

# Caste Systems Exercising By Tamil 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.*

**Key words:** *Stratification, Social Class, and Caste*

## Background of the Study

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.

The class systems are based on individual achievement, and social mobility is the foundation of the class system. Caste system is the system of division of labor and power in human society. The caste system is one form of a social stratification and it is based on ascription, meaning that there is no social mobility within the society (Fuller, C.J., 1996). Therefore, this paper tries to emphasize the social class and caste systems among Sri Lankan communities with the evaluation and the overview of the historical evidences and records.

## 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.

### Upper class

The upper class in Sri Lanka is statistically very small and consists of industrialists, businessmen, senior executives and serving government ministers. These people are the wealthiest in the land, some having inherited money and position, and other having earned it themselves. Their educational background may vary, but they typically send their children to national, private or international schools to be educated in English and thereafter send them to overseas Universities.

### Upper middle class

The upper middle class in Sri Lanka consists of bourgeois and educated professionals who generally come from educated background, having been educated at public or private schools and local or foreign universities. Traditional

jobs include Lawyers, Doctors, Military Officers, Academics, Senior Civil Servants and Managers. They typically send their children (depending on family income, traditions, residence) to national, private or international schools to be educated in English or in their local languages. For university education, they may be sent to overseas universities or local private higher education institutions depending on family income.

### **The lower middle class**

The lower middle class in Sri Lanka consists of people in white-collar jobs living in less prosperous suburbs. This class constitutes the largest of Sri Lanka's social groups. Typically they have not had a university education, and send their children to national or provincial schools to be educated in their local languages (depending on family residence or scholarship). For university education, if selected they may be sent to local state universities, if not private higher education institutions.

### **The poor**

These people would typically be on low incomes and dependent on state benefits (food and other economic subsidies provided by the government). Many reside in the slums or shanty towns of cities or underdeveloped rural areas. They send their children to provincial schools to be educated in their local languages: Sinhala or Tamil. This class category is normally considered in the bottom level of class spectrum in Sri Lanka.

### **Conceptualizing 'Caste'**

Caste system is the system of division of labor and power in human society. Majumthar and C.N. Madan stated that 'the caste as a closed group' (Rao Sankar, 2008). So, as a South Asian country, Sri Lanka has a complex caste system and as a result extensive caste discrimination, even though its constitution states that all men and women are equal before law. The Caste system in Sri Lanka is a division of society into strata, differing somewhat from the classic Varnas of North India but is similar in nature to the Jāti system found in South India. So, it can be examined the caste systems and its distribution among Sinhala and Tamil communities.

### **Castes amongst Sri Lankan Tamils**

The caste structure of the Northern Tamils is somewhat different compared to the Eastern Tamils. Northern Tamil caste system is mostly dominated by the Vellalar except in some coastal region where the Karayar have numerical and ritual superiority over others.

In the east coast, the fisher castes are dominant numerically that they have used to create ritual superiority over other castes except the Vellalar who seem to be newer arrivals from the North. Paradoxically, the Mukkuvars who are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy in the North are almost at the top in the East. The following table specifies the castes followed by Northern Tamils.

Table: 3List of Northern Tamil Castes

Name of Caste Group	Occupation(s) of Caste Group
Vellalar	Farmers
Pallar	Farm hands
Nalavar	Toddy tapper
Thimilar	Fishers
Primanar (Iyar)	Brahmin priests
Karaiyar	Fishers, soldiers & landholders
Maravar	Landholders
Thurumber	Washers for toddy tappers and other low-caste families
Koviar	Temple workers
Mukkuvar	Fishers
Paraiyar	Tom-tom beaters (traditional drummers)

(E-sources: ref. 11)

The above table shows the details of Northern Tamil castes, and the following table demonstrates the main caste systems and their occupation among Tamil community in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka.

Table: 4List of Eastern Tamil Castes

Name of Caste Group	Occupation(s) of Caste Group
Mukkuvar	Land holders, fishers and farm hands
Tattar	Gold smiths
Thacher	Carpenters
Thimilar	Land holders, fishers and farm hands
Vettar	Hunters
Karaiyar	Land holders and fishers
Vellelar	Farmers
Vanniar	Landholders

(E-sources: ref. 11)

### **Castes amongst Hill Country Tamils**

The Tamils of Indian origin or Hill Country Tamils who were brought over by the British as indentured laborers were mainly from the lower Indian castes. Their caste structure resembles that of Tamil Nadu villages. According to Professor Bertram Bastianpillai, they were brought from Tamil Nadu cities of Thirunelvely, Tiruchi, Madurai and Tanjore were recruited from 1827. Those who are considered to be of higher castes such as Maravar, Kallar, Agamudayar and Vellalar occupied the first row of line rooms. They performed respectable jobs such as factory work and grinding of tea. They worked as minor employees too. Even though they belong to the labor category they were influential among conductors, tea makers, Knanganies or supervisors and other officials. The workers considered low castes lived in the dwellings that are away from the center and these dwelling are called distant or lower lines. This group consists of Pallar, Paraiyar, Sakkiliar, Washers and Barbers. The yard sweepers and changes of clothes are in the lowest rank (Bryce Ryan, 1953).

### **Conclusion**

This paper mainly focused the social stratification, especially social class and caste systems operating by Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims communities in Sri Lanka. In this backdrop, it can be understood the fact that the class system have developed among Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims 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 socioeconomic, 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.

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