

## A Symposium on Caste in Sri Lanka and the Sri Lankan Diaspora: An Introductory Note

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In comparison to the expanding body of literature on caste in the Indian subcontinent, caste in and connected to Sri Lanka has received relatively little attention in contemporary academic research, policy debates and social development interventions. This is perhaps the result of a widely held view on the island that even though caste was important in the past, it no longer exists as a vital social institution. Though there may be an element of truth in this observation, we feel that the actual reality is far more complex. Caste may seem to be dormant in day-to-day public life, but one need only consider its role in the selection of marriage partners or the operation of both national and local electoral processes to see that caste remains a ubiquitous factor of life on the island.

While open discussion about caste is almost completely absent in contemporary Sri Lanka (Uyangoda, 2000; Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges, 2009), this cannot be interpreted to mean that caste is dead or dying in Sri Lankan society. On the contrary, there are many caste-instigated frictions in various communities across the island. For instance, reports from the north indicate a certain resurgence of caste practices in former war-affected areas following the end of war and the cessation of the strict censorship of caste imposed by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) (e.g., Kuganathan, 2022). There is also evidence that suggests that caste continues to play a role in social, economic and political dynamics affecting access to limited resources such as land, drinking water, employment and political power (Lall, 2015). Difficulties encountered by internally displaced people from disadvantaged caste backgrounds to secure their original land or move to alternative sites include a combination of caste discrimination in the land market, a lack of resources, the inability to influence state policies (Thanges, 2015; Silva, 2020) as well as the denial of access to cemeteries (Wickramasinghe, 2023).

Caste may also seem to be dormant in central and southern regions in Sri Lanka. However, caste continues to play a role in marriage partner selection, land

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tenure, temple rituals, politics, economic relations and the performing arts (Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges, 2009; Reed, 2010; Simpson and de Silva, current issue). Despite these facts, caste information is not collected in the state's population census or in any other official social surveys in Sri Lanka, including in official assessments of poverty. This makes it difficult to pinpoint the role of caste as a facet of social and economic discrimination, such as in land ownership, unemployment, migration patterns and access to social services. In the meantime, there has been considerable interest in caste in Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil and Malaiyaha (Up-Country) Tamil communities in Sri Lanka, and in dissertation research particularly based in overseas universities (e.g., Räsänen, 2015; Douglas, 2017; Thanges, 2018; Esler, 2019; Balmforth, 2020; Kuganathan, 2021). Against this background and spread out over the coming issues of *CASTE: A Global Journal of Social Exclusion*, this symposium will provide a forum for scholars and social activists to initiate an open discussion about caste in Sri Lanka.

## **JVP, LTTE and the Articulation of Social Unrest in Sri Lanka**

Studies indicate that underneath the apparent disappearance of caste from public life, the resentments of disadvantaged or oppressed caste groups may have played an important role in activist and social unrest movements of the twentieth century, including the JVP uprisings against the state in southern Sri Lanka in 1971 and 1987-1989 as well as in the Tamil insurgency against the state from 1983 to 2009. This is not to say that these movements were exclusively caste-based. The JVP uprising was driven by a mix of ethnonationalist, class and caste grievances to establish a mass political movement against the status quo. The caste rumblings within the JVP were reflected in the non-Goyigama leadership of the movement. The founding leader, Rohana Wijeweera, and many of the national level leaders came from Sinhala coastal castes, with Karawas overrepresented among them. Some of the rank and file in particular localities also came from so-called depressed caste groups such as the Bathgama and Wahumpura, who were excluded by dominant castes from access to land and government employment (Obeyesekere, 1974; Jiggins, 1979; Gunaratne, 2008). The JVP clearly deployed caste while recruiting its cadres at the village level (Jiggins, 1979; Chandraprema, 1991; Ivan, 1993). However, caste was not featured at all in its political campaign and the program of social reform as a political party once it entered the democratic process even after it became the ruling party in the country in 2024. This suggests that despite their egalitarian ethos, caste was instrumentalized rather than genuinely and openly critiqued as an instrument of social injustice and discrimination even among the so-called political left.

Comparisons could be drawn between the way the LTTE and the JVP negotiated caste. As was the case with the JVP, the LTTE mobilized a mix of ethnonationalist, class and caste grievances in launching their struggle against what they perceived to be a Sinhala state. The ethnonationalist agenda was clearly more significant in the LTTE, presenting itself as a national liberation struggle seeking to establish a Tamil homeland and an independent state in northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The leadership of the

LTTE also came from outside the dominant Vellalar caste who controlled established electoral politics in the predominantly Tamil regions of northern and eastern Sri Lanka. The charismatic LTTE leader, V. Prabhakaran, came from the Karaiyar caste, the structural equivalent of the Karawa of southern Sri Lanka. We do not have accurate information on the overall composition of the membership of the LTTE, though evidence suggests that a disproportionate number of Tiger cadre were from oppressed caste groups (Räsänen, 2015). This is also confirmed by information on internally displaced people, who remained in camps many years after the end of war (Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges, 2009; Silva, 2020). Like the JVP, the LTTE did not center the critique of caste in its political campaigns or internal organization of the movement. However, open discussion about caste was banned in order to deliberately prevent caste from becoming a divisive force within the Tamil nationalist struggle (Räsänen, 2015; Silva, 2020). There were also efforts to promote equality through measures such as recognizing all fallen LTTE cadres, regardless of caste, as war heroes in the cemeteries established by the LTTE (Wickramasinghe, 2023). Like the JVP, the LTTE did not seek to comprehensively deal with caste-based discrimination, for instance in matters such as access to land, services and public sector employment. The LTTE efforts to silence caste talk may have worked during the war when the LTTE was effectively running areas under their control, but caste discrimination was restored in numerous areas once the LTTE was overpowered by the state in 2009. Conflict over access to cemeteries is just one example of the resurgence of caste in the post-war era.

The social unrest articulated by the JVP and LTTE obviously reflects the diverse forms of inequality in the form of caste, class, gender and ethnicity and they cannot be reduced to one dominant form of inequality that overdetermines politics in Sri Lanka. Caste may be hidden or silenced by dominant forces in society but it also triggers social unrest and violent struggles against the status quo. Victor Ivan, who was a key player in the JVP uprising in 1971, once explained that “These uprisings are not purely caste or class struggles. It is more meaningful to analyze them as a curious mixture of both caste and class. I do, however, think that those who joined the movement because they were subjected to caste oppression were the most agitated group in the movement. They were not the leaders or the forerunners of the movement, but a key group of fully committed fighters who suffered heavily as the counter insurgency operations targeted such communities” (1993, p. 120). Both the JVP and the LTTE mobilized widespread resentment in these communities that held local gate keepers from privileged backgrounds responsible for the closure of pathways to upward social mobility such as education and white-collar employment.

## The Origins of this Collection

This symposium had its start in long-term conversations between the editorial team at *J-CASTE* and Kalinga Tudor Silva about finding creative ways to expand the journal’s collection of Sri Lanka-based research, while at the same time building awareness on the island of the journal and its publishing priorities. Following the Sixth Annual

Conference on the Unfinished Legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar held at Brandeis University in October 2023 and hosted by the *J-CASTE* team, Mark Balmforth was solicited to collaborate with Silva to put together a collection of essays on caste in Sri Lanka. This led to a call for papers released in May 2024 that received more than thirty-five submissions, far more than we could ever reasonably include in the collection. Over the next several issues of *J-CASTE*, we will be releasing a select number of these papers.

## Caste in Southern Sri Lanka

Three of the papers published in this symposium deal with caste in Sinhala society in southern Sri Lanka. The first, by Kalinga Tudor Silva, argues for a multispecies approach to caste in Sinhala society. According to his view, the specificity of and challenges for caste must be understood not only in terms of challenges from the angle of social justice and human rights but also in terms of environmental justice and sustainability of caste occupations in the context of limited natural resources. Interspecies dynamics between the endemic cinnamon plant in southwestern Sri Lanka and the Salagamas have developed in response to the demand for Sri Lankan cinnamon from local and colonial rulers from the precolonial era onwards. The demand for cinnamon was high throughout the colonial era and the shift from foraging of wild cinnamon to the domestication of cinnamon stabilized the role and position of the Salagama in Sinhala society despite their ostensibly “foreign” roots in Kerala.

As for the mutually supportive interspecies dynamics, the endemic cinnamon plant enabled the “outsider” Salagama to become an indispensable unit of the Sinhala caste system and facilitated a section of the caste to achieve phenomenal social mobility during the nineteenth century. The cinnamon plant itself survived endangerment caused by indiscriminate foraging following its adoption in smallholder agriculture in southwestern Sri Lanka under the stewardship of the Salagamas. A number of recent developments have however posed new challenges for the mutual coexistence between the plant and the caste. They include challenges for Sri Lankan cinnamon in the global market due to a lack of branding, an absence of quality control and challenges to smallholder agriculture from changes in land use practices caused by urbanization, fragmentation of landholdings and class polarization resulting in the formation of a subaltern group of paid cinnamon workers. Caste and the social history of this industry are completely ignored in the ongoing public and private sector efforts to address these issues through technological and market interventions. How this will play out in social and economic terms is unclear.

The second paper in the symposium is by Bob Simpson and Premakumara de Silva and it explores three types of cultural ambivalence towards and among the drummer caste in southwestern Sri Lanka, drawing on long-term ethnographic study at sites in the Benthara valley in the Western Province and the Nilwala valley in the Southern Province. One type of cultural ambivalence is the attitude towards the caste by society at large. Next, they consider ambivalence towards the drummer caste by the

state, and finally, mixed attitudes towards drumming within the caste itself. Building on prior research by Reed (2010), Simpson and de Silva find that while the Beravas became perceived bearers of cultural legacy epitomizing Sinhala Buddhist heritage, they have a more ambiguous position within the neoliberal framework that came to prominence from 1977. The paper highlights how the drummer caste reacted against resulting ambivalences in the context of radical politics by organizations such as the JVP. Some gave up drumming and dancing altogether, while others took advantage of new opportunities opened up by the tourist economy.

The third essay in the symposium, titled “Recasting the Brahmin,” is by Praveen Tilakaratne. The essay illustrates how caste has been hidden in plain sight within Sinhala literature by examining two writings of the doyen Martin Wickramasinghe who hailed from Koggala near Galle town. This essay emphasizes that Sinhala literature privileges ethnicity over caste in the selection of themes, reflecting the broad public silence surrounding caste noted earlier. Tilakaratne states that, “in public culture and literature, however, an air of silence continues to envelope caste. Curious it is, 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”. The two selected works of Wickramasinghe, *Bava Tharanaya* (Crossing the Cycle of Existence) and *Bamunu Kulaye Bindavatima* (Fall of the Brahmin Caste) provide both an epistemic critique and an allegorical narrative of caste. In the view of Tilakaratne, however, this is a useful literary device to sensitize the Sinhala reading public about caste at a time when caste became politically salient in southern Sri Lanka due to the JVP uprising and open discussion about caste using caste names and lived experience was considered inappropriate.

## Caste in the Sri Lankan Tamil Diaspora

An important facet of the continuing vitality of caste in Sri Lankan society is its deployment among members of the Sri Lankan diaspora overseas. This includes the Tamil and Sinhala diasporas in Canada, the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and various countries across Europe. There again, caste has come into play in partner selection, and in diasporic involvement in community activities such as temple construction and social development. In marital partner selection, matrimonial web sites have been established, mechanisms have been developed to secure visas for marriage partners from Sri Lanka and customary arrangements such as marriage ceremonies have been established following appropriate caste practices as revealed in some recent studies (e.g., Maunaguru, 2019). Where caste endogamy is violated, honor killings have been reported, for instance in a well-known 2007 case in the Greater Toronto Area.

Mark P. Whitaker’s “Caste, Space, and Retail Religiosity in Tamil Toronto” presents two seemingly contradictory views about caste in Toronto’s Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora, based on a generation gap. Whitaker finds that members of the generation who emigrated to Canada tend to treat caste as part of an important cultural heritage

that must be preserved in order to sustain Tamil culture in a foreign land. The first generation to be born and raised in Canada, in comparison, is reticent about caste and sees it as an inappropriate transplant that makes it more difficult for Tamils to assimilate within Canadian society. Reflective of the older generation's perspectives, Tamil Hindu temples in Toronto that serve as community cultural centers also deploy caste as part of a cultural heritage that includes Tamil language, culture, and music, and believe it must be preserved in order for this heritage to survive in a foreign environment. While there is an emerging anti-caste opinion in the new generation, open discussion about caste remains limited to burgeoning activist circles. How these apparent contradictions will be resolved may determine the future of caste in the Sri Lankan Tamil diaspora.

In summary, these papers highlight that caste remains an important social issue in Sri Lanka as well as in the Sri Lankan diaspora. The prevalent view that caste will naturally disappear over time due to the impact of modernization, globalization and non-recognition of caste by the state is challenged by the evidence presented here. This symposium is a wakeup call to researchers, activists and policy makers to recognize that caste is among us and that we should not be deceived by the prevailing silence about and denial of caste in Sri Lanka and among Sri Lankans overseas.

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