTE's position in respect of gender and whether large scale involvement of Tamil women in the armed struggle, for instance as suicide bombers, lead to any kind of emancipation of women in a society where women have been oppressed in many ways, for instance dowry issue (Ann 1994, Coomaraswamy 1997, Schalk 1992).

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16 In one of the few ethnographic researches conducted in a LTTE controlled area Trawick (1999) noted

“...the LTTE perceives their role to be more than freeing the Tamil society from the Sinhala oppression. Supporters of the LTTE have said that the civil war is a ‘good medicine’ for the Tamil society. They say that Tamil society has serious flaws, particularly caste discrimination and oppression of women and only the revolution led by the LTTE can rid the society of these flaws....A socially egalitarian policy governs the LTTE combatants; there is supposed to be no correlation between rank and caste, the rank of a person is not revealed until his or her death, and women are said to achieve liberation from oppressive gender roles through active combat”. (Trawick 1999: 141).

17 It is noted that the term “Dalit” is not used to refer so-called low caste people either by researcher or inhabitant of Jaffna society. The term Panchamar is used instead of that.

## **War, Population Displacement and Caste**

Recent social changes in Jaffna society have been heavily influenced by the war and related developments. The war related displacements have led to a large scale migration of people within the peninsula, from Jaffna to elsewhere in Sri Lanka and a massive exodus of people from Jaffna to overseas destinations either as legal or illegal migrants (Daniel & Thangaraj 1994, Fuglerud 1999). Escalation of conflicts during Eelam War 1 (1983-1987), Eelam War 2 (1989-1993) and Eelam War 3 (1995-2002), and ongoing Eelam War 4 (started in 2006) produced waves of displacement which in turn, affected the size and distribution of population within the Northern Province. The population displacements have led to some integration of people from different caste backgrounds in the camps established for the Internally Displaced People (IDPs). Over one million people have left Jaffna and other areas in the Northern Province since the outbreak of war in the 1980s (Siddartan 2003). People from different caste backgrounds have left Jaffna under these population movements, but a disproportionate number of people from Vellālar backgrounds have successfully moved to Colombo and overseas taking advantage of their existing social networks extending beyond the peninsula (Siddartan 2003). The oppressive nature of the caste system of Jaffna may have been weakened by the rapid exodus of many Vellālar landlords and the availability of some of their land for sale to those from other castes besides the ban on caste imposed by the LTTE. There is, however, no evidence that the social gap between the Vellālar and the 'lower castes' and the discriminatory practices of the former have necessarily decreased due to recent developments. One recent change is that caste has become more of a hidden phenomenon in Jaffna society, as is the case in the Sinhala and Indian Tamil communities.

## **Internally Displaced People and Caste Discrimination in Jaffna Society**

Population displacement due to war and the tsunami of December 2004 has affected many people in the Jaffna Peninsula. These

two major disasters have affected all people irrespective of caste, class and gender (Silva 2003). However, the specific impact on different population groups has been different. There is no accurate information available about the size and composition of the present day population in the Jaffna peninsula due to the inability of conducting a population census since 1981. The estimated total civilian population in the peninsula as of 2006 ranged from 300,000 to 500,000<sup>18</sup>. Of these, a significant proportion (1/3 to 1/5 depending on the estimated total population) consisted of internally displaced people living in Welfare Centres or living with their friends and relatives (see Table 4.2).

Thus of the remaining IDPs in the Jaffna district, a vast majority (100,756) lives with relatives and friends. The others (11,169) live in the Welfare Centres maintained by the government and the NGOs. Those who remain IDPs are unable to return to their homeland due to the military occupation of these places, now designated as high security zones by the government security forces or continuing insecurity in their places of origin. They are generally people with limited resources and insufficient means to move elsewhere and rebuild their lives (see case study in Annexure 2). Of the IDPs, those remaining in Welfare Centres are the poorest of the poor with limited resources, limited social contacts and limited avenues for improving their condition. The total number of Welfare Centers (Mukām) for IDPs in the Jaffna District was 81 as of 31-10-2007. There is no accurate information available about the caste background of all IDPs in the Jaffna district, but the information available indicates that there is a disproportionate presence of Panchamar caste people in the IDP camps. This itself was a significant finding, given the fact that war and the tsunami affected all people irrespective of caste

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18 There were many efforts undertaken by the state to enumerate the total population in the Northern and Eastern Provinces to determine the actual size of the population following the outbreak of war. These efforts have been obstructed by the LTTE in an obvious effort to conceal the actual population in the areas for strategic reasons. On the other hand, there has been a tendency among administrative personnel in the areas to exaggerate the total number of people for humanitarian purposes.

and the Panchamars are the minority in the total population in the district of Jaffna. Women, children and elderly comprise over 75 % of the population in IDP camps. Moreover, IDPs in Welfare Centres faced many socio-economic and livelihood problems, including caste-based discrimination in some instances. As is becoming evident in the emerging literature on disasters in South Asia, those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy are often the silent victims of disasters (Gill 2007).

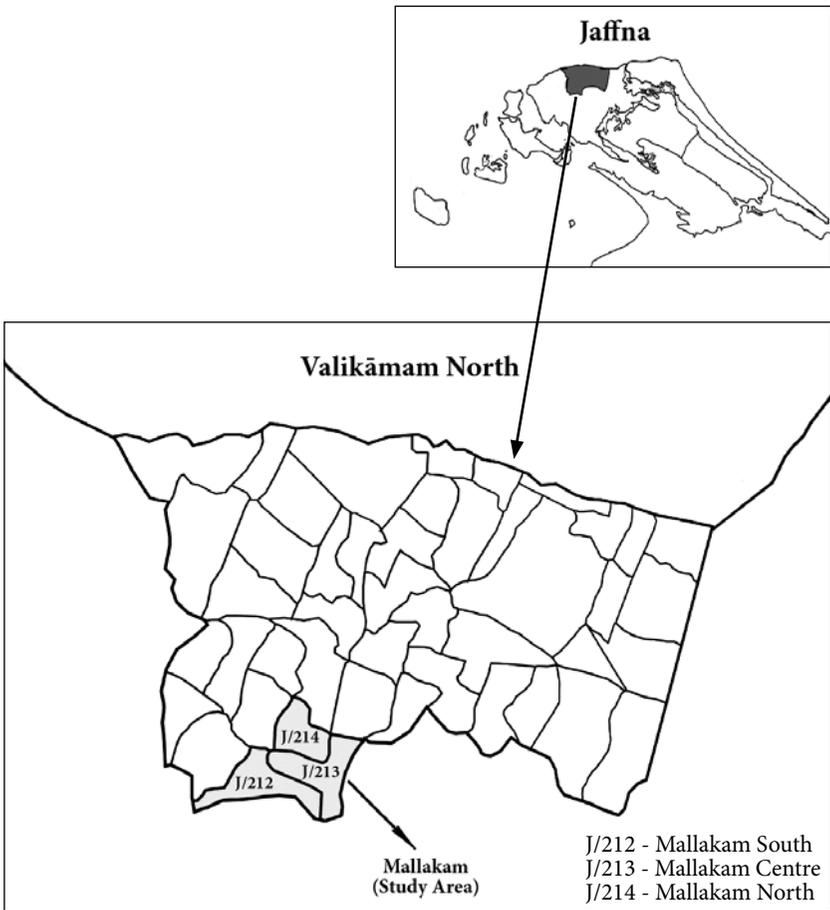
**Table 4.2**

Internally Displaced People in the Jaffna District by Category and DS Division, as at 31-10-2007

DS Division	IDPs in Welfare Centres			IDPs living with relatives and friends		TOTAL	
	Welfare Centres	No of families	Total Pop.	No of families	Total Pop.	No of families	Total Pop.
Delft	0	0	0	58	181	58	181
Velanai	0	0	0	500	1,383	500	1,383
Kayts	0	0	0	1,913	5,754	1,913	5,754
Karainagar	0	0	0	410	1,464	410	1,464
Jaffna	2	115	412	1,684	6,290	1,799	6,702
Nallur	2	15	52	3,417	12,242	3,432	12,294
Sandilipay	11	226	846	1,927	7,226	2,153	8,072
Chankanai	11	381	1365	1,485	5,057	1,866	6,422
Uduvil	15	517	1960	2,841	10,176	3,358	12,136
Telleipalai	11	527	1910	1,430	5,192	1,957	7,102
Kopay	5	244	1001	2,997	9,430	3,241	10,431
Chavakachcheri	4	17	58	5,194	18,390	5,211	18,448
Karaveddy	6	120	463	1,392	5,173	1,512	5,636
Point Pedro	11	590	2,122	3,206	11,291	3,796	13,413
Maruthankerny	3	268	980	425	1,507	693	2,487
Total	81	3,020	11,169	28,879	100,756	31,899	111,925

Source: Jaffna District Secretariat, November 2007.

Map 3: Map of the Study Area in Jaffna



### Caste Composition in Mallakam

As caste is not an official census category in Sri Lanka and subject to prohibition in the areas influenced by the LTTE, it is difficult to determine the population in each caste group, following the major shifts that have taken place in Jaffna society during the past two to three decades. In this work, we managed to secure basic information about the contemporary caste composition in the Mallakam area with a significant IDP population.

In Mallakam, the 'high caste' Vellālar comprises about 31% of the population, whereas the 'low castes' Panchamars, namely Vannār, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar and Parayar altogether comprise a majority (58.3%) of the population. In this 'low caste' category, Nalavar (26.6%) and Pallar (28.5%) form significant segments of the total population. When we consider the population of each caste group in Mallakam separately, the Vellālar (31%) remained a majority. This must be understood in the light of the findings that the Vellālar constituted over 50% of the total population in the Jaffna peninsula during the 1950s (Banks 1960: 67).

Table 4.3

The Caste Composition of Mallakam in 2005<sup>19</sup>

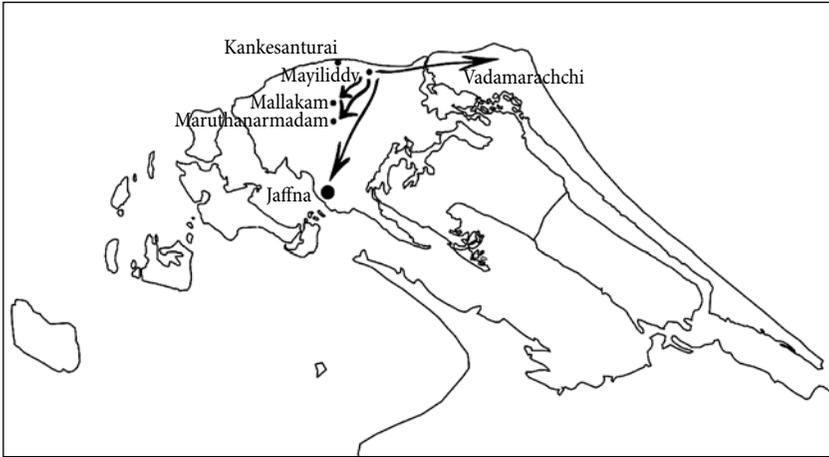
Tamil Name	English Name	Traditional Occupation	Population (%)
1. Vellālar	–	Landholder, Farmer	31.0
2. Piraman	Brahman	Temple priest	0.3
3. Pantāram	Garland maker	Temple helper	1.2
4. Kōviyar	–	Domestic servant	4.0
5. Thachchar	Carpenter	Carpenter	5.0
6. Nattuvar	Musician	Auspicious music	0.2
7. Vannār	Dhoby	Washer man	2.0
8. Ampattar	Barber	Barber	1.0
9. Pallar	–	Agricultural Labourer, Toddy tappers	28.5
10. Nalavar	–	Toddy tappers	26.6
11. Parayar	–	Drummer	0.2
<b>Total</b>			100.0

Source: Field Notes, December 2005

There are 11 castes in this area: the Vellālar, Piramanar [Brahmin], Pantāram, Kōviyar, Thachchar, Nattuvar, Vannār, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar, and Parayar. Among these castes, the Vellālar and Brahman

19 People who live in the four IDP camps in Mallakam belong to Nalavar and Pallar. They were displaced from Mayiliddy, Oorani, Vasāvilān, Kankesanthurai and so on. These villages are under the High Security Zone. They were also included in this table.

**Map 4: Displacement from Mayiliddy 1990  
(Ealam War II)**



are considered as 'high castes'. The Kōviyar, Pantāram, Thachchar and Nattuvar are considered as 'middle or intermediate castes', while the Vannār, Ampattar, Pallar, Nalavar, and Parayar are considered as 'low castes'. These five 'low castes' are collectively referred to as Panchamar in Tamil.

A considerable number of people who were displaced by the war from Mayiliddy, Oorani, Vasāvilān, Kankesanthurai and some other villages towards the north of Jaffna peninsula currently under the High Security Zones (see Maps 3 and 4) are living in four Welfare Centres in Mallakam. They live in the Coir Industry Centre, Neethavan Welfare Centre, Konappulam Welfare Centre, and Oorani Welfare Centre. The Coir Industry Centre is located in the south division of Mallakam. The Neethavan Welfare Centre is located in the central division of Mallakam. The Konappulam and Oorani Welfare Centres are located in the north division of Mallakam. As shown in Table 4.3, the entire population of all the four IDP camps was found to be from Nalavar and Pallar castes that come under the category of Panchamar.

**Table 4.4**  
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
Konappulam Welfare Centre	Nalavar	122	415
Total		247	874

*Source:* DS/AGA Division, Vali North, Thellipalai, 2007

### **IDPs and Caste Identity**

One of the key issues examined in this study was overrepresentation of certain low-status Panchamar castes (in this instance Nalavar and Pallar) in the IDP population remaining in the Welfare Centres, some four years after the beginning of the ceasefire between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE. If the war affected all inhabitants of Jaffna irrespective of their caste and class backgrounds, how is it possible that many of the long-term IDPs come from the traditionally underprivileged caste groups to the exclusion of people from the numerically large Vellālar caste?

The investigations revealed that the remaining IDPs in many welfare centers in Jaffna as of 2006 were from the Panchamar background. Members of the three deprived caste groups in Jaffna namely, the Nalavar (toddy tappers), Pallar (agricultural labour) and Parayar (drummer) were clearly present in large numbers in these IDP camps. As already shown, all the remaining IDPs in the four Welfare Centres in Mallakam belonged to the Nalavar and Pallar castes. During our investigations of the various Welfare Centres in Jaffna, we came across only one welfare centre with a significant population of those from outside the Panchamar social layer. This was Katkoyalam Welfare Centre located in Vadamarachchi East, where nearly all inhabitants came from the Karaiyār (fisher) caste.

It is significant that the IDPs in the Katkoyalam centre had been displaced by the tsunami that affected the coastal communities with a majority of fishermen.

There are several reasons for the predominance of Panchar people in the remaining IDP camps. 1) Traditionally, the 'low caste' people did not own much land other than their ancestral landholdings of miniscule size. As a result, 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. 2) These people, reportedly of depressed 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. 3) Most of them do not have enough resources to purchase new land or build separate shelter on their own. 4) Even if they have enough savings, they may find it difficult to purchase land from those of 'higher castes' due to the continuing practices of caste discrimination and unwillingness on the part of other castes to accept Panchar as their immediate neighbours. 5) For a variety of reasons such as security and mutual support mechanisms, people themselves may prefer to live together in their own caste communities in or outside the IDP camps.

It is important to point out that the Vellalar and other high status people from the area too have been displaced by war from time to time, but often they were able to move to greener pastures in Colombo or overseas using their educational and professional qualifications and social asset (Siddartan 2003, Fuglerud 1999, Daniel & Thangaraj 1994). Where they remain in the Jaffna district, they are more likely to stay with their relatives and friends outside the camps, rather than in the camps themselves with minimum facilities, limited privacy and low status bordering on stigma attached to them.

### **Caste Discrimination against IDPs in Welfare Centres**

The IDPs are in any case socially disregarded and the 'low caste' status of many IDPs simply adds to their marginal position vis-à-vis the surrounding communities. The derogatory word, "Mukām Aakkal / Sanangal" (Mukām People) is often used to identify IDPs. This label contains several derogatory meanings (not necessarily linguistic meaning), including 'low caste', 'poor', and 'bad behaved' and 'aggressive'.

Caste discriminations in contemporary Jaffna society are much more subtle compared to early forms of caste discrimination. At the same time, the present instances of caste discrimination are not entirely new phenomena. They come from the early roots of caste consciousness and take new formations within entirely different social contexts. Many of the inhabitants of IDP camps, who are disapprovingly referred to as "Mukām Sanangal" (camp people), are not only victims of war and/or natural disasters, but their situation has been further aggravated by their 'untouchable status' combined with extreme poverty. Access to Hindu temples controlled by 'upper caste' Hindus, access to drinking water from the wells owned by 'high caste' families, discriminations experienced by the Panchamars in the land market are some examples of caste discrimination in the contemporary Jaffna society. (See also Annexure 2)

### **Caste-based Discrimination in Hindu Temples**

As already discussed, the temple entry struggles have a long history in social movements against caste in Jaffna society. The most famous temple entry struggle took place in the Maviddapuram temple, which is situated a few miles south of Kankesanthurai. In this temple entry struggle in 1968, the Communist Party and a large number of people from oppressed caste backgrounds participated. In the following period, the other leading regional and local level temples, which were being managed by the Vellālars, did not want their temples dragged into the politics of temple entry. A nominal and an extremely formal entry was permitted in many instances. The temple entry movement had only a limited success. Sivathamby

(2005) rightly pointed out that the temple entry movement only had a symbolic success.

It is important to note here that village temples were not affected by this temple entry campaign. Even today, the 'low caste' people are not allowed to enter most village level temples, which are owned and managed by the 'high castes'. Most of the 'low caste' people avoid entering these temples. Those who had money, established their own Agamic temples but this did not put an end to their problem. The 'low caste' people still face difficulty in the recruitment of qualified priests from the Brahmin caste and the Nathaswaram-Thavil players from the Nattuvar caste. They are only able to secure the services of the priests who are considered to be from an inferior layer of the Brahmin caste.

The IDPs in Mallakam had many difficulties concerning access to the Hindu temples. They were not welcome in the local Hindu temples under the control of Vellālar landlords. On the other hand, they could not go back to their own temples in original villages now under the control of security forces. Often they restricted themselves to domestic rituals as a means of addressing their religious needs.

### **Caste-based Discrimination in Access to Water**

Ground water is the major natural water resource in the Jaffna Peninsula. Literally, each house in Jaffna has its own well. Their daily needs of water are largely met from these wells. According to the notion of purity and impurity, water is considered as pure and purifying. As the 'low caste' people (Panchamar) were traditionally considered untouchables except the Vannār (David 1974a: 47 and Banks 1960: 65), they were strictly prohibited to draw water from 'high caste' wells. A 'low caste' person working for a 'high caste' household was given water and food in cups and plates, which were kept for the future usage of particular 'low caste' persons. He was not served meals in a plate that was used by the 'high caste'. Although this notion of impurity changed to some extent, this oppression is seen in Jaffna among most of the 'high caste' families. This is a paradoxical situation. Often the 'low caste' people dig wells for the

'high caste' households. First, they touch the water and work hard to make the water clean and pure. Even after doing so, they are not allowed to draw water from the same wells made by them.

The 'low caste' inhabitants of the Welfare Centres have great difficulties. Each Welfare Centre contains one or two small wells for the daily usage of a large number of families. For example, there is only one small common hand-pump well for seventy nine families in 'Neethavan Welfare Centre' (Neethavan Mukām) in Mallakam. This common well is not enough to fulfill the daily needs of water among the IDPs. Therefore, they need to get water from the nearby houses outside the camp. The wells in the surrounding communities are owned by 'high caste' families. The IDPs face difficulties in drawing water from the wells of 'high caste' people. They are not allowed by the 'high caste' well owners to draw water directly from their wells. They need to wait till the owner of the house provides them water. Therefore, these 'low caste' IDPs are at the mercy of 'high caste' households in the vicinity of these camps. Many IDPs felt that this is a new form of social discrimination they have to face due to their displacement as they had their own perennial wells in their original villages.

### **Caste-based Discrimination in Land Market**

Land is one of the most valuable assets in the densely populated Jaffna peninsula. The wealth and status of the people are dependent on the amount of land they control. Traditionally, the Vellālar owned a large amount of land in Jaffna. The land located in or around a 'high caste' hamlet or owned by a 'high caste' is normally not sold to the Panchamars in Jaffna. If a 'high caste' person wanted to sell his land, first he would inform his own relatives or fellow caste members and offer them a chance to purchase this land. Under these circumstances, it becomes really difficult for the Panchamar people to purchase land as much of the land is owned by those of 'higher castes'. As a result, the land ownership pattern has not been changed much in spite of the war-induced population movements and a vast chunk of land not being accessible to civilians due to high security zones.

There is, however, some changes brought about by the out-migration of many Jaffna people over the past three decades. Some members of the Panchamar castes, whose family members successfully migrated to western countries, receive remittances from these relatives staying abroad and with this money, they are able to offer above the market price of land prices to the 'high caste' landowners, including the absentee owners, who have left their original villages and are willing to sell their land to these new rich people in spite of their caste issues. The 'low caste' buyers have to pay extra amount to acquire land from the 'high castes', which itself indicates a degree of discrimination in the land market. On the other hand, a vast majority of the Panchamars living in IDP camps are poor and they simply cannot gain benefit from this land market closed to them forever because of their poverty and underprivileged caste background.

## **Conclusions**

In conclusion, most severe forms of untouchability and caste discrimination in Sri Lankan context have been reported in Jaffna society. This was accompanied by convergence of economic domination, ritual superiority and political power in the hands of the Vellalar caste, which was also the numerically largest caste in Jaffna society. 'Low caste' resistance against the caste system, which gathered momentum since the 1920s, population displacement, outward migration and the general social breakdown brought about by the war and the ban imposed by the LTTE on caste discrimination have led to considerable erosion of caste discrimination at various levels. However, the preponderance of Panchamar groups among the long-term IDPs remaining in camps and the kind of discrimination they experience from the settled high caste communities in the vicinity of these camps indicate a degree of continuity in caste discrimination irrespective of the ongoing changes noted above and the LTTE ban on caste discrimination. These patterns of discriminations also indicate the greater vulnerability of the underprivileged caste groups during all kind of emergencies and disasters, including war and natural disasters (Goonesekere 2001, Gill 2007). Both government and NGO

programmes for IDPs have been caste-blind and this too may be partly responsible for the total neglect of caste-based discrimination in the post-war and post-tsunami context. It is important to note that the social movement against caste discrimination which in some ways paved the way for the current developments in Jaffna society, has been co-opted and more or less silenced by the LTTE in its militant programme of Tamil nationalism where caste is seen as at best an unnecessary diversion and, at worst, a threat to political and social unification of the desired Tamil nation. This policy however has failed to prevent or even recognize that some forms of caste-based discrimination have evolved in the relationship between IDPs and the surrounding communities.

It is however wrong to assume that organized resistance against caste discrimination in Jaffna society has disappeared completely. In recent years two fairly active caste organizations namely Sikai Alangaripālar Sangam (barber movement), Salavaith Tholilālar Vennira Ādaich Sangam (dhoby movement) have emerged respectively among Ambattar (barber) and Vannār (dhoby) in Jaffna society. Perhaps with the tacit support and approval of the LTTE, they have banned customary practices such as house visits by Barbers and Dhobies to Vellālar houses within the caste idiom increasingly seen by these organizations to be demeaning and unacceptable. Further, these organizations have tried to professionalize these occupations stipulating a standard fee structure and making it necessary for all clients irrespective of their caste to visit the business establishments and secure these services in an impersonal and business like manner rather than in the customary hierarchical idiom. How far this has actually eliminated caste discrimination is yet to be ascertained but it shows that in Jaffna society struggle against caste has by no means ended in spite of the war, an official ban on the caste system by the LTTE and a growing sense of an overarching Tamil consciousness.

It is important to point out that in contemporary Jaffna society, continuing notions of untouchability often operate in combination with poverty and other inherited disadvantages to aggravate the

adverse impact of war and other disasters on the affected people. While caste is only one aspect of a complex web of class, caste, ethnic, and gender related disadvantages and deprivations, one cannot single out caste as the only dynamic operating in these war and tsunami affected and displaced populations. Among other factors caste continues to be important in a variety of settings, including who joins political movements, who remains in IDP camps over a long period in spite of the poor living conditions and the discriminations they experience vis-à-vis surrounding communities, who have managed to escape the war and escape violence and forced recruitment by the militant groups, who have access to social capital and who is without access to many support mechanisms and therefore more inclined to seek the help of one benefactor or another or yield to the pressure of one armed group or another. Even though caste is not explicitly recognized in many matters and there is a public denial of the importance of caste by most parties, the educated middle classes in particular, the actual social reality is much more complex and multilayered and demands an understanding that goes beyond the superficial level and official truths whether coming from the state or non-state actors who are eager to reduce every thing to meta-narratives such as terrorism, nationalism and liberation struggle.

## Chapter Five

# **Caste Discrimination among Indian Tamil Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka**

*Sasikumar Balasundaram*  
*A.S. Chandrabose*  
*P.P. Sivapragasam*

This chapter begins with an overview of caste in the Indian Tamil population and goes on to examine the issue of caste discrimination in selected plantations in Sri Lanka.

### **Background**

In a number of ways, the prevailing caste system of the Tamil plantation community in Sri Lanka is a continuation and an adaptation of the South Indian caste system to suit the situation in the plantations. The plantation workers are mostly Tamil-speaking Hindus. As an integral part of the Hindu religion, caste has continued among the plantation workers of South Indian origin. The Tamil plantation workers were brought to the country as indentured labourers by the British planters when they established the coffee plantations in Ceylon somewhere in the 1840s. In spite of the many changes the plantation industry has undergone during the past 170 years, caste has provided an element of continuity in the social organization among plantation workers (Jayaraman 1975, Peebles 2001). On the other hand, the caste system that originated in a peasant economy

has adapted itself to changing circumstances in a plantation economy during colonial and post-colonial eras (de Silva 1982, Wesumperuma 1986, Muthulingam 1996).

The term 'Indian Tamil' is the official nomenclature for the Tamil plantation community in the country.<sup>11</sup> However, the term "Indian Origin Tamils" (IOT) may be more appropriate as they have lived in Sri Lanka for many generations and many of them do not have any links with India at present. The population of IOT in Sri Lanka is not accurately enumerated particularly in the last two censuses (1981 and 2001) (Chandrabose 2003, Peebles 2001). In these censuses many IOTs declared themselves as "Sri Lanka Tamils" instead of the census category "Indian Tamils", asserting their rights in Sri Lanka<sup>12</sup>. The estimated number of IOTs in Sri Lanka is 1.3 million or roughly 6.4 percent of the total population in the country in contrast to 5 percent according to official census figures. Nearly 80 percent of the IOT is concentrated in the plantation sector. The rest is scattered with a significant presence in Colombo, Kandy and other cities as businessmen, manual workers and sanitary labourers. Out of the total IOT population, 51.3 percent is in the district of Nuwara Eliya, which is the mainstay of the tea plantation economy of the country. The other districts where they live in large concentrations are Badulla (18.2 percent), Kandy (8.45 percent), Ratnapura (7.8 percent), Kegalle (5.9 percent), Matale (5.3 percent), Kalutara (2.7 percent) and Matara (2.2 percent).

The IOTs in Sri Lanka represent a part of a large movement of labour from India to various other countries that started in the 19th century. A majority of the Indian immigrants in Sri Lanka consisted of Tamils from most impoverished regions in South India. They were predominantly landless and poverty-stricken

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11 Other terms used to refer to this group include "Plantation Tamils" and "Malaiyaha people" (literally people of the hill country).

12 After Indian Origin Tamils were granted citizenship rights in Sri Lanka some of them identified themselves as "Sri Lanka Tamils", seeing it as a more appropriate identity following the change in their status.

agricultural workers occupying the lowest position in the existing caste hierarchy, especially Parayan<sup>13</sup>, Pallan<sup>14</sup> and Chakkilian<sup>15</sup> in the southern districts of Tamil Nadu (Wesumperuma 1986). A minority among them were relatively small owner farmers, poor tenants and agricultural workers belonging to various cultivator and 'high castes' such as Mottai Vellalan, Reddiyar, Ahamudiyar, Muthuraj, Ambalakkaran, Kallan, Naidu, Mudaliyar, Udaiyar, Padaiyachi and Kavundar. A few families belonging to the artisan castes and some goldsmiths (Asari) also migrated to Sri Lanka. People belonging to specialized castes like barber, Vannan (washerman) and temple priest (Pandaram) were recruited for the purpose of fulfilling the growing needs of the estate communities for their special services such as ritual and religious practices for both the 'high' and 'low caste' communities in the plantations. The British planters preferred to recruit landless and vulnerable communities such as Parayan, Pallan and Chakkilian to work in the plantations, possibly due to their greater likelihood of staying on in the plantations, greater ease in converting them to a pliant work force and greater adaptability to the regimented work in the plantations. The colonial rulers and the planters alike considered that certain racial and caste groups were inherently suitable for certain specific occupations (Wickramasinghe 1995). The planters clearly utilized caste as an organizing principle in recruiting workers and organizing the plantation workforce. While "invention of caste" by the Europeans (Dirks 2001, 1997) may be an overstatement, the planters certainly utilized it for their own advantage. The recruitment of 'low caste' workers was done through upper caste Kanganies who also served as labour supervisors in the estates. The Kangany became an important link between the planter

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13 Also spelt as 'paraiyan' and 'parayar' in some documents.

14 Also referred to as Pallar in some documents. In this work the term 'pallan' will be used throughout.

15 Also referred to as 'Sakkiliar' in some documents and in conversation. As the term 'Chakkilian' is seen as less stigmatizing it will be used consistently in this work.

and the workers. In the early period the Kanganies invariably came from the 'high castes'.<sup>16</sup>

The Kanganies and head-kanganies mostly belonged to the 'high caste' Vellalan category. The other members of the 'high caste' community became "Sillarai Kanganies", traders and money lenders who provided the basic consumer items to the 'low caste' workers. The 'high caste' community not only maintained the leadership in terms of the supervision of the work rendered by the 'low caste' workers but also became the trade union leaders and obtained the leadership in the various community-based organizations in the estates. They were able to send their children to the city schools whereas the 'low caste' workers were compelled to send their children to the estate schools, which were providing education up to primary level; a majority of them were single teacher schools which functioned under the supervision of the estate superintendent until recent times.

The caste composition in the estate was characterized by the numerical preponderance of Parayan, Pallan and Chakkilian (PPC castes), which reportedly constituted around 75 percent of the total IOT population in recent times. The 'low caste' Parayan alone constitutes 40 percent of the total labour population. As Mahroof (2000) has pointed out the Indian Tamil community has "a truncated social pyramid" with PPC castes comprising a vast majority in this ethnic community. In spite of their minority status within the community, the 'high caste' population controlled labour supervisory and intermediate level positions in the plantations, thereby acquiring the status of a small upper caste elite with considerable power and influence over the PPC castes. These elite also gave leadership in annual festivals such as Theru Thiruvilla (Sami Kumpidu), Marghali Bajan, popular folk dramas like Ponnar Sangar, Kamankuthu

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16 In some sense plantation labour was a kind of bonded labour based on ethnicity and caste. Mobility from one estate to another or from estates to elsewhere in Sri Lanka was restricted and the ethnic, caste and gender identities served to specify their role within the plantation economy and society.

and Arjunan Thavasu. The 'low caste' communities were large in number in the estates but they were isolated from such activities controlled by the 'high caste' communities. The 'high caste' people also maintained links with their ancestral villages in Tamil Nadu through frequent visits for social and ritual purposes. The 'high caste' Kanganies and their associates in the estates also have links with their relatives in other estates and towns. On the other hand, the 'low caste' communities were more or less restricted and isolated in their respective estates. In a nut shell, the difference between the 'high' and 'low caste' people continued up to the 1980s in the estate sector. The so-called Adi Dravida community comprising Parayan, Pallan and Chakkilian were isolated and confined within their day-to-day 'task work' determined by the estate management through Kanganies in the estates. Nevertheless, the communities like barber and Vannār were slightly better than the others because their services were necessary in the context of Hindu religion.

However, the situation changed significantly during the process of repatriation of some IOT workers. Several agreements were reached between the government of Sri Lanka and the government of India, but the Sirimavo-Shastri Pact which was signed in 1964 made a considerable impact on the Indian Tamil plantation workers. Under this Pact a large scale reverse migration took place from Sri Lanka to South India. The number that was decided to repatriate under the Pact was 506,000 and it was half of the total IOT population who were present during this period in the country. The process of repatriation commenced in 1968 and it continued at a slow pace until the suspension of the ferry service between Talaimannar and Rameswaram due to the breakout of ethnic violence in Sri Lanka in 1983. The people who joined the repatriation process to South India initially were mainly the 'high caste' IOT. The 'high caste' Tamils who lived in the estates not only provided the leadership which has been an integral part of the plantation system but also represented the elite group within the social system. Indeed, the process of repatriation resulted in further truncating the caste hierarchy in estates in favour of the PPC castes. According to some

estimates, these Dalit categories now constitute 83 percent of the total population in the plantation communities (Sivapragasam, pers. com, 2007). While one may argue that a social vacuum was created through the rapid repatriation of mostly 'higher caste' people, it has also eroded some aspects of caste discrimination in the plantations, enabled PPC castes to challenge the continuing leadership of the 'higher castes' particularly in the trade unions and political parties and resort to violence against high caste elite in some instances.

It should be mentioned here that the administration of the plantations and the conditions of the plantation workers in general underwent radical changes in the post independence era. The nationalisation of plantations paved the way for erosion of the Kangany system in the plantation as a whole. The plantation sector came under the purview of the Janatha Estate Development Board (JEDB) and the Sri Lanka State Plantation Corporation (SLSPC) which were large government agencies in charge of the management of the plantations. A new category of superintendents mostly from the Sinhala majority ethnic group replaced the old superintendents, many of whom were Europeans. The administrative system of the plantation was decentralized. Unexpectedly, restrictions were imposed on food consumption due to the shortage of food during the 1973-76 period. The nationalisation and numerous changes in the administration as well as ethnic riots led to further deterioration of the living conditions and security of the IOT plantation workers. This, in turn, contributed to acceleration of repatriation of many IOTs who considered it safer to move to India. An estimated 459,000 went to India under the repatriation process during the 1970s and 1980s.

As mentioned before, many of the repatriates were from 'high castes' like Mottai Vellalan, Reddiyar, Ahamudiyar, Muthuraj, Ambalakkaran, Kallan, Naidu, Mudaliyar, Udaiyar, Padaiyachi and Kavundar. These 'upper caste' communities remained somewhat aloof from PPC castes in the estates. With the repatriation of a substantial number of 'upper caste' people, the remaining 'upper caste' people found it difficult to live in the plantations. The 'upper caste' people

who stayed in the estates were either estate staff or small traders. As a result, now the estates were left mainly with the 'low caste' groups like Parayan, Pallan, and Chakkiliyan. Caste-based Kanganany system has more or less disappeared. The system of head-Kanganany was abolished. Kanganies are appointed by the estate management based on the need for supervision of the workers in the field and factory. In recent years, more and more of the Kanganies have been recruited from PPC backgrounds.

In the past children from Parayan, Pallan, and Chakkiliyan castes rarely went for education beyond the primary level.<sup>17</sup> This was due to many factors, including lack of resources and contacts, lack of encouragement from their parents and in some instances due to discrimination practised by 'high caste' teachers in these schools. The school education in the plantations developed considerably due to the implementation of Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA)-assisted school development projects after the nationalisation of the estate schools. Some upwardly mobile PPC members have also made considerable progress through political participation, business and other avenues. However, the political leadership of IOTs still remains in the hands of 'upper caste' leadership, in spite of growing 'low caste' resentment against this leadership.

### **'Untouchable' Becomes 'Touchable'? Ethnographic Research in Selected Plantations in Sri Lanka**

The objective of ethnographic research conducted as part of this study was to ascertain the notion and practices of untouchability and caste-based discrimination in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka. Field work was conducted at Rozella Estate in Watawala, Opatha Estate in Kahawatte, Templestowe Estate in Hatton and Mocha Estate in Maskeliya. One can argue that due to various changes discussed

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17 Many of the estate schools have classes up to grade eight only. This in turn along with several other factors such as language competencies (Tamil only) limited their ability to pursue higher education and seek employment opportunities outside the plantations.

in the previous section untouchability became touchability in Sri Lanka over time. Although the term Dalit has sometimes been used to refer to PPC castes in the plantations (Sivapragasam, pers.com, 2007), it is not widely accepted within the communities themselves and there is a view that the concept of Dalit may further marginalize an already marginalized community. Another concern is that this label may militate against overall unity within this ethnic minority in Sri Lanka and its common interests within the ethnically polarized Sri Lanka society.

As a majority of the IOTs in Sri Lanka belongs to PPC castes, they may be seen as 'untouchable' in social origin. However, given the caste demography in the plantations (only a minority of high caste people), labour organization (levelling influence of the plantation work patterns) and close proximity of PPCs and other castes in barrack like labour quarters ("labour lines") in the plantations, no elaborate system of untouchability developed in the plantations. The pattern of upper caste domination in IOT communities had more to do with secular authority and power structure within the plantation workforce rather than the notion of untouchability *per se*. The patronage to different Hindu temples has been on the basis of caste identity to some extent but caste has never been an important determinant of access to water, health services and other amenities in the estates. The caste system in the plantations has developed in some unique ways. "The caste system of the plantation Tamils occupies a different physical, economic and mental space" (Mahroof 2000: 01).

The estate caste hierarchy has four layers: Kudiyanavar, Pallan, Parayan and Chakkiliyar. Instead of a notion of untouchability, a notion of "good caste" and "low caste" prevails. The Pallan, Parayan and Chakkiliar (PPC) communities considered to be untouchable in India became touchable in the plantations of Sri Lanka. This can be illustrated by considering caste composition in the Rozella Estate.

**Table 5.1**  
Caste Composition in Rozella Estate

<b>Group</b>	<b>No of families &amp; %</b>	<b>Traditional or Ritual role (India)</b>	<b>Present occupation/ritual function (Sri Lankan estates)</b>
Kudiyanavar	61 (30.3%)	Cultivator	Estate workers/Business/cultivation
Pallan	49 (24.4%)	Manual workers	Estate workers, Mellam beating (drum beaters in Kovil and Weddings/auspicious events)
Parayan	24 (11.9%)	Drum beaters/manual workers	Estate workers, Drum beating (Thappu/Kovil/unauspicious events), Oodumpilai (helper)
Chakkiliar	56 (27.9%)	Sweeper, cobbler & scavenger	Estate workers, Vasakooti (sweeper), Oodum pillai
Sinhalese	08 (4%)	–	–
Muslims	03 (1.5%)	–	–
Total	201 (100%)	–	–

Source: Field Notes, May 2007

It should be noted that no one in the estate had any records of caste identity of households. The researchers had a hard time trying to determine the caste composition in the estate. As caste is a sensitive issue, no one asks about another person's caste position publicly. If you do so, people think you are asking an unnecessary and unacceptable question. In Rozella Estate, the relevant information was collected from key informants and through a focus group discussion with five old women who were in their sixties. Almost all members in the focus group personally knew the caste of each household in the estate. Generally, people do not want to talk about it but the researchers successfully secured this information after establishing a good rapport with the selected informants.

Interestingly, many people did not know the caste identity of other people except a few families directly related to them but almost all women in their 60s knew the caste identity of almost everyone in the estate. Men thought talking about caste was useless. For them, caste had nothing to do with their day-to-day lives.

In table 5.1, the traditional role refers to occupations defined by the original Hindu caste system in South India. Present occupation is what people actually do in the estates. The table indicates that in nearly all cases the present occupation in the plantations is different from what they were expected to do under the Hindu caste system. For almost every one, estate labour has become the primary occupation. In addition, the traditional occupation continues in some cases but as secondary and ritualistic activities. Sometimes people do not want to identify with any hereditary caste occupation as it is demeaning in nature. These are no longer treated as family or caste-based occupations. As a rule young people do not want to take up such occupations because of the stigma associated with such work. In general, caste-based occupations are less important in the estates. The researchers found that no one in this estate served as cobblers or scavengers. Dhoby (washermen) and barber (hair dresser) were mostly from the Pallar or Parayar castes and the Vasakooti (sweeper) were mostly from the Chakkiliyar caste but sometimes they came from Parayar or Pallar castes. It shows the complications in identifying caste occupations in the estates.

The table reveals that the so-called PPC comprise a majority (64.2%) of the population whereas the Kudiyanavar comprise only about 30.3 percent. However, compared with other estates in general, the percentage of Kudiyanavar population is significantly high in this estate. Despite their minority status, Kudiyanavar are economically and politically powerful in the estate which will be explained in detail in the latter part of the chapter.

Earlier studies tried to understand castes in plantation communities using the Indian caste model, which does not fit the caste system in the plantations in Sri Lanka in some respects. In general, there are four main castes known as Kudiyanayar, Pallar, Parayar and Chakkiliar and each caste has sub-castes and each sub-caste has sub-sub-castes. Sub-caste and sub sub-castes also have their own hierarchical order but this could not be clearly identified since everyone seems to believe his or her sub-caste was the highest. It also shows that people are proud of their own caste in spite of their specific position in the caste hierarchy.

**Table 5.2**  
Caste Hierarchy in Rozzela

<b>Caste</b>	<b>Sub-caste</b>	<b>Sub-sub caste</b>
Kudiyanavar	Vellalar, Motta vellalar, Vanniya kavundar, Muthuraj, Ahampadiyar, Padaichi, Kallar, Muthaliyar, Udayar, Muppuli, Vaduvu naidu (1) Pandaram, (2) Chettiar, (3) Maravar, Iidayer, Asari	<p><b>Vaduvu Naidu Pandaram:</b> Kochikka vaduvu, Kongavaduvu, Koravan vaduvu, Selanga vad uvu, Chetti vaduvu</p> <p><b>Vaduvu Naidu Chettiar:</b> Perri chetty, Komutti chetty, Kuthirai c., Vanniya c</p> <p><b>Vaduvu Naidu Maravar:</b> Sempunattu maraver, Kondayampeattai m., Cootrali m., Karkurichi m., Vannikuti m., Uppukati m., Pulluka M.</p>
Pallar	Theivendra pallar, Melakara p., Urummy p., Amma p., Aaya pallar., Velikattu p.	
Parayer	Thangalan parayar, Cholia p., Maurutha seman p., Arkattu p., Valluwa p,	
Sakkiliar	Arunthathi s., Retty sakili, Thotti s., Vadvu s., Unnambu s., Kannadi s., Sulagu s., Momora s.	

According to some elderly women in the estate, their parents held a notion of untouchability. A sixty-five year old Poosari ('high caste priest') woman in Rozella estate said that her mother used to tell that physical contact (touching) with 'lowest caste' would result in a scorpion bite of the one who got polluted. She said the scorpion would bite 'high-caste' people as a punishment for having had such a close contact with 'low-caste people'. Scorpions never bite those who cause pollution to others. She said that she heard that a lot of

people in India had been bitten by scorpions after having physical contact with 'low caste' people.

In the early period, 'low caste' people could not enter the Karuwarai of the Kovil (the room in which the main god or goddess' statue was placed) or become a Poosari (priest). Sometimes, 'high-caste' people disliked 'low caste' people entering their houses. There are two relatively important taboos still prevailing in the estates. One is prohibition for 'high caste' people against eating at low caste people's houses and the second is inter-caste marriage. It should be noted that people do not explain these taboos in terms of untouchability but rather as a matter of social incompatibility.

When it comes to religion in the estates, people have had caste-based gods and goddesses in the past. Although Mariamman was worshipped by all people in the estates, some people believed Amman was from the Kudiyanavar caste. Those who claim that Amman was from the Kudiyanavar caste say that the 'pottu thali' (nuptial) Amman wears seems to suggest that she belonged to one of the sub-castes of the Kudiyanavar caste. Thali is still considered a symbol of one's caste identity. Even today, each caste makes their own type of Thali and avoids wearing those that signify a different caste identity. Even though some Kudiyanavars claimed that the goddess was from the Kudiyanavar caste, others argued that the same type of Thali was worn by women from one of the sub-castes of Chakkiliyar caste. Val Rajah (sword king) was Pallar's god and both the Pallar and the Chakkiliar worshiped Maruthaiveeran as he had married one woman (Pommiyamma) from Pallar caste and another one (Vellaiyamma) from the Chakkiliar caste. The Parayars mostly worshiped Katteri. However, there were so many gods and goddesses worshiped by almost everyone irrespective of caste. It should be noted that Kudiyanavars also worshiped Maruthaiveeran, although he was considered a 'low-caste' god.

It was believed that each caste had its own distinctive attributes and behaviours. The following folk song signifies perceived caste distinctions and caste stereotypes prevailing in Sri Lankan estates:

A Folk Poem among estate workers

**Kallanukuku powerrirukku (Kallan has power)**

**Vellalanukku panamirukku (Vellalan has money)**

**Kavundannukku serrukkukiruku (Kavundan has pride)**

**Pallanukku paliyirukku (Pallar has revenge)**

**Paryanukku pattirukku (Paryan has songs)**

**Chakkilian Sandaiyirukku (Chakkilian has fight)**

*Source:* Personal interview 2007, Templestowe Estate, see also Daniel 2001.

Apart from these stereotypical views, each caste tends to have a sense of heritage and a notion of common social origin. Parayans, for instance, consider themselves to have certain artistic skills and often claim that “art is in our blood” (UNFPA 2007). These skills include drumming, singing and acting in folk rituals such as kamankutthu. Similarly, Kudiyanavars often see themselves as hard working, honest, intelligent and good organizers.

In the back and forth movement of plantation workers between India and Sri Lanka there were instances where touchables became untouchables. In 1960s, more than half of the Indian Tamil population was repatriated to India under the Sirima-Shastri agreement. When Indian Tamils of PPC ranks reached the Indian shores as repatriates they became untouchables or Dalits. Chandrasekran, the secretary of the Malayaha Makkal Maruvalzvu Mandram (Up-country Repatriates Organization, India) writes “in the Nilgiris, the Tamil repatriates, most of them Dalits, fell victims to a milder form of racism, if the discrimination on the basis of birth can be defined so” (Chandrasekaran 2006). Many people who had to register themselves in official records did not know anything about Dalits or untouchability but the Indian immigration rules made them untouchables whereas they were born as touchables in Sri Lanka. The next generation who were born to those touchables by birth became untouchables by birth. This very clearly shows that the notion of untouchability is an Indian phenomenon.

Because of the lowering of status the PPC repatriates encountered when they returned to India, it appears that compared to Kudiyanavars, PPCs were less eager to join the repatriation process. In fact, there is considerable evidence that as a result of the repatriation the caste demography in the plantations was altered resulting in further decline of the size of the Kudiyanavar group in the estates.

Today, even though caste distinctions are still important for certain purposes like marriage, caste is not necessarily the main determinant of a person's identity in the plantations. When it comes to caste status in estates today, people are classified into two broad categories; 1) *Nalla jathi* or *oyantha jathi* (good caste or high caste) and 2) *Keel jathi* or *illaka jathi* or *kuraincha jathi* ('lowest caste', 'derogated caste' or 'lower caste'). The first type refers to the Kudiyanavar caste and its sub and sub-sub castes. The second type refers to the so-called Pallar, Parayan, Chakkiliyan (PPC) castes and their sub and sub-sub castes. This research found that when it comes to caste identity sometimes the self identification and identification given by others may differ. For example, the Kudiyanavar identify themselves as *Oyantha jathi* (high caste) while other people (PPC) identify Kudiyanavar as *Nalla Jathi* (good caste). In identifying and referring to PPC persons Kudiyanavar people use the term "keel jathi" or "illaka jathi" ("of lowest or derogated birth") but PPC castes prefer to identify themselves as "kuraincha jathi" (low caste), which gives somewhat higher status than lowest or derogated caste. However, the term *jathi* is not widely used in daily life. Today, the term "alluha" (human kind or people) is the one often used instead of caste. Instead of referring to the caste names or above classifications, people use "unga alluhal" (your people) and "enga or namba alluhal" (our people). These words do not always have caste connotations because they are also used to refer to ethnic and religious identities. It depends on the context. It is interesting to note that many young people do not talk or do not know about their caste. Once they reach marriage age or have a love affair only then do they become conscious of caste as caste is considered in marriage even today.

At present, when it comes to caste and religion in estates, all worship every god and goddess irrespective of caste. Presently no caste-based religious festivals take place in estates. In the past people had minor caste conflicts related to religion and Kovil but it is very rare today. Low-caste people have equal access to resources and equal opportunities in sharing the Kovil. It is because each one contributes the same amount of money from their salary. Kovils are no more controlled by certain caste groups.

When it comes to the opinions of people about other castes, they have their own prejudices but it does not necessarily lead to caste-based discrimination. For example, a Kudiyanavar woman and man said that the Pallar are dangerous and the Parayars are violent. Similarly a 'low-caste' man said Kudiyanavars are stingy people. A Kudiyanavar man said, "Chakillians are ready for a fight at any time and they use very derogatory language when quarrelling with others in the estates".

With regards to leadership positions, in the past, there was a connection between caste and leadership. Many of the Peria Kangani (head kanganies) and Sillarai Kanganies (sub-Kanganies), Thotta Thalaivar (estate trade union leader) were from the Kudiyanavar caste (Kallan subcaste) but this is no longer so prominent (Hollup 1994). One of the main reasons for such a drastic change was that a large number of Kudiyanavar moved to India in the 1960s, to northern Sri Lanka in the 1970s and once again migrated to India after the 1983 riots (Balasundaram 2005). This resulted in the 'low-caste' people becoming an overwhelming majority in every estate. This in turn led to a transition in power in plantation workforce and politics. It is, however, important to point out that the leading Indian Tamil political organization, Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), continues to be controlled by the Kudiyanavar caste in spite of them being a minority among plantation workers.

When it comes to occupations, only a few caste-based occupations exist in estates. Almost all work as labourers in the estates; however, there are certain caste-based jobs such as Pandaram (priest), Vasakooti (sweeper), Thappukaran (tom-tom beater), Oddumpillai (helper)

and Kullivetal (burial cutting). These caste-based jobs are ritualistic in nature. The new notion of “Colombo boys” (estate boys who work in Colombo) changed the caste-based occupations to some extent. Many estate boys who work in Colombo are becoming a very important group in estate communities. They too have a good place in the community. They visit the estates during festivals and when there is a funeral. They actively take part in these functions. When Colombo boys do such activities they disregard caste altogether. For example, burial digging was traditionally performed by Parayar caste but now Colombo boys who belong to almost all caste groups do it as a contribution to the community. This is indicative of a weakening of caste consciousness and even a deliberate disregard for caste in younger generations exposed to the outside world.

Although, caste system in the plantations has become relaxed in many ways, caste rigidity is still maintained in marriages. This is not specific to up-country Tamils but common in Sri Lanka in general. When it comes to marriage, each caste group wants to maintain its own social identity. In the early period, marriage was more or less restricted to the same sub-castes of every major caste. Later, with displacement, repatriation process and migration to India after the 1983 riots, people encountered problems in finding suitable marriage partners within the same sub-caste. This led to inter-sub-caste marriages in the estates. In marriage, each caste has its own rituals and practices. Usually, the whole estate is invited for a wedding or puberty ceremony but if the wedding is held on a small scale, only people from the same caste will be invited. Anyway, this cannot be seen as caste-based discrimination as such. However, inter-caste marriages too have become more common in estates in recent times. It is coupled with the notion of “Colombo boys”. Boys working in Colombo choose their marriage partners from estate girls who work in Colombo, mostly as garment workers. Many of these marriages are inter-caste marriages. In many cases, parents do not like their children having a relationship or getting married to someone from another caste. If parents do not say ‘yes’, it usually ends up in elopement. Later, when a baby is born both families tend

to accept such marriages. Many young people believe that the first child is a bridge between two families from different castes. When, the researchers talked to a Kudiyanavar caste boy who had recently eloped with a girl from a 'low caste' and having problems with his parents, he said with a smile "only till we get a child".

Many PPC caste people hire a person from the Kudiyanavar caste to make food for visitors during a wedding or any other ceremonies to which the whole estate is invited. It is believed that if a 'low-caste' person prepares food at these ceremonies, the Kudiyanavar will not eat. But this too has significantly decreased as many of the estate weddings are taking place in the Kovil, hotels and reception halls. No one keeps track of who cooked the food in a wedding held in a hotel or reception hall. These are some indicators of how caste-based discrimination in the estates has declined over time.

The current research also examined if there was a relationship between caste and poverty. The study discovered that in general the people of Kudiyanavar caste were better-off than others. To some extent this may be a reflection of the socio-economic standing of various castes within the plantation community. Low level of alcohol consumption, engaging in various kind of entrepreneurial activities, cattle raising, vegetable growing and trade union influences were expressed as reasons why Kudiyanavars are better-off than others. The incidence of poverty was higher in marginal plantation areas where plantations had experienced long periods of neglect and Indian Tamil plantation workers with better social networks had managed to move to better managed plantations with more regular wage incomes (Silva 1990, de Silva 1989). The pattern, however, was not uniform and there were some instances of PPC caste people getting rich through overseas employment in the Middle East, business and commercial farming as well.

In conclusion, it can be said that caste has survived in some form in spite of many changes in the plantation economy and in the larger society. Caste has been mobilized by various parties for various purposes, including planters, plantation management, trade union leaders, political parties and communities themselves. Caste

has been a factor in recruitment of workers of estate origin for positions such as sales assistants in Indian Tamil owned businesses in Colombo and other cities (Hollup 1993, 1994). In spite of these “caste continuities” (Jayaraman 1975), a number of factors made untouchables touchable in the hill country plantations in Sri Lanka. When Indian Tamils came to Sri Lanka they had to shape their own culture according to the needs of the new situation. In other words, the culture which is seen among Indian Tamil plantation workers in Sri Lanka today is a transformed Indian culture. Many things have been newly added and some elements of the original culture were given up leading to the formation of a distinctive culture (see, Suryanarayan 1999, Bass 2001, 2005). The patterns of bonded labour in the plantations utilized caste-based division of labour to some extent in that Kanganies were mostly from Kudiyanavar caste and they supervised the work of those from PPC castes. However, all IOTs in plantations shared resources like water, Kovil, workplace, line rooms, school and crèche irrespective of caste. Homogeneity among worker families in a way eroded the notion of untouchability in the estates. Another important factor is that in the estates trade unions to some extent replaced the role of caste in their original villages in India. Thirdly, in a situation where PPC castes collectively formed an overwhelming majority of the population, untouchability against them could not be practised by a minority of Kudiyanavar caste people. Fourthly, geographical and social mobility among people (Colombo boys, Middle-east workers, garment factory workers) and an increase in inter-caste marriages indicate further challenges to the caste system. Finally, ethnic marginalisation of IOTs, efforts to forge a new “Malaiyaha” (literally “hill country people”) identity to assert their cultural distinctiveness and common heritage among Indian Tamils and outbursts of ethnic riots where they became victims often strengthened their ethnic solidarity as distinct from caste identity (Balasundaram 2005, Brass 2001, 2005).

Ethnicity itself and an emerging sense of Malaiyaha identity may be seen as a means to overcome the caste divide as in the case of Tamil nationalism in the North. Malaiyaha identity may

be particularly advantageous to the Kudiyanavar leadership of the community in that it forges vertical ties with PPCs who comprise the base of the social pyramid in the plantations (Balasundaram 2005, Brass 2005, 2001). On the other hand, the new Malaiyaha identity enables those from deprived caste backgrounds to redefine their identity in a more respectable manner in ethnic rather than caste terms. While some efforts have been made in recent years to assert the Dalit identity of the vast majority of plantation workers and challenge the political leadership of the community coming mainly from the Kudiyanavar background, this is yet to come to the political mainstream. The plantation workers of Indian origin continue to be one of the most marginalized sections of the Sri Lanka population. They are compelled to take up wage labour in the plantations and other marginal occupations in the society at large, including services as domestic servants (mostly female maids) in middle class homes in Colombo and other cities due to lack of alternative opportunities and limited social capital outside the plantations (Omvedt 1978). Their marginal position is due to a complex web of factors, including history of indenture, social class, ethnicity, caste and overall minority status in a Sinhala dominated political system. Opening up opportunities for those at the bottom of the social hierarchy in terms of ethnicity, class, caste, gender and political and social rights remains a key challenge to social policies in the plantation sector in Sri Lanka.

## Chapter Six

### **Urban Untouchability: The Condition of Sweepers and Sanitary Workers in Kandy**

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Caste in Sri Lanka is often seen as a rural phenomenon that rapidly disintegrates with the beginning of modernization and urbanization. Urban Sri Lanka is particularly silent about caste and recognizes caste as a sign of backwardness and an outdated institution. Contrary to this, urban sanitary worker communities of distinct caste and ethnic backgrounds have evolved from the colonial era in many cities in Sri Lanka. They are often employed by the respective local government agencies or contractors as municipal labourers for cleaning of public latrines and streets and garbage collection. Like plantation workers described in Chapter Five, they descend from specific caste groups brought into Ceylon from South India by the British colonial rulers during the 19th century as they established the relevant local government entities. This is another instance where the colonial rule actually contributed to “invention of caste” along the lines suggested by Dirk (2001). What is significant is that as the relevant local government agencies provided housing for these urban workers in specific locations in each town, these congested housing schemes comprising ‘labour lines’ have survived into the modern era as urban ghettos with a complex mix of underclass,

outcaste and ethnic enclave characteristics. The number of people living in these communities is not known, but such communities are known to exist in a number of towns in Sri Lanka as indicated in Map 5.<sup>11</sup>

These congested ghetto-like urban communities in Sri Lanka have received relatively little attention from researchers or policy makers. To the extent they paid any attention to these communities, the researchers glossed over the caste issue and focused on issues like ethnicity, housing problems and alcohol and drug problems known to be widespread in these communities (Marga 1977, Silva & Atukorala 1996). In a survey of Tamil caste systems in Sri Lanka, Mahroof (2000) described the Jaffna, Batticaloa and Plantation systems as main caste systems and caste in what he referred to as “urban scavenging communities” as a “fugitive system”. Further he noted,

“The fugitive caste system among the Tamils, refers to the erstwhile scavenging labourers of some of the local government bodies in Ceylon. Of small numbers, they were assured of regular, though small pay. They had settled down among the slum dwellers of Colombo and other towns. In course of time, they had improved their dress, sent their children to schools, and acquired such household equipment as sewing machines.” (Mahroof 2000: 43).

In the present study, caste and related issues such as social exclusion in one such community in Kandy, namely Mahaiyawa, are examined through rapid ethnographic research, inclusive of a household survey and Focus Group Discussions with young people and women. Mahaiyawa is one of the largest sanitary worker communities comprising Indian-Origin Tamils in Sri Lanka. It was

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11 For instance, McGilvray (2008) reports of some Cakkiliar sweepers employed by the Town Council in Akkaraipattu town in Eastern Sri Lanka. They being newly introduced to the area, McGilvray noted that they “are clearly outside the framework of intercaste rights and duties that constitute the armature of Tamil Hindu society in Akkaraipattu” (2008: 157). This analysis however prevented him from examining in detail the marginal position of this Indian origin workers in a provincial town.

established by the British in the 1920s to house 'conservancy workers' employed by the Kandy Municipal Council (KMC) for undertaking manual scavenging of bucket latrines widely used in the town at that time as well as for day-to-day cleaning of city streets polluted by commercial establishments, ritual activities and visitors in the Kandy town. Mahaiyawa gradually evolved as an inner-city slum with multiple connections to the KMC as well as other establishments and informal sector in the town. As of 2007, Mahaiyawa city ward with a total population of about 6,400 people, was one of the largest concentrations of urban poor in Kandy town.

Mahaiyawa is one of the densely populated urban low-income communities in Kandy town (see Map 6 for distribution of these communities). Mahaiyawa ward is divided into two sections, typically designated as Mahaiyawa MC and Mahaiyawa MT sections. The MC consists mainly of labour lines for workers employed by the KMC and a range of unauthorized housing units built typically by descendants of the KMC workers who could not secure KMC housing using whatever open space available in-between some 12 rows of line houses built in the 1920s. This community is highly overcrowded with a population of 4130 occupying a land area of 2.43 hectares (a mean density of 1700 per hectare of land). The MT stands for model tenements built by the KMC also with effect from the 1920s for the purpose of housing higher grade KMC workers, including supervisors of KMC manual workers and small traders and other such groups in the town. This neighbourhood too is highly congested with a total population of 2,290 housed in a land area of 1.82 hectares (mean density of 1,258 per hectare). As will be elaborated later, in terms of socio-economic status as well as visible housing characteristics, there is shuttle variation between MC and MT sections, with MC representing the bottom of the social hierarchy in Kandy town.

Mahaiyawa is located close to the main public cemetery (Mahaiyawa Cemetery), some sewer canals and a municipal dumping ground in Kandy. All of these are seen as sources of environmental and ritual pollution and signifiers of marginal status from the angle

of residents in the town. In the past, the location has served as a shelter for beggars and location for herding draft animals used by the KMC, adding to its degrading status. The labour lines are located on a steep hill slope with limited road access for some sections of the MC division in particular.

### **Ethnic and Religious Composition**

The Mahaiyawa community indicates a complex juxtaposition of ethnicity, religion, caste and social class in ways that marginalize the entire community that perpetuates their social exclusion over a long period of time.

**Table 6.1**  
Percentage Distribution of Households by Ethnicity in  
Mahaiyawa and Kandy City

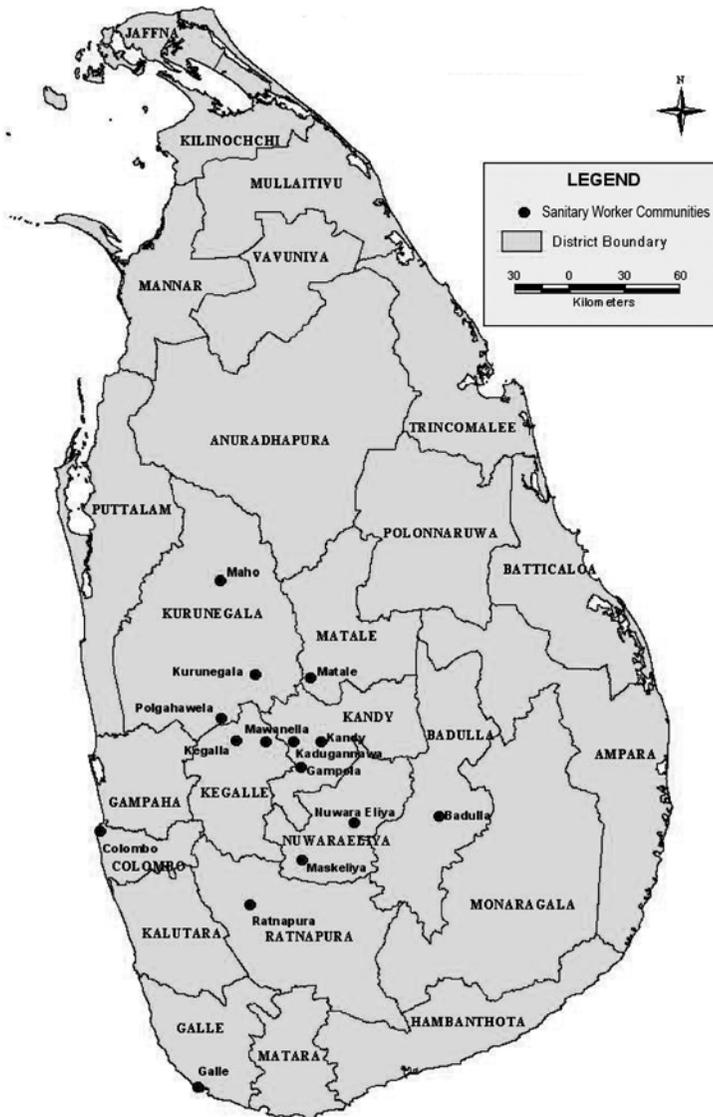
<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>MC*</b>	<b>MT*</b>	<b>Kandy City**</b>
Sinhala	5.3	34.0	70.5
Tamil	93.5	21.7	13.7
Muslim	1.2	42.3	13.5
Other	0	2.1	2.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: \*Based on a sample survey of households, \*\*Based on Population Census 2002

The population in Mahaiyawa MC is predominantly Indian Tamil with a sprinkling of Sinhala and Muslims. On the other hand, Mahaiyawa MT is ethnically heterogeneous with Muslims as the largest ethnic category, followed by Sinhala and Tamils. The majority of the population in these two densely populated city neighbourhoods is Tamil speaking. The ethnic composition of the two neighbouring areas is vastly different from the ethnic composition of the city as a whole where the numerically largest ethnic group in Sri Lanka, the Sinhala, constitutes an overwhelming majority. Interestingly, the Sinhala members of the Mahaiyawa MC community themselves come from underprivileged caste backgrounds indicating a kind of caste-based solidarity cross cutting the ethnic divide. One Sinhala-speaking ethnically mixed family with a history of involvement in KMC sanitary work and some inter-marriages with fellow

Tamils in the community, in fact, claimed Rodi caste origin with a corresponding tendency for assimilation with the bottom layer of the Indian Tamil community.

Map 5: Map of Sri Lanka showing the distribution of towns with sanitary labourer settlements under local government authorities



Map 6: Map of Kandy Showing Distribution of Low-Income Communities, Including Mahaiyawa



**Table 6.2**  
 Percentage Distribution of Households by Religion in  
 Mahaiyawa and Kandy City

Area/Religion	MC*	MT*	Kandy City**
Buddhist	5.9	34.0	66.9
Hindu	82.8	20.6	10.9
Islam	1.8	42.3	14.9
Christian	9.5	3.1	7.3
Other	0	0	0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: \*Based on a sample survey of households, \*\*Based on Population Census 2002

A similar pattern is evident in the case of religion. Corresponding with ethnicity, there is a diversity of faith with Tamils predominantly Hindu in religion, Sinhala Buddhist and Muslims Islamic. There is a notable proportion of Christians in Mahaiyawa MC, indicating conversion from Hinduism to Christianity, a strategy widely pursued by underprivileged caste groups in South Asia as a means to overcome hereditary disadvantages and the ideological baggage that comes with such disadvantages.

**Caste Background**

Unlike ethnicity and religion, there was an aura of considerable silence in respect of caste in these communities. When asked about caste, some community leaders and community members replied “Why do you want to know our caste? It was a thing of the past. It is not important anymore”. There was a tendency to deny the significance of caste particularly among educated young people. As will be elaborated, caste, however, had some significance in marriage, local politics and the attitude of the larger city population towards the Mahaiyawa community in general and the Mahaiyawa MC community in particular.

A report prepared by an urban planner who worked in Mahaiyawa in 1999 made the following remarks about the community:

“The remnants of the caste system from South India still seem to have some influence in Mahaiyawa. Within the community there seems to be an elite set of Tamils who have prospered possibly due to political affiliation. There is another set of Tamils who tend to have employment of a lower stature. Externally, the community is perceived as an ethnic minority and their nature of work emphasizes their lower stature. They are discriminated by just being from this settlement and hence denied social mobility and access to mainstream of life in the city.” (Bhanjee: 1999).

This description remains more or less valid even today.

It is important to point out that in the view of many city people outside the community, the Mahaiyawa community comprising Indian Tamil immigrants like plantation workers is not only ethnically marginal, but also socially marginal due to their actual and caste-specific association with scavenging, overcrowdedness and poor housing, notoriety for bad behaviour such as alcoholism, drug addiction and other vices attributed to them and low social esteem attributed to the place itself. Some of these characterizations in respect of the two neighbourhoods are examined below.

### **Mahaiyawa MC**

This is an inner-city neighbourhood occupied by the KMC labourers, including sanitary workers, and other low-income residents whose livelihoods are closely connected with the city. The origin of this settlement goes back to early 20th century when the British rulers brought in Tamil indentured workers from South India to serve as sanitary labourers and street sweepers. Since there is no precise information about the caste composition of this community, in the survey we failed to secure reliable information on caste identities of each household due to the embarrassing nature of any conversation about caste at household level.

The key informant interviews revealed that some 45 percent of the population belonged to Parayan (sweeper) caste and another 30 percent belonged to Chakkiliar (toilet cleaning) caste. The folk history among community leaders in Mahaiyawa indicated that

the members of these two caste groups were recruited for specific tasks under the KMC during the British period. The pattern is continued even today with members of the Chakkiliar caste engaged in sanitary labour work, including cleaning of public latrines in the town, cleaning drains and sewers and members of the Parayan caste engaged in street sweeping and collection of solid waste. The majority of the population in the community comes under the Dalit category, even though this term is not used either as a self-identification or label used by social analysts or political activists. The terms Chakkiliar (Sinhala “Sakkili”) and Parayan (Sinhala “Paraya”) are often used by Sinhala outsiders as derogatory labels, for example, Sakkili Demalu (literally “Sakkili Tamils”) or Para Demalu (literally “Paraya Tamils”) indicating extreme low status and their perceived position as “outsiders”<sup>12</sup>. These labels also indicate the complex synthesis of social marginality expressed in ethnic, caste and social class terms.

**Table 6.3**

Percentage Distribution of the Population by Caste in Mahaiyawa MC, 2007 Estimated Percentages

<b>Caste</b>	<b>Traditional Occupation</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Parayan	Drummer, Street sweepers, Garbage collectors	45
Chakkiliyar	Toilet cleaning	30
Thelingu	Work supervisors	2
Reddi	Religious functionaries	3
Chetti	Funeral Drummers	5
Vannār	Washing of clothes	2
Caste not known		13
Total		100

*Source:* Field Survey

12 Both ‘sakkili’ and ‘para’ are used in Sinhala as derogatory and abusive terms.

Chetti and Reddi were associated with the nearby cemetery maintained by the KMC. The presence of Thelingu indicates that in setting up this community apart from various categories of KMC workers, some intermediate caste groups in Hindu society were recruited as labour supervisors by the founders of KMC using a caste-based recruitment pattern as well as a caste-based mobilization of labour within the public health department of the KMC.

The initial houses were barrack style line rooms with minimum facilities. Over the years the housing stock has multiplied due to expansion of line rooms and construction of unauthorized new semi-permanent structures in whatever open space in between existing rows of line rooms in order to accommodate population increase. With over 90 percent of the population belonging to the Indian Tamil ethnic group, this community has the character of a large ethnic enclave of Indian Tamil workers currently or previously connected with the KMC. In this community an estimated total population of 4130 was distributed in 579 households with a mean household size of 7.13. The entire population was distributed in a land area of 2.43 giving a population density of 1,700 per hectare. The land was owned by the KMC but many of the residents held land on a long-term lease from the KMC. There were, however, many unauthorized residents with no legal rights of any kind to the land and occupying make shift housing units built without obtaining any permission of the KMC.

### **Mahaiyawa MT**

The Mahaiyawa Model Tenement (MT) division has evolved side by side with and in close proximity to the Mahaiyawa MC for accommodating supervisory grade KMC workers, blue collar government servants and a range of businessmen with commercial operations in Kandy town. The MT settlement developed some years after the establishment of labour lines for KMC workers, to accommodate other categories of urban residents. The population is multi-ethnic and by and large lower middle class in composition. The housing stock is of superior quality compared to the MC

division. Here too some unauthorized constructions have come up for accommodating natural increase in the population and in-migration from surrounding areas. This community is multi-ethnic in composition with Muslims, Tamils and Sinhalese living side by side with each other with no apparent conflicts among them. The caste composition of the residents was not known even though it was generally believed that Tamils in the MT area were of superior caste compared to those in the MC division. The community had an estimated total population of 2290 distributed in 321 households again with a mean household size of over 7 people. The location was thickly populated in a total land area of 1.82, giving a density of 1258 people per hectare. Most of the residents in the Mahaiyawa MT had title to the land and they were living in housing units built with the permission of the KMC. There were, however, some unauthorized housing constructions in this community as well. Generally speaking, housing conditions and living standards were better and population density somewhat lower in the Mahaiyawa MT, but this does not mean that conditions in this community were satisfactory.

Populations in both these communities have been more or less stable with no large scale influx from outside in recent years. Much of the recent expansion of the population has been due to natural increase in the communities rather than due to any large scale in-migration. The out-migration from these communities too has been rather limited with only a limited number who successfully achieved a degree of upward social mobility through education and employment opting to move out from these communities. Nearly always such upwardly out-migrants severed all contacts with Mahaiyawa in an effort to hide their humble social origins. As Mahroof (2000) pointed out, such upwardly mobile people who originated in communities such as Mahaiyawa often sought to “pass off” as high caste Tamils or even Sinhalese.

In the household survey some 47 percent of the households in Mahaiyawa MC expressed their willingness to move out to a better location if they were provided with an opportunity to do

so. This may be indicative of a high degree of dissatisfaction with the status quo inclusive of poor living conditions and ethnic and caste-based social marginalization. In Mahaiyawa MT only 14 percent of the households expressed willingness to move out of their current location.

### **Marriage Patterns**

Traditionally, marriages for young people in Mahaiyawa MC were arranged by their parents either within the community or from other such communities in nearby towns or in plantations keeping in mind that marriages take place within appropriate caste groups. Within the past 20 years or so, love marriages have become more important among young people in the community (see UNFPA 2007). Some of the love marriages are between partners of identical caste groups, but there have been many instances of inter-caste or even inter-ethnic love marriages in recent years. Such marriages often take place under parental opposition but gradually such couples and their children are accepted into one side or both sides undermining the neat separation that prevailed among castes in the past.

### **Caste Discrimination against People of Mahaiyawa**

Many leaders of the Mahaiyawa MC community were reluctant to talk about their caste status and the difficulties they faced in life because of the treatment they received from other communities in town. Some said “why do you want to talk about caste. It is something we want to forget”. On the other hand, the two elected representatives of Mahaiyawa in the KMC came from Chakkiliar and Parayan castes, the two largest castes among Tamils in Mahaiyawa indicating a degree of caste-based political mobilization in local politics. Some leaders agreed that they experienced caste and work-based social ostracization in the past but now they have problems not because of their caste as such but because of their poverty and powerlessness. Historically, sanitary workers and sweepers experienced many forms of untouchability and discrimination. They were not

welcomed into tea shops and other establishments in town. They were served tea in coconut shells and discarded milk cans. They were not taken into shops but were served outside in a demeaning manner. Their children were not admitted to any good schools in town. They received education in primary schools established in the community by church organizations. Their condition improved in and after the 1950s. One leader said that they protested against tea shops and other establishments that did not accept them. This led to some violent clashes between Mahaiyawa youth and owners of these establishments somewhere in the 1950s. Later, the business owners indicated to them that they would only be welcomed if they come in proper dress having washed themselves after completing their work. At that time bucket latrines were being used in public latrines in town and the workers were very dirty. The change from bucket latrines to pit latrines and pit latrines to water seal latrines occurred in the 1950s. The technological improvement in sanitation, sewage disposal and collection of solid waste led to an improvement in the status of these Indian Tamil workers as well. The community also took care to present themselves in proper dress in shops and other places and gradually they were accepted into these establishments. Thus they interpreted their condition in hygienic and occupational terms rather than in terms of a hereditary demeaning status given to them by the caste system.

Other forms of discrimination experienced by the residents in the Mahaiyawa MC community included the following:

1. Rejection by certain Hindu temples: Some leading Hindu temples in Kandy such as Pulleyar Kovil in Katukale and Kathiresan Kovil did not allow the Mahaiyawa residents to enter these temples. Here again the priests requested the Mahaiyawa residents to visit the temples after properly cleaning themselves and wearing suitable dress. Some who comply with this requirement are admitted to these temples but even today the members of the Mahaiyawa community

are not admitted freely in these high caste temples. The residents in Mahaiyawa patronize their own temples (mainly Mariamman Kovil) with the Goddess Mariamman as the deity worshipped by the Chakkiliar in particular.

2. Denial of admission to good schools in Kandy for the children from Mahaiyawa: Still many of the children from this community study in a limited number of urban schools catering to children from poor and underprivileged communities. One such school, located in Mahaiyawa itself, was originally built as a primary school during the British period by the Salvation Army for children of KMC workers. This Tamil medium school continues with classes up to GCE Advanced Level in the arts stream but it has seen limited improvement in terms of staff and facilities available. Some parents complained “when we go for interviews in better schools as the school authorities see our Mahaiyawa address they simply find some excuse to reject our applications”. Often they are unable to pay the admission fees required by these better schools. Another problem the community faces is due to the medium of instruction in which the children want to study. Many of the good schools in Kandy teach in the Sinhala or English medium and the children from the community cannot get admission to these schools as they do not provide education in the Tamil medium. A few members of this community proceeded to higher education and once they did well in education and got good employment they moved out of the community and severed all connections with this community.
3. The community is identified as a major source of environmental pollution and infections in the city. The leaking public latrines, unhygienic sewer systems, unhealthy lifestyle of the people themselves (e.g. alcohol, smoke, drugs) and occupation of the people as latrine cleaners and garbage handlers are seen

as sources of the problems. The community is also known to be a breeding ground of socially condemned diseases like TB and diarrhoea. This has meant that the community receives considerable attention from health authorities in the town both in positive and negative ways. These assumed pathologies in Mahaiyawa, in turn, contribute to the social exclusion of Mahaiyawa by surrounding communities.

4. The Mahaiyawa MC community has earned a reputation as a place where several anti-social activities take place that includes drug peddling, crime, petty theft and prostitution. People are also known to be aggressive and abusive. As a result, the police constantly inspects and is vigilant about this community. This in turn has served to reinforce the ethnic marginality and outcaste status of the community.

As an outcome of all these discriminations and exclusions imposed by the larger society, Mahaiyawa has remained one of the most deprived neighbourhoods and the services in this ward have remained poor compared to neighbouring communities. Their ability to improve their situation has been constrained by a number of factors, including ethnicity, caste, social class and powerlessness. It is important to mention that the underclass status of the community is due to a combination factors emanating from caste, ethnicity, social class, historical circumstances and certain hereditary disadvantages, related adaptations and prejudices of the larger society that survived into the modern era.

Some specific manifestations of these disadvantages are spelled out in the sections that follow.

### **Employment**

Historically, Mahaiyawa MC Community earned their livelihood from various categories of employment in the Kandy Municipality. The pattern has become much more diversified in more recent years as evident from Table 6. 4.

**Table 6.4**

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 labourer	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 labour	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%	3.7%	3.2%
Blue collar worker	4.5%	.9%	2.8%	3.4%	.0%	1.7%
Housewife	.2%	30.3%	14.6%	4.2%	4%	22.5%
Overseas work	.6%	2.4%	1.5%	3.4%	4.1%	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%	.0%	.6%
Other employment	5.3%	1.4%	3.5%	11.4%	5.8%	8.6%
Pensioner	2.7%	1.1%	1.9%	3.4%	.0%	1.7%
Dependent child	31.4%	32.3%	31.8%	29.5%	27.7%	29.6%
Dependent elderly	4.1%	8.6%	6.3%	5.9%	8.2%	7.6%
Unemployed	9.8%	16.0%	12.8%	11.4%	4.8%	8.6%
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

As evident from Table 6.4, the leading employment category for people in Mahaiyawa MC is work in the KMC as sanitary labourers or other kinds of labourers. For males in both Mahaiyawa MC and MT and females in Mahaiyawa MT, the KMC remains a main source of employment. Manual labour in other venues is also important particularly for people in Mahaiyawa MC. Higher level business in town is more important in Mahaiyawa MT while petty trade appears to be equally important in both communities. A considerable

number of men and women in Mahaiyawa MC serve as shop assistants in commercial establishments in the town. On the other hand, higher grade white collar employment is more common in Mahaiyawa MT. Overseas work is more common among females in Mahaiyawa MC and among males in Mahaiyawa MT, indicating that they go for different types of employment with males going for better paid skilled employment while women go for domestic employment with lower remuneration. The unemployment rate is much higher in the case of Mahaiyawa MC, particularly among women, indicating a combination of ethnicity, caste and gender related discriminations in the local employment market. The higher unemployment among men compared to women in Mahaiyawa MT may be due to greater importance of education and related problems of educated unemployment among youth in this community.

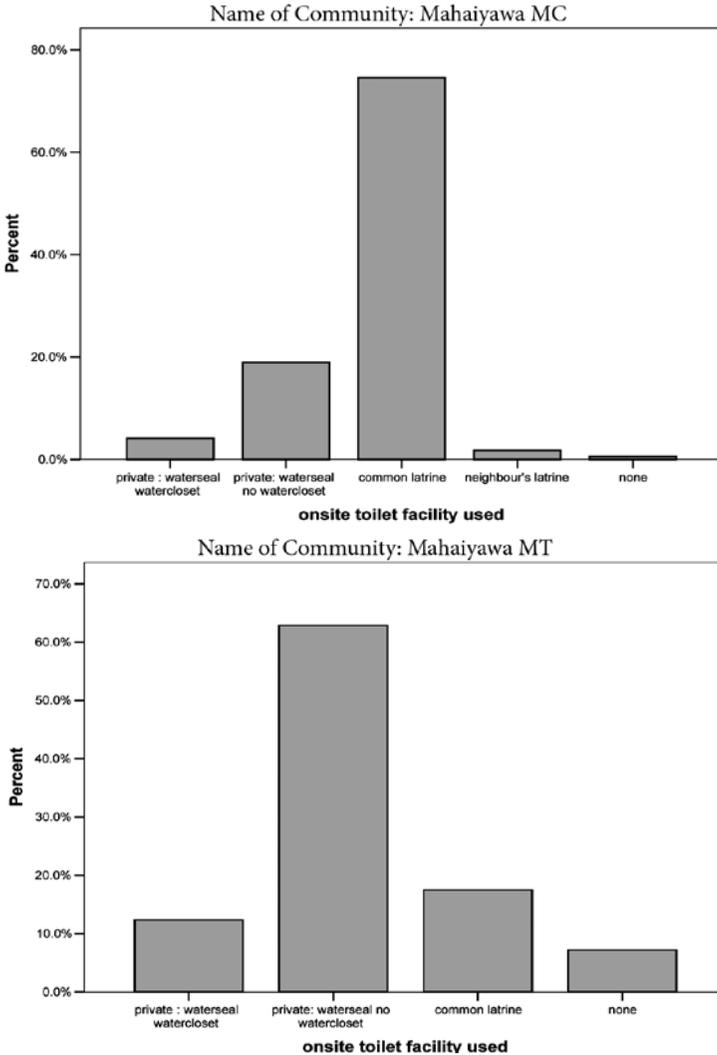
On the whole this employment profile indicates that certain restricted and poorly remunerative categories of employment in the KMC and urban informal sector is open to people from Mahaiyawa MC in particular. Social background such as ethnicity, caste, and gender as well as poor educational achievement and limited acquisition of marketable skills that in turn may be attributed to social exclusion evident in the education system are important in understanding the employment profile of this greatly marginalized community.

### **Housing Condition**

Congested housing was a key feature of both Mahaiyawa MC and MT. A majority of people in Mahaiyawa MC (58% of the sample surveyed) lived in line rooms established by the British in the 1920s and has not been renovated substantially since then. These line rooms were owned by the KMC until the 1970s and since then they have been transferred to the residents under long-term lease. Any substantial improvement of this housing is not possible due to lack of space and conditions in the lease agreement. In Mahaiyawa MT, some of the original housing remains but most people have been able to upgrade their housing as they received title to land and houses

early on. Some 30 percent of houses in Mahaiyawa MC came under the category of unauthorized housing built on KMC land with no permission obtained from the KMC and with resulting difficulties in accessing municipal services such as electricity and water. The corresponding figure for Mahaiyawa MT was 4 percent. The mean

**Figure 6.1: Latrine Facilities in Mahaiyawa MC and Mahaiyawa MT**



floor area per housing unit in Mahaiyawa MC (229 square feet) was substantially lower compared to Mahaiyawa MT (418 square feet). On the other hand, the mean number of persons usually living in a housing unit was 6.4 in Mahaiyawa MC as compared to 5.4 Mahaiyawa MT. All these data indicate that while the housing units are smaller in size and poorer in quality in Mahaiyawa MC compared to Mahaiyawa MT, typically there is a higher number of persons per housing unit in Mahaiyawa MC indicating both much greater congestion and poorer quality of living.

In both communities most houses had electricity, in spite of the fact that some of the houses were unauthorized constructions. However, while 97 percent of the houses in Mahaiyawa MT had electricity, only 88 percent of the houses in Mahaiyawa MC had electricity connections. As far as water supply is concerned, in Mahaiyawa MC only 60 percent of households had domestic water connections compared to nearly 90 percent in Mahaiyawa MT. This in turn, indicates that the living conditions in the sanitary worker settlement are much worse even when compared to a neighbouring densely populated urban community.

### **Sanitation Facilities**

Mahaiyawa MC community has been assigned the responsibilities of cleaning the entire Kandy city, including cleaning of public latrines and sweeping of city streets, by the KMC. Ironically, the sanitation infrastructure established and maintained by the KMC for the benefit of this community has been in a poor state of repair and a key source of poor hygiene as well as low social esteem affecting this community. Further, this is the only community in Kandy where a vast majority of the residents rely on public latrines for their day-to-day use as evident from Figure 6.1.

Thus while over 70 percent of the people in Mahaiyawa MC use common latrines, a vast majority of people in Mahaiyawa MT uses private water seal latrines with or without water closets. Most people in Mahaiyawa MC do not have adequate space or adequate income to build their own latrines due to the extreme congestion in this community as also evident from the lowest mean floor area

per house. The use of common latrines gave rise to many problems like poor state of repair, long queues, lack of privacy, low dignity, bad smell and possible impact on ill health. These public latrines are connected to septic tanks through sewer lines and those septic tanks are periodically emptied by KMC workers. Most people want to change from public latrines to private latrines given the opportunity, but there is simply not enough space to build private latrines. Further, capacity in the existing sewer lines to accommodate sewer from any build up of private latrines, particularly in Mahaiyawa MC is much restricted.

Different methods of sewage disposal were used by different people depending on the latrine type and connectivity with septic tanks. The public latrines directly under KMC operations and maintenance were connected to septic tanks periodically emptied by the KMC using gully suckers. Even though the KMC was expected to provide this service periodically, often the local residents had to take the initiative and inform the KMC and even provide incentive payments to workers in order to arrange for sewage collection from the septic tanks. In the case of private latrines only some of them were connected to proper septic tanks and the owners of these latrines had to pay a stipulated fee to the KMC for emptying the relevant septic tanks. In the case of many (but unknown number of) private latrines the waste was simply released to either open or closed drains or natural streams that fed into tributaries of the Mahaweli Ganga, the source of drinking water in Kandy. The local residents had devised many different schemes to get rid of their waste from private latrines, some releasing them to public drains or streams at times of heavy rain so that the rain water flushes down the sewerage. Some had real difficulty in trying to get rid of the sewage due to lack of public drains or streams where they could be dumped and inability of the KMC vehicles with gully suckers to reach the pits or septic tanks due to lack of road access and unauthorized housing constructions sometimes blocking or covering drains. The relevant households were unwilling to admit that they themselves were releasing sewage from private latrines to public drains or streams, but they frequently mentioned that

their neighbours were doing it. In group discussions and private discussions some mentioned that apart from residents, many of the private enterprises and even government institutions including the Kandy market, prisons and even the KMC sometimes release sewage to public drains and streams, and they justified their own sewage disposal practices saying that “if they can do it why should we be prevented from doing the same?”.

In the focus group discussions most people mentioned unhygienic situation in their localities particularly during heavy rains. When it rains many of the toilets and drains carrying faecal matter and other wastes overflow into low-lying areas, including roads and even houses, giving rise to bad smell and generally unhygienic conditions.

The poor municipal services in Mahaiyawa MC community in spite of their long-term association with this local government agency indicates a cumulative outcome of hereditary disadvantages and the inability of the community by virtue of its political and social marginality to press their rights and demands due to a combination of factors that inhibit their full participation in decision making at higher levels.

### **Social and Political Mobilization of Sanitary Workers**

The Mahaiyawa community has various political organizations including local branches of national level political parties such as the United National Party and the Peoples Alliance as well as strong connections with ethnically driven political organizations such as the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) mainly representing plantation worker interests. These organizations are often driven by outside leaders who may provide some temporary relief for the problems in the community or channel state or KMC patronage to intermediaries in Mahaiyawa MC. In the case of CWC as reported in the previous chapter the leadership comes from a Colombo-based upper caste elite in, Indian Tamil community, highly sensitive to wider ethnic issues but with limited concern for caste-based discrimination as such. It is important that there is no common identity among disadvantaged caste groups across the ethnic divide

or even within each ethnic group. Further, there is no countrywide organization or regional organization among numerous sanitary worker settlements distributed in various urban centres in the country (see Map 6). On the other hand, the denial of caste on the part of these urban residents tends to inhibit their capacity for such organizational development.

It must be noted here that there have been many development initiatives in urban low-income communities in Kandy. From 1991 onwards the UNICEF initiated Urban Basic Services Program (UBSM) in several communities in Kandy including Mahaiyawa. This project sought to improve sanitation and child care services with the participation of a category of Community Development Officers (CDOs) selected from within the affected communities. The KMC was the main implementation agency in this project and CDOs though paid by UNICEF funds were actually employed by the KMC. CDOs were expected to establish and strengthen Rural Development Societies as a vehicle for mobilizing urban poor for infrastructure development purposes. CDOs were responsible for training community leaders and community members for various community activities. In 1992 in collaboration with the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) and Urban Development Authority (UDA), the KMC initiated Community Action Programmes focusing on housing and community infrastructure development. NHDA provided low-interest loans for selected urban residents for improving their houses. These programs led to considerable activity within these communities for some time but the enthusiasm died down after some time and the activities initiated were not completed as planned due to scarcity of funds, administrative problems and inherent political and social polarization within these communities. The CDOs ceased to function after the external funding stopped somewhere in mid 1990s.

There are very few active and credible community organizations in Mahaiyawa MC and MT. The active organizations include sports clubs among youth, party organizations mostly active during election periods, funeral aid organizations and a few credit societies. None of

these are particularly useful from the angle of addressing rights issues relating to under class communities such as Mahaiyawa MC. The recent history of Mahaiyawa is full of failed community organizations initiated by outside agencies for upgrading infrastructural facilities in these communities. It is important to point out that most of the political parties and development initiatives led by them have simply turned a blind eye to the caste issue while privileging ethnicity and/or social class in given situations.

The Indian Tamil community in Mahaiyawa was not targeted in the ethnic riots in 1977 and 1983 partly due to its size and own reputation for violence and aggression. This was not the case in respect of smaller sanitary worker settlements in some other towns in Sinhala dominated areas. For instance, the entire population in an inner-city from sanitary labour settlement in Ampara town was killed or displaced during some ethnic riots in this town in 1990<sup>13</sup>. As a matter of fact some affected people in surrounding areas moved to Mahaiyawa for safety during 1983 identifying it as a place of refuge. This points to insecurity associated with minority and low caste status in the ethnically charged atmosphere in contemporary Sri Lanka.

On the whole the Mahaiyawa community indicates the cumulative impact of social exclusion and discrimination over many decades. While explicit caste discrimination has decreased over the years, urban untouchability has continued unabated due to caste origin, derogatory occupations inherited from the past, ethnic enclave atmosphere, population congestion, social vices and environmental and health hazards and many other factors. As these problems are closely interconnected, they need to be addressed in a comprehensive manner. While caste related notions of untouchability derived from South India have served to place this community at the bottom of the social hierarchy, notions of ethnic origin and social pathologies have served to intensify social marginality of this population. In analyzing multiple parameters of

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13 The survivors of these ethnic riots were later relocated in another location (Valathapitiya) in the periphery of Ampara town.

social discrimination affecting communities such as Mahaiyawa MC often there is a tendency to totally disregard the caste dimension and purely focus on ethnic and/or social class related variables as was evident in some of the feedback for this study in the national consultation on caste-based discrimination held in Kandy on May 27, 2007. The caste-blind political actions as well as social policies in respect of vital issues such as urban housing, basic urban services and access to education and health have turned a blind eye to caste discrimination against communities like Mahaiyawa MC with the result that the problems have not been addressed in their proper historical and structural context. On the other hand, the analysis pursued here also points to the need to treat caste not in isolation but as one of many related and frequently nested mechanisms of social exclusion and denial of rights. Treating caste along with many other parallel forces that contribute to social and political marginalization of specific communities presents far more complex challenges than addressing caste-based discrimination in isolation and as a factor in its own right.

## Chapter Seven

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

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#### **Conclusions**

In Sri Lanka at least three separate caste systems coexist in different ethnic communities in the country. They have interacted with each other and with Hindu caste systems in India. There is no uniform notion of untouchability in the three caste systems in Sri Lanka. Untouchability and caste-based discrimination are found in varying degrees in all three caste systems. The caste system in Jaffna can be seen as the most rigid and the one with clearly defined patterns of inequality, discrimination and social rejection. The Sinhala caste system too has some notion of social outcasting, but the people and communities involved are dispersed and often invisible. Among the Indian Tamil plantation workers a vast majority of people is selectively drawn from some of the lowest and most impoverished caste groups in South India. The small upper caste elite in this community has found it difficult to enforce rigid caste discrimination and untouchability but here caste discrimination has been infused into the plantation economy and the social system involving super exploitation of labour. The urban untouchability involving socially excluded communities of sanitary workers has been enforced through

the municipal administration established in the colonial era, once again using the model of the Hindu caste system.

In the absence of any reference to caste in contemporary census data in Sri Lanka, any estimate of numbers of people affected by CBD is only a guess work. On the basis of available information 20 to 30 percent of the country's population may be seen as victims of CBD of one kind or another. This may range from roughly about 20 percent among the Sri Lanka Tamils, 30 percent among Sinhalese to as many as 75 percent among the Indian Tamils. In each community there are certain pockets such as IDP camps in Jaffna, Rodi, Kinnara, Gahala, Berawa, Bathgama, Kumbal and Wahumpura pockets among the Sinhalese and sanitary labour settlements consisting mainly of Indian Tamils where social exclusion and inherited disadvantages have taken an acute form often combined with other forms of marginality such as widespread poverty, overcrowdedness, ethnic marginality and lack of access to services and resources.

This study identified several specificities of the caste systems in Sri Lanka.

First, caste is a tabooed subject in Sri Lanka and there is more or less complete silence about this phenomenon in all communities covered by this study. Any open discussion about the topic or even mere reference to caste is discouraged, treating it as an unnecessary diversion, outdated concept, and a threat to social cohesion within the larger society or even a deliberate means adopted by interested parties to divide up a unified ethnic group. This makes it extremely difficult to collect reliable information about caste or addressing discrimination and social rejection associated with caste. While CBD in Sri Lanka is mild by comparison to that in India, for the most part it is not recognized and addressed as a problem by the victims or by society at large.

Second, since the latter part of the colonial era, the official policy of the Sri Lanka state has been to not recognize caste at least for official purposes, including census and survey purposes. The assumption has been that any official recognition of caste would legitimize it in one way or the other. In effect it is difficult

to approach the subject of caste except at the level of ethnographic studies at the village level (e.g. Ryan 1993, Leach 1960, 1961, Silva 1982, 1992, Yalman 1967).

Third, each caste system has ways and means of identifying the lowest rung of the caste system. For instance, “*neecha kula*” or “*adu kula*” in Sinhala society, “*panchamar*” in Jaffna society, and “*PPC castes*” in Indian Tamil society. There is, however, no way for downtrodden layers in each caste system to come together in the way the Dalit movement has emerged in India. In fact ethnicity tends to divide, segregate and hide the outcaste communities in each ethnic group. Some efforts have been made to introduce the term Dalit as a unifying framework for identifying their common experiences and denial of rights, but so far this has not had much effect on the identities and social and political mobilizations of the underprivileged caste groups in different ethnic groups. In recent years very few persons from underprivileged caste backgrounds have been bold enough to publicly declare their caste identity and campaign for the rights of the underprivileged.

Fourth, the rise of ethnic nationalism in Sri Lanka in recent decades has served to further sideline and silence caste issues. One of the most important long-term transformations taking place in Sri Lanka appears to be a gradual change in the primary identity of individuals from caste to ethnicity (Silva: 1999).<sup>11</sup> In the interest of solidarity within each ethnic group, caste has been put in the back burner even though this has not necessarily led to decline in caste as such.

Fifth, in the case of Sri Lanka disadvantaged caste background and ethnic marginalization have sometimes reinforced each other in ways that produce multiple disadvantages as is evident in the Mahaiyawa community in Kandy. This community may be seen as a victim of “a double minority” syndrome in that it is both an outcaste and an ethnic enclave within a city where political, ritual

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11 In “Demography of Ceylon” published in 1957 N.K. Sarkar noted that “.... people in 1824 were not so much conscious of race distinction as they were of caste distinctions”.

and economic control and domination rests with other ethnic categories.

Sixth, while there is clear evidence of diminished importance of caste in occupations, identity formation and day-to-day social relations, there are caste continuities in ritual domains such as the Kandy Perehera, Kovil festivals and marriage patterns as well as in new social formations like IDP camps, migration patterns and patterns of dissent within each ethnic formation.

On the other hand, resistance against caste and other forms of inequality has emerged in several fronts such as high participation of youth from disadvantaged class and caste backgrounds in anti-establishment militant struggles such as the LTTE and the JVP, emerging campaigns to take political leadership of the Indian Tamil plantation community away from the Kudiyanavar upper caste elite in the community, and increased resistance against any manifestation of caste in day-to-day social life in almost all communities. Similarly some programmes of the public sector such as the Gam Udawa Movement and Housing Development Programmes, and some initiatives of civil society such as early Shramadana (labour sharing) efforts of the Sarvodaya Movement sought to assist some of the underprivileged rural and urban communities (Ratnapala 1979). This study also found that both men and women from underprivileged backgrounds have readily participated in globalization and economic liberalization programmes such as migration of a large number of women from these backgrounds to work in the Middle East, migration of IDPs to foreign countries as refugees and legal migrants, taking up commercial farming and long distance trade by some of the upwardly mobile persons from depressed caste backgrounds in Sinhala society. Some people have turned to these new opportunities as a means of escaping their inherited disadvantages in traditional spheres of employment, including public and private sector agencies where entitlements based on ethnicity, family and kinship networks and old school ties appear to disadvantage those from underprivileged caste backgrounds. How far market liberalization and economic reforms have actually

benefited traditionally disadvantaged social groups, however, need to be established through carefully designed future research.

It is important to point out that while there are many stirrings against caste in Sri Lanka they are neither coordinated nor strategically guided through an active social movement like the Dalit movements in India and Nepal.

### **Dimensions of Caste-based Discrimination in Sri Lanka**

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

First, there is lack of dignity and lack of social recognition affecting in varying degrees all the deprived caste groups covered in this study. 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. 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.

Second, discrimination experienced by underprivileged caste groups in the ritual sphere include limited access to Kovils (e.g. Mallakam, 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 is not available, the poverty and landlessness are high as evident in overcrowdedness, congestion, poor housing, whether in slum-like urban environment in Mahaiyawa, IDP camps in Mallakam or Gubbyama settlements in ‘low-caste’ craft villages like Henawala.

Fourth, access to services such as water and sanitation facilities remains poor in urban Mahaiyawa as well as in rural IDP camps in Mallakam. 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 mobilize 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.

Sixth, this study also revealed that underprivileged caste groups such as Panchar in Jaffna society are often the hardest hit by civil war and natural disasters like the tsunami. 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 in ways that defy a simplistic and one dimensional analysis of caste. For instance, in the case of Mahaiyawa social exclusion is driven by overlapping 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 and at the expense of 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 and a coping mechanism on the part of some of the affected people, it also tends to perpetuate their condition and enhance their vulnerability.

Ninth, the women in these communities may be seen as an 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 also 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 the 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 some isolated instances of upward mobility from these communities through education, trade 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 through 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 recognizing 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.

### **Legal and Policy Framework for Dealing with Caste**

The Constitution of Sri Lanka (1978) prohibits discrimination against persons by reason of his/her caste, work or descent to any disadvantage with regard to access to shops, public restaurants and places of public worship of his/her own religion in Article 12 (2). Partly influenced by the temple entry struggles by Pancharamar castes in Jaffna, the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act was passed by the Colombo government in 1957. The 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 to impose heavier punishment. Initially, there were some prosecutions under this Act in Northern Sri Lanka but there was a tendency for the police not to take action against violations<sup>12</sup> 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 the 1930s onwards have assumed that universal coverage in providing free education, free health care and subsidized food rations will serve all deserving communities irrespective of caste, ethnicity, religion and gender. The Government has thus shown considerable resistance

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12 Prevention of discrimination and protection of indigenous peoples (E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001/16) p. 11.: Working paper by Mr. Goonesekere on the topic of discrimination based on work and descent, submitted pursuant to Sub-Commission resolution 2000/4.

against any form of reservation policy favouring the traditionally underprivileged caste groups in contemporary Sri Lanka and as an effect 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 social parameters such as ethnicity and caste have sometimes served to dilute and distort the effect of universal coverage policies in respect of 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. From the angle of many such students, education is more of a “blind alley” rather than the “highway” to upwards social mobility it is expected to be much contributing to their anger and frustration (Uswatte Aratchy 1972).

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.

### **The Role of Civil Society**

Even though Sri Lanka has a wide spectrum civil society organizations, including many human rights organizations, caste-based discrimination has not received sufficient attention (Jayawickrama 1976). Organizations 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 mobilization 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 mobilize 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 appear to be important factors to reckon with.

Human Development Organization 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 organizations representing such communities and advocacy efforts targeting other civil society organizations. It has initiated a useful dialogue with other agencies that needs to be mainstreamed in time to come.

### **Global Context**

At international level, the Government of Sri Lanka is bound by a number of international treaties prohibiting work, descent 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.<sup>13</sup> The Government of Sri Lanka should follow and enforce effectively its

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13 CERD General Recommendation no. XXIX (2002).

legal provisions at domestic level in compliance with the general and special measures contained in CERD General Recommendation no. XXIX in its national policy framework. Sri Lanka is yet to undergo a full scale review of its human rights record in relation to caste-based discrimination.

### **Recommendations**

In order to mitigate and finally eliminate CBD the following measures can be suggested.

1. The Government of Sri Lanka, civil society organizations, including human right actors and international donors supporting development activities in Sri Lanka should explicitly recognize the existence of caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka and plan for social policies and legislative and administrative measures that aim to prohibit work-based and descent-based discrimination and involve affected communities in their implementation. The constitutional and legal measures currently available for prevention of CBD 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 recognize that universal provisioning and free of charge public educational facilities is not a necessary 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, 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. (see also Thorat and Shah 2007).

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 deeply 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, indigenous people 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 (see also 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 utilize 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 the 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 in the local context. The appropriateness of this or any other suitable common identity for the different groups involved must be further explored.
8. The civil society organizations 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 any 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 modernization 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) c) the impact of economic liberalization on patterns of caste inequalities and d) interplay between caste, class and ethnic identities. This research must inform future policies and programs in relation to CBD.

## **Annextures**

### **Annexture 1**

#### **Origin Tales of Rodiyas**

**According to Robert Knox (1911) the Origin Tale of Rodiyas is as Follows:**

“The Predecessors of these People, from whom they sprang, were Dodda, Vaddahs, which signifies Hunters: to whom it did belong to catch and bring Venison for the King’s Table. But instead of Venison they brought Man’s flesh, unknown; which the King Liking so Well, commanded to bring him more of the same sort of Venison. The King’s Barbar chanced to know what flesh it was and discovered it to him, at which the King was so enraged, that he accounted death too good for them; and to punish only those that had so offended, not a sufficient recompence for so great an Affront and Injury as he had sustained by them. Forthwith therefore he established a Decree, that all both great and small, that were of that Rank or Tribe, should be expelled from dwelling among the Inhabitants of the Land, and not to be admitted to use or enjoy the benefit of any means, or ways, or callings whatsoever, to provide themselves sustenance; but that they should beg from Generation to Generation, from Door to Door, thro the Kingdom; and to be looked upon and esteemed by all People to be so base and odious, as not possibly to be more.

“And they are to this day so detestable to the People, that they are not permitted to fetch water out of their wells; but do take their water out of Holes or Rivers. Neither will any touch them, lest they should be defiled.

“Many times when the King cuts off Great and Noble Men, against whom he is highly incensed, he will deliver their Daughters and Wives unto this sort of People, reckoning it as they also account it, to be far worse Punishment than any kind of Death. This kind of Punishment being accounted such horrible Cruelty, the King doth usually of his Clemency shew them some kind of mercy, and pitting their Distress, Commands to carry them to a River side, and there to deliver them into the hands of those who are far worse than Executioners of Death: from whom, if these Ladies please to free themselves, they are permitted to leap into the River and be drowned ; the which some sometimes will choose to do, rather than to consort with them.

“The Barbar’s information having been the occasion of all this misery upon this People, they in revenge thereof abhor to eat what is dressed in the Barbar’s House to this day.”\*

The tradition is in accord with the Rodiyas’ own account of their degradation, which is given by **Hugh Neville** quoted in **Denham 1911**.

“At Parakrama Bahu’s court the venison was provided by a certain Vaedda archer, who, during a scarcity of game, substituted the flesh of a boy he met in the jungle, and provided it as venison for the Royal Household. Navaratna Valli, the beautiful daughter of the King, discovered the deception, and fascinated by a sudden longing for human flesh ordered the hunter to bring this flesh daily. The Vaedda accordingly waylaid youths in the woods, and disposed of their flesh to the royal kitchen. The whole country was terrified by the constant disappearance of youth and maidens. It happened that a barber who came to the Palace to complain of the disappearance of his only son while waiting was given, by the royal scullery, a leaf of rice and venison curry. Just as he was about to eat he noticed on his leaf the deformed knuckle of the little finger of a boy. Recognizing it by the deformity as that of his son, he fled from the palace and

spread the alarm that the king was killing and eating the youths of the city. The facts then came to light, and the king, stripping of her ornaments, and calling up a scavenger then sweeping out a neighbouring yard, gave her him as wife, and out to earn her living in her husband's class. The princess and the scavenger fled from the town, and as night came on asked for shelter from Kinnara, but were angrily repulsed."

## **Annexure 2**

### **A Case Study Illustrating Problems of Panchamar IDPs**

Seelan is a 42 year old IDP in Konappulam Welfare Centre in Mallakam. A member of Nalavar caste, at one time he was involved in toddy tapping in his original village in Mayiliddy. He has experienced three Eelam wars. He first became displaced in 1987 during the Eelam war I involving the IPKF and LTTE. In this first displacement, he moved to Karavampānai, which is situated about eight kilometers from Mayiliddy village in Thellippalai. He stayed there for nearly three months. Then he returned to his original home. Again, he was displaced to Mallakam village in 1990 due to the war between the Sri Lankan forces and the LTTE during the Eelam war II. With the Eelam war III (particularly during the Operation Rivirasa I), he was displaced to Kodikāmam, which is situated in Thenmarāchchi. When the Sri Lankan forces captured the entire Jaffna Peninsula in the wake of Operation Rivirasa II, he went back to the Konappulam Welfare Centre in Mallakam. Thus, he has been displaced repeatedly during most of his life.

When interviewed about caste-related problems, he initially expressed hesitation to talk about the issue. In the course of discussion, he started speaking openly and expressed his dissatisfaction over the caste problems and oppressions that he had faced during different phases of displacement and narrated his life in the Welfare Centres.

He stated that he had only stayed with the Vellālar in the temporary Welfare Centres such as temples and schools and that too was for a few days only. However, the land on which the camp is located is owned by a Vellālar. He further added that since most of the Vellālar are economically strong and have adequate social networks or contacts with other parts of Jaffna, they are able to settle down anywhere they like and they can build their own shelter in a suitable location. “As we do not have adequate contacts with other parts of Jaffna and have less assistance from other caste people, whether we like it or not, we have to stay in a land or in a welfare centre with our own caste community”.

He moved to Kalviyankādu, which is located near the Jaffna city, before moving to Kodikāmam in Thenmarāchchi following Operation Rivirasa I. He continued to stay in a land owned by a Vellālar person. During this displacement, his brother 'Sritharan' fell in love with the daughter of the landowner and got married on their own without the consent of the wife's father (landowner). As a result of this inter-caste marriage, the land owner forced them to evacuate his land. For him, it made his displaced life even more miserable. In the meantime, he moved to Kodikāmam, where he did not face any caste-related difficulties except the difficulties of regional differences. But these difficulties were not as serious as the caste issue.

Now, he is temporarily resettled in the Mallakam Konappulam Welfare Centre, only to face caste-related problems arising out of water and temple entry. As only one hand pump well is available in the Konappulam Welfare Centre, they have to depend on a well owned by a 'high caste' family. He mentioned that it is a daunting task to draw water from the wells of 'high caste' people. To get water from the well of a 'high caste' person, they had to wait till the owner of the well provided them with water because the so-called 'high caste' people feel that if water is touched by them it gets polluted.

He also said that in his day-to-day life, he often had quarrels with others. This is because they all live close to each other and facilities for them are limited. Many outside people saw them as inherently aggressive, but he felt that the real reason for this situation is the difficulties they face in life as IDPs.

There is a Hindu temple situated near Konappulam Welfare Centre called "Konappulam Vairavar Temple", which is owned by a 'high caste' person. He said that people from this Welfare Centre are not allowed to enter this temple and the gates of the temple are always locked except for ritual times. Although he requested the owner of the temple several times to perform a religious ritual on behalf of IDPs in this temple, this request was not granted giving one reason or another. He believes that the 'high caste' temple owner refused to comply with his request because of the 'low caste' background of those living in the Welfare Centre.

### **Annexure 3**

#### **Report on the National Consultation Workshop on Caste-based Discrimination in Sri Lanka Held on May 27, 2007 in the Seminar Room of the Faculty of Arts, University of Peradeniya**

The above workshop was held as scheduled on May 27, 2007 with the participation of researchers, social activists, NGO personnel, human rights specialists, students and trade union personnel. This was the first national workshop on caste-based discrimination to be held in Sri Lanka where researchers and social activists shared their views and discussed possible courses of action for addressing the relevant issues.

This National Consultation Workshop was conducted as part of a multi-country research program on Caste-Based Discrimination in South Asia sponsored by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in collaboration with the International Dalit Solidarity Network. (IDSN) The objectives of this workshop were as follows:

- to share the finding of the Sri Lanka study with key stakeholders;
- to validate the information acquired through various sources;
- to get necessary feedback from the experts, researchers, activists and key actors of governmental as well as non-governmental agencies to enrich the report; and
- to promote networking and dissemination of findings among all relevant parties.

The number of participants under each category is as follows:

**Table A3. 1: Participants in the National Workshop in Sri Lanka by Category**

<b>Category</b>	<b>No</b>	<b>%</b>
Researchers	<b>11</b>	<b>27.5</b>
NGO Activists	<b>7</b>	<b>17.5</b>
Political leaders/trade unionists	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>
Human rights activists	<b>2</b>	<b>05</b>
Community representatives/ leaders	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>
Students	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>
Representatives of IDSN/IIDS	<b>2</b>	<b>05</b>
	<b>40</b>	<b>100</b>

In keeping with the agenda of the workshop, the workshop began with a welcome address and description of the objectives of the workshop by Prof. K. Tudor Silva, the team leader of the research project on caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka. He welcomed the participants from overseas, from several organizations in Kandy, Colombo and outstations and community representatives from several study locations.

Prof. Ghanshyam Shah representing IIDS in this national workshop addressed the workshop next. He explained the background of the larger study on Caste-based Discrimination in South Asia supported and coordinated by IIDS and implemented in Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. He emphasized the need to understand the changing nature of caste-based discrimination in South Asia and the importance of the Dalit struggle in the Indian context. He pointed out that based on Indian experiences it is necessary to focus on caste-based discrimination in a number of spheres, including private sphere, public sphere, and religious sphere.

### **Summary of Presentation By Prof. K.T. Silva**

In the next session from 9:30-10:30 am Prof. Silva presented the preliminary findings of the study. The power point presentation delivered by him as well as the full text of his presentation were circulated as part of the conference documentation. The key points of his presentation are as follows:

1. There are actually three parallel caste systems in Sri Lanka, Sinhala, Sri Lanka Tamil and Indian Tamil. Each involves caste discrimination of some sort.
2. The academic research on caste was popular in the 1950s and 1960s. Most of these studies focused on functions of caste within a system of organic solidarity to the neglect of any consideration of caste discrimination and the plight of the bottom layers in society.
3. Caste is a tabooed subject in contemporary Sri Lanka. Since the 19th century the population censuses or any of the national surveys do not collect any information about caste. Social policies and even human rights discourses rarely address the issue of caste.
4. The colonial regimes in Sri Lanka did not approve caste but nevertheless they utilized caste for various purposes including selecting suitable officials for administration of countryside, tax collection, and even in recruiting and managing workers in the plantation economy developed by them.
5. The welfare state policies of the Sri Lankan state from the 1930s onwards assumed that universal coverage in providing free education, free health care and subsidized food rations would serve all deserving communities irrespective of caste, ethnicity, religion and gender. No reservations of any kind have been introduced by the state in order to address hereditary disadvantages of deprived caste groups.
6. Elaborating caste discriminations under three caste systems operating in the country, first attention was focused on the caste system in Jaffna society. A religiously sanctioned notion of untouchability similar to the Indian situation prevailed in relation to Panchamar caste groups comprising about 18% of the population in Jaffna society as of 1957 (no macro data on caste composition in Jaffna available since then). Discriminations imposed upon the Panchamar included 24 prohibitions covering all aspects of life. Campaigns against the caste system in Jaffna

began in 1920 and included campaigns for equality in seating and eating in schools, tea shop entry and temple entry. Some of these campaigns took a violent form and set the stage for a violent Tamil liberation struggle which, however, had the effect of silencing caste struggle in the interest of a unified Tamil struggle against the Sinhala dominated state. Many of the explicit caste discriminations had disappeared by the 1980s due to the outcome of Panchamar struggles in the preceding period, population displacement caused by civil war and many other factors. However, many of the IDPs remaining in IDP camps in Jaffna are of Panchamar background, due to a combination of factors including lack of alternative housing, deep seated poverty, lack of social capital, exclusion from the local land market and security and welfare considerations of the affected people.

7. Analyzing the caste-based discrimination among Indian Tamil plantation and other workers in Sri Lanka, the bulk of plantation workers came from three depressed caste communities in South India, namely Pallan, Paryan and Chakkilian. While the plantation economy in some ways had a levelling working class influence on plantation workers, the plantation economy in some ways reproduced the caste system for its own advantage. For instance, initially most Kanganies (labour supervisors) were selected from the higher caste people who came with these labourers). Similarly some of the caste occupations (e.g. sanitary labour, washing of clothes) were reproduced within the plantations. Thirdly ritual system popular in the estates also recognized caste distinctions. The study, however, found that caste-based discrimination, has progressively weakened among the plantation workers. There are, however, two sectors where elements of caste-based discrimination continued. The trade union movement is largely controlled by high castes in the plantation community in spite of the work force being predominantly of PPC background. There are also urban communities of sanitary labourers of Indian Tamil origin

who continue to experience a degree of social exclusion due to a combination of factors including their ethnic, caste and occupational backgrounds and existence in ghetto-like crowded urban communities.

8. The Sinhala caste system may be considered mild compared to the Hindu caste systems due to secular nature of the hierarchy, critical doctrinal perspective in relation to caste in Buddhism, the predominant religion in Sinhala society, lack of a notion of untouchability and relatively small size of the bottom layer of society. The pre-British Kandyan state was organized according to the principles of caste, with land ownership, power and authority and superior status mainly concentrated in the aristocratic layer in society. There were four clearly separate layers in the Kandyan caste system with Goigama (farming) caste at the top, coastal caste groups as the next layer, artisan service castes and three highly despised ostracized groups (kinnara, gahala and rodi) at the bottom. The latter groups, who never comprised more than 1% of the total Sinhala population, continue to experience a degree of discrimination in the private sphere (interpersonal relations) as well as in schools. Social grievances among some of the middle level caste groups (Karawa, Bathgama and Wahumpura) have been responsible for political radicalism and anti-establishment mobilizations in political movements such as the JVP. There is however, complete silence about caste in Sinhala society and there is considerable resistance against any kind of open discussion about caste in general. The caste sentiments however are mobilized for electoral purposes in all national elections.
9. In conclusion Prof. Silva raised the issue if keeping silence about caste is the best strategy for dealing with caste discrimination in Sri Lanka society. He emphasized the need for civil society organizations including NGOs working in these deprived communities in all three ethnic groups to come together and address these issues in an open and coherent manner. He also suggested that linkages and networks among deprived castes

in all three ethnic groups must be promoted and efforts should be made to bring them under a common social movement to fight against any remaining caste discriminations in Sri Lanka society. The term Dalit is not known to many such groups in Sri Lanka and it may well be that a more acceptable local term has to be invented if all deprived caste groups in Sri Lanka are to be brought under a common umbrella for the purpose of fighting the system.

### **Discussion**

At the time of discussion, some of the participants, especially those representing the trade unions, maintained that caste is no longer important in understanding social injustices, social discriminations or social mobilizations in Sri Lanka society. For them caste was merely a historical phenomenon and the contemporary social reality must be understood in social class and ethnic terms rather than in caste terms. To the extent caste continues it is continued through caste endogamy which is in the private rather than public domain. The issues raised in the report had more to do with material poverty rather than with caste discrimination per se. In response Prof. Silva pointed out that while there is considerable overlap between caste and social class in Sri Lanka, the conditions in the sanitary worker community in Mahaiyawa or in IDP camps in Jaffna or in some of the deprived communities to be presented later in the workshop cannot be understood in social class terms alone. While untouchability does not exist in contemporary Sri Lanka to the same extent it is the case in India, it does not mean that caste discriminations do not exist. In many instances caste operates as an undercurrent and just because people do not openly talk about it we should not assume that caste is dead in Sri Lanka. We only have to turn to matrimonial advertisements in Sunday newspapers to learn that a large proportion of people seeks to preserve caste distinctions. Even though caste is not mentioned in public, Sri Lanka society continues to be highly status conscious with educated young people from deprived caste backgrounds eager to denounce their caste identities. On the other

hand, educated youth from underprivileged backgrounds may be more inclined to turn to violent political movements like the JVP or LTTE as is evident from the limited data available because they lack alternative means to pursue their aspirations or fight what they perceive as interlocking mechanisms of caste, class, gender and ethnic injustices. Continuing the discussion another participant asked the researchers to elaborate the role of caste in youth uprisings in the South (JVP) and North (LTTE). Prof. Silva pointed out that while neither movement explicitly campaigned for the rights of any specific caste groups and they presented themselves as patriotic national movements representing broader masses, both movements exploited caste as well as ethnic and class grievances in recruiting their cadres. Finally a question was raised why the ethnographic research conducted under this project did not extend to the East and Southern parts of Sri Lanka where caste dynamics appear to be important in recent political developments. In response Prof. Silva said that due to the current security situation in the East ethnographic study was not possible in the east and due to budgetary constraints it was necessary to limit the number of field locations covered in the study.

### **Presentation by Mr. P.P. Sivapragasam on Sanitary Workers in Urban Sri Lanka: Descent and Work Based Discrimination**

1. Most sanitary workers employed by municipal councils and urban centres throughout Sri Lanka descend from Indian Tamil workers imported by the British for this purpose from South India. They belong to specific caste groups such as Chakkilian (Sakkilian) to whom despised tasks such as toilet cleaning, street sweeping and removal of human waste have been assigned as a matter of a hereditary obligation. Even though many descendants of these communities have sought to move out of these socially ostracized occupations, not many have been able to do so due to their poverty, lack of education and lack of alternative employment opportunities. They continue to live in congested urban neighbourhoods assigned to them during

the British period and have become extremely overcrowded in subsequent period due to natural increase, in migration, poor services and lack of alternative housing to descendants of these communities. Due to their hereditary occupations, poor housing, lifestyle and social marginality they are treated with much contempt and social distance by surrounding communities, employers and even other categories of urban workers and urban residents.

2. The exact number of these communities or the number of sanitary workers in different towns in Sri Lanka are not known. Mahaiyawa in Kandy with nearly 300 sanitary workers and over 5000 residents is one of the largest of such communities. HDO is in contact with such communities in several other cities as well including Kegalle, Kurunagala, Matale, Gampola and Nuwara Eliya.
3. Both men and women in these communities are engaged in sanitary work and are employed by Municipal Councils or other local government agencies. Their working conditions were most unhygienic up to the 1950s when bucket latrines used in the towns were gradually replaced by water seal latrines. In recent years there have been considerable improvements in their working conditions due to change from bucket to water seal latrines, and supply of modern equipment and gloves and related improvements in sanitation, but methods of garbage collection and disposal used in these towns remain fairly primitive and maintenance and use of public toilets remain unhygienic adversely affecting the working conditions and health of the sanitary workers.
4. In many of these communities the workers were originally housed in labour lines constructed during the British period. Their housing stock and living conditions further deteriorated over the years due to poor maintenance, unauthorized construction of temporary shelter to accommodate the natural increase in these communities and poor and unreliable services including water supply, toilets and garbage disposal. Even though the

members of these communities clean the whole city, their own neighbourhoods remain most unhygienic and most undesirable to live in due to these conditions.

5. Due to combination of their ethnic, caste and class backgrounds and association with toilet cleaning and scavenging, these communities have been victims of many discriminations and social exclusions, including non-acceptance in tea boutiques run by those superior to them in social hierarchy, non-acceptance of their children in good schools in the towns, and rejection from participation in some rituals conducted in major Hindu shrines in the towns (e.g. Theru festival). Further, the estate residents of Indian origin living in nearby tea plantations have refused to marry young men and women from these communities despite their common language, common cultural background and common ethnic identity as Indian Tamils. Many of these social barriers have been relaxed during the past few decades due to a certain improvement in their status and due to violent reactions against these practices on the part of such communities. There is a clear improvement in their level of education, housing and involvement in occupations other than sanitary work with younger generations reluctant to continue the occupations of their parents. With improvements in education, employment and income there is, however, a marked tendency for the upwardly mobile to move out of these communities and sever all ties with these communities in what appears to be an individualistic rather than collective effort to overcome their social disadvantages.
6. The sanitary workers in urban Sri Lanka do not have any community level or higher level organizations seeking to address descent and work based discriminations. Instead they tend to respond to existing patterns of social discrimination and rejection by turning to alcohol, betel and aggressive personal behaviors, female migration to the middle-east for domestic work and other such paths of individual escapism rather than collective mobilization for confronting and dealing with

remaining spheres of social discrimination. Denial of caste is also widespread with no one openly admitting themselves to be of Chakkiliar or Dalit background. There are some trade unions active in these communities but they too are mainly concerned about their rights as workers rather than their human rights in general.

7. To some extent these communities have benefited from some state led initiatives such as transfer of ownership of the housing units to the residents, credit facilities for housing improvement and some water and sanitation projects supported by the state or NGOs. These improvements, however, have not been substantial enough to lift them out of social and economic deprivations to which they were subjected for generations.
8. As regards strategies for addressing remaining social barriers, it is important to organize and mobilize these communities, raise awareness of their rights and promote advocacy on behalf of these communities.

## **Discussion**

Two members of the audience (one trade union leader and one head of a NGO active in the plantations) asked the presenter to explain what he means by caste-based discrimination and give any evidence to demonstrate that caste-based discrimination continues to exist in these communities. In response the speaker mentioned that in his presentation he referred to work and descent based discrimination rather than caste-based discrimination as such. As this work has been transmitted from generation to generation along family lines and derogatory caste labels are often used by outsiders to refer to them (e.g. Sakkili), he felt justified in using the category “work and descent based” in his analysis. While admitting that poverty is an important characteristic of their living conditions as stated by one of the participants who questioned him, he said that the condition being described cannot be reduced to poverty (lack of resources, low income) alone, as the sanitary workers and their families continue to experience many deprivations due to their social background,

association with that hereditary occupation and the stigma attached to the communities in which they live. Asked how some members of these communities have been able to move up in society despite the barriers he described, Mr. Sivapragasam mentioned that such individual upward mobility achieved through considerable hardship and exceptional merit (e.g. education, sports, business) has not altered the overall conditions in these communities and the denial of the existence of caste and related social exclusions is not the best way to help restore their human rights and social dignity.

### **Presentation by Mr. A.S. Chandrabose on Caste System among Indian Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka**

1. Caste has been an important feature of the social organization among plantation workers from the inception of the plantation system in Sri Lanka. While a vast majority of the workers came from the Pallan, Parayan and Chakkilian (PPC) castes all belonging to the Dalit category in South India, initially many of the kanganies (labour supervisors), who were also labour recruiters came from higher castes, giving rise to a caste-based social hierarchy among the plantation workers while they all belonged to the working class in the plantations in social class terms. Apart from kanganies, shop owners and money lenders typically came from higher castes in Indian Tamil society, giving rise to social and economic domination of the low caste majority in the plantations by a high caste minority, a feature different to both Sri Lanka Tamil and Sinhala societies.
2. As the kanganies served as a link between plantation management and workers, they were able to sustain the caste order in the day to day work organization in the estates as well as in the ritual sphere totally controlled by them. The minor elite in Indian Tamil plantation communities came from castes such as *Mottai Vellalan, Reddiyar, Ahamudiyan, Muthuraj, Ambalakkaran, Kallan, Naidu, and Mudaliyar*.
3. The higher castes sent their children to better schools in nearby towns, whereas the plantation workers sent their children to estates schools with minimum facilities and primary education

- only. As a result, the educational achievement and upward social mobility were for the most part limited to high castes. The more successful among the higher castes migrated to cities also establishing social networks that spread beyond the plantations. The higher caste persons among Indian Origin Tamils (IOTs), also had better contacts with their villages of origin in India due to their ability to visit them from time to time.
4. The total number of higher caste IOTs in plantations decreased over the years due to repatriation to India, migration to towns and other factors. This enabled the PPCs to gain more influence in the plantations and challenge high caste domination in some instances.
  5. Caste distinctions among plantation residents have gradually become less significant when it comes to social relations and internal differentiation. Now many Kanganies come from PPC backgrounds. Even though trade union movement is still controlled by the upper caste minority, this leadership is increasingly challenged by the numerical majority belonging to the Dalit category. Intercaste marriages appear to be on the increase even though the exact percentage of such marriages is not clear from the available data. However, when considering work and descent based discrimination and social marginalization as applicable to the plantation residents as a whole, ethnicity, caste and gender continue to operate in ways that perpetuate their social marginality. Youth are increasingly reluctant to continue the occupations of their parents indicating a generalized resistance against work and descent based discrimination as applicable to this community.

### **Presentation by Mr. B. Sasikumar on Caste in a Selected Tea Estate in Sri Lanka**

1. The high caste people in the estate are collectively referred to as Kudiyavar. There are twice as more from PPC caste people compared to Kudiyavar in this estate.

2. Even though within each caste subcastes and even sub-sub castes were recognized in the past only big divisions are recognized nowadays for marriage purposes etc.
3. Traditionally low caste people were not allowed in Kovils controlled by the high castes. Different castes worshiped different deities and had Kovils devoted to respective deities. Conflict over management of Kovils often took the form of caste conflicts. This pattern has now changed and the same gods are worshiped irrespective of caste.
4. Even though caste-based occupation pattern has gradually eroded a few caste-based occupations still continue. They include sweepers (Vasakutti), priests (Pandaram), tom-tom beaters and temple cooks.
5. The notion of “Colombo boys” indicate changes in caste relations. These are young boys who have returned from a period of employment in Colombo. They do not care about caste and treat each other as equals irrespective of caste status. They do not follow any taboos applicable to high castes in their relations with low castes. They do not even care about caste in selecting their friends or even girl friends. This however does not mean when it comes to marriage caste is ignored altogether. If intercaste marriages take place it takes time for the new couple to be accepted by both parties.
6. In spite of many changes in the plantations over the years, poverty is more common among those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Kudiyanavar are generally better off and they have better social contacts outside the plantations. This inequality may be due to differences in lifestyle rather than differences in income earning capacities alone. The PPC castes tend to waste their earnings on alcohol, smokes and betel while the Kudiyanavar are more methodical and more careful in spending.
7. There has been a spate of caste conflicts in the estates in recent years. This is partly due to gradual decrease in the number of Kudiyanavar due to outmigration and repatriation and increased

resistance on the part of the PPCs against any effort on the part of the kudiyanvar to perpetuate and sustain their caste privileges. In many estates caste relations are delicately poised as Kudiyavar have gradually become a small minority with none of the privileges they had in the past such as control of kangani posts and ability to influence the plantation management.

### **Discussion**

Papers by Chandrabose and Sasikumar were discussed together as both related to plantation residents. Some members felt that social class is the more important phenomenon in the estates while caste was merely a remnant from the past. For instance, it was stated that the educational advantages of Kudiyavar are no longer so pronounced as some PPCs too have benefited from educational expansion in the estate areas in recent years. The research findings of the two presenters, however, pointed to a much more complex picture where some interplay among caste, class and ethnicity was also evident. It was pointed out that the researchers should take into account the impact of the DMK movement in South India on the plantation workers in Sri Lanka. Apart from caste and class ethnic identity also plays an increasingly important role in politics and social identity of plantation residents. The researchers were also asked to explore the nature of the trade union movement and the role of caste in this movement more closely. There was also some discussion surrounding if the term Dalit could be profitably applied to PPCs in Sri Lanka. It was mentioned that caste is very much a hidden but at times potentially explosive subject in the plantation communities.

### **Presentation by Mr. P. Thanges on Caste-based Discrimination in Jaffna**

1. The lowest castes in Jaffna are collectively referred to as Panchamar. They include Vannār (dhoby), Ampattar (barbers), Pallar (farm workers), Nalavar (toddy tappers) and Parayar (drummers). According to a caste census in 1950s they comprised about 18%

of total population in Jaffna. Traditionally these castes were highly oppressed and socially ostracized by the Vellālar caste controlling land, office, ritual activities and local politics.

2. Caste conflicts between Panchamar and Vellālar have been a significant development in the peninsula since the 1930s. Organized campaigns against all kinds of restrictions imposed by the high castes on the Panchamars were a prelude to the outbreak of a civil war between the government and Tamil rebels since the 1980s.
3. The study focused on the Mallakam area in the Jaffna Peninsula. Of the total population of about 5000 in 2006, nearly 1000 were people displaced from high security zones controlled by the Sri Lanka security forces. The IDPs lived in four camps established by the government and the NGOs. All residents in the IDP camps came from the Nalavar and the Pallar caste. Some 'high castes' too had been displaced by the war but they were able to find residence from their relatives or friends or move elsewhere including overseas because of their better social contacts, educational achievements and other such qualifications.
4. The reasons for concentration of 'depressed castes' in IDP camps are many. They include relative landlessness among them, lack of resources to buy land and build their own houses outside the camps, security considerations, social networks within the camps and possible difficulties in moving into surrounding areas dominated by 'high castes'.
5. The IDPs are subjected to a variety of caste-based discriminations. The 'high caste' families who own the lands where these camps are located often tried to regain their land and force out the IDPs. They also report difficulties in accessing drinking water from wells and Hindu temples in surrounding areas often owned by the Vellālar households. At times they have managed to overcome some of these discriminations through the intervention of the LTTE who has banned any caste-based discrimination.

6. Traditionally Tamil political parties were dominated by Vellālar leaders. This pattern changed with the rise of militant groups. The LTTE led by Karaiyār (fisher caste) has gradually become multicaste in composition. The LTTE has adopted punishment and intimidation as a means to eliminate caste discrimination. The LTTE and the Tamil nationalists in general tend to see caste as a divisive force that undermines the national liberation struggle of Tamils. Even mentioning of caste is a punishable offence in LTTE held areas. The LTTE, however, has not made any effort to mobilize Panchamar as a force against the caste system, clearly identifying such efforts as a divisive mechanism that serves against the common struggle of the Tamil people against the Sri Lankan state. In recruiting its members it has always appealed to ethnic rather than caste sentiments. It has however, indirectly supported the campaigns by barbers, washermen and other such occupational groups to professionalize their services and remove any stigma and caste obligations attached to these occupations.
7. On the whole while caste discriminations have gradually decreased due to successful campaigns by Panchamars and others supporting their struggles, the high low caste presence in remaining IDP camps in Jaffna Peninsula indicates that caste dynamics still operate in ways that enhance the vulnerability of selected Panchamar castes in spite of over two decades of armed conflict and related disruptions of the social order in the affected areas.

### **Discussion**

Another researcher from Jaffna Peninsula while agreeing with Thanges that most of the remaining war IDPs are of Panchamar background, argued that this may be an artifact of the settlement pattern in Jaffna rather than a manifestation of caste discrimination *per se*. In reply the presenter mentioned that given that the war caused displacement of all caste groups, we cannot ignore the fact that some of the 'lowest caste' groups appear to be the worst sufferers

of war in that they have not been able to move out to safer areas to the extent 'higher castes' were able to do so and they continue to remain in IDP camps under fairly difficult circumstances. Some participants argued that Vellālar domination in the Jaffna Peninsula is no longer possible as many of the more affluent members of Vellālar caste has moved out of the Peninsula, the demographic balance is now more in favour of the Panchamars and the LTTE itself is opposed to any explicit acts of caste discrimination. Some questions were raised regarding the caste composition of the LTTE leadership and cadres. In the absence of any reliable data on the social background of the LTTE leaders and cadres it was not possible to address this question in full. It was also pointed out that in spite of the reported ban on the caste system by the LTTE, caste is still operative especially where marriages are concerned. Many of the Tamil diaspora members living in far away places like Canada visit the Jaffna Peninsula in order to find brides of appropriate class and caste backgrounds. While the Panchamars successfully gained a degree of acceptance in some temples through their temple entry campaigns since the 1950s, the management of these temples still remains in the hands of Vellālar, showing a degree of continuity in caste-based social arrangements.

### **Voice of a Victim of Caste Discrimination**

At this point a girl from an affected community made a brief intervention describing her personal experience as a girl from an underprivileged background. She mentioned the difficulties and humiliation she encountered in school because of her social origin and lack of avenues to seek any redress for her grievances. She hoped that all parties concerned would open their eyes to the plight of young people like her who are from deprived social backgrounds.

### **Presentation by Prof. K. Tudor Silva on Caste-based Discrimination in Sinhala Society**

1. The Sinhalese caste system has been identified as a secular caste system compared to the Hindu system in that the Sinhala

caste system is not based on a religious foundation as such. The highest caste in Sinhala society is Radala aristocracy, which unlike Brahmins in the Hindu caste system, occupies no priestly status. Similarly the lowest caste in Sinhala society is Rodi caste, considered not so much as ritually impure but socially inferior and subordinate because among other things they engage in begging. In pre-colonial Sinhala society, caste status, land ownership and power went hand in hand.

2. The lowest castes in Sinhala society consist of Rodi (beggars), Kinnara (weavers) and Gahala (executioners). Their numbers are very small (together comprising less than 1% of the total Sinhala population) and they live in isolated but densely populated communities with limited social contact with surrounding communities.
3. Among others, Wahumpura (traditionally domestic servants of high caste Goigama) and Bathgama (traditionally outdoor manual workers employed by the Goigama landlords) have been identified as “depressed castes” in Sinhala society. These two castes comprise 15 to 20% of the total Sinhala population. For the most part they live in large low caste concentrations characterized by landlessness, poverty, unlawful activities, violence and social marginalization. Like Karawa (fishing communities in the western and southern coastal belt) caste, some sections of the Bathgama and Wahumpura castes became converted to Christianity during the colonial period and benefited from commerce and education, but most members of these castes remain poor and underprivileged with limited opportunities in society in spite of opportunities offered by the welfare state policies introduced since the 1930s.
4. Karawa, Bathgama and Wahumpura communities have been in the forefront of political uprisings led by the JVP in 1971 and 1987-89 period. Even though the JVP did not openly appeal to caste sentiments or openly campaign against the caste system as such, it is well known that unresolved grievances among

youth from depressed caste backgrounds played an important role in the formation of this political movement.

5. The results of ongoing research in two villages in the Kandy district were presented to illustrate the nature of caste discrimination in Sinhala society.
6. In Welivita, where nearly 80% of the population belonged to Berawa (drummer) caste, the latter were traditionally tenant farmers for high caste landlords. Traditionally the names of individuals were caste specific and indicative of hereditary status. The Berawa were subjected to a range of discriminations in access to land, access to education and access to services of the state controlled locally by high caste officials. Rapid social change has occurred since the 1930s when the Berawa caste people became politically active and established connections with powerful politicians from outside who managed to grant them some favors in allocation of state controlled resources, including land, employment and educational facilities. Youth from low caste backgrounds were increasingly hostile towards any caste-based discrimination in education and employment as well as in day-to-day social relations.
7. Research conducted by Ms. Kotikabadda in Henawala, a Kinnara caste village in Kundasale area, indicates that this village continues to experience social and economic marginalization because of its hereditary caste background. The name of this village was changed to Kalasirigama (lit. artistic village) under the Gam Udawa Movement led by President Premadasa, but the former name continues to be used by most people in and outside the village. A majority of men and women continued the hereditary mat weaving industry. Only a small number of people in the village had received education beyond 8th standard. Partly because of continuing discrimination suffered by children from this community in nearby schools, parents encouraged children to join mat weaving from an early age. The marriages were within the village or with other villages of

the same caste located elsewhere. A large number of women from this community (33 out of a total of 121 working people in the village) had migrated to middle-east countries for work as domestic servants. This appears to be a widespread trend in most depressed caste communities, suggesting that it is one way in which they seek to escape caste and gender discrimination experienced by them in such villages.

8. In conclusion it was mentioned that caste in Sinhala society is rarely discussed in public and rarely addressed as an important problem affecting many people. There is a tendency to ignore and deny caste and consider it as an aspect of private domain of the people concerned rather than a social policy or public issue as such. The assumption is that caste will die a natural death if is not recognized or ignored by all parties concerned, This untested and, for the most part, unproven assumption remains a major obstacle to elimination of caste discrimination in Sri Lanka as a whole.

## **Discussion**

Some participants were of the view that given the mild nature of caste in Sri Lanka compared to India and evidence of decline of caste over the years, any efforts to mobilize public opinion against caste discrimination may be counter productive. The research team argued that while caste and descent based discrimination in Sri Lanka may have declined over the years, such discriminations continue to exist in some areas as evident from the case of Henawala and other examples in Sri Lanka, including the condition of urban sanitary workers. The necessity to consider caste, class and ethnicity as related phenomena was brought out by one participant. Asked how welfare state policies pursued in Sri Lanka from 1930 to 1977 and subsequent change to open economic policies impacted on caste, Prof. Silva mentioned that neither policy has effectively eliminated caste discrimination as such as evident from the current research. In so far as caste operates underground and caste discrimination is not addressed in social policy, neither the welfare state nor the

market can be expected to erode the caste system as anticipated by advocates of one policy regime or the other.

### **Panel Discussion on How to Mainstream Issues Related to Caste-based Discrimination in Sri Lanka**

Four panelists representing civil society organizations participated in this panel discussion. Opening this discussion Mr. Sivaprakasam from the Human Development Organization in Kandy mentioned that early on many people denied that there was any gender discrimination in society but now the society is more aware of gender discrimination due to the activities of the women's movement. A similar process must be pursued in order to mainstream the discourse on caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka. His organization is active in several populations subjected to caste-based discrimination, including sanitary workers and depressed caste Sinhala and Indian Tamil communities. He stressed that caste is a very sensitive issue with strong roots in Sri Lanka and it will not simply disappear unless we lobby against it. Joining the discussion Mr. Muthulingam, the founder director of the Institute of Social Development (ISD) in Kandy mentioned that he welcomed the research project as the information generated will be useful to activists and development workers. He said that struggles against caste in Sri Lanka predated those of India but subsequently social and political campaigns in Sri Lanka focused more on class and ethnic discriminations. He emphasized the necessity to treat caste discrimination in the light of overall patterns of social discrimination where caste may be one but not necessarily the most important element of discrimination. For instance, poverty is a larger problem affecting all sections of the population, including the so-called high caste people, but there may be instances where poverty and social exclusion based on caste go together. In India people may be poor and underprivileged because they are Dalit, but in Sri Lanka caste may not necessarily be the primary basis of social exclusion and deprivation. Representing the Uva Community Development Centre in Badulla in the South Eastern part of Sri Lanka, Mr. Navaratne Hennyake said that his

organization works in deprived Indian Tamil communities as well as in underprivileged Sinhala communities, including some Rodiya villages. His organization has not focused on caste issues as such but come across some depressed caste communities in their efforts to address poverty and related social problems in these highly remote region in Sri Lanka. He identified sexual exploitation of women as an important parameter of social discrimination as it affects the Rodiya communities in the area. Dr. Nimalka Fernando from the Human Rights Commission in Colombo stated that in order to mainstream struggle against caste discrimination it has to be placed within the broader human rights discourse in Sri Lanka and other South Asian countries. She also pointed out that existing legal measures against caste discrimination have been rarely used in Sri Lanka due to lack of awareness and insufficient sensitivity towards all forms of discrimination. Cases of caste discrimination do not come to public attention in Sri Lanka, not because they do not exist, but because they are seen as natural and unproblematic. She also pointed to the need to promote networking among all organizations and groups committed to eliminate all forms of discrimination in Sri Lanka.

### **Closing Remarks by Ms. Rikke Nohrlind from International Dalit Solidarity Network**

She opened her remarks by describing the role of IDSN as an advocacy and lobbying organization committed to promote the rights of Dalit people in India and elsewhere. IDSN played an important role in mainstreaming Dalit issues in the agendas of UN, other multilateral donors and human rights organizations. Social exclusions and discrimination faced by Dalits are of various kinds. Access to markets, access to education, access to employment, access to drinking water and access to land are among the key areas where caste-based discrimination operates in various countries. Going back to the issue of sanitary labourers, she mentioned that lack of alternative avenues of employment may be the primary reason why people continue to engage in such work in spite of discrimination

against such workers. In this regard, she also drew attention to possible parallels between Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, as sanitary workers in both countries are Dalits of Indian origin and they are ethnic minorities in these two countries as well as people from an underprivileged caste background. In both situations lack of alternative sources of employment reinforced by social exclusions associated with caste, ethnicity and minority status may be implicated in perpetuation of relevant forms of social discrimination. She mentioned the need for reliable information, thorough analysis and exchange of views between researchers and activists in the struggle against caste-based discrimination. The multi-country research project on caste-based discrimination is opening new grounds in providing an evidence base in the struggle against caste-based discrimination. Finally she thanks the conference organizers for inviting her for this national workshop and giving her an opportunity to share her thoughts on the subject.

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# Casteless or Caste-blind?

Dynamics of Concealed Caste Discrimination, Social Exclusion and Protest in Sri Lanka

**Kalinga Tudor Silva, P.P. Sivapragasam, Paramsothy Thanges**

There is complete silence about and widespread denial of caste in contemporary Sri Lanka. Caste is not recognized for any official purpose at least since the abolition of Rajakariya in the 1830s. The issue of caste is not discussed or debated in Sri Lankan mass media in sharp contrast to the situation in India or Nepal. In Northern Sri Lanka there is a ban imposed upon caste by the LTTE, treating it as a potential obstacle to a unified Eelam liberation struggle. In spite of these restrictions and denials, caste seems to operate in various private and public domains, including marriage, political and social mobilization as well as in patterns and degree of social mobility among Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka. In the prevailing social and political environment in the country caste is very much an underground and doxic phenomenon. Nevertheless, continuing caste discrimination and related grievances drive part of the social unrest in both Northern and Southern Sri Lanka. This volume brings out changing facets of caste discrimination among Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils in varied social contexts such as rural Sri Lanka, plantations, urban settings, war-affected regions, IDP camps, religious sphere and local and national politics. Arguing that Sri Lankan society is caste-blind rather than casteless, the book advocates for more explicit and targeted social policies that ensure the human rights and the dignity of underprivileged caste groups and articulate and foster their agency and capacity for bringing about social change and social justice.



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