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Recasting the Brahmin: Martin Wickramasinghe and the Epistemic Critique of Caste

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Abstract

The dominant public perception is that caste is a matter of minor and diminishing significance in Sri Lanka, especially for the Sinhalese, who form the island's ethnic majority. Although sociological and anthropological studies have pushed back against this perception, its pervasiveness and importance for modern Sinhala identity formation have resulted in questions of caste seldom being raised in the field of modern Sinhala literature. It is surprising, therefore, that the oeuvre of perhaps the most prolific Sinhala writer and public intellectual of the twentieth century, Martin Wickramasinghe, is checkered with references to caste; particularly, polemics against a "brahmin caste" that he claims is responsible for the maintenance of epistemic hierarchy in Sri Lanka and beyond. This essay distills Wickramasinghe's caste-text through two illustrative moments, the Buddha-biographical novel *Bava Taraṇaya* (1973) and the essay "Bamuṇukulaya Biṁda Væṭīma" (1956), suggesting that it advances a critique of epistemic stratification and the coloniality of knowledge *through* the idea of caste, while also contesting the givenness of caste as a category. Wickramasinghe's work is a productive starting point through which an archive of anti-caste thought situated in the Sinhala literary sphere yet addressed to a wider humanity might be imagined, since his caste-text illustrates how thinking about caste in and from Sri Lanka is of value not only for its inhabitants, but also for transnational forms of politics that use caste as a nodal point for the articulation of structural inequalities and injustices that are not vestiges of antiquity but features of colonial modernity.

Keywords

Sri Lanka, Sinhala Literature, Martin Wickramasinghe, Caste; Buddhism, Coloniality, Epistemology

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Introduction: Conditions and Possibilities

Questions of caste are seldom raised in the field of modern Sinhala literature. Provisionally assuming that there is sufficient reason to raise such questions, we might think of this silence as resulting from at least two interlinked epistemic conditions that delimit what is sensible and sayable within the field. The first is the unstated yet normative assumption that Sinhala literature is an ethnic—and, therefore, *particular*—expression of the Sinhalese people, who form Sri Lanka's ethnic majority. A couple of factors contribute to the continued reproduction of this condition. On the one hand, there is a historically entrenched and not easily overcome incongruity between *human* universality, which is the basis for theory and philosophy proper and the purview of Western man, and *anthropic* difference that cannot transcend non-Western ethno-racial peculiarity and specificity (Sakai, 2010). Anthropic difference often becomes the basis for the global legibility of non-European peripheral literatures. As a peripheral literature—even within South Asia—Sinhala literature is ethnically marked. Its universalistic impute has to contend with a host of apparently non-universalizable ethnic particularities. On the other hand, Sinhala literary expression is frequently forced into a "homolingual structure of address" (Sakai, 1997), that circumscribes it within a linguistically and culturally bound unitary community, often in complicity with the Sinhala-centric imaginary of the Sri Lankan nation. This furthers its insularity, inhibiting its cross-cultural and trans-regional comparability, and ultimately, its ability to address itself to the universal. To put it reductively, Sinhala literature becomes confined to a limited form of expression *from* the Sinhalese, *for* the Sinhalese, and in the last instance—even if in a roundabout way—*about* the Sinhalese. Following from this, it is often the case that the reader of Sinhala literature is either ethnically Sinhalese, thus falling within this presumed structure of address, or is a "specialist" who is after knowledge about the Sinhalese and Sri Lanka, in which case the structure of address is left undisrupted through the reader's façade of scholarly neutrality and objectivity.

The second condition that inhibits questions of caste is one that qualifies Sinhala society itself, predicating it with what, in the words of Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges (2009), might be called a "comparative castelessness." That is, there is a persistent popular notion that Sinhala society, which is imagined in ideality as a Buddhist cultural whole, is impacted far less by caste ideology and hierarchy than two privileged and somewhat necessarily posited points of comparison, Hindu India and Sri Lankan Tamil society, which act as foils against which the uniqueness and specificity of Sinhala identity are articulated. Caste is hereby rendered temporally and spatially external. Its presence is registered as a vestige that continues to haunt the quotidian lives of the contemporary Sinhalese, as something that can be disavowed and dismissed as anachronistic and incidental to modern sociality, and as an "Indian" or "Brahminical" influence that is *foreign* to Sinhalese cultural essence. Caste studies scholarship on Sri Lanka, coming mainly from disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, has contested these tropes by showing how caste continues to stratify persons in domains such as education, politics, economics, and marriage. However, owing

to the comparative norms and empiricist tendencies surrounding the deployment of caste as an analytic category, the academic literature too often repeats the diminished visibility and significance—or at least relative flexibility and porousness—of caste in Sri Lanka in comparison to India (Yalman, 1967, pp. 60-61; Stirrat, 1982, pp. 8-9; Silva, Sivapragasam & Thanges, 2009, p. 1).

In public culture and literature, however, an air of silence continues to envelope caste. It is curious then, that the body of work of perhaps the most prolific and influential Sinhala writer and public intellectual of the last century, Martin Wickramasinghe (1890-1976), is checkered with references to caste, including, most strikingly, polemics against a "brahmin caste" (*bamuṇu kulaya*) that he claims is responsible for the maintenance of rigid epistemic hierarchies both in Sri Lanka and beyond. Yet one looks through his writings in vain for familiar, disciplinary legible, Lanka-specific caste categories and names—for example, *govigama*, *karāva*, *durāva*, *salāgama*—that have been established and elaborated empirically, mainly through sociology, anthropology, and history. The dynamic caste-specific sub-text (hereafter, "caste-text") that runs through Wickramasinghe's oeuvre runs the risk of appearing shallow and "*artha*-less"—that is, devoid of meaning and value—from this largely empiricist academic vantage point. At best, his evocation of caste would appear metaphorical, and therefore, bereft of a positive yield that can result in "real" knowledge or actionable politics. My attempt in this essay is to signal ways in which Wickramasinghe's caste-text might be read not as metaphor but as epistemic critique. I argue that this caste-text offers a critique not only of caste hierarchy but also of the epistemic conditions that determine how caste is *given* as an object of study and category of analysis in relation to Sinhalese and broader Sri Lankan society. Wickramasinghe's caste-text warrants further study, for in addition to seeping into a multitude of other Wickramasinghean texts (such as the political economic, the historical, and the religious), it also dynamically evolves over six decades, across a plethora of genres and styles, ranging from novels and short stories to works of criticism and philosophy. For the purposes of this essay, I have chosen two illustrative moments: the Buddha-biographical novel *Bava Taraṇaya* (1973)[1] and a polemical essay titled "Bamuṇukulaya Biňda Væṭīma" (1956; "The Fall of the Brahmin Caste"), both from what might be thought of as Wickramasinghe's late period (roughly, 1956 to 1976). Characteristic of this late period is Wickramasinghe's turn towards a distinctly iconoclastic style of thought that neither represses nor shies away from ambiguity, fragmentariness, and skepticism: features conducive for epistemic critique and contestation.[2] In the following sections, I will first discuss *Bava Taraṇaya*,

[1]The phrase "*bava taraṇaya*" is not easily translatable into English. *Bava*, in the Buddhist philosophical context, might be thought of as the process of becoming, or, as a countable noun, a birth within the cycle of *saṃsāra*; a contingent and non-transcendent form of being. The novel, however, writes *bava* not as a religio-philosophical process, but as a socio-political and historical one. *Taraṇaya* can be translated as crossing or overcoming, so the book's title references the overcoming of *bava*, that is, the overcoming of socio-politically and historically determined being.

[2]The "late Wickramasinghe" can be distinguished from and contrasted with the "early Wickramasinghe," author of the famous *Gamperaḷiya* trilogy, which is primarily "realist" in style. Questions of aesthetic continuity and rupture in Wickramasinghe's oeuvre are beyond

earmarking a few illustrative episodes, in order to lay out Wickramasinghe's ideas on the sociality of caste in relation to his vision of history, repetition, and revolution, after which, I will turn briefly to "Bamuṇukulaya Biñda Væṭīma" to signal possibilities for a broader critique of caste—and the *concept* of caste—as it pertains to epistemic hierarchies at a global scale. In order to do Wickramasinghe's caste-text justice, it has been necessary to bracket or actively forget the sociological, anthropological, and historiographical discourse on caste in Sri Lanka, even as this very discourse surreptitiously re-enters and punctuates our reading.[3]

Why Wickramasinghe, though? Wickramasinghe's impact on the "Sinhalasphere" —that is, the sphere of Sinhala linguistic and cultural influence beyond the imagined community of "native" Sinhala speakers and the bounds of the nation is hard to overstate. Most if not all ideological formations in the Sinhalasphere of the second half of the twentieth century were influenced by his work, and divergent political positions sprung from seemingly contradictory strands—or conflicting readings—of his thought (Jayanetti, 1977, p. 31; Wijesiriwardena, 2021, p. 274). Though widely controversial during his lifetime—garnering accusations ranging from anti-nationalism, anti-Buddhism, and covert Christianity to charlatanry and perversion—Wickramasinghe was subsequently co-opted into the nation's narrative and canonized as "*heḷayē mahā gatkaru*," or "the great writer of the Hela (Sinhala) nation." A necessary condition for the maintenance of this nationally-congruent image is perhaps the proliferation of superficial, prejudiced, and ahistorical readings of his work. Complexity, ambiguity, and indeed, perversion, are often cast away and kept out of sight. In terms of national co-optation, the legacy of Wickramasinghe bears parallels to that of his saffronized Indian contemporary, B.R. Ambedkar, and it may be useful to think about the relationship between Wickramasinghe's work and Ambedkarite Dalit thought in the form of a missed encounter (see: Teltumbde, 2018, pp. 216-235). Some marginal references to this will be made in the following sections, although a sustained comparison is beyond the scope of this essay. In relation to questions of caste, however, Wickramasinghe's work is a productive starting point through which an archive of anti-caste thought situated in the Sinhalasphere yet addressed to the *human* might be imagined. His caste-text clearly illustrates why thinking about caste in and from Sri Lanka is of value not

the scope of this paper but have been addressed, in various ways, by previous scholarship (see: Suraweera, 1979; Dharmadasa, 1980; Tilakaratne, 2019).

[3]Here, I am partially influenced by Aniket Jaaware's (2019) operations of "deliberately forgetting" or "oublierring" the vast body of scholarly literature that writes caste into the paradigm of "Indian difference." By bracketing the sociological, anthropological, and historical discourse on caste in Sri Lanka, I am not signaling the need for an epistemic rupture that would reconceptualize caste as a category of analysis. My move, rather, is best thought of as a provisional and strategic one, which offers more interpretive freedom when dealing with Wickramasinghe's texts. If one has fewer preconceptions about what caste *denotes* in the Sri Lankan context, one is less likely to dismiss Wickramasinghe's ideas as having no empirical—and therefore, political—relevance. Such a move also helps us see beyond the "givenness" of caste, to appreciate how Wickramasinghe himself deploys the concept in order to think about structural inequality, oppression, and human liberation within and beyond Sri Lanka.

only for the island and its inhabitants, but also for transnational forms of politics that use caste as a nodal point for the articulation of structural inequalities and injustices that are not vestiges of antiquity but features of colonial modernity.

Locating the Buddha: *Bava Taraṇaya* and the Sinhala Writing of Caste

The culmination of decades of research and experiments in literary and philosophical style,[4] *Bava Taraṇaya* was an intervention in the field of knowledge known as Buddhism. Buddhism as an *ism*—that is, as a cohesive and ideal system of thought grounded in empirical and secular history, offering philosophical, literary, and political possibilities within modernity—was born of the complex (and unequal) epistemic encounter between orientalism, Indology, and philology on the one hand, and the collaborations, interventions, and reappropriations of Asian Buddhist monastics, scholars, and reformers on the other. The possibilities offered by Buddhism were not abstract, but depended on the concrete contexts—the demographics, forms of self-consciousness, and configurations of political power—of its highly varied geographic areas of operation. That Buddhists form a numerical majority in Sri Lanka is established as "fact" by the same scripts that write Sri Lanka as a nation; and during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when Buddhism was re-written and restructured as a modern system of thought, its relationship with the Ceylonese colonial state was dynamic, multifaceted, and complicated. On the one hand, it experienced generalized discrimination and epistemic devaluing, for it was not only a "non-Western" and thus implicitly "inferior" mode of knowledge, but also a vehicle through which colonial power and knowledge were contested and anticolonial sentiments publicly articulated. On the other hand, it also received forms of state patronage, especially under more liberal forms of colonial governmentality, as well as "positive" revaluations from Western reformists and scholars of religion (Blackburn, 2010; Sivasundaram, 2013). Given this ambivalent relationship to colonial governmentality and knowledge as well as the island's demographics, Buddhism in Sri Lanka could not have the same kind of oppositional and iconoclastic edge that it did in India, from where it had apparently "disappeared." For instance, the year 1956 saw Ambedkar's formal conversion to Buddhism, months before his death, marking a crucial moment in his rejection of caste-based Hindu sociality, and paving way for a mass of Dalit conversions into a new Buddhist "moral community" (Blackburn, 1993). However, in Ceylon, the same year marked the electoral victory of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and the implementation of

[4]In his preface to *Bava Taraṇaya*, Wickramasinghe writes that the novel was fashioned out of three volumes of notes, each of around 300 foolscap pages, on ancient India and Buddhism. Sections of *Bava Taraṇaya*, which feature dense philosophical debate, as well as several other texts on Buddhist philosophy written in 1960s, attest to the existence of such an archive. Being Wickramasinghe's last novel, written when he was eighty-three and three years before his death, the text is also somewhat "rough." Though not entirely unedited, Wickramasinghe's weakening eyesight did not allow him to significantly revise, revisit, and "clean" the text (Wickramasinghe, 1973, pp. 8-9).

the infamous "Sinhala Only" act, as well as a political turn towards Buddhism, to the detriment of the country's non-Sinhala and non-Buddhist minorities. It is problematic, therefore, to frame modern Buddhist literature and thought in the Sinhalasphere through ideal notions of Buddhism that associate it with an inherent and essential sense of egalitarianism, non-sectarianism, rationality, and progressivism.

Yet neither Buddhism nor Sinhala culture were monoliths complicit with the postcolonial state and mainstream Sinhala nationalism. The mid-twentieth-century nationalist anxiety over certain intellectual strands in Sinhala society—most notably, the so-called Peradeniya School,[5] that was accused of perverting the Sinhala youth and insulting Buddhism, and of which Wickramasinghe was deemed to be a member and abettor (House of Representatives, 1963, pp. 3449-3478; Kumara, 2013)—throws light on the proliferation and popular appeal of alternative readings of Sinhala culture and Buddhism that contested the official, state sponsored, and nationally mandated discourses. Within months of its publication, *Bava Taraṇaya* became a bestseller, resulting in a national-level controversy, with powerful Buddhist monks—most prominently, Yakkaduwe Pragnarama of the Vidyalankara Pirivena—as well as lay Buddhist leaders campaigning against the book, demanding its ban and the arrest of its author (Wijewardena, 2023). This strong and almost kneejerk reaction against the novel prompts us to situate it within an alternative and counter-nationalist discursive space when interpreting its caste-text; to not read the invocation of caste as a move to buttress Sri Lanka's national self-image, but rather, as a means of questioning and even shattering it. It is perhaps due to this shattering that critics like Yakkaduwe Pragnarama railed against the doctrine represented in the novel as being Hindu-leaning and Vedantist (Pragnarama, 1978, p. 30), although even a cursory reading of the novel would invalidate such a claim.

What the *Bava Taraṇaya* controversy fundamentally centered on was Wickramasinghe's alleged misrepresentation of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha. The novel portrayed the Buddha not only in a secular and mundane light, as a subject who continues to experience the thrust of human desire even after enlightenment, but also as a political and revolutionary figure, who openly revolts against the status quo. More implicitly, however, the unease surrounding the novel may have resulted from the sentiment that it was at least partially allegorical; that it was not simply about

[5]The "Peradeniya School" (*pērādeṇi gurukulaya*) was a name coined primarily by opponents of the modernist (and, in some instances, psychologistic) turn in Sinhala literature, in order to collectively identify the works (primarily novels, but also, at times, poetry and theatre) of, most prominently, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Siri Gunasinghe, Gunadasa Amarasekara, and, more controversially, Martin Wickramasinghe. Out of these four writers, the first three had formal ties to the University of Peradeniya, an institution viewed by the school's opponents as complicit in the maintenance of colonial regimes of knowledge and epistemic power even after Ceylon's formal independence in 1948. Although the four writers most commonly identified with the Peradeniya School quite clearly contested colonial norms of knowledge, sensibility, and moral action through their works, their affiliation with the university—coupled with their non-conformity to more mainstream strands of cultural nationalism—enabled detractors to see them as culturally inauthentic, perverse handmaidens of Western imperialism (see Tennakoon, 1958; Deshabandhu, 1961).

the Buddha, situated neatly within the sixth century B.C.E., but about contemporary Sinhala society. That such a sentiment would hold sway is unsurprising in light of the revolutionary politics of the Southern youth, who had, under the Marxist Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (J.V.P), launched their first unsuccessful armed revolt against the state in 1971. In as much as caste was a driving factor of the 1971 insurrection (Uyangoda, 2000, p. 17), it is also central to the social allegory that *Bava Taraṇaya* weaves. The novel starts with an intricate portrayal of the Sākkiya (Śākya) society in which Siduhat (Siddhārtha) grows up, detailing the education he receives under traditional and formal caste-bound tutelage. This education reflects the aristocratic and militaristic ideology of the "*kæt-kula*" (the kshatriya or warrior/princely caste). Subverting this education, however, Siduhat engages in more independent and dissident forms of learning, which expose him to the life-worlds and epistemologies of "lower" castes and classes, prompting him to eventually relinquish his own community and his prescribed social position and function. It is important to note that *Bava Taraṇaya* steers clear of presenting Siduhat as simply anti-Brahminical, for anti-Brahminism is already part of his caste inheritance. It is not inherently revolutionary, for it is a *given*. In fact, an alleged freedom from Brahminical tyranny—a claim Siduhat will gradually contest—serves as a condition for Sākkiya identity formation, and proof of the superiority of the Sākkiya republic's caste-free—but inevitably and naturally *classed*—social order. The Sākkiyan representation of their own social order along these lines is clearly articulated by Siduhat's half-brother, Nanda, who insists that, "what exists here is not caste division but class division" (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 66).[6]

Yet, when this social order is questioned, or its representation challenged, those around Siduhat resort to the invocation of caste-based norms, which are presented in the form of cultural mandates. Disarticulated from the public realm of politics, caste is rearticulated through culture, which results in its disavowal; that is, its simultaneous affirmation and denial. Culture enables caste to function and exert influence on society even while its signifiers are symbolically effaced. The novel shows, moreover, that what legitimizes and authorizes culture is a naturalized civilizational scheme. The Sākkiyans, as an urban people with claims to sovereign power, maintain that they are civilizationally "advanced," especially in opposition to the "uncivilized" and politically excluded Veddas (*væddō*), a name referring in general to any kind of forest-dwelling community, connoting savagery and primitivism, but denoting specifically, to the modern Sinhala reader, the so-called "tribal" communities of Sri Lanka. For the Sākkiyans, the transgression of civilizational norms is accompanied by an acute sense of shame, since it brings to the fore the usually submerged issue of caste. To be a Sākkiyan—even one who, by all odds, claims to be free of caste ideology—one must think, feel, and act according to prescribed, caste-bound scripts. For instance, in the hunting scene featured at the start of the novel, where Siduhat chastises his brother-in-law and adversary Dēvadatta for taking pleasure at the sight of his kill, Dēvadatta

[6]All translations from Sinhala are my own.

undermines Siduhat's judgment by shaming him for experiencing the "childish emotions" (*boḷaňda hæňgīm*) of "uneducated peasants" (*nūgat gæmiyan*). In turn, Siduhat deploys Sākkiyan civilizational rhetoric and caste supremacy, camouflaged by seemingly ethical and humanitarian ends, by asserting that his adversary is behaving like a Vedda (ibid., pp. 17-21). As the novel progresses and Siduhat embarks on the path to enlightenment, he would, of course, abandon this language. The "politically enlightened" Buddha does not articulate his vision of the liberated human over and against a sub-human, outcast, civilizational Other, but rather, *embodies* the human by disarticulating himself from the de-humanizing structures of caste.

The Sākkiyans' disavowal of caste and the functioning of a highly specific and distinctly *modern* civilizational scheme strongly suggest that *Bava Taraṇaya* was intended to work allegorically. After all, not only is the disavowal of caste a common *element* in Sinhala cultural discourse; it is also, as we have indicated above, an a priori *condition* for the consolidation of Sinhala as a modern ethno-national identity. Further indicative is the Sākkiyan princes' discourse on the Veddas and civilization, which hinges upon the distinction between "*sabhya*" (civilized or cultured) and "*asabhya*" (uncivilized, uncultured, or obscene). Interestingly, this very distinction was the subject of a prominent debate on obscenity, perversion, and the role of literature—the "*sabhya-asabhya-vādaya*"—that unfolded in the Sinhalasphere in the 1960s, drawing in a vast number of public intellectuals, Wickramasinghe included. The Sākkiyan princes' invocations of *sabhya-asabhya* distinctions most specifically echo Ananda Guruge's (1961) ideas during the debate, which maintained that *sabhya-asabhya-vādaya* was of central importance to Sinhala society well before the modern period due to the absence of Brahminical mandates against miscegenation, the caste-bound partitioning of cultural spheres, and the artificial inertness of the Sanskrit language, which was confined to a priestly/princely elite. In other words, for Guruge, cultural and civilizational norms *become* a matter of debate and theme of discourse for Sinhala society precisely because it lacks the rigid caste-based and linguistic partitions that Brahminical India maintains. *Sabhya-asabhya-vādaya* indexes for him Sinhala society's supposed openness to democratic change and flux.

Wickramasinghe's (1961) interventions in this debate covertly pushed back against Guruge's chronology to emphasize the modern, colonial basis of *sabhya-asabhya-vādaya*; and indeed, as we will further discuss in the following section, Wickramasinghe's conceptualization of caste also foregrounds the concept's colonial construction. Moreover, in his account, caste does not appear as a foil against which Sinhala society's core values can be written. Rather, it is re-written into colonial modern society, based not upon the traditional prestige of Sanskrit or a comparable "classical" language, but upon the social, political, and epistemic power of English. Indeed, among certain Sinhala speakers—especially among university students of the post-independence, pre-globalization generation—the English language was dubbed "*kaḍuva*" (the sword), for those who wielded it, those to whom it had been passed down as a familial inheritance, had access to colonially-derived social power, while those

who could not command it were cut off (Kandiah, 1984). In an essay published two years before *Bava Taraṇaya*, the same year that witnessed the first J.V.P. insurrection against the state, Wickramasinghe wrote:

> The social environment in the towns of Ceylon still remains a part of the legacy of colonial rule. Its linguistic class basis, a form of Westernised Brahminism, encourages even our angry young men to treat workers and peasants as the lowest classes. Far from trying to identify themselves with the latter, they aspire to imitate the middle and upper classes even in revolutionary attitudes… English colonial rule created an environment and atmosphere in Ceylon which easily converted the educated community into an elite of society who succumbed to the English language and to Western behaviour patterns. They discarded their own language, literature and culture, and persons of the urban lower middle-class and even some urbanized workers in towns began to imitate the elite. All these people formed a segregated minority community. Workers, peasants, the merchant class and even wealthy native capitalists, who did not adopt the English language and the behaviour patterns of the Westernised Sinhalese, have been and still are treated as a vulgar vernacular under class, lower even than the lowest rungs of the English-speaking under class, who imitate the Westernised elite in dress and behaviour patterns (1971/2006, p. 34).

The allegorical form enables *Bava Taraṇaya* to unpack the sociopolitical dynamics of this so-called "Westernized Brahminism" that Wickramasinghe diagnoses in Ceylonese society by retroactively mapping it onto the "original" Sanskritic context. If the English language—as *kaḍuva* or sword—signals the suturing of linguistic/epistemic power with political/societal power, *Bava Taraṇaya* shows how the brahmin and the kshatriya can be thought of as *functions*—functions pertaining to knowledge and power respectively—that work in conjunction. If in certain republics the brahmin caste legitimizes kshatriya power through religion and ritual in exchange for patronage and protection, even in anti-Brahminical polities like the Sākkiya republic, the kshatriyas are seen to mimic and replicate Brahminical worldviews and cultural practices. The novel also indicates how this system of knowledge and power is extended into the economic sphere by the wealthy mercantile castes, under whom the lower classes' labor is exploited and knowledge appropriated.

Siduhat is born into a republic where kshatriya power professes anti-Brahminism, yet where Brahminically derived forms of linguistic partitioning are deployed on a day-to-day basis. For instance, when the still naïve Siduhat visits a burial ground with his friend Kapila at the start of his dissident education, he talks about the subaltern castes that live off the burial grounds in Sanskrit so that only Kapila can understand him. The use of Sanskrit creates a partition between the studied object (the community that lives on the burial ground) and the studying subject (the two kshatriya princes). Those who are objectified and studied are barred from accessing knowledge about themselves, even as their speech and forms of self-representation are appropriated for

the production of such knowledge. However, this epistemic partitioning is contested by the grave-keeper, who understands what the two researcher-princes are saying, much to their surprise and embarrassment. The grave-keeper explains that his father was a brahmin and his mother a slave (*dāsa*); that he learnt Sanskrit and some aspects of the Vedas; and that, being an illicit product of miscegenation, he was banished from brahmin society during his childhood (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 32). The ideal authority of Sanskrit is challenged here through the *fact* of miscegenation, the fact against which the ideal of caste-purity is anxiously articulated.[7] The parallels between this scene and the Sri Lankan situation—that of "Westernized Brahminism" and English linguistic/epistemic superiority—are clear. If the Brahminic partitioning of linguistic and epistemic power in the novel is doomed to fail, so too does it in Sri Lankan society, where colonial modernity itself produces hybrid forms that contest the ideal partitions and hierarchies of colonial ideology (Bhabha, 1994). Indeed, without the functioning of hybridity and ambivalence, it is impossible to understand how individuals like Wickramasinghe, raised in rural society with little formal education, had access to colonial modern fields of knowledge, to the point of actively intervening in them and contesting their basis. It is this kind of complex social order—a system where repressive and rigid partitions and hierarchies co-exist with truant forms of mobility and access—that *Bava Taraṇaya* allegorizes; and it is against such a social order, and not a reified Brahminism, that the Buddha's intervention is articulated.

"What you seek is not a path of liberation (*vimukti*) but of revolution (*viplava*)," exclaims one of Siduhat's teachers, Uddaka, upon hearing his ideas for a psychosocially and politically liberated society (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 129). Uddaka's claim is justifiable, for Siduhat's quest in *Bava Taraṇaya* is explicitly political. Even its most "spiritual" elements are ultimately psychologized and subsumed within a broader political project that aims to transform humanity as such. *Bava Taraṇaya* pushes back against the dominant trope that Siddhartha relinquishes his princely life of pleasure out of a sense of "*kalakirīma*" (a feeling of dissatisfaction or disillusionment) and seeks a spiritual/ascetic path (*āryāṣṭāṅgamārga*) aimed at the cessation of desire and suffering (*dukkha*). Unlike the Siddhartha of canonical Buddhism, Wickramasinghe's revolutionary Siduhat feels not only dissatisfaction, but also rage (*kōpaya*); a politicized rage directed towards the brahmin-kshatriya confluence and mercantile complicity that partition knowledge and power such that human suffering becomes non-universalizable and incommensurable between castes (ibid., p. 53). A path that

[7]It is also important to note that *Bava Taraṇaya* stages a critique of Sanskritic-Vedic authority at the level of form and language. Wickramasinghe dismisses previous "classical" Buddha biographies on the grounds that they give way to the Brahminical/puranic mysticism and ornamentalism that the Buddha himself rejected. He also takes effort to expunge from the text Sanskritic words and letters—such as aspirated consonants (*mahāprāṇa*)—which he claims are "intellectualized signs constructed by brahmins and urban intellectuals to show that they are a separate race/clan with no relationship to common people" (Wickramasinghe, 1973, pp. 5-8). Even Sanskritic *tatsama* words that are commonly used in Sinhala are either rendered through *tadbhava* forms or heavily vernacularized; for example, "*kṣatriya*" appears in the novel as either "*kæt*" or "*kʾsattiriya*."

seeks liberation from suffering must, therefore, first seek the annihilation of the system that makes suffering itself a caste-bound and hierarchized condition. Human suffering can only become a cognizable object when humanity is equally granted to all, and not contingent on birth and lineage. Siduhat thus declares that "it is necessary to find a path to annihilate these divisions of caste (*kula*), race (*varga*), and family (*pavul*). I renounced domestic life not to liberate my soul" (ibid., p. 101). But why is renunciation necessary at all? As Siduhat's foster-mother Gōtamī argues, one liberates "the suffering masses not by running away from society," by renunciation, but instead, by initiating "social change." The novel provides a significant rebuttal to this through Yasōdarā, Siduhat's wife: *renunciation is not a form of escapism, but a form of divestment.* If Siduhat were to pursue social change without renunciation, his project would amount to a state-bound reformism, of whose results only the Sākkiyans could reap. If he were to depend purely on the resources given to him by his caste-bound education, he would only be able to propose a path for brahmins and kshatriyas. To address a common humanity, Siduhat must cast himself out of his familiar web of social relations, divest himself from brahmin-kshatriya forms of epistemic and political power, and refuse social recognition. Only through such a process can a radical humanism aimed at the annihilation of caste truly emerge (ibid., p. 108).

The standard account of Siddhartha's *saṃvega* (feelings of alienation and dismay coupled with a sense of spiritual urgency) upon seeing the "four sights"—an old man, a sick person, a corpse, and an ascetic—becomes vastly insufficient to account for the more revolutionary path taken by *Bava Taraṇaya*'s Siduhat. Indeed, in questioning the mystical and idealized accounts of the four sights as the basis for Siddhartha's spiritual disillusionment and eventual quest, Wickramasinghe's formulations closely resemble those of Ambedkar in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957/2011), although there is no known evidence that Wickramasinghe was directly influenced by Ambedkar's treatise. What informs Siduhat's choice of social divestment is not a naval-gazing which results in him realizing the futility of kshatriya erotic life in face of an abstract and metaphysical truth on impermanence and suffering, but rather, a long-drawn and dissident education that witnesses the suffering of common people (Wickramasinghe, 1973, p. 46). Importantly, Siduhat's sights appear doubled in the novel. On the one hand, he sees within his own historical context, producing concepts and names—*dāsa*, *sæḍol*, *gopalu*, etc.—that sound archaic to the us "modern" readers. On the other hand, he sees *for* us our own social fabric, transforming archaisms into signs of present-day destitution and historical injustice. In place of the classical four sights, then, Siduhat witnesses the extreme exploitation and dehumanization of slaves or indentured laborers in his father's agricultural lands—a system reminiscent of the plantation economy central to Sri Lanka's modern history—whom he hurriedly and somewhat impressionably sets free (ibid., pp. 24-26). Similarly, he is deeply struck by the destitution of the urban poor, whose extreme poverty appears to him as the ironic yet bitter price that must be paid for their recognition and incorporation within the social order legitimized by the brahmins, governed by the kshatriyas, and

economically driven by the merchants (*veḷeňdun*). Siduhat contrasts this poverty and recognition—this recognition-in-poverty—with the non-poverty and non-recognition of the Veddas. The Veddas, in other words, are not "poor" since their social being is embedded within a different and incommensurable system of values, an epistemic-aesthetic system deprivileged by the Brahminic, yet *external* to it and opaque. Rather than refusing to encounter the Veddas' ways of knowing, or refusing to touch their bodies, Siduhat enjoys close and prolonged communion with them, which leads him to realize the caste-bound nature of his education and cultural inheritance, which portrayed the Veddas as savage and uncivilized (ibid., p. 52). He thus overcomes his prior moralism—his "*sabhya-asabhya-vādaya*"—that attempted to ground ethical value in a teleological vision of civilizational progress. Indeed, it is through Vedda society that Siduhat first encounters the possibility of an "outside," the possibility of a new form of sociality divested from caste- and class-based forms of stratification and oppression.[8]

Most strikingly, however, it is not the sight of an ascetic that prompts Siduhat to relinquish domestic life and princely comforts, but the words of Vajirā, a concubine of Sudovun (Śuddhodana), Siduhat's father. Vajirā, comparing herself to a caged bird, complains that she is sick of her repetitive life, expressing a desire to free herself from socially-produced repetitiveness by becoming a wandering ascetic or a prostitute (ibid., p. 36). What lay the foundation for Siduhat's political path, therefore, is an exposure to the life-worlds, epistemologies, desires, and sufferings of underprivileged castes, slaves, concubines, and tribals: women and men for whom the unequal and unjust stratification and distribution of "being" bars access to universal, spiritual, and metaphysical truths about liberation. These are subjects for whom liberation is inseparable from revolution. Readers of the novel, who, as we mentioned above, are either ethnically Sinhalese or (more rarely) Sri Lanka "specialists," *know* through experience that this kind of liberation is far from being realized; and, indeed, the first wave of the novel's readers had just seen the state crush the revolutionary dissent of the 1970s. *Bava Taraṇaya*'s Buddha, in this dynamically evolving social fabric, is as much a figure of futurity as one of historicity: a figure that abides by a casteless and classless humanity to come; a figure somewhat indigestible for the mainstream Sinhala Buddhism patronized by the Sri Lankan state.

[8]Wickramasinghe's portrayal of how the Veddas provide Siduhat with the possibility of an outside (and of divestment), while simultaneously proving false the *kæt-kula*'s image of Veddas as uncivilized hunters, calls to mind Obeyesekere's (2022) recent writings on the Veddas. If the *kæt-kula*'s image of the uncivilized Vedda is a fabrication intended to buttress its own claims to caste superiority, Obeyesekere shows how the idea that the Veddas are an aboriginal, and even "indigenous" tribe of hunters beyond the pale of civilization is a colonial construct aimed at producing a primitive Other. His study goes on to reveal how the Veddas have not always been wholly "outside" Sinhala society, nor necessarily hunters, and how "outsiderness" itself is produced through complex and historically contingent forces. Indeed, although Wickramasinghe is neither situated within the same epistemic field or problem-space as Obeyesekere, nor particularly interested in giving voice to the historical Veddas of Lanka, his portrayal of Siduhat's intimacy with the Veddas offers interpretive possibilities that resonate with Obeyesekere's ideas.

The antinomies of the Buddha's path continue to unfold to this day within the Sinhalasphere. The spiritual and philosophical reading of the path, which is legitimized not only by state narratives but also by scholarship, cannot be easily reconciled with the political reading of the path, which, though inflected by complex historical differences, cuts across dissident movements across India and Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka's postwar political landscape, not only the so-called ethnonationalist rightwing, primarily represented by the Rajapakse clan, but also politicians with more "liberal" façades—such as Ranil Wickremesinghe, who rose to presidency through the power vacuum left by the ousted Gotabaya Rajapakse in 2022—resort to forms of discourse that center Buddhist authenticity and cultural essence. Indeed, even Ranil Wickremesinghe's 2024 election campaign paraded the slogan of a "Theravada trade economy" (Gunasena, 2024). In November 2022, Anura Kumara Dissanayake, then an opposition M.P. representing the J.V.P., remarked that despite President Wickremesinghe's constant invocations of Buddhism, he seems to have failed to acknowledge the Buddha's central message of equality (*samānātvatāva*) and social justice (*samāja sādhāranatva*). Wickremesinghe dismissively replied that what the Buddha preached was not equality, but the "four noble truths" centered on *dukkha* or suffering, and the *āryāṣṭāṅgamārga* as a spiritual path for overcoming it (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2022, pp. 1205-1206). In this brief parliamentary exchange, Wickremesinghe and Dissanayake articulate the antinomic readings of the Buddha's path. One sees, of course, in Dissanayake's remarks the specter of *Bava Taraṇaya*'s Siduhat, whose revolutionary path implies not only Buddhist reform, but an entire rethinking of Buddhism's relationship to the modern Sri Lankan state; a Buddhism that can be leveraged by *all* that experience inequality and injustice against the state that professes to "guard" it. It is significant for us, of course, that the primary category through which *Bava Taraṇaya* articulates such political possibilities is through caste; and yet caste is not simply an allegory for class, but a concept that opens up the possibility of addressing Buddhism, as a historical tradition of revolutionary thought, to the deep-seated sociopolitical inequalities reproduced within colonial and postcolonial modernity.

The Fall of the Brahmins: Questions on Caste and Knowledge

It is perhaps due to its allegorical dimension that *Bava Taraṇaya* appears as one of the most accessible points in Wickramasinghe's corpus through which a critical and conceptual discourse on caste from the Sinhalasphere can be inaugurated. The allegorical dimension, as we discussed above, allows for the complex present of caste to be narrated and unpacked through a more familiar historical narrative: one set in India, involving hierarchical social relations between legible caste groups that fall within the well-known if not overstated fourfold *varṇa* system. Wickramasinghe's caste-text, nonetheless, extends well beyond the domain of literature, and his writings on the brahmin caste are not simply allegorical or metaphorical, as we briefly saw in his references to the Westernized Brahminism that forms the linguistic class basis of urban Ceylon (1971/2006, p. 34). It is worth asking, however, if there is not a way of

historicizing and mobilizing Wickramasinghe's ideas of the brahmin caste (*bamuṇu kulaya*) without circling back to his fictional writings, such as the Buddha biography discussed above. In other words, beyond the allegorical text of *Bava Taraṇaya*, how might we interpret Wickramasinghe's claim that a brahmin caste asserts epistemic superiority and furthers the coloniality of knowledge, when, as per the dominant narrative, Sinhala society has been shaped by an allegedly anti-Brahminical religious and intellectual tradition—Buddhism—and has no identifiable brahmins?[9] In order to answer this question, it may be useful to defamiliarize the term "*bamuṇu kulaya*" itself; that is, to not treat it as something whose meaning we can easily gauge, but to appreciate its *strangeness*, especially in terms of its function within the historical and political field that Wickramasinghe is situated in.

Let us start with the second word in the term in question: *kulaya*. It is often said that a direct equivalent for the word "caste" cannot be found in South Asian languages. A key assumption here, of course, is that English or Portuguese, or even their so-called creolized forms are not truly South Asian, at least not in the way that Indo-Aryan and Dravidian languages are. The consensus among scholars is that the word caste, derived from the Portuguese *casta*, came to be used to systematically understand the *varṇa* categories (*brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya*, and *śūdra*, in hierarchical order) and the more complex and localized *jāti* configurations (comprising regionally-specific endogamous groups), that were perceived to be the basis for the political, economic, and cultural functioning of greater India. Given this linguistic gap, it has become standard practice for scholars to qualify their use of the term caste when studying communities that use different terms and concepts to describe their own lived experiences of social stratification, hierarchy, and endogamy. Despite acknowledging linguistic gaps and the impossibility of direct translation, endonyms such as *jāti*, *vaṁsa*, *kula*, *variga*, and *minissu* used in Sri Lanka are frequently subsumed into the signifier "caste." This signifier, in turn, defines and delimits the significatory field within which the vernacular terms are indexed. We might recall here, the scene of linguistic and epistemic partitioning involving the Sākkiyan researcher-princes and the gravekeeper in *Bava Taraṇaya*. We are accustomed to thinking about how local terms and knowledges are extracted and appropriated within standardized conceptual categories that bear the mark of theoreticality, abstractness, and academic legitimacy. That is, the flow of knowledge is often thought through the one-way passage from Prakrit to Sanskrit; from non-European vernaculars to metropolitan, colonial European languages; from ethnic particularity to human universality. The *Bava Taraṇaya* episode, however, points towards the *failure* of this one-way process, by showing how subjects who are officially barred from the latter, epistemically privileged signifiers,

[9]Obeyesekere (2015) has contested this assumption by writing about the movement of brahmins into Sri Lanka and their assimilation into Sinhala society, where they were demoted in terms of the varna system yet promoted through Lankan values. Wickramasinghe's assertion on the existence of brahmins, of course, operates entirely differently to Obeyesekere's more historicist account, for it takes the form of an intervention in the *concept* of the brahmin, in light of the widespread idea of their non-existence in Sri Lanka.

cognize and retranslate them, ensnaring and subverting them within the sphere of vernacularity. Being "low caste" in the eyes of brahmins—whether "Sanskritic" or "Westernized"—does not imply ignorance or the lack of knowledge, but rather, a state of disenfranchisement within the field of knowledge, in which the brahmin is structurally privileged.

A similar process might be imagined with the word caste. In Sinhala, although *kulaya* is certainly a word whose use predates colonial rule, it has come to subsume and contain the term caste as well the genealogies of colonial encounter and epistemic exchange that are appended to it.[10] In other words, *kulaya* is not simply a native word for caste. It is also one that cognizes and indexes the colonial construction of caste. It is this term specifically, and never quite the others, that Wickramasinghe deploys. Wickramasinghe's views on colonial construction are complex. On the one hand, he notes that the idea that local concepts and ways of being must be independent, sovereign, and traditionally "Eastern" is a result ("*phala*") of the waning of colonial empire and the power of the white man ("*sudu minisun*") (1969/2006, p. 74). On the other hand, colonial construction is by no means for him the genesis of all things sensible, for a major part of his intellectual labor is devoted to understanding the unconscious yet irrepressible historical transmissions that shape popular culture and quotidian life across the historical ruptures ensuing from colonialism. Wickramasinghe's usage of *kulaya*, therefore, might be thought of as straddling these two somewhat disparate positions: a straddling constitutive of the postcolonial condition.

The colonial construction of caste in Sri Lanka is a complicated affair, no less than because caste was one of the key terrains upon which Ceylonese difference was articulated with respect to the Indian mainland. In the early nineteenth century, when caste was becoming a well-defined category central to colonial governance in India, it was gradually losing legitimacy with the colonial state in Ceylon (Rogers, 2004). If one were to construct a colonial genealogy of caste on the island,[11] it is possible to see how caste goes from being a relatively general, geographically and racially hazy idea during the Portuguese period, to a more racially loaded yet conceptually vague category during the Dutch and even early British periods, and finally, to the most recent systematic and "disciplinary" concept that marks Indian difference; or, given the long-drawn process of partitioning and differentiation of the island of Ceylon from the Indian mainland,[12] *a different kind of Indian difference*. India is doubly implicated

[10]That "*kulaya*" is the closest approximation of the Portuguese-derived English term "caste" is also noted in recent anthropological studies (Douglas, 2017, p. 11).

[11]The quick and barebones genealogy I am working with is based on a reading of Queyroz's *Conquista* (1992, pp. 19-22) and Knox's account of the interior of Ceylon (1911, pp. 105-107), both from the seventeenth century, Valentijn's description (1978, pp. 161, 190-191) from the eighteenth century, and a several nineteenth-century British accounts, foremost among which is Cordiner's (1807, pp. 90-95).

[12]I am influenced here by Sujit Sivasundaram's (2013) discussion of Ceylon's *islanding* in the context of the British Empire in South Asia. A longer and, perhaps, conceptually different kind of islanding might be imagined if one were to consider the Portuguese and Dutch periods of colonial rule, as well as precolonial understandings of space through land, sea, and sky.

in the idea of "caste in Ceylon / Sri Lanka": first, India becomes the privileged site for the description of caste as an abstract and potentially universal system. That is, even the broadest, emptiest, and most universalistic invocations of caste as a category frequently use the case of India to empirically furnish the category's bare form; and thus, the use of the category for Sri Lanka somewhat inevitably casts the shadow of India upon the island. Second, if one were to take caste as an anthropological and historical "given" pertaining to the *real* of Indian society, then it seems reasonable to assume that it must be a significant—even if secret—factor in the story of Sri Lanka's population and ethnic formation, especially since most communities on the island trace their ancestry and some of their cultural traditions back to various parts—and *times*—of India. This complex relationship to India as well as to the "world"—the world proper to the signifier caste—undergirds *kulaya* as Wickramasinghe uses it, especially when directed towards epistemic critique and a decolonial politics of knowledge.

That *kulaya*/caste appears as a departicularized term that cannot be circumscribed within the Sri Lankan nation or Sinhala ethnic identity does not diminish the term's heuristic value. Indeed, the term's ambiguity and porousness have been mobilized by anti-caste politics globally. One thinks here of the Dalit Panthers' attempts at transcending the narrow framework of caste and religion in India through solidarity with "Dalits of the world," people suffering under the "hideous plot of American imperialism," "the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion" (*Dalit Panther Manifesto*, 1973, pp. viii-ix). One also may call to mind invocations of caste beyond South Asia; for instance, Isabel Wilkerson's (2020) recent efforts to think about racial hierarchy in the United States through the prism of caste. The colonial ambivalence of caste is transformed into a discursive advantage in the political field. If caste points towards something archaic and unassimilable within ideally conceived modernity, this archaism itself is mobilized for the revelation of modernity's "dark" underbelly, which is coloniality (Mignolo, 2011).

If *kulaya* functions as a term that reveals caste's colonial construction as well as political potentiality, then *bamuṇu kulaya* signals an attempt at thinking about a departicularized, de-Indianized Brahminism that operates within the colonial modern economy of knowledge. Wickramasinghe's best-known criticism of this *bamuṇu kulaya* appeared in a polemical essay "Bamuṇukulaya Biñda Væṭīma" ("The Fall of the Brahmin Caste") published in the wake of S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike's 1956 electoral victory over the United National Party, which was briefly mentioned above. Although 1956 paved way for the Sinhalization and Buddhistization of the state, it also bore witness to more "anticolonial" forms of expression, especially in the cultural sphere, that were relatively independent of nationalist and ethno-chauvinistic elements. Wickramasinghe's intervention is best located within this anticolonial space, for he is concerned neither about party politics nor about ethnic hegemony, but about the transformations in the post-colony's cultural and epistemic landscape. That is, amid the nationalist clamor, Wickramasinghe chooses to focus on how the cultural

consciousness of the people has come to challenge the epistemic authority of the colonial university, announcing the imminent fall of the brahmin caste.

Wickramasinghe asserts that since Ceylon's independence from the British in 1948—an independence won not through bloodshed but through peaceful piety—the country has been ruled by a Sinhala brahmin caste, a Westernized elite who exercise epistemic supremacy over the masses and maintain colonial relations in the absence of white rulers. As the counsellor (*purōhitayā*) of this caste, he names none other than Sir Ivor Jennings (1958/2016, pp. 84-86), an Englishman and Cambridge-educated scholar of constitutional law, who became the first Vice-Chancellor of the University of Ceylon in 1942. A liberal proponent of the colonial civilizational and educational mission, Jennings insisted on Ceylon's cultural and civilizational lack, highlighting the need for the colonial university to operate beyond its usual limits, subsuming broader cultural and civic functions: "The colonial university is not merely a university," he wrote. "[I]t is also National Gallery, British Museum, Burlington House, Bloomsbury, Chelsea, Royal Society, London Library, Chatham House, Drury Lane, and much more besides" (1946, p. 231). The history of education in Ceylon is filled with examples of how colonialism not only reinforced caste but actively produced it. The colonial state's first formal higher educational initiatives in the nineteenth century were directed at the sons of Mudliyars, an elite caste formed not through "traditional" links to pre-colonial Lankan kingdoms, but through loyal service to the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial powers (Jayawardena, 2000). Ceylon's first university was established only in 1942—nearly a century after its neighboring India—as a result of native advocacy, particularly from bodies like the Ceylon University Association and the Jaffna Association, which represented the island's emerging bourgeoisie (Warnapala, 2011; Alwis, 2013). While a relatively decolonial model—at least in a limited sense—could have been envisioned through this native advocacy (Schubert, 2020), the University of Ceylon was ultimately realized as a Jenningsian colonial university and an instrument of Western epistemic power.[13] Up until the 1970s, a decade that opened with youth insurgency, the university privileged not only the upper and upper-middle classes, but also something that might be thought of as a Westernized brahmin caste. That is, a conservative and regressive force that could rightly be called *caste* maintained—mainly through cultural hegemony—the linguistic and epistemic superiority of the English language and Western knowledge, despite the dynamic class mobilities that

[13]Prior to the founding of the University of Ceylon under the Jenningsian model, other kinds of colonially-delimited forms of higher education were operative in Ceylon. The immediate predecessor of the University of Ceylon, the University College, which was established in 1921, for example, functioned as an affiliated institute tied to the University of London, administered, however, in the form of a Government Department (Warnapala, 2011). If the Jenningsian university adapted the rhetoric of liberal humanism, the ideology that drove the University College was more explicitly utilitarian. The colonial authorities in Ceylon seem to have been cautious, furthermore, to regulate affiliation in such a way that directly benefited the governance of the island as a crown colony. Thus, for instance, affiliations with the University of Calcutta which had been formed by the Colombo Academy in 1859, were later severed, particularly in light of the burgeoning anticolonial movement in India.

had been enabled through the introduction of Free Education and the Swabhasha scheme, whereby students could receive education free of charge and through the local languages, Sinhala and Tamil. Caste/*kulaya* in the Wickramasinghean sense, therefore, is an intrinsic limit within modernity and its ideal aspirations of class mobility; a limit that demands the addressing of the colonial structures that undergird modernity.

The brahmin caste, says Wickramasinghe, mystifies the field of knowledge in order to assert epistemic superiority and exclusivity: academic language often terrorizes students, confounding their minds, and crushing their spirits. The effects are doubled when academia delegitimizes students' "mother-tongues" and operates in an esoteric register of another language which itself is experienced as a colonial imposition. The Indic parallel to this, which is used allegorically in *Bava Taraṇaya* and also featured in Wickramasinghe's writings on the history of Sinhala literature, is the ornamentalism, conservatism, and enforced stylistic and syntactic complexity of Sanskrit, the "original" language of the brahmins (see: Wickramasinghe, 1963). Despite the absence of brahmins in Sri Lanka—in the sense of a traditionally maintained social and political elite—the colonial university and its architect, Sir Jennings, ensure that Brahminical forms of epistemic mystification continue to operate. The discipline of anthropology at the University of Ceylon, Wickramasinghe notes, purposefully excludes the study of "comparative anthropology," thus barring the possibility of an anthropology of the West, a provincialization of universalized colonial culture, and even the demystification of academic language. Such a mode of study, writes Wickramasinghe, would "peel away the rotting skin of the filaria-ridden foot (*baravā kakula*) known as Western culture." The filaria-ridden foot, he continues, given its swollen and formidable appearance, is what the university's archons—the Western brahmins—use to intimidate the rulers of the country, raising epistemic power to the plane of political power (1958/2016, p. 89). Nonetheless, the filaria-ridden foot might be imagined as numb, lacking in sensation, and slow: as inhibiting movement. Thus, while a range of sociopolitical and cultural dynamics were transforming the sphere of knowledge-production in the country post-independence, resulting in truant forms of epistemic access and mobility, the dull and conservative university-apparatus fails to cognize these. It simply cannot keep up. This, for Wickramasinghe, is the historic fall of the brahmin caste, a rupture signaling the possibility of a more ethical and decolonized epistemic field.

The Wickramasinghean brahmin caste, nonetheless, did not completely fall in the 1950s. Perhaps, what the 50s witnessed was a historical *hope* of its eventual dissolution. Indeed, if we were to abide by our own departicularization and politicization of *kulaya*/caste, such a process cannot be imagined within the confines of a single ethnic community or nation. Reading Wickramasinghe's caste-text today, within our current historical conjuncture where Brahminism and the coloniality of knowledge have been reproduced within the corporate university at a global scale, is refreshing and even helpful. The epistemic forces he narrativizes—whether regressive or progressive, colonial or anticolonial, caste-bound or radically human—are very much alive today, signaling both the constraints and possibilities for knowledge in an era where questions

of colonial oppression and dehumanization have returned in full force. It is in light of these present-day problems that I have attempted a reading of Wickramasinghe's caste-text above, especially in a way that breaks the ethnically bound structure of address to which Sinhala literary and intellectual expression is confined. The lessons Wickramasinghe's text teaches us about caste (or *through* caste) are not addressed to the Sinhalese despite being written in Sinhala, but addressed to the *human*: a life-form that can only emerge through a global political process of decolonization and the annihilation of caste, for which no blueprint or script exists.

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