

## A Historical Survey of Social Class and Caste System 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, Tamils and Muslims communities in Sri Lanka. This study found that the social class has developed among Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims historically, and Sinhalese and Tamils who make up majority of the population in the country have their own distinctive caste system consequently.

**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 through out 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.

### 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 and Tamil communities significantly.

### Methodology of the Study

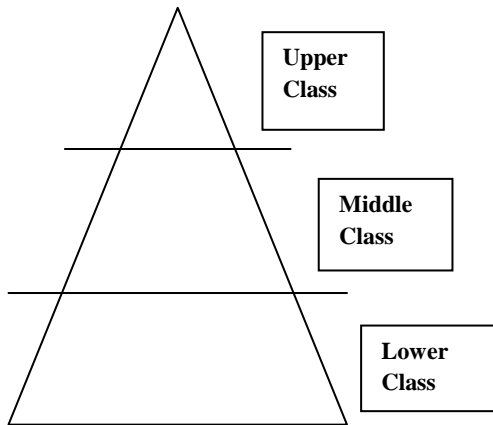
This is basically a qualitative study which is constructed based on the conceptual framework of stratification. Data for this study have been gathered from various resources of the secondary information schemes such as published journals, articles, books and electronic documents. The primary data also 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.

### Literature Review

Literatures related to this study are also amalgamated in this paper. Allison Davis et al. (1941) done a research on “*Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*”. In this study, the American cast and class were analyzed especially lower Negro caste systems. Meantime, the white caste (whit upper, white middle, white lower) and social mobility within the white caste is also investigated by the authors. Further, the study reveals the division of labor (based on caste and class structure) and its exercises in the plantation sector economy and it identifies how caste and class control the land in old period. Also this study elaborates the relationship between caste and race based on anthropological perspective.

The research paper titled “*Race, Class, and Gender in Education Research: An Argument for Integrative Analysis*” authored by Carl A. Grant and Christine E. Sleeter, explores that the race, social class, and gender tend to be treated as separate issues in education literatures. And this study illustrates how attention to only one status group

oversimplifies the analysis of student’s behavior in school. The study found that integrating race and class, and race and gender, it argues that, attending only to race oversimplifies behavior analysis and may contribute to perpetuation of gender and class biases.

An article written by Puja Mondal “*Essay on the Caste-Class Nexus in India*”, which contains the structural historical perspective of caste and class system among Hindu society in India. And the author examined how Hindu society composed and practiced their own caste and class system by using different approaches. The article analyzes that the class has been an in-built mechanism within caste, and therefore, caste cannot be seen simply as a ‘ritualistic’ system, and class cannot be seen as an open system as it has often been influenced by the institution of caste.

Brian K. Smith has written a book titled “*Classifying the Universe: The Ancient Indian Varna System and the Origins of Caste*”, which comprehensively examines the ‘Varna’ (Chaturvarna) system and its origination laid out in the classical Hindu Vedic literature and thought to underline the concept of caste, which continue to exert a powerful and pervasive influence over Indian life.

Many studies carried out and provided different finding and conclusion on the basis of the study area and the research content. So, this study basically focuses the social stratification; class and caste systems followed by the Sri Lankan communities within the multi cultural sphere.

### Social Class in Sri Lanka Society:

#### Historical View

By the late 19<sup>th</sup> 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

The direct result of the changes of the 1970s and 1980s was witnessed only at the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and start of the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 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.

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1. Caste among Sinhalese: Kandiyani (Up-Country)
2. Caste among Sinhalese: Southern (Low-Country)
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), Porowakara (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

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)

Porowakkara	Wood cutters
Bathgama	Traditionally cultivators
Radala	Aristocracy of the Kandyan Kingdom
Wahumpura (Dewa)	Merchants, Confectioners and Military personals
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 low-country 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.

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)

### Castes amongst Sri Lankan Tamils

Just like amongst the Sinhalese, 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. are almost at the top in the East. The following table specifies the castes followed by Northern Tamils.

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

Table: 3List of Northern Tamil Castes

Name of Caste Group	Occupation(s) of Caste Group
Vellalar	Farmers
Pallar	Farm hands
Nalavar	Toddy tapper
Thimiliar	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).

### **Does Caste is following by Muslims in Sri Lanka?**

Caste is not an issue among Muslims everywhere in the universe. This caste system is not considered as an important stratification instrument in Sri Lanka society. But, many sects are practicing by Muslims within the

framework of religious believes and thoughts. Among Sri Lankan Muslims, some descent groups were maintained their class system during the colonial and post-colonial period in various levels. And now, they performed their social events on the basis of social class in terms of education, business, property and power. But, Muslims in Sri Lanka have not associated with any kinds of caste formations like Sinhalese and Tamil communities in the country.

### **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 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.

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