

## **The Sri Lankan caste of mind**

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Recent discussions within Sri Lanka have focused on the ‘alien’ nature of democracy, rule of law and human rights, advocating a return to the ‘paradise’ that existed prior to the country’s colonization. Without detracting from the condemnation of the colonial domination and its repression of local people, this is a dangerous illusion; pre-colonial Sri Lanka was far from a paradise. Nine to ten centuries before the colonial takeover of the island in 1815, Sri Lanka was a society organized under the principles of the caste system.

This system is perhaps the most important aspect of Sri Lanka’s political and social organization, and yet is the least studied amongst historians and anthropologists. In fact, the practice of the caste system is firmly linked to all aspects of contemporary life, including the blanket rejection of democracy, rule of law and human rights, as well as a rejection of the concepts of a modern state, such as the separation of powers, all of which were enshrined in the 1948 constitution of independent Sri Lanka.

Common reasons given for not paying much attention to caste are that the caste system in Sri Lanka was far less rigorous than in India, and that today, the caste issue is no longer of much importance. A close examination would show that both these assertions are only partially true. Basic principles of the caste system were the same in India and Sri Lanka: (a) a person’s occupation is determined by birth, (b) there cannot be intermarriage between persons from different castes (the principle of endogamy), (c) your caste cannot be altered, (d) the positions and privileges each person has is determined by caste and these positions must be demonstrated externally by the language used to address each other, by dress codes and all areas of lifestyle, and (e) the hierarchical form of society which accepts these distinctions are conducive to the making of a harmonious society. There was also no distinction in the way the principles were practiced between the Sinhalese and Tamil communities within Sri Lanka. As a mode of social organization and control, the caste system worked in the same way in both countries: one all powerful caste existed, whose position was beyond the challenge of others and this position was passed from generation to generation on the basis of birth. Central to the concept of social organization based on caste is the complete rejection of any form of meritocracy—a system in which the talented move ahead on the basis of specific criteria.

One difference however, was that in India, harsher methods were used to maintain the distinctions between different castes. At a later stage, India also developed the idea of ‘untouchability’ in absolute terms; the complete separation of one group of persons, who constituted almost one-third of the Indian population. The practice of untouchability is less known in Sri Lanka, although it is evident to some extent among the Tamil community in particular.

This brings us to the second argument, that caste is no longer of importance in today’s Sri Lanka. In fact, what this article attempts to show, is that the historical practice of the caste system has left indelible marks on the psyche of Sri Lankans, which are an obstacle to genuine progress in the country’s economic and political development, conflict resolution and the realization of human rights. A brief review of three periods of Sri Lankan history will examine the practice of the caste system, followed by its impact for today.

### **Pre-colonial origins of Sri Lanka’s caste system**

By the end of the Anuradapura period (approximately 250 BCE-1020 CE) the caste system was solidly entrenched as the mode of social organization in Sri Lanka. While in India it was the Brahmins (priests) who were the upper caste, in Sri Lanka the system was adjusted to make the landlords the upper caste. To

protect the absolute power of the upper caste, it is essential for the caste system to prevent social mobility. For anyone born outside the upper caste to think of changing his social status was a ridiculous, silly thing. Anyone silly enough to do so, was punished with death or other forms of gross abuse, thereby warning others against similar silliness. In a caste-based society, all power is at the top and below that there is only powerlessness. Such a relationship can only be maintained by extreme forms of repression, which become part of the system and even peoples' mindset.

Such a mindset is well illustrated by two stories in the Sanskrit epic 'Mahabharata', of Sambuka and Ekalvya. Sambuka was a Sudra, and therefore forbidden to engage in any exercise of learning, which was the privilege of the Brahmins. He was silly enough to dream of being a learned person however, and secretly learned as much as he could. In this way, Sambuka soon acquired knowledge and skills equal to that of any Brahmin. During this time, a Brahmin's son died. The Brahmin father brought his son's corpse to Rama's residence and complained that the death of a young Brahmin can occur only when someone has transgressed their law and defiled their order; it was Rama's duty to find and punish the transgressor. Rama immediately left to do so. He could not find the transgressor so he resorted to the normal custom among Brahmins of identifying each other by asking for their genealogy. When he came to Sambuka and asked for his genealogy, Sambuka replied, "Sir, I am a poor man who has a thirst for learning and that is how I have acquired this knowledge and skills." At this, Rama used his weapon like lightning and slew Sambuka. The story goes on to say that 'devas' descended from heaven and praised Rama for his defense of the divine order.

Ekalvya was a young boy fascinated by archery after he saw a guru training Arjuna in archery. He sought his mother's advice regarding obtaining the services of the same teacher for himself. His mother explained that they were not of the same social standing and were not allowed to practice archery. Furthermore, gurus demand dakshina, which they were unable to pay. Ekalvya refused to give up. He made a sculpture of the guru, which he worshipped before he did the archery exercises himself which he learned secretly by watching the guru teaching Arjuna. Soon, he became an expert archer and secretly practiced his art. One day he was meditating when he heard a dog barking, disturbing his meditation. To regain the silence, he shot a small arrow in the direction of the noise, which prevented the dog from opening its mouth. Passing by the place, Arjuna and his guru examined the dog and were convinced that only a very great archer could do this. This meant that there was someone around who excelled Arjuna and even the guru, which aroused their jealousy. They looked around and found the boy and the sculpture in which the guru recognized the image of his own face, about which he questioned the boy. The boy, seeing the guru, worshipped him and begged him to teach him also. The guru promised to teach him if he were to give his dakshina immediately, and the dakshina he demanded was the boy's right thumb. According to the story, the boy immediately obeyed the teacher, thereby losing his thumb and his capacity to be an archer.

Both these stories can be further supplemented with thousands of similar incidents from India as well as Sri Lanka. The suppression of the lower caste was the main function of the upper caste, particularly those who were to exercise leadership roles. Sri Lanka's present elite in fact originate from such upper caste families of the past.

### **Colonial times**

Under the Portuguese, Dutch as well as British rulers of Sri Lanka, every form of local resentment and protest was crushed with complete ruthlessness. The atrocities committed during these times indicate the absence of any norms or standards when punishing dissent. Among the many rebellions crushed, the 1918 and 1948 rebellions against the British are prominent. Thousands of people were killed, villages burnt and paddy fields destroyed, in order to instill fear in anyone who may rebel in future. The killing of monks

and destruction of Buddhist temples conveyed the message that to think of rebellion is downright silly and would be dealt with absolute ruthlessness.

Like in India, the British learned to rely on the Sri Lankan elite for the purposes of social control. The elite acted as informers about any form of protest against the British rule in the country and helped to crush any rebellion. Due to economic opportunities during this time, some families outside the traditional upper caste families also entered into the elite group through their acquired wealth. Once within, they also acquired caste-based social habits. In this way, although caste-based traditions were somewhat undermined during colonial times, they continued to remain a powerful force in controlling people's minds as well as behavior.

The British introduction of rule of law and a judicial system was restricted by imperatives of the colonial system. The supremacy of the law for instance, was in no way allowed to undermine colonial power or interests. The same principle applied to judicial independence. As a result, though professional classes grew during this time, receiving liberal education in schools locally and abroad, their liberalism was limited to matters which did not challenge the interest of the empire. Their caste of mind remained.

### **Post-colonial times**

With the achievement of independence the colonial imperative disappeared. The new elite coming to power however, had inherited the mindsets and attitudes of the past eras. When protests occurred after a few years of independence, Sri Lanka's ruling elite resorted to the same patterns of repression used in the past. The crushing of 1971's minor rebellion, the killing of over 10,000 persons, suppressing the second Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) uprising, perpetuating widespread torture, disappearances and mass graves, and the large-scale killings of the Tamil rebels from 1978 onwards, as well as ruthless killings by the rebels themselves; these are all forms of repression in the face of conflicts.

Spokespersons for various regimes in modern Sri Lanka have denied the existence of any form of repression. Rather, when meeting violence and conflict, whether in the south or the north, with more violence, government and security officers term this as acts of heroism and patriotism. Even among professionals and intellectuals, there has been considerable praise for this behavior.

### **The impact of caste on social development**

It is therefore clear that the historical practice of caste and all of its consequences has left a lasting impact on Sri Lanka. Recent nationalistic aspirations to return to pre-colonial times stem from these ingrained attitudes and rejection of reality. Some individuals from the Sinhala community believe a return to the past means a return to the Anuradapura period, forgetting the centuries of caste-based social organization that existed between the Anuradapura period and British colonization. In fact, this period of caste-based organization is seen by archaeologists and anthropologists as a clear rupture from the Anuradapura period, while historians view it as a period of decadence.

Such nationalistic aspirations also indicate the conflict between Sri Lanka's centuries-old mindset and the basic concepts of a modern legal system. The concept of equality for instance, still remains an imaginary concept for many Sri Lankans, despite rational acceptance of it through basic documents upon which the country's constitutional and legal framework is based.

While it is not possible for Sri Lanka to return to a caste-based mode of social organization--despite all the political rhetoric of nationalism--the rejection of social organization based on equality and meritocracy have created a vast vacuum within social consciousness. This vacuum perpetuates ordinary Sri Lankans' inability to form coherent views on issues of national and social importance. Some are

questioning whether being Sri Lankan involves the rejection of democracy as a western or Judeo-Christian concept. By implication, this would mean that a caste-based social order of inequality is a more acceptable national ideal than democracy. It would also mean that Sri Lanka is better governed by an authoritarian system than a legal system based on rule of law and democracy.

The concepts of equality and meritocracy imply that individuals have obligations towards others in their public and private lives, including accountability for one's conduct. The rules of public life based on the ideals of equality and meritocracy are completely different to the eternal rules on which the caste system is based. Instead of the restraint used within a rule of law system, the punishment within the caste system knew no bounds. According to principles of caste, those who decided upon and carried out the punishments—like in other areas of life—were not accountable to anyone. The upper caste could punish individuals at the bottom in any manner they chose. The punishments did not have to conform to strict limitations laid down by law or basic principles of equality. The reemergence of this tradition is starkly manifest in the type of punishments that have surfaced in Sri Lanka since 1971, both on the part of the state as well as its opponents, such as the JVP, various Tamil militant groups culminating in the LTTE, as well as other paramilitary groups that have proliferated in the past three and a half decades.

Within caste-based societies the notions of common good and common humanity are absent. In fact, there is no 'common' at all; everything is defined and understood in the context of each specific caste. The absence of the common good concept makes the idea of democracy alien to such a society. Similarly, to attribute any characteristics that humans might commonly share amongst each other is incompatible with the concept of caste, which is based on the understanding of different categories of human beings who are unsuited to common discourse. For the upper caste the people of the lower caste are not human at all. While the idea of common humanity celebrates differences among humans while underlining the common characteristics binding them together, what we find within the caste system is the concept of the insiders (those who belong to one caste) and the pariahs. The idea of the pariah is not the equivalent of an outsider; it is the equivalent of the unworthy outsider, an 'out-caste'. It is a term that denotes rejection of the most fundamental kind; all those of a different caste are excluded as unworthy of contact and of 'polluting' the insiders. When this idea is practiced over centuries, psychological habits are formed which resist latter day rationalizations about common humanity.

Related to the absence of common humanity is an absence of civic consciousness. In celebrating common humanity, where each person is a part of the other, civic consciousness links preservation of the self with preservation of the other. The recognition of self by the other is the obligation of each individual, forming the basis for civic consciousness. Both have basic boundaries not to be transgressed by either. The individual and the other are distinct but not separable concepts; rather, they are mutually dependent.

It is therefore no surprise that Brahminism—the conceptual framework on which the superior position of the Brahmin caste is based—rejects the idea of self (this is not to be equated with a rejection of selfishness, as posited by some; the question of selfishness does not arise at all within the context of Brahminism). Without a recognition of self and other, the behavior of one caste reaping all the advantages of society to the detriment of another caste is not considered wrong, nor a transgression.

It has become fashionable these days to claim that the western civilization is based on the idea of the individual, while the Indian civilization is based on the idea of the collective. Such a claim can be made only by those rejecting the link between Indian civilization and the caste system. The caste system is a complete rejection of the collective. Each caste exists as a fragment; a caste-based society, by its very definition and nature, is a fragmented and divided society. Any system that rejects the concepts of self and other, of common good and common humanity, cannot have any collective consciousness.

In the same way that the caste system rejects common good and humanity, it also rejects any notion of the 'public', whether it is public space or morality. Equality is essential to the idea of a public. In a society organized by caste, there can be gatherings of pariahs, but these do not constitute a gathering of the public. In such circumstances, events bringing people together do not have much meaning. Public space is the space—geographically and politically—for people to gather to express themselves or in solidarity with others. There is no need for a public space if the public itself is an alien concept. In the same way, Brahminism failed to create any kind of public morality as the different castes have nothing in common. How can pariahs be expected to have the same moral norms and standards as the insiders?

The only bond or solidarity one had was to one's caste. Belonging to the most privileged and powerful caste, Brahmins considered solidarity to members of their caste in sacred terms and everything was permissible for its defense. They owed no obligation of solidarity to those outside their caste. This absence of solidarity is one of the fundamental problems of a caste-based society. In fact, the deadening of the Indian mind commonly acknowledged to have taken place after the Gupta period (approximately 600-700 CE), can be attributed to this absence.

A key theological concept in sustaining the caste system is the Brahmin rejection of the 'real': everything in this world is illusory, what is important is spiritual liberation. If absolute power and exploitation of other castes are not in fact real or important, there is no room or need for discourse. Notions of equality, repression and suffering were not rooted in any reality according to Brahminism, they were mere illusions.

Without discussing the philosophical implications of this concept, it is clear that such a rejection of reality makes it possible to imagine certain historical periods as divine, while others are seen as of no importance at all. The result of all this is the incapacity to build connections between events and epochs. In other words, reality is denied.

In this way Sri Lanka has inherited a legacy of denial, denial of repression. This legacy is a product of three distinct periods: the end of the Anuradapura period when social organization was controlled on the basis of caste; the brutality of the colonial times; and the authoritarianism marking Sri Lanka since independence and self rule. All three periods saw the suppression of ordinary people as the way to maintain harmony in society. Harmony referred to the prevention of any challenges to the privileged elite. Anyone who disrupted the harmony—who dared to challenge the elite—were silly fools to be put in their place.

Liberal education has done little to alter such ingrained attitudes among the descendants of the privileged elite, who even today, largely retain the more powerful positions in Sri Lankan society. It is therefore not surprising for anyone pointing out repressive habits in Sri Lankan society to be considered silly. If the critic is Sri Lankan, his 'silliness' is counteracted with violence, explaining the routine aggression and intimidation directed at local journalists, political dissidents and human rights activists. If the critics are foreign, including groups such as Human Rights Watch or the IIGEP, they are dismissed as being silly and unaware of the actual situation.

Such a mindset is responsible for the lack of any substantial dialogue on any matter of importance within the country. What is the need for discussion when your opponent's views are clearly silly? Rather, he should be punished for insisting on such silliness. This mindset also has no room for remorse or regret. When there is nothing to regret, there is also no reason for investigation or prosecution. The denial of investigations into all the events since 1971 is therefore no matter for surprise. The practice of investigation can develop only when a society develops the acceptance that some kinds of actions are wrong and must be prevented. If all these acts--considered crimes elsewhere--are seen as good deeds of the security forces, then on what basis can they be blamed? It is silly to be worried about such behavior. If some foreign fools refer to them as violations and Sri Lanka may be blamed internationally for such acts,

then some way must be found to satisfy these fools. Hence you have all sorts of so called investigations and commissions set up to pander to the international community; they are nothing but a theatre of the absurd.

As long as a society cannot distinguish between what is serious and what is silly, no public ethics or morality can develop within that society. Without a moral and ethical foundation, no special condemnation is attached to murder, torture or any other violations. This is starkly manifest in the writings of Sri Lanka's government spokespersons, who regularly deny or snub allegations of human rights abuse. This mindset has gone a long way to make Sri Lanka a fragmented and divided society, with each community divided within itself, and set in conflict with other communities. Caste of mind remains the curse of the country.

### **Incapacity to change**

Only when there is a realization that something is wrong, and when habits and routines are collectively altered, can social consciousness change. In order for this to take place, habits of retrospection must exist within society, which include an acceptance of regret, repentance, mourning, dialogue and reconciliation. Such acceptance is the basis of tolerance. Through such a social framework, individuals are able to engage in meaningful interactions encompassing retrospection. If however, a particular form of social stratification has created habits and routines inherently opposed to acceptance and retrospection, individuals will be held back from such acts and emotions. The caste system for instance, allows no room for regret for any 'wrong' committed against those of a lower caste.

Under the caste system, there are no common wrongs of equal gravity; rights and wrongs are defined relatively. A rule of law system would see murder as a wrong of equal gravity irrespective of whether it is committed by a Brahmin or an untouchable. According to the principles of caste however, the killing of a Brahmin by a person of an inferior caste is considered an unforgiveable wrong, while a Brahmin killing an untouchable is not a wrong at all. As a result, wrongs are only committed by the lower castes, and any form of regret, repentance, mourning or dialogue cannot alleviate their responsibility; their wrongs—particularly against the upper castes—are deemed unforgiveable. Moreover, popular notions of reincarnation (to be distinguished from religious/theoretical concepts) hold that it is only through the long process of rebirth that such sins are erased. Meanwhile, those higher up the social ladder can do no wrong to those below them, and therefore should feel no regret at their suffering. In fact, any such regret or repentance would be seen as personal weakness, as well as a threat to their authority.

Under these circumstances, all social relationships are stiff and prone to violence. Flexible and creative interaction requires an acknowledgement of imperfections and a respect of both the self and the other. Centuries of habits and routines established through the practice of caste however, have created a mindset unable to adjust easily to creative interaction. Instead, a chain of retaliation and violence characterizes social relationships that have no room for regret, repentance or dialogue. For this reason, the influence of caste is important in understanding how violence has developed in south Asian societies. Not only do the upper caste elite believe in using violence and repression against the lower castes, but the lower castes are trapped by a psychological fear of rebellion against the upper caste.