

Caste Systems Exercising By Sinhalese Community in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the practices of social stratification along the lines of stratification theory and relevant published materials. This paper highlighted the social stratification, especially social class and caste systems exercising by Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka. This study found that the social class has developed among Sinhalese historically, and Sinhalese and Tamils who make up majority of the population in the country have their own distinctive caste system consequently and this paper focuses on how people in Kandyan, Southern peasantries have been involved in the market-oriented development process, and in particular, why the low and up caste people in these highland peasantries benefitted from education, once they have secured their economic gains while the high caste people have not.

Keyword :-Stratification, Social Class, and Caste

1. Introduction and Research Problem/ Hypothesis

Social stratification is the hierarchal system that society uses to rank and categorize people. Sociologists claim that social stratification is a natural consequence in every society (Ursula Sharma, 2002). There are various types of social stratification systems throughout the universe. In Sri Lanka, there are four key elements that comprise social stratification: caste, class, gender, and ethnicity. Based on these elements of stratification, the social class and caste system developed in Sri Lanka historically.

Problem Statement

Every society has maintained its stratification in various forms as the stratification is identified as natural one in all societies. Therefore, this study is significant as it explore how the social class and caste systems are maintaining social strata among Sri Lankan communities even though the other social and economical distinctions are accessible in the country. Objective of the Study The main objective of this paper is to scrutinize the development of social class system among Sri Lankan communities historically and to understand the types of social stratification, especially caste system among Sinhalese community significantly.

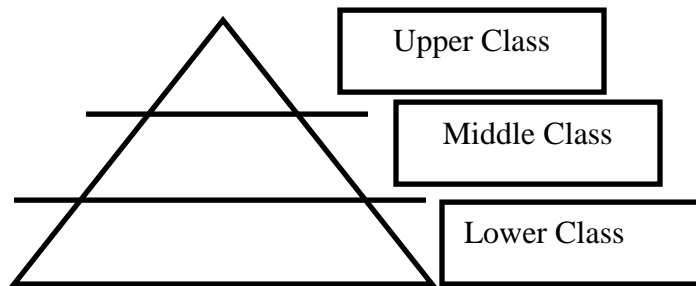
Methodology of the Study

This is basically a qualitative study which is constructed based on the conceptual framework of stratification. Data for this study have been gathered from various resources of the secondary information schemes such as published journals, articles, books and electronic documents. The primary data also has been gathered from the structured interview with key informants. The following groups of people were interviewed as key informants; Academics; Religious leader; Experienced people. This paper analyzes the data of social stratification along the lines of organizational theory and relevant published materials.

Conceptualizing Social Class

Social classes are economic or cultural arrangements of groups in society. Social class is often discussed in terms of 'social stratification'. Stratification typically comprises of three layers: upper class, middle class, and lower class.

Spectrum of Social Classes in Society



Thus, it can be discussed in the above mentioned social class structure and its trend in Sri Lankan society historically.

Historical View

By the late 19th century, the upper class natives of Ceylon (called as Ceylonese by the British) formed a second class group in their own land, serving to their colonial masters. This upper class of Ceylonese derived their wealth from land holdings that were passed down the generations and derived their power from severing in posts in the British colonial administration (Ceylon Gazetteer, 1855). At first, these were limited to post special posts reserved for natives such as Rate Mahattaya in the central highland and the Mudaliyars in the coastal areas, latter as new generation of this native chieftains grew up educated in the Christian missionary schools, public schools modeled after their English counter parts and at British Universities. They were taken into the prestigious Ceylon civil services; others took up places in the legislative and later the state council. Entering into this upper class were successful merchants who gained wealth in the lucrative mining industry of the time. A middle class emerged at this period of a bourgeois people who gained their status by professions or by business. The 20th century brought several changes to the social structure of Sri Lanka. By the 1940s when Ceylon gained independence from the British in 1948, there were four social groups. Upper class made up primary of landowners, the upper middle class of educated professionals holding traditional jobs such as Lawyers, Doctor, Army Officers, Academics, Senior Civil Servant and Police officers and merchants. The political leader of new dominion of Ceylon came from these two classes (Ceylon Gazetteer, 1855). Lower middle class made up persons who were educated but held less prestigious, but respected jobs such as lower level public servants, policemen and teachers. This order changed dramatically in the 1970s due to the land reformation brought on by the government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike who limited private ownership of land to 50 acres and excess land was nationalized along with many industries. This rendered the wealthiest that made up the upper class and upper middle class who greatly dependent on a secondary income void of their income and with it their power. Following the failure of the socialist economic drive of the 1970s the new government of J. R. Jayawardena opens up the countries economy to free market reforms. As well as the free education introduced by C.W.W. Kanangara also derived many changes in the social class structure of Sri Lanka historically (De Silva, K. M., 2005).

Social Class in 21st Century

The direct result of the changes of the 1970s and 1980s was witnessed only at the late 20th century and start of the 21st century. Today, Sri Lanka's social structure is based purely on money and power consequently. There are four main class component comprised the hierarchy in Sri Lanka in the 21st century.

3.Castes System in Sri Lanka

It is one of many systems in the world. As everywhere, a Sri Lankan caste can be functional, religious, ethnic, tribal or even composite in origin. Caste as we know it today appears to have been introduced to Sri Lanka by Prakrit - language-speakers from North India. Whether the similar Jāti like separation of society existed prior to this invasion is unknown (Mahawamsa, 2007). Sri Lanka's caste system is divided in to five major types.

1. Caste among Sinhalese: Kandiyani (UpCountry)
2. Caste among Sinhalese: Southern (LowCountry)
3. Caste among Sri Lankan Tamils: Northern Caste
4. Caste among Sri Lankan Tamils: Eastern Caste
5. Caste among Tamils: Hill Country Tamils (Indian Origin)

Caste among Sinhalese

The majority caste among the Sinhalese population now is the Goyigama. It appears that the Goyigama comprise at least half of the Sinhalese population. The traditional occupation of this caste is cultivation, and most members are still farmers in villages almost many places in Sri Lanka. In traditional Sinhalese society, they were the landed proprietors. The Sinhalese system is divided between the Kandiyani (up) and Low country.

Kandyan (Up-Country) Caste System

In the central highland, some traditions of the Kingdom of Kandy survived after its collapse in 1818, preserved in unique forms of the caste system until the post-independence period. The most important feature of the old system was Rajakariya, or the 'King's work' which linked each caste to a specific occupation and demanded services for the court and religious institutions (e-sources: ref. 12, 13).

The connection of caste and job is still stronger in the central highland, and at events such as the Kandy Perahara, an annual festival honoring Hindu Gods and the Lord Buddha, the various castes still perform traditional functions. The Goyigama in the highland differ from those of the low country because they preserve occupational divisions within the caste such as Patti (Herdsmen), Porowakkara (wood-cutters) etc.

In the highlands of Kandy district live the Bathgama or Padu, another caste of agricultural laborers who have escaped the British period consolidation of the cultivator caste. Also untouchable Rodiya and the Kinnaraya, who display the vestiges of a hunter-gather tribe, were traditionally segregated from other groups because of their basic status. Living in all areas are service groups, such as the Hena or Rada, traditional washer-men who still dominate the laundry trade; the Bereva, traditional temple drummers who work as cultivators in many villages; and the Navandanna or Achari types are traditional artisan. The highland interior is home to the Wahumpura or traditional makers of jaggery (sugar made from palm sap), who have spread throughout the country in a wide variety of occupations, especially agriculture (e-sources: ref. 12, 13). The following table details the

Kandyan (up-country) caste systems followed by Sinhalese.

Table: 1 List of Kandyan (Up-Country) Castes

| Name of Caste Group | Occupation(s) of Caste Group |
|---------------------|--|
| Goyigama | Traditional cultivators, farmers and herdsmen |
| Ahinkuntaya | Gypsies |
| Pamunu | Tenant farmers |
| Pannikki | Barbers |
| Porowakkara | Wood cutters |
| Bathgama | Traditionally cultivators |
| Radala | Aristocracy of the Kandyan Kingdom |
| Wahumpura (Dewa) | Merchants, Confectioners and Military personal |

| | |
|------------|--|
| Hannali | Tailors |
| Panna | Grass cutters |
| Rodiya | Outcastes |
| Rajaka | Dhobis, Washermen |
| Berava | Tom-tom beaters (traditional drummers) |
| Navandanna | Artisans |

(E-sources: ref. 11)

Low Country (Southern) Caste

There are still major differences between the caste structure of the highland and those of the low country, although some service groups are common to both. The South-west coast is home to three major castes other than the majority Goyigama common to both lowcountry and up-country, whose ancestors are believed have migrated from South-west India but who have become important actors in the Sinhalese social system: the Salagama, the Durawa and the Karawa (Bryce Ryan, 1953). These groups have exploited their traditional occupation and their coastal positions to accumulate wealth and influence during the colonial period. By the late twentieth century, members of Southern castes, especially by the Salagamas, had moved to all parts of the country, occupied high business and academic positions. Formerly untouchable Rodiya and Kinnaraya are also found in the low country. The following table shows the caste systems of low-country (Southern) Sinhalese.

Table: 2List of Low-Country (Southern) Caste

| Name of Caste Group | Occupation(s) of Caste Group |
|---------------------|--|
| Salagama | Cinnamon tapers, Soldiers & Weavers. |
| Karawa | Traditional fishermen, naval warriors, seafaring traders, boat builders, carpenters & pioneering planters. |
| Durawa | Traditional Soldiers and toddy tappers. |
| Navandanna | Artisans (Many subcategories) |
| Goyigama | Traditional cultivators, land workers and herdsmen |
| Wahumpura (Dewa) | Merchants, Confectioners, Military personals. |
| Berava | Tom-tom beaters (traditional drummers) |
| Badahala (Kumbal) | Potters |
| Hannali | Tailors |
| Pamunu | Tenant farmers |
| Porowakkara | Wood cutters |
| Rodiya | Outcastes |
| Gattara | Cultivators |
| Hinna | Washers |
| Pannikki | Barbers |
| Rajaka (Hena) | Washer-men |
| Ahinkuntaya | Gypsies |

(E-sources: ref. 11)

4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper mainly focused the social stratification, especially social class and caste systems operating by Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka. In this backdrop, it can be understood the fact that the class system have developed among Sinhalese on the basis of various socio-economical and political aspects historically from the period of colonial era

to post-colonial structure. And this study highlighted that the caste system is followed by the Sinhalese and Tamils widely in the country on the basis of various socio -economical, cultural, religious and ritual aspects. So, the Sinhalese and Tamils who make up majority of the population in the country have their own distinctive caste system consequently

5. REFERENCES

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