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Towards a Multispecies Approach to Caste in Sinhala Society: Interspecies Dynamics between Cinnamon and the Salagama People

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Abstract

This article deploys a multispecies perspective to understand the role of human and non-human actors shaping the Sinhala caste system in Sri Lanka. Apart from human interlocutors, certain animal species (e.g. elephants, cattle and fish) and certain plant species (e.g. cinnamon, coconut and a local palm tree called kitul) are implicated in the natural resource base aligned with the Sinhala caste system. These animal and plant species are part of the natural resource base exploited to produce goods and services for the benefit of each other and some overlords inside or outside the system. The caste system is understood here as a human-made extractive mechanism where humans and other species aligned with them are subjected to hereditary extractions imposed from above. Thus, the Sinhala caste system intersects with both culture and nature, interrogating the culture-nature dichotomy altogether. Using historical analysis and the author's own experience in growing up in a cinnamon smallholder household in southern Sri Lanka, this article explores the multispecies foundation of the Sinhala caste system as it evolved through the precolonial, colonial and postcolonial dynamics. The Salagama caste was initially engaged for foraging of cinnamon that grew in the wild and the Dutch colonial regime shifted from foraging to domestication of cinnamon around 1770 providing Salagama caste a vested interest in this process. The multispecies approach, where interactions among humans and also between humans and non-human species are explored in relation to specific forms of inequality, may open new pathways for overcoming human centrism and Eurocentrism in social analysis and the resulting failures in fostering social and environmental justice. While caste may appear as a naturalized and, at the same time, a culturally prescribed social order for some, it is not so for its victims, humans and non-humans alike. This article begins with a multispecies take on Sinhala caste, using Salagama caste to illustrate the potential of this approach for

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expanding the understanding of caste by exploring its human diversification and natural resource base as well. The interpenetration between culture and nature is one of the systemic features of Sinhala caste that accounts for its stability and vulnerability in given contexts.

Keywords

Sinhala Caste System, Multispecies Approach, Companion Species, Culture and Nature, Salagama Caste

Introduction

Both the protagonists and the antagonists of caste typically approach it from a human relations angle, considering it as a barrier or a pathway to desired human relations.[1] This is understandable as caste revolves around a differentiation of human groups on the basis of some existing categories into which human beings are born or assigned at birth. Human relations within and across castes are certainly a core aspect of any caste system.[2] Leach (1960), for instance, configured caste as a system of organic solidarity unifying all humans where each specialized caste invariably depends on the specialized services of other castes. However, a caste system cannot be identified as an exclusively human affair as some non-human entities such as plants, animals and minerals are also mobilized in hereditary caste occupations. Certain plant and animal species are centrally important for the fulfillment of several caste occupations in Sinhala society. Specific castes in Sinhala society have intimate connections with the natural endowments in local settings. Therefore, the rise or fall of these castes cannot be assessed without considering the vicissitudes of these typically ignored companion species as understood in the multispecies framework. It is important to mention here that humans in the relevant castes have had an intimate knowledge about the distinctive natural resources in the area directly relevant to their hereditary caste

[1]I dedicate this work to late Koronchige Babysingho, my maternal uncle who was my mentor in life in the growing up period. I learnt intricacies of cinnamon work mostly from him. Let me also thank several scholars who provided valuable insights about theory, history and cinnamon industry in general during preparation of this paper. They include Professors C.R, de Silva, Premakumara de Silva, Nirmal Dewasiri, H.M.D.R. Herath, Sarath Amarasinghe, Dr. Mark Balmforth, Dr. Eva Ambos, Mr. Nalaka Jayasena among others.

[2]The term 'caste system' has received multiple criticisms from analysts such as Dirk, Guha and Gupta whose thinking has significantly influenced the current study. The term caste system is blamed for its essentialist tendency, disregard for variation and diversity, attribution of too much stability to caste, and the neglect of internal contradictions in the so-called system. I do agree with these criticisms to some extent. However, we do need to acknowledge the systematic nature of caste in that individual castes are not merely an assemblage or hangovers from the past but interconnected entities that shape human to human as well as human to non-human relations. I argue that caste systems prevail at local levels encompassing inter-caste relations rather than at national or global levels. While I do not claim that there is only one caste system encompassing the Hindu world or South Asia in general, following Mosse (2020) and Ryan (1953) I argue that the systemic nature of caste in interaction with each other must be clearly recognized in dealing with caste as a subject of research and an object of social policy.

occupations. Their knowledge and skills in dealing with appropriate natural resources was an inherent aspect of the caste system encompassing both culture and nature. Further, we should not assume a one-way relationship between humans and these natural resources in determining the directions of history. In other words, animals and plants were an inherent component of human interaction with nature in their shared struggle for survival.

There is an emerging literature on the role of non-human agents in caste dynamics in Sri Lanka. In her ethnographic study of two craft villages in central Sri Lanka, Aimee Douglas (2017) found that the chief raw material used in the artistic Dumbara mat weaving industry in one of these villages, the availability of fibrous hana plant (*Agave cantala*) has declined over the years causing livelihood difficulties for the local Kinnara caste involved in the industry. This is at a time of an upsurge in the tourist industry and a resulting increase in the demand for local craft products. Several factors served to aggravate the scarcity of raw material for this industry. They include the over extraction of hana from their natural habitats, the refusal of the upper caste landlords to permit extraction of hana from their landholdings, their new demand for payment for hana freely extracted for the industry in the past, damage caused to hana habitats by changing land use practices including building constructions, and increased exposure to droughts resulting in habitat reduction. Imported substitute raw materials from China are available in the market and some crafts have resorted to these substitutes in order to continue their production. This has increased production costs and adversely impacted the quality of craft products such as wall hangings, affecting sales to tourists in particular. Another complication noted by Douglas is the refusal by the younger generation to take up the caste occupation or identify with it as a heritage of the community because of the perceived stigma attached to the Kinnara caste and the hana industry imposed upon it by the caste system. This is despite the efforts made by the National Craft Council set up by the state to support such crafts and disseminate the idea that these crafts are an inherent aspect of the valued national heritage of Sri Lanka.

Douglas highlights the challenges to the industry posed by the difficulties in accessing the hana plant:

> ….. the intensification of local road and housing construction in the region surrounding Atwaedagama has resulted in a relative scarcity of *hana,* the raw plant material that village residents have long relied upon for the manufacture of the decorative mats, fly whisks, change purses, and other items ultimately sold on the street and in shops throughout the country. As we have seen, this scarcity has driven those who would use the plant's fibers to either venture further away from Atwaedagama to secure it or, as is increasingly the case, turn to alternative and more readily available materials.
>
> In addition to the inconvenience of having to travel often considerable distances to collect *hana*, many in the village report that, while they were once given free access to the plant wherever they happened upon it, since around 2013 they

> increasingly find themselves having to pay those from whose land they harvest it. Generally speaking, *hana'*s sudden acquisition of exchange value was met with discontent. Many of my interlocutors in Atwaedagama complained about being refused outright or being asked to pay (Douglas, 2017, pp. 226–227).

This account indicates that the youth reluctance to undertake hana work because of status reasons is further complicated by the difficulty of securing hana from the natural habitats where it was freely available in the past. The Kinnara caste was obviously attracted to alternative employment available locally, regionally and internationally against a background of an increasingly unreliable foraging access to the hana plant, a companion species of the Kinnara caste. This in turn points to the fact that in understanding the rise or fall of caste we must not only assess the experience and the view of the relevant groups of humans but also what happens to the relevant species of plants and the natural resource base exploited in the specific caste occupations.

A promising direction for such an approach is pursued by a specifically multispecies essay by Tamara Fernando (2021) on caste and ocean life forms in Mannar, Sri Lanka. Her study examined the relationship between the Parava caste and the pearl industry in British Ceylon. As a fisher caste in South India, the Paravas migrated to the northwestern coastal belt in Sri Lanka mostly for pearl fisheries. Since then, they have operated as an intermediary caste connecting the Tamil and Sinhala caste systems. Conversion of the Paravas to Catholicism facilitated their mediating role and the mobility between South Indian and Sri Lankan littoral for pearl fishing, trade and pilgrimage. In many of these operations the Paravas had close ties with the local Muslim communities who were also active in cross border trade and pearl fisheries. Fernando noted that:

> "for centuries, oysters and other marine creatures including sea cucumbers, rock fish and sharks, lying on the bottom of the shallow gulf had long knit these communities with the state, as they hired out their skills to regional powers" (2021, p. 137).

As a seafaring community the Paravas gradually developed an intimate knowledge of oysters, pearl and the local habitat.

Fernando captures this vividly.

> Since the pearl beds in the Gulf of Mannar are relatively shallow, human and natural geographies of work overlapped. Through the work of diving, fishing communities had intimate, embodied and dynamic knowledge of the oyster at sea. Boys began diving at eight years age, training with relatives and other members of their caste and village. The work of diving was in the body, which encountered the sea visually, physically and into the transition from airborne to waterborne sound, optimizing for vision underwater, equalizing with increasing depth until the pressure inside the ears adjusted to that outside and relaxing the spasms of the diaphragm. The body had to be streamlined to bear

> the weight of the ocean, and the mind quieted as the spleen contracted, blood flow to the extremities decreased and the heart rate slowed in tactile ways. Free diving on reefs involved acclimatizing bodies (2021, pp. 137–138).

Fernando's study found that the pearl industry in Mannar collapsed by early 1900 for unknown reasons. The colonial state tried to revive the industry because of the high value of genuine pearl extracted in Sri Lanka. This included efforts at oyster farming and the application of Western scientific knowledge including marine biology for renovating the industry along capitalist lines, but it was one colonial enterprise that failed. Clearly, the Parava caste with first-hand experience and embedded local knowledge about pearl fisheries was central to the sustenance of the pearl industry in the region. Their embedded local knowledge about animal species in marine waters transmitted through caste lines could not be replaced by colonial scientific knowledge production as discovered by Fernando (2021). Following the downfall of the industry, the Paravas possibly diverted to other engagements such as trade. The study was not designed as a multispecies investigation of the impact of the demise of pearl industry on the Paravas. However, it does appear that as in the case of the Hana industry in central Sri Lanka, the end of the pearl industry may have contributed to a corresponding decline of the Paravas' role in the local social system. This, in turn, points to the potential relevance of a multispecies approach towards understanding the rise and fall of individual castes within a caste system. While providing useful insights for understanding caste from a multispecies perspective, neither Fernando nor Douglas tried to explore the implications of their findings beyond the individual castes subjected to their ethnographic enquiries. Inspired by the current symposium on caste in Sri Lanka, the present study takes a broad-brush approach to a multispecies analysis of caste in Sinhala society exploring cross-cutting multispecies ties among different castes as well as different species that interact with each other. Such an approach is likely to call for further research on the rise or fall of individual castes as well as the overall system changes due to the combined effects of changes in individual castes.

The multispecies approach highlights the need to incorporate human and non-human entities such as animals, plants and fungi in social analysis. Its aim is to understand the complex interactions between humans and other living entities in shaping the world around us. For instance, in multispecies ethnography, the interactions between humans and their non-human counterparts are explored recognizing their agency, mutual impact and interdependence in ways that avoid human centrism in social analysis. The concept of companion species has become important in multispecies accounts of human and non-human interactions. Typically companion species are animal or plant species that are non-human companions of human actors who have established an interpersonal bond with one or more non-human companions as sincere and transformative agents. Donna Haraway who introduced this concept in 2010 applied it to understand the intimate relationship between humans and their pet dogs in Western industrial societies. She identified this unique interspecies relationship markedly different from exploitative capitalist relations in the human world entrenched

in the Western industrial societies, mutually dependent and co-constitutive, namely productive of a shared-self of a kind. She excluded a blind person's dependence on a guide dog from the idea of companion species as it may lack mutual choice.

Extending this approach to human relationship with plants, Tsing (2012) in an essay titled 'Unruly Edges: Mushrooms As Companion Species', argues that symbiosis or mutually beneficial interspecies living as the key driver of this human-plant relationship established through human foraging of specific types of mushrooms such as chanterelles. In this article, I use a similar approach to explore the relationship between the Salagama caste in Sinhala society and the cinnamon plant that initially grew in the wild and was domesticated since the eighteenth century. It is important to point out here that both Haraway and Tsing applied the concept of companion species to describe seemingly non-capitalist interspecies bonds within the capitalist society, the companionship between the Salagamas and the cinnamon plant developed as an extension of the Sinhala caste system generative of permanent bonds among humans as well as between humans and non-human entities who are part of a broader pool of human and natural resources serving the caste system.

The multispecies approach has been successfully applied in Sri Lanka in other related spheres. In a recent study of pilgrimage to Adam's Peak, Alexander McKinley (2024) explored pluralism in this precolonial religious center catering to diverse pilgrims from Sri Lanka and elsewhere as well as a range of non-human visitors in what he referred to as "animal pilgrimage". Its application to caste will be a logical extension to exploring how human and non-human species interact with and mutually constitute each other in a constantly changing world. This is also in line with recent efforts at extending the understanding of the mobilization of caste within both the Hindutva and anti-caste movements in India with the sacred cow and the scavenger pig as rival and coting images deployed to characterize and contest caste identities (Narayanan, 2023). While pursuing a similar analytical framework that factors in the role of human and non-human animal and plant species in understanding caste dynamics, this article calls for a more inclusive systemic approach to examine the linkages between castes in Sinhala society and their ecology of animal and plant species operating as drivers of identity and day-to-day economic and social transactions and an embedded local knowledge about exploitation of natural resources anchored in the caste system.[3]

Objectives of the Study, Methodology and Scope

The current study applies a multispecies approach to understand the dynamics of caste in Sinhala society within a historical perspective encompassing both recorded

[3]Narayanan pays attention to the symbolic significance of cows and pigs in the Hindutva and Dalit political struggles. While the idea of sacred cow and unclean pig are essentially slogans propagated by the Hindu right in their campaign against the Muslims, they have also penetrated into Dalit politics complicating their identity dynamics. In the analysis pursued in the current essay, the role of plants and animals aligned with different castes are examined as entities connected with caste occupations and are of economic, cultural and environmental value, apart from their symbolic value extracted in the political process.

history from precolonial period onwards and an oral history in the postcolonial period captured through an auto ethnography. The specific objectives of the study are to identify and delineate the multispecies dimensions of caste in Sinhala society, and assess the specific role of the cinnamon foraging, cultivation and production in the social history of the Salagama caste in southern Sri Lanka from precolonial to postcolonial periods. A detailed history of the Salagama caste is pursued to understand its dynamic interaction with cinnamon over a long period of time.

This study uses a combination of research strategies to arrive at a multispecies analysis of the Sinhala caste system. First, selected historical and ecological writings relating to the cinnamon industry in Portuguese, Dutch and British periods were consulted. Second, an autoethnography of the researcher derived from growing up in a cinnamon smallholder household in southern Sri Lanka is presented. This household was also engaged in leasing in others' cinnamon land for harvesting purposes. The researcher draws on his personal experience in growing up in a cinnamon smallholder household from birth until 18 years of age, assisting one of his uncles in cinnamon cultivation and production. Along with his uncle and other cinnamon workers, I visited several cinnamon smallholdings in the area for contractual assignments that included harvesting and processing of cinnamon. I was privileged to listen to the oral histories of cinnamon workers and traders. Based on this personal experience that predated his professional training in Sociology, the social history of the Salagama caste is presented through a reflective process to illustrate the interspecies dynamics between the Salagamas and the cinnamon plant.

The article begins with a synoptic multispecies characterization of the Sinhala caste system in general. Second, it gives a brief description of cinnamon foraging by the Chalias from precolonial to the eighteenth century when colonial rule in the country shifted from the Portuguese to the Dutch. Third, it provides a detailed analysis of the transition from foraging to cinnamon cultivation and production by the Chalias or Salagamas as they came to be known following this transition. I examine how this domestication of cinnamon production led to a consolidation of the caste system in Sothern Sri Lanka. Contrary to the experience of Kinnara and Parava castes who continued with foraging with the resulting collapse of the respective caste occupations, the cinnamon cultivation introduced by the Dutch in 1770 not only sustained the cinnamon production, but also stabilized the Salagama caste vis-à-vis other Sinhala castes. Finally, the implications of these findings for establishing a more egalitarian social order in an environmentally sustainable manner are explored in the last section of the paper.

Sinhala Caste System through a Multispecies Framework

The Sinhala caste system is not merely a system of social inclusion and exclusion imposed by humans upon other humans. It is a larger system structuring the relationships among humans and various local plant and animal species implicated in a hereditary network of social, economic and cultural transactions that constituted the

rajakariya service tenure system. Certain mineral resources in local areas such as clay used in the pottery industry were also part of the larger system of exchanges.

Table 1 summarizes the components of this wider network

Table 1: Sinhala Castes and their Use of Natural Resources

Caste	Traditional Occupation	Natural Resource Type	Specific Plant, Animal or Entity Involved
Radala	Aristocracy	Plant/Animals	Paddy (*Oryza sativa*)/elephants (*Elephas maximus*)
Govigama	Farmers	Plant/Animals	Paddycattle (*Bos tarurus)*
Patti	Herdsmen	Plant/Animals	Paddycattle
Karawa	Fishermen	Animals	Fish
Durawa	Toddy makers	Plant	Coconut (*Cocos nusifera*)
Salagama	Cinnamon work	Plant	Cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*)
Hunu	Lime makers (construction material and product used in betel chewing)	Mineral	Limestone
Navandanna	Smiths	Mineral/plant	Iron ore/ Plants used in the Laksha industry
Wahumpura	jaggery makers	Plant	Kitul trees (*Caryota urens*)
Kumbal	Potters	Mineral	Clay
Rada	Washers	Natural resources	Streams/wells
Berakara	Drummers (do not use plants or animals directly. Drums are made by another caste using animal skins)	?	?
Bathgama	Manual workers Farm laborers	Plant/ mineral	Paddy/iron ore
Welladura	Guardians of the bodhi tree	Plant	Srimahabodiya (*Ficus religiosa*)
Pannadura	Elephant handlers	Animals/plant	Elephants/ kitul trees for extracting leaves for feeding elephants
Kinnara	Mat weavers	Plant	Hana
Rodi	Garbage handlers, beggars	Animal/Plant	Elephants/ Making of elephant traps (*madu*), raising of pigs (*Sus scrofa domesticus*)

To situate the Sinhala caste system within a multispecies framework, let me begin with some introductory points.

First, the Sinhala caste system has two parallel and mutually reinforcing components, a human resource component and a natural resource component. Human resource component is made up of the division of humans into different hereditary caste groups performing different duties assigned by the precolonial state, custom and tradition. On the other hand, the Sinhala caste system draws from a whole range

of natural resources needed for performing the relevant caste occupations. They include some endemic tropical plants (e.g. palm trees, cinnamon, hana) and tropical animals (e.g. elephants, cattle and fish) locally available for foraging or production. The local caste groups have developed an embedded contextual knowledge about the identification, extraction and processing of the locally available natural resources needed for their caste occupations. This is however not to say that the caste system has automatically evolved as part of nature but constructed in an extractive manner that enabled the dominant layers in society to benefit disproportionately from the subordinate caste groups with intimate knowledge about the natural resources in the area.[4] This dual extraction from the hereditary caste groups and the localized natural resource base must be seen as an important feature of local caste dynamics. The localized and grounded nature of caste partly stems from its anchorage in a resource extraction pattern encompassing both human and natural resources in a given area (see also Winslow, 2024).

Second, land was a key natural resource utilized by this system. In theory all land inclusive of plants, animals and minerals belonged to the king and he distributed them among different groups according to their specific position in society as determined by the caste system. The land grantees were bound to provide the specified services also defined by the caste system to the state and its assigned agents proportional to the volume of land granted. This resource use plus service extraction system was referred to as the service tenure (rajakariya, literally duty to the king) (Pieris, 1956). There were specified departments of the state, extracting services from castes assigned to deliver these services to the state. For instance, kottal badda,, madige badda and badahala badda for extracting services of the Navandanna, Karawe and potter castes respectively. Thus, the state operationalized, legitimized and benefitted from the caste system in Kandyan and Kotte periods. In contrast to the Hindu caste system with a strong religious foundation as understood by Dumont (1970), the Sinhala caste system had a stronger political foundation, articulated by Ralph Pieris as secularization of caste (Pieris, 1956, p. 193).[5] This, however, does not mean that one is easier to dislodge than the other. Nor does it mean that social hierarchy is more sharply drawn in one than in the other.

Third, with the possible exception of the Govigama caste engaged in paddy cultivation as a fulltime livelihood (hence referred to as Govigama, namely resident farmer community), it is likely that all the other castes were and are foragers to varying extents. For instance, Pannadura captured wild elephants, domesticated them and handed them over to the royal or aristocratic power holders as their symbolic capital and wealth. Similarly, the Wahumpuras foraged for palm (kittul) flowers suitable for tapping. Initially the Salagamas foraged for cinnamon that grew in the wild for

[4]Emerging research on the history of caste-based iron industry elsewhere in Sri Lanka must be recognized as another body of knowledge relating to the natural resource use connected with the caste system. See Juleff, Craddock and Malim (2009).

[5]A comprehensive multispecies analysis of Sri Lanka society is certainly needed but it is outside scope of the current study. A useful pioneering work in this regard is available in McKinley (2024).

supplying the processed cinnamon to the royal family and later colonial rulers. They became cinnamon cultivators since the Dutch period as will be described later. The Govigama caste was entitled for the full complement of services from other castes such as production or repair of agricultural tools (Navandanna caste), farm labour and domestic help (Bathgama caste), pots and pans (Kumbal caste), washing of clothes (Rada caste), supply of jaggery (Wahumpura caste) and the removal of solid waste and dead animals (Rodi caste). Those who provided these services were paid in rice as and when the services were delivered. The Goigama caste, therefore, became the cultivator caste even though other castes too were engaged in farming to varied extents for their own sustenance. In any case the transition from foraging to cultivation has been an important aspect of the stabilization of the Sinhala caste system and the accompanying natural resource utilization pattern. The distinction and inequality between forager castes and cultivator castes is an important feature of the Sinhala caste system yet to be explored in research.

Fourth, castes were not static entities formed in a stable manner over a long period of time. Rather they were constantly changing in response to precolonial, colonial, and post-colonial developments as also argued by scholars like Guha (2013). The Sinhala caste system became a mix of foraging and production that partly accounts for its inconsistent outcomes over time, also well captured in the cartwheel model of Sinhala caste presented by Winslow (2024). These researchers highlight the need to consider regional differences, local politics and identity dimensions as articulated by local actors from different castes. In addition, the multispecies approach brings out the need to factor in the ecological dimensions, the natural resource base and the role of endemic animal and plant species in maintaining or undermining the caste order.

Finally, multispecies dynamics are particularly important in respect of four caste groups in the Western coastal belt in Sri Lanka. They are Karawa, Salagama, Durawa and Hunu castes. Of these, the first three identified by Roberts (1982) as KSD castes, have had parallel trajectories of migration from India to Sri Lanka and getting established in Sri Lanka as different caste formations in Sinhala society. The KSD castes are particularly suitable for a multispecies assessment as Karawas are involved in fishing, Salagamas cinnamon peeling and Durawas making a mild alcoholic drink (toddy) extracting the sap of coconut flowers. Of the three castes, Salagamas were more aligned with Buddhism with a caste occupation free of any negative implications for Buddhism. In contrast, Karawas and Durawas were engaged in rather 'sinful' occupations, taking of life of fish as part of Karawa livelihood and promoting alcohol consumption as done by the Durawas, being violations of two of the five precepts (*pancil)* in Buddhism. This resulted in the conversion of many Karawas from Buddhism to Catholicism during the Portuguese period. On the other hand, Salagama occupation of cinnamon peeling had no clash with Buddhist teachings and this led to their active engagement in Buddhism as reflected in the formation of a new Buddhist monastic chapter called Amarapura Nikaya aligned with the caste in 1800. This article does not go into the history of all the coastal Sinhala castes, but this macro profile is useful for our understanding the larger multispecies context in which the Salagama caste is

located. It must be noted here that the Karawa and Durawa castes catered to the local demand for important consumer goods even though they had an ambivalent position in Buddhism. On the other hand, the Salagamas catered to the international demand for cinnamon, used the revenue made from this avenue for advancing Buddhism and the Buddhist revival in the west coast and, therefore, represented Sinhala Buddhist nationalism in identity politics and inter-caste competition in this important region in Sri Lanka, serving as a gateway to westernization and reactions against it (Malalgoda, 1976; Blackburn, 2010).

Formation of the Salagama Caste

This section examines the evolution of the Salagama caste, focusing on the cinnamon industry and its role in identity formation, social mobility and stabilization of the caste.

Cinnamomum Zeylanicum as an Anchorage of the Salagama Caste

As an immigrant group from India who arrived in Ceylon during the twelfth century, the Chalias (named Salagamas subsequently) did not have a firm grounding in local history or local culture. Their absorption into Sri Lankan society and the Sinhala caste system was a gradual process that was perhaps completed after the 1830s, when they became cinnamon smallholders. Initially, the Chalias established a foothold in Sri Lankan society through their engagement in cinnamon foraging at the request of the local rulers. Their association with the cinnamon plant endemic to Sri Lanka appears to have been their main link to Sri Lankan society at first (De Silva, MU 1993). They were hesitant and protesting participants during the foraging phase because of the difficulties encountered in meeting the excessive demands of the colonial rulers in Ceylon.

Over the years they achieved important milestones in the assimilation process. This included learning the Sinhala language, the transition from cinnamon foraging to cultivation, their formation as a separate caste group engaged in cinnamon work, and the formation of a local knowledge base about the plant and the industry within the caste. These achievements enabled them to connect with the rural economy as well as the local environment. It gave them a stake in local culture and the rural economy simultaneously.

As an endemic local plant that grew in the wild, cinnamon has had a much longer natural history in Ceylon compared to the Salagama caste. Cinnamon indeed cemented its link with Ceylon as a newly established immigrant community.

Invention of Caste in Colonial Ceylon

This section examines how the Salagamas became involved in the cinnamon industry in Sri Lanka. Cinnamon that grew in the wild under lush tropical conditions was one of the greatest attractions of Sri Lanka for the colonizers and the Arab traders before them (Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda, 2020). Colvin R. de Silva referred to “the lure of

cinnamon" in Ceylon (1953, p. 1). Apart from cinnamon, Ceylon was already famous globally for gems, ivory, pearl and spices. The Portuguesa took over these Indian ocean trades from the Arabs by breaking their long-held monopoly. Ceylonese cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) was already well established as the best quality cinnamon in the world and the western colonizers competed with each other to establish their own monopolistic control over this commodity.[6]

The royal families in the Kotte kingdom had already mobilized the Chalias of Kerala origin to collect cinnamon in the wild and process it for supplying to visiting traders and earned a significant revenue from this transaction. The Portuguese and subsequently the Dutch quickly seized this business, gained control over the existing production process and the supply chain by overpowering or persuading the local ruling families (De Silva, C.R. 1973, De Silva, M.U. 1993). Working through the existing social hierarchy, the Portuguese took charge of the prevailing cinnamon production process and reaped maximum benefit from it. Locally hereditary social divisions were known as jathi (lit. stemming from birth). The Portuguese referred to it as casta, rendered in English as caste. In either case, it was a somewhat ill-defined epistemic category, referring to birth, hereditary occupation, social network of consanguinity and affinity and much more. This is a clear example of what Dirk (2001) described as colonial invention of caste as a new epistemic category. Subsequent researchers elaborated how this new epistemic category was deployed by colonial rulers to improve imperial governance (Guha, 2013) and expand revenue extraction (O'hanlon, 2017). In this process, colonial rulers formalized and rigidified what existed as a loose local category.

Chalia's engagement with cinnamon appears to have been a historical accident. Having been weavers in India, they had no prior working experience with cinnamon or any similar product. This was a newly formed caste in Ceylon catering to the needs of kingship and subsequently colonial rule. The Sinhala kings assigned cinnamon work to Chalias taking advantage of their immigrant status, lack of assigned land rights at the time and their greater manipulability in terms of the work assigned (Abeysinghe, 1966). They were granted land on condition that they collected wild cinnamon and provided processed cinnamon as a kind of tribute to the king in lieu of the land they occupied under the rajakariya system. In the villages between Kalutara and Matara cinnamon workers were settled, and they were assigned to a revenue administration called Mahabadda responsible for extracting tributary payment in the form of processed cinnamon and they were relieved from routine rajakariya duties and taxes to the state (de Silva, C.R. 1973, 1989). They were also relieved from services to any other castes as they were not 'a service caste' as defined in the local caste hierarchy. On the other hand, they were entitled for services from other castes such as blacksmiths. Any extra cinnamon they produced over and above the stipulated tributary payment,

[6]This was one of the 8 endemic species of cinnamon prevalent in Ceylon at the time (Pathirana and Senaratne 2020). This particular species became popular in the European market because of its flavor, aroma and multiple uses in food preparation, cooking and in various home remedies.

could be sold to the king at a below market price. In contrast, people living along Kalani river engaged in cinnamon production were called Sulubadda (minor revenue administration) were required to sell all the cinnamon they produced to the royal family at prices determined by the latter.

Thus, Chalias themselves were internally differentiated and all cinnamon peelers did not necessarily come from Chalias as other local castes too were mobilized in cinnamon extraction whenever the demand exceeded the capacity of Chalias (de Silva, C.R. 1989; de Silva, M.U 1993). Initially Chalias were not particularly attracted to cinnamon peeling because of its mandatory nature and the difficulties in foraging cinnamon that grew in the wild distributed in a vast area held by different ruling families. Further, their official categorization as slaves by the Portuguese regime did not appeal to Chalias (De Silva, M.U. (1993, p. 87). Collective protests against their heavy workload and what they perceived as excessive colonial demands for processed cinnamon were rather common (de Silva, M.U. 1993, Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda, 2020). Clearly the ruling elite imposed cinnamon foraging upon them. Interestingly the Portuguese expanded the mandate of caste to include slavery and indiscriminately impose a quantity of cinnamon to be supplied annually by each Chalia male 12 years or older (Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda, 2020). The Chalias resisted this as far more oppressive than their customary obligations within the Sinhala caste system where services were proportional to the land held from the state and one could end the service obligation by returning the land back to the state. This may be seen as another instance of the colonial invention of caste in a more extractive manner (Dewasiri, 2008; O'hanlon, 2017).

The Chalias resorted to certain new strategies to bypass the colonial extractions. According to Serrao (2014), the amount of cinnamon supplied to the state by the cinnamon peelers increased fivefold between 1590 and 1640. In defiance of the hierarchy, the Salagamas opted to change their caste identity by intermarrying with other castes or changing their names (de Silva MU 1993).

In summary cinnamon foraging was an extractive process resisted by the Chalias. The colonial rulers kept on increasing the target set for Chalias disregarding the limits set by the traditional caste system. The colonial reinvention of caste as a form of slavery added to its oppressive character that in turn evoked contestations by the Chalias.

From Foraging to Domestication

It is in this context the Portuguese were ousted by the Dutch who became new colonial rulers in Ceylon in 1658. The Dutch East India Company had the same motives as the Portuguese for taking over colonial territories and followed many of the same strategies. One important difference, however, was that the Dutch had a greater trust in farming compared to foraging as an economic enterprise. The Dutch were instrumental in promoting cinnamon cultivation in Southern Sri Lanka. In order to retain the Dutch monopoly over the cinnamon industry and trade, three schemes were introduced when

cinnamon cultivation was started (de Silva, Colvin R., 1962). The first was to establish East India Company-owned cinnamon plantations on public land. The second was to allow private persons to establish cinnamon plantations on crown land without land ownership being transferred, on the understanding that all produce will be sold to the state. The third was to allow private individuals to establish cinnamon plantations on their private land on the understanding that all their produce will be sold to the state. The strict laws of the state prevented any cinnamon cultivation outside these schemes clearly demonstrating the monopolistic aims of the state. The Salagamas were involved as cinnamon cultivators and workers under all these schemes. The progress of cinnamon cultivation under these three different schemes were variable with state regulation determining their progress in many instances (Kanapathipillai, 1979). The effort to deploy the rajakariya system in cinnamon cultivation and work was another bottleneck in the system (Dewasiri, 2008; Abeysignhe, 1960; de Silva, M.U. 1993). The colonial state wanted to ensure that there was no overproduction of cinnamon that would push down the price of Sri Lankan cinnamon. On the other hand, cinnamon foraging was continued as and when necessary in order to meet any shortfall in production.

The British colonial rulers did not pay as much attention to the cinnamon industry as was the case in preceding colonial rulers. However, their abolition of rajakariya in 1832 and the decision to open up cinnamon cultivation for smallholders as well as any interested planters removed the heavy state control in the industry since the nineteenth century.

The new system provided incentives for the Salagamas and whoever else who opted to cinnamon as a profit-making enterprise. Caste was mobilized in the entire domestication process as a means of building on available local knowledge about the plant and its harvesting. Often cinnamon was a home garden crop whose fluctuating market prices determined the level of wellbeing of the family. Even a half an acre of cinnamon cultivated and harvested using family labor and own tools provided a decent income.[7] Cinnamon was a versatile crop with processed cinnamons, as well as byproducts such as scrapes (cutta), firewood, cinnamon leaves and cinnamon oil all contributing to family income. The Salagamas played a pioneering role in converting cinnamon to an important cash crop in the rural economy in southwestern Sri Lanka. By the mid nineteenth century much of the cinnamon production in the country came from smallholder sector even though a few large cinnamon plantations owned by local entrepreneurs continued (Moore, 1978).

The Salagamas became intimately connected with cinnamon cultivation and work due to the transition from foraging to domestication. As noted earlier, they were unwilling participants in cinnamon work under the foraging system. As of 1965 this pattern had completely changed and the Salagama engagement with cinnamon had

[7]In an important report on the smallholder cinnamon cultivation in Sri Lanka, Mick Moore (1978) noted that it was too heavily subsidized by the state but it did not necessarily strengthen the industry because of growing competition from other countries who have taken up the cinnamon cultivation on commercial lines.

become an intimate personal and family engagement. The cinnamon work and related knowledge and had become a shared heritage of the group. In the next section I present my personal experience as a young boy growing up in a cinnamon smallholding household.

Personal Experiences with the Cinnamon Industry around 1965

As a perennial crop harvested one to two times a year, many Salagamas became cultivators and owner-operators. Cinnamon was grown in separate plots prepared and dedicated for the purpose or as an undergrowth side by side with existing perennial crops like coconuts, jackfruit, arecanut within the home garden. Tsing characterized plantations "as the engine of European expansion …..that allowed Europeans to take over the world" (2012, p. 148). Unlike plantation crops such as tea, rubber and coconuts introduced by the British on large plantations exclusively planted with the specific crops and worked exclusively by wage labour and owned and managed by the planters, cinnamon was established in smallholdings (usually less than five acres in extent) of Salagama owner-farmers cum cinnamon workers. The volume of production depended on the extent of land under the crop and the number of cinnamon peelers available. The production process was unmechanized with the Salagamas possessing much of the inherited local knowledge relating to the cinnamon industry. Salagamas developed an intimate relationship with and knowledge about the cinnamon plant, its seasonal changes like emergence of tender leaves (*dalla*), appearance of seeds and determination of the optimum time (*talena kale*) to begin the peeling process. The boys were encouraged to take up long-handled knife used for cutting mature cinnamon stems and the mamoty used for weeding cinnamon plots (*kaththe-udalle vada*) at an early age. The Salagama knowledge about cinnamon was through intimate daily engagement with the plant rather than through science as indeed was the case with the Paravar knowledge about oysters and pearl as noted by Fernando (2021). One important difference however was that unlike the Paravas who were employed by others, in the post-independence era the Salagamas were mostly self-employed smallholders with their home gardens converted to cinnamon smallholdings.

The first step in the peeling process was scraping the outer skin of the bark (*ganawa*) using a particular metal tool (*gana kokaththa*) and this activity was done by female household members or younger males. The peeling of the main bark was done by experienced males using a set of traditional tools illustrated in Figure 1.[8] The final product of processed cinnamon quills was made by connecting strips of cinnamon barks and filling them with smaller pieces of cinnamon in a process referred to as quill formation (*handikaranawa*). These vernacular terms signified intimate Salagama knowledge derived from cinnamon work.

[8]These tools were made by the blacksmiths of the Navandanna caste using local designs applicable to local cinnamon plants. In this sense Navandanna caste too was implicated in the multispecies engagement involved in cinnamon production. However, their relation to the cinnamon plant was indirect rather than direct. The cinnamon industry did not determine the life chances of the Navandanna caste to the same extent it impacted on the Salagamas.

The entire process of cinnamon harvesting, peeling and processing, the tool kit used for this purpose and the ways of application of these tools became embodied practical knowledge of the Salagamas. Often the entire family was involved in cinnamon work. Their mannerism, dress code, speech and hands were well adapted to using *gana kaththa* (scraping tool)*, kokaththa* (peeling knife) and *talana polla* (rubbing rod) with a minimum of injuries to the workers and those around them including small children. Their practical knowledge about the cinnamon plant covered a range of subjects including plant growth, optimum time for weeding, manuring, harvesting, pruning, storage, and sun drying of processed cinnamon.

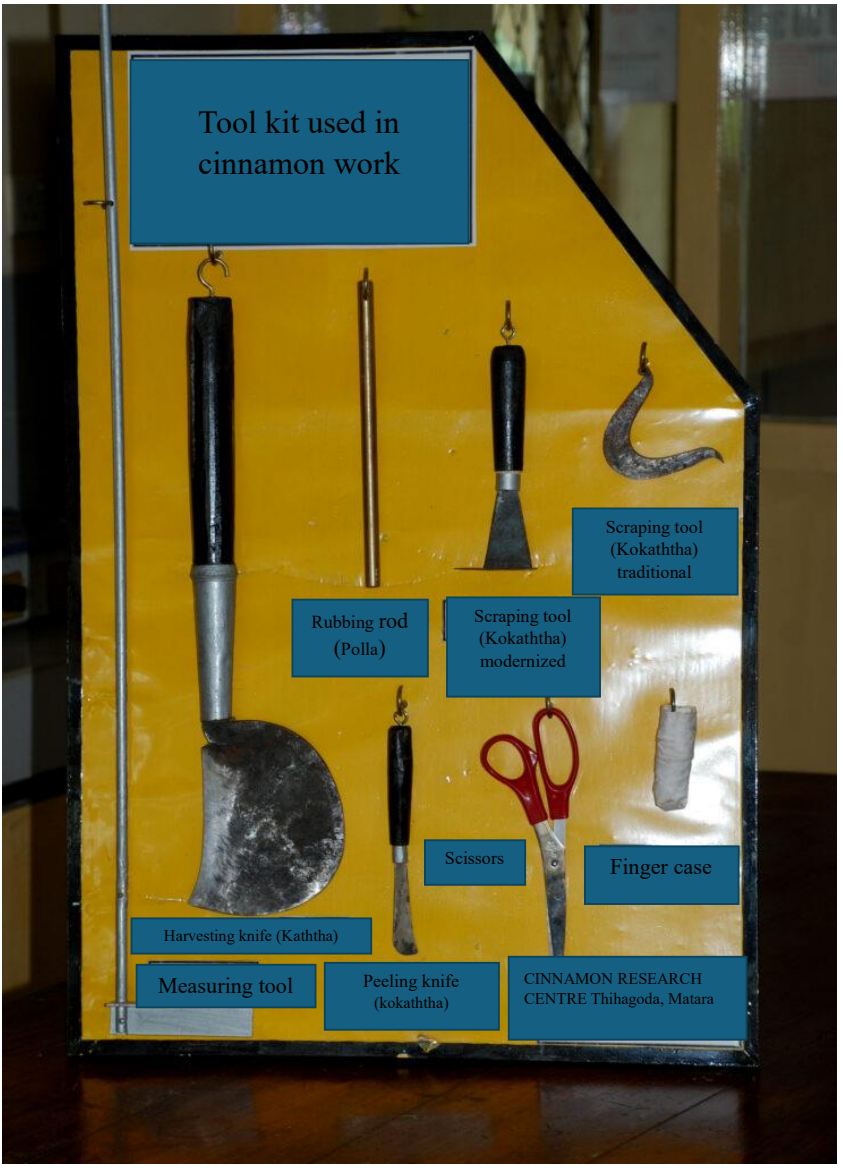

Fig. 1: Tool kit used in cinnamon harvesting and peeling in Sri Lanka

It is important to stress that the Salagama knowledge about cinnamon was not a textbook knowledge about the botany or chemistry of cinnamon. Rather it was an experiential knowledge acquired from their families. It was by no means a secret knowledge but an embedded local knowledge sustained through caste dynamics as also noted by Fernando (2021). Just as much as the tool kit and its application were

Fig. 2: The process of cinnamon peeling

appropriated through kinship and caste lines, the cinnamon industry became a shared vested interest of the caste. For instance, the needs of the cinnamon industry contributed to endogamy within the Salagama caste.[9] In working-class circles male cinnamon workers preferred to marry women with appropriate life skills. Salagama men used to say "what is the use of marrying a woman who cannot even hold a *gana kokaththa* in her palm properly." In any case marriage partners were likely to meet each other within the cinnamon industry because of the way it was organized. In richer circles cinnamon estates were an important element of the dowry for women. For instance, in one famous cinnamon plantation in Kosgoda, the owner had divided into three portions named Lokkige Kalla (eldest daughter's portion), Madduge Kalla (middle daughter's portion) and Poddige Kalla (little one's portion), with the aim of giving them as dowries for his three daughters. Thus, cinnamon cultivation played a significant role in family and kinship dynamics in the Western coastal belt (Gamburd, 2010). While it

[9]In order to prevent cross-caste marriage, the Dutch introduced a law to ban such marriages. This colonial legal intervention, clearly made with a view to keep the number of cinnamon workers intact, had only limited impact. (*Dewasiri, Wagenear and Uyangoda* 2020: 49). This intervention showed that apart from customary laws and kinship norms in place, colonial administration too contributed to the promotion of caste endogamy in some instances purely out of self-interest and the desire to keep the colonial income sources intact.

is true that marriages were not always confined to one's own caste in the congested coastal belt where caste boundaries are porous (De Silva, C.R. and Senewiratne, 2025), we cannot exaggerate this trend because of the pragmatic multispecies considerations that operated (de Silva, M.U., 1993). In the same way the Salagamas safeguarded their cinnamon properties and knowledge about the plant, the industry promoted caste endogamy in an environment otherwise conducive for inter-caste mixing.

Cinnamon as a Companion Species of the Salagamas

From its inception as a Sinhala caste, cinnamon had the potential to become a companion species for the Salagamas.

As a new caste formed by immigrants, Chalias established a foothold in Sinhala society through the endemic cinnamon plant. Their hereditary mission assigned by the Sri Lankan rulers was to look after and harvest this native plant. They became a companion to the Salagamas who held an exclusive right over this plant assigned to them by the precolonial Sri Lankan rulers. However, As Colvin R. de Silva rightly characterized it became 'a privileged servitude' under Portuguese and Dutch rule.

Cinnamon actually became a companion species to the Salagamas as defined by Haraway only after cinnamon was domesticated and the Salagamas took up cinnamon as a smallholder crop in the British period. This cash crop became a primarily home garden crop for the Salagamas who shifted from foraging to cultivation. This was, therefore, an instance of mutual constitution of a plant (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*) and a caste (the Salagamas). The latter saved it from possible extinction if foraging continued uninterrupted. Similarly, the Salagamas were a caste without a clear mandate and a well-defined livelihood as such until they became vanguards of cinnamon domestication.

Another aspect of this companionship is the embedded local knowledge the Salagamas accumulated through cinnamon work year after year. This has contributed to conservation of cinnamon as a tropical plant and indirectly maintaining Salagama caste as part of the Sinhala caste system. Unlike in the case of pearl fisheries in British Ceylon, Western scientific knowledge was not applied displacing the caste-based embedded local knowledge in order to maintain the cinnamon industry and this has contributed to the preservation of the cinnamon industry until now.

Cinnamon as a Pathway for Upward Social Mobility

From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, the Salagamas relied heavily on cinnamon income in moving up the social ladder. They pursued three related avenues of upward social mobility from the cinnamon smallholder level. The first was the built-up of incomes from the cinnamon industry by expanding one's scale of operations by purchasing or leasing in cinnamon lands from others. Often this served to enhance and stabilize cinnamon incomes. They, however, quickly realized that income from

cinnamon was somewhat unpredictable because of price instability in the market. Many Salagama families invested in the education of their children as a second and more attractive pathway for social mobility. The more successful members of these families entered professions such as medicine, law, engineering, Ceylon administrative service and politics. These positions served to enhance the power, influence and prestige of the relevant families and the overall position of the caste in relation to other local castes. The educational achievements and related gains in professional careers were cumulative, gains made in one generation often superseded in the subsequent generations. Third, a few Salagama families invested in private sector enterprises such as new industries and services. Sir Cyril de Zoysa who set up a private bus company and established Kalutara Bodiya as a philanthropic activity is one such example. In all these instances, income from cinnamon provided the seed money for subsequent investments. In other words, with a lucrative income from cinnamon, the Salagamas had a head start in the social mobility process during colonial and post-colonial periods.

As a combined outcome of these developments the Salagama caste developed an aristocratic layer during the nineteenth century.

From Slavery to Aristocracy

Salagama caste was eager to monopolize cinnamon production within its ranks because of the premium attached to Ceylonese cinnamon in the international market and the cash flow that enabled a process of upward social mobility. Many rich Salagama lineages along the west coast who made money from the cinnamon industry and gained power through education and positions reein colonial administration, gradually acquired an aristocratic lifestyle modelled after the landed Radala aristocracy in Kandyan areas. As many as 10 aristocratic mansions (walawwas) had been established in the Balapitiya region alone. For instance, the famous Mahakappina Walawwa in Balapitiya. Even though Chalias resisted the slavery-like cinnamon foraging imposed upon them by the colonial powers in the early period, the pattern was completely changed after domestication of cinnamon and a free market for cinnamon was gradually established

The so-called aristocratic layer of the Salagama caste gradually became an exclusive group within the caste along the lines of Pelanthiya formation described by Obeyesekere (1967) in a different context. Distinguishing themselves from Kurundukara cinnamon workers, the aristocratic layer presented themselves as a category of cinnamon planters detached from cinnamon work. They were also instrumental in setting up some rich Buddhist temples in the area and the formation of the Amarapura Nikaya. They presented themselves as an exclusive group not eager to mix with the ordinary members of the caste. Their decline started in the 1940s or so due to a combination of factors including the economic downturn in the cinnamon industry, unsustainable expenditure patterns and the migration of the better off sections of this group to Colombo and other cities.

Emerging Challenges for the Cinnamon Industry and Remedies Pursued

Upward mobility through cinnamon cultivation, however, was only part of the story. By the post-independence period, the local cinnamon industry faced a variety of problems stemming from the global market, production processes in Sri Lanka and the socio-economic issues among cinnamon workers.

At the global market level, falling cinnamon prices, demand for improved quality, use of cheaper substitutes and new suppliers in the market were challenges faced by the Sri Lankan cinnamon industry. This may be attributed to the system of smallholder agriculture connected with the cinnamon industry. Similarly, quality control of produce may not be feasible with the caste-based system of production that operates within the framework of the family and the household.

As for the system of cinnamon production, shortage of cinnamon workers as well as shortage of land under cinnamon cultivation had become serious problems by the 1970s. The shortage of cinnamon workers may be due to issues such as poor income and low dignity connected with caste occupations in general (Douglas, 2017, Reed, 2010). Shortage of land under cinnamon cultivation may be due to changing land use practices, urbanization, building constructions and subdivision of cinnamon landholdings due to inheritance. While smallholder agriculture received a new lease of life after independence, public sector investments concentrated on irrigated rice cultivation to the relative neglect of other crops like cinnamon (Moore, 1985; Farmer, 1957). Some of the local cinnamon species are identified as endangered or seriously endangered species due to due to indiscriminate harvesting of cinnamon and deforestation over a long period of time (Pathirana and Senaratne, 2020).

A number of social issues also cropped up among the impoverished cinnamon workers by the 1970s. They included indebtedness, widespread gambling, alcoholism, drugs, crime, gang activity and violence. These problems were entrenched in certain Salagama communities. Many cinnamon workers were dependent entirely on wage labor moving from one cinnamon plantation to another in search of work, living and working as families in temporary cinnamon sheds (*kurundu vaḍi*). Arrangements like weekly advance wages (*sumana kasi*) provided by the employers as well as securing daily necessities from local stores on credit were aspects of the peripatetic existence of these cinnamon workers. Entering radical politics, some joined the JVP uprising in 1971 and 1987. Problems associated with the cinnamon industry may have contributed to these processes in so far as cinnamon did not guarantee a secure livelihood to a significant number of cinnamon workers who were trapped in a downward spiral of social mobility. In the same way cinnamon contributed to the formation of an aristocratic layer in Salagama caste during the nineteenth century, the same cinnamon industry also produced an impoverished layer who lived a hand to mouth existence dependent on better off segments of society.

The remedies for these problems came from the Department of Export Agriculture (DEA), private sector agencies representing cinnamon growers, traders and exporters

like the Cinnamon Association (CA) and the Spice Council (TSC) and newly established public-private partnerships like the Cinnamon Training Academy (CTA). The DEA introduced measures such as replanting of cinnamon and the introduction of cinnamon cultivation to marginal tea and rubber lands. CA and TSC took steps to improve quality control of cinnamon and branding of cinnamon exports as pure Ceylon cinnamon in line with pure Ceylon tea. CTA initiated by some entrepreneurs with a family history in cinnamon cultivation with their base in Kosgoda at the heart of the cinnamon belt introduced some certified training courses for cinnamon workers with a view to improve the quality of their output and also attract youth to the cinnamon industry. None of these interventions sought to address the caste background of cinnamon workers with the possible exception of CTA which tried to promote the dignity of labour among its trainees. The whole issue of the traditional knowledge base of the Salagama caste had been completely ignored in the effort to improve quality and replace it with scientific knowledge.

Conclusions

In this essay initially, we approached the Salagama caste from a historical viewpoint to identify how it was established in Ceylon from precolonial era onwards as an addendum to the Sinhala caste system. The founders of the Salagama caste were Chalias who migrated from India way back in the twelfth century. Their adaptation to Sri Lanka society was facilitated by their assigned role in foraging cinnamon that grew in the wild. Cinnamon had already become an important commodity in international trade and it was indeed this much sought-after product of the tropics that attracted the colonial rulers to Ceylon already reputed as the source of the best quality cinnamon in the world. The nexus between cinnamon and colonialism was an important reason for the companionship between the Salagama caste and cinnamon established over roughly a millennium. Over this long period, this companionship survived despite challenges it faced from time to time. The partnerships between the Salagamas and cinnamon became closer in the aftermath of the domestication of cinnamon as the Salagamas became growers and workers of cinnamon. As we have seen this led to a stabilization of the Salagama caste as well as the cinnamon industry which depended on each other.

In the second part of this essay we examined the living reality of the Salagama cinnamon workers in southern Sri Lanka employing an auto-ethnographic perspective. The Chalias who did not have a strong foothold in Sri Lanka as a new immigrant group from India secured a firm position as they became connected with the endemic cinnamon plant long established as a valuable natural resource and an important revenue generator in Ceylon. Cinnamon was important for the Salagamas in their identity formation, family and kinship dynamics as well as patterns of social mobility. On their part, the Salagamas contributed to sustaining the endemic cinnamon species endangered due to over harvesting and changing land use practices in a variety of ways.

First, the Salagamas established an embedded local knowledge about the plant that facilitated the transition from foraging to domestication. Second, an important aspect of this local knowledge has been the development of an effective tool kit for cinnamon peeling. Third, the Salagamas played a significant role in the development of cinnamon smallholder agriculture along the western coastal belt well adapted to the local ecosystems. Finally, these processes jointly contributed to the sustenance of *Cinnamomum zeylanicum* as a tropical plant species despite numerous challenges it faced due to colonial extractions, indiscriminate foraging and changing land use practices.

This is however not to say that all is well with the cinnamon industry and the Sinhala caste system within which it is located. We found multiple issues relating to the quality of its output, which also affects the market prices and income from the industry. The survival of the plant itself has become problematic due to urbanization and related changes in land use practices. The rapid impoverishment of cinnamon peelers and their engagement in crime, alcoholism, drugs and violence is another serious challenge faced by the local cinnamon industry and the Salagama caste historically connected with the industry.

A range of remedies have been identified and pursued by the public sector and public-private partnerships responding to these issues. These remedies draw heavily from commercialization, training of cinnamon workers, replanting of cinnamon and value addition to raw cinnamon. They may or may not be effective in addressing the serious challenges faced by the industry. Two shortcomings evident is the lack of a solid understanding of the history of the industry and its strong connections with the caste system as discussed in this essay. We do agree that caste may not provide the way forward from the angle of upgrading the industry or developing a suitable policy for its future. Nevertheless we think that a realistic assessment of its current status and challenges and opportunities must situate it within its colonial history, tropical context and the caste system and must seek ways and means of taking advantage of its historical legacies and liberating it from the constraints imposed by the very same setting inclusive of the caste system.

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