

The Caste Negotiations of Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) in Colonial Ceylon

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Abstract

Analyses involving Anagarika Dharmapala (1864–1933) and his relationship to caste—rare enough as they are—often mirror conversations on the position of caste in Sri Lanka more generally. Despite the presence of caste and its previous significance in the island’s history, these discussions hold that caste no longer maintains a critical social purpose. Dharmapala’s formulation of Buddhism as an ethnocentric and hegemonic ideology that concealed rather than addressed social inequality within the island’s majority Sinhalese community perhaps also best summarises these narratives. Yet what is lost in these discourses is that caste remained an ever-present feature of Dharmapala’s social vocabulary and for his visions for both the Sinhalese ethnicity and for Buddhism more generally.

This article tracks Dharmapala’s caste engagements and the wider societal implications of his understanding of the phenomenon for Sri Lanka today through analyses of his writings and speeches both in English and in Sinhalese. As this article demonstrates, caste became an important instrument for Dharmapala to distinguish that which was good for society from that which was bad. Of mixed-caste parentage himself, Dharmapala remained exceedingly critical of Sri Lankan caste structures yet curiously respected—if not admired—those in neighboring India. As perhaps the most high-profile Buddhist anywhere in South Asia during his time, Dharmapala had an incomparable influence on publics across the wider region. While dismissing the significance of caste in religious practice, Dharmapala nonetheless accepted its traditional social function with caste reform rather than abolition at the core of his wider societal plans.

Keywords

Anagarika Dharmapala, Buddhism and caste, colonial Ceylon, Govigama, Karava, Sri Lankan castes

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Introduction

In the Sinhalese language, just as in many other Indic languages, the term *jāti*—and the various words derived from it—connotes not just caste but also ideas concerning ethnicity, nationality, citizenship, and race (de Silva, 1981, p. 512; Uyangoda, 1994, p.13). Semantically ambiguous, the term’s opacity allows its association with various forms of exclusion and difference along the lines listed previously. Just as the word *jāti* masks identities which often compete with rather than complement each other, caste, too, often finds itself concealed by ethnocentric biases in historical and sociological analyses of Sri Lankan society. Yet as one of the identifying—if not defining—features of subcontinental societies, caste remains an ever-present fixture of island life despite the paucity of studies exploring its role in social settings.

When compared to those in neighbouring India, caste relationships in Sri Lanka remain comparatively understudied and under-theorised. This remains true for each of the caste structures in operation for the island’s Sinhalese, Sri Lankan Tamil, and Indian Tamil populations (Silva, Thanges & Sivapragasam, 2009, p. 1). Indeed, while there remains an ever-expanding body of literature elsewhere across the subcontinent, caste as an institution in Sri Lankan society continues to receive little attention in contemporary academic circles, social initiatives, and governmental policies. Furthermore, with the Sri Lankan state neglecting to collect caste information in official records, the specific role of caste as a force for discrimination and oppression remains difficult to discern (Silva & Balmforth, 2025, pp. 1–2). Given caste’s exclusion as a category in the island’s censuses since 1871, even estimating the numbers of those who belong to the various castes traditionally ascribed to Sri Lanka remains a notoriously difficult endeavour (Simpson & de Silva, 2025, p. 36).

What is clear, however, is that a system of caste practice developed there independently and largely without the structuralising influence and power of the *varṇa*-based Hindu system with its ritualised divisions into Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra found in neighbouring India. While similar cultural practices undoubtedly present themselves across both the mainland and the island, “local customization” rather than “wholesale adoption” became the norm (Winslow, 2024, p. 110). Sri Lanka’s “wider geography”, with its external linkages extending beyond the subcontinent to the Mediterranean World, coastal Africa, Arabia, and Indochina, perhaps provides us with further answers as to how this local customisation occurred (Winslow, 2024, p. 110). Furthermore, the lack of a strong religious sanction for caste from Buddhism—the predominant religion among the island’s majority Sinhalese community—also created the conditions for the emergence of a caste system often described as “mild” in terms of its injunctions when compared to those found in other religious systems across the mainland (Gombrich, 1971, pp. 294–317; Silva, Kotikabadda & Abeywickrama, 2009, p. 29). Moreover, the general absence of caste and its effects in Buddhist societies outside of South Asia further complicates studies of the practice of caste amongst Sinhalese Buddhists, given the difficulty in finding

suitable comparisons from within the wider Buddhist fold.¹ The Buddha himself, of course, neither explicitly condoned nor denounced caste as an institution and chose instead to preach against the discrimination and stigma associated with its practice.

Published shortly after the island's independence in 1948, Bryce Ryan's *Caste in Modern Ceylon* opened the way for scholarly analyses of caste in Sri Lankan society with his view that caste in Sinhalese culture was "a self-contained emergent arising from diffuse Indian influences and historically unique situations" (1953, pp. 4–5). Ryan and the generation of scholars who followed him remained fixated on "village minutiae" to find a "correct" or "authentic" form of caste in the island, which could be reconciled within a wider Indic civilisational understanding of caste (Jiggins, 1979, p. 19). Yet, as John Rogers (2004) convincingly argues, present-day conceptions of caste find their origins in the consequences of the social, economic, and political decisions the British took during the early nineteenth century. While caste may appear "dormant" in Sri Lankan public life today, one needs only to refer to matrimonial advertisements in local newspapers or scrutinise the selection of candidates in electoral processes to conclude that caste remains "ubiquitous" in everyday life (Silva & Balmforth, 2025, p. 1).

The tendency to diminish the place and effect of caste and treat Sinhalese society as unified and culturally homogenous also remains a feature of commentaries on the career of Anagarika Dharmapala, which either neglect the role of caste in his life or lessen its importance. Indeed, it is difficult to write about cultural and social developments in modern Sri Lanka without reference to Dharmapala and his activities (Hewage, 2022). During his funerary procession in Colombo in 1933, the procession of mourners that followed Dharmapala's casket stretched over half the distance of the two-mile route. Dozens of his statues have been erected across the island, and today several city streets bear his name in places such as Anuradhapura, Kandy, and Galle (Kemper, 2015, p. 3). Remembered variously within Sri Lanka today as an anti-colonial hero or as a nativist bigot (Senanayake, 1965, p. v; Sarvan, 2017), Dharmapala arguably became the most prominent commentator on Sinhalese affairs during the island's late colonial period. As one of the "founding contributors" (Mukherjee, 2015, p. 19) of what is often termed Sinhalese-Buddhist nationalism today, Dharmapala—through his writings and speeches in the English and Sinhalese languages—provides us with unique insights into the place of caste across both ethnic and religious axes.

Dharmapala, however, remains an exceedingly complicated character to portray in clear and concise terms. Ananda Guruge's (1965) published collection of his writings and speeches—along with, more recently, his personal diaries—in the English language features extensively in Dharmapala's wider historiography. Written primarily for Western audiences unfamiliar with its everyday trappings, Dharmapala's English-language writings naturally do not dwell at length on the phenomenon of caste. Furthermore, the colonial state closely followed these publications, with police

¹Nevertheless, scholarship exists which examines so-called "hidden" or "latent" caste systems amongst Buddhists in polities such as Thailand and Japan. See, for instance, Aaronson, Gaines & Abouharb (2016) and Gordon (2017).

across the subcontinent keeping track of Dharmapala's statements throughout his career (Guruge, 1965, pp. 1-11). This article, however, capitalises on his Sinhalese-language output, which remains glaringly absent in Western scholarship.² Often more intimate and forceful than his English-language work, likely because Dharmapala was aware it would largely escape the scrutiny of the state, his Sinhalese writings frequently provide more comprehensive analyses of his thinking and visions regarding his native island and its affairs. Indeed, it is from these writings that we gain our clearest understanding of Dharmapala's positionality regarding caste and his attitudes towards its practice and existence.

Though a complete biography of Dharmapala and an extended account of his many activities are beyond the scope of this article, any cursory overview of his life reveals two interconnected objectives that he continually referred to throughout his life.³ Namely, a personal mission to become the next Buddha, which accompanied his vow to serve humanity through Buddhist welfare work—of which the campaign to reclaim Buddhist ownership of the Mahabodhi temple complex at Bodhi Gaya dominated.⁴ Furthermore, in how he presented Buddhism to others, Dharmapala focused primarily on both tradition and modernity (Hewage, 2025). For his fellow Sinhalese Buddhists, he emphasised how Ceylonese antiquity and precolonial times created a benevolent Buddhist society with harmony and prosperity for everyone. The introduction of “Western abominations”, from weapons to whiskey, and an adherence to “heathenish diabolisms” resulted in a move away from the “ethical purity” Buddhism provided for Ceylonese society (Dharmapala, 1965f, p. 105). As he repeatedly insisted throughout his career in both his English-language and Sinhalese writings and speeches, Buddhism's value for the Sinhalese was as a traditional religion that greatly enriched their lives and defined their society.

Whereas tradition perhaps best characterised Dharmapala's appeals to his Sinhalese kin, Dharmapala preferred instead to present Buddhism as a religion of modernity for Western audiences. For Dharmapala, modernity represented morality and scientific progress, which he believed perfectly described the Buddhism he wished to propagate. In his earliest public speeches to non-Buddhist audiences in the West, Dharmapala (1965j, pp. 18–20) maintained that Buddhism made people “gentler and milder” and was a “scientific religion” that was “tantamount to a knowledge of other sciences.” Indeed, morality and science appeared to represent the best way for Dharmapala to encourage Western audiences to warm to and accept Buddhism, and discourses on

²Only H.L. Seneviratne (1999) has made extensive use of Dharmapala's Sinhalese writings in English-language scholarship. Yet even his usage of these documents is largely limited to an examination of Dharmapala's views on the Buddhist monkhood. Sarath Amunugama (2016) also references Dharmapala's Sinhalese-language writings but does not make wide use of them in his extended biography on Dharmapala's life and career.

³For extended biographies of Dharmapala, see Karunaratna (1965); Kemper (2015); and Amunugama (2016).

⁴The Mahabodhi complex is traditionally associated with the site where Siddhartha Gautama achieved Buddhahood. For an overview of Dharmapala's activities involving the Mahabodhi complex, see Trevithick (2006).

modernity became a constant refrain in Dharmapala's engagement with non-Buddhist audiences—especially those in Europe and North America. What is important here, however, is not Dharmapala's specific appeals to tradition and modernity—important as they are in evaluations of his life and career—given the inherent contradictions between them. Rather, Dharmapala's tendency to emphasise and dwell on different aspects of the same issues for different audiences is of greater significance for us here when we consider his engagement with caste.

As an emblem of tradition and as a barrier to modernity, where then, if at all, did caste fit in with Dharmapala's dual objectives and representations of Buddhism? Despite his efforts to personally distance himself from its practice and reach, caste surprisingly remained a critical component in Dharmapala's various social calculations and engagements. Born in 1864, Dharmapala emerged during the mid-nineteenth century into a Sinhalese society witnessing a new awareness regarding the importance of caste in a colonial Ceylonese setting. Yet the goal here is not to pass judgement on his positioning and views on caste but instead to understand Dharmapala's reasoning and its significance in later developments affecting both his native Sinhalese community and Sri Lanka more generally.

Critiquing the Sinhalese Caste System

Dharmapala formed part of the first generation of Ceylonese to experience the effects of a new kind of socioeconomic order hitherto unseen on the island. Establishing the Colebrooke-Cameron Commission in 1831, Britain charted its island colony on a course away from quasi-feudalism and indigenous economic practices to create a free labour model oriented towards export markets. This spelled the end for the traditional Sinhalese *rājākariya* system of personal service through which the monarch provided land tenure in return for service provision from various occupation-based castes. In its place, a network of plantations developed with tea, rubber, and coconut estates emerged throughout the island. Demand boomed for agents and contractors to supply labour for this new economic system, and ambitious locals quickly reaped the benefits from the entrepreneurial culture that accompanied the plantations. These pioneering entrepreneurs who moved into newly created contract industries, such as cooping and transport provision, however, did not emerge from the ranks of the Sinhalese aristocracy. Rather, this new class of businessmen was formed from across the Sinhalese caste spectrum, with no one caste grouping able to claim dominance over these new trades (Amunugama, 2016, p. 354; Obeyesekere, 2018, p. 278).

Overtime, the numerically superior *Govigama* caste—to which Dharmapala's father, Don Carolis, belonged—found its position under attack from rival caste groupings. The “farmer-aristocracy” as Ralph Pieris (1956, p. 171) first described them, the Govigama were traditionally engaged as land-holding cultivators, and “to all intents and purposes”, he argues, “constituted the chief caste” in terms of influence and power during Ceylon's pre-colonial period.⁵ Many new entrepreneurs, such as

⁵As mentioned, the exact figures of each caste community on the island are difficult to validate.

The Govigama community, however, is believed to constitute around 50 per cent of the wider

Don Carolis, emerged from the middle and lower ranks of the Govigama. Yet they faced commercial competition from rivals in the *Durāva* caste, traditionally associated with toddy-tapping and to which Dharmapala's mother—Dona Mallika—belonged, the Karāva caste historically engaged in maritime activities, and the Salāgama caste associated with cinnamon cultivation (Amunugama, 2016, p. 354).

Competition among these castes took different forms, and the early nineteenth century witnessed various “caste propagandists” from various backgrounds attempting to influence and shape government policy and the allocation of public employment (Rogers, 2004, p. 61). Economic competition also extended into other arenas, and the latter half of the nineteenth century witnessed the publication of polemical caste accounts and histories where various castes attempted to elevate themselves and downgrade the status of others (Blackburn, 2010, pp. 79–90). Although some of these polemics appeared in the colony's English-language press, most of the writing on caste was in Sinhalese (Rogers, 2004, p. 69). The *Itihāsayā* (“History”), a pro-Govigama caste narrative, and the *Kevaṭṭa Vamsaya* (“The Fishers' Chronicle”), a rejoinder to the *Itihāsayā* from the Karāva community, perhaps represent the best examples from the period.⁶ Earlier scholarship suggests that these caste accounts reflected the concerns only of a narrow social class of elites who employed caste to compete over social prestige (Peebles, 1995, pp. 166–168; Kannangara, 1993, p. 113). Yet, as Rogers argues, the tone of several of these exchanges indicates that far deeper issues of status and worth were at stake for all members of the different caste groupings (2004, p. 69). A voracious reader throughout his youth and beyond (Kemper, 2019, p. 228), Dharmapala undoubtedly became intimately familiar with the arguments of these revisionist texts with their references to geographical, historical, and religious subject matter.

It is from Dharmapala's Sinhalese letters, addressed primarily to one of his closest disciples Devapriya Valisinha, that we get the best insights into how this commentary functioned in practice. Discussing the fate of Ceylon's leading Buddhist school, Ananda College in Colombo, from Bombay in 1922, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 331) firmly connected educational attainment and achievement with various Sinhalese caste groupings. While he suggested Karāva students *igeṇagāṇimaṭa dukgannavā* (strive hard to learn), he claimed to Valisinha that Govigama schoolchildren instead *igeṇagāṇa molē naeta* (do not have the brains to learn). In the coastal towns where the Karāva dominated, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 331) argued that the community together uplifted themselves through education, while the Govigama community bickered amongst themselves and *asamagiyeṇ siṭiti* (could not find consensus). He further questioned Valisinha about the number of Govigama students enrolled at Ananda and lamented what he believed was the tendency of Govigama elites to Christian schools over Buddhist ones. Curiously, he also noted the caste background of Ananda's

Sinhalese population in Sri Lanka. The Govigama caste is itself, of course, divided into several sub-castes. For a dated but valuable, detailed description of these sub-castes along with other Sinhalese castes, see Pieris, 1956.

⁶All translations provided in this article are my own.

headmaster P.S. de Silva Kularatne—who belonged to neither the Govigama nor Karāva castes—and doubted his ability to command the support of both castes.

Dharmapala's criticism here of the Govigama caste—the caste to which his own father belonged—exemplified how caste controversies remained a periodic feature of Ceylonese public discourse well into the twentieth century. Indeed, the rivalry between the Govigama and Karāva castes remained the central feature of these polemics, though several other caste groups also involved themselves (Blackburn, 2010, pp. 79–90; Rogers, 2004, p. 69). Yet Dharmapala proved unique in his involvement in the central rivalry between the two castes as he readily criticised both. Indeed, while he praised the educational achievements of the Karāva, he considered their religious devotion suspect. As mentioned, Dharmapala's career ambition was to recover Buddhist ownership over the Mahabodhi temple complex in northern India. In diary entries from 1925, again written in Sinhalese, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 384) lamented how the Karāva people *Buḍagayāwa sambandha dēṭa udav naē* (give no help in affairs relating to Bodh Gaya). Curiously, he proceeded to describe the Karāva as a people who *buḍagayāwaṭa waḍā jātiya salakana* (cared more about their caste than Bodh Gaya) and then compared their piety unfavourably to that of the Govigama. As was typical of Dharmapala, however, he took the opportunity here to criticise the Govigama again. The prosperous among them, he (2014e, p. 384) claimed, *śraddhava naē* (have no faith). Those Govigama who did have faith, he claimed, *dhanaya naēta* (had no riches). When they accumulated wealth, he lamented, *lōbhayen kriyā karati* (they acted stingy).

The fate of the Mahabodhi site proved especially pressing in Dharmapala's caste polemics. While existing scholarship has captured his involvement in tensions between Buddhists and Hindus over the site (Kemper, 2015; Trevithick, 2006), Dharmapala's engagement with caste concerns regarding the complex remains less well known. When a Sinhalese monastic specifically suggested in 1925 that stewardship of the complex be given to the Karāva rather than the Govigama, Dharmapala (2014b, pp. 242–243) commented that it was an *ajñāna kamaki* (unwise act). The Govigama community, as he explained in a Sinhalese-language article, had historically provided for all monastic sects and was central to Buddhism's survival in Ceylon for over 2,000 years *jāti gōtra nosalakā* (irrespective of ethnicity and caste). Yet he took care here again to avoid the implication that the piety of the Govigama elevated them over others. Should monks from other Sinhalese caste communities travel to reside at the Mahabodhi complex, Dharmapala (2014b, p. 243) insisted that he would personally provide for their maintenance there.

It was not just the Buddhist laity that Dharmapala targeted along the lines of caste. The Ceylonese monkhood also attracted fierce criticism from Dharmapala for its caste-based composition. Indeed, he repeatedly slammed the island's monastics for what he believed was their defeatist and unprincipled position in Ceylonese society. "The Bhikkhus [monks] in Ceylon are indolent and ignorant", Dharmapala (1965a, p. 520) noted in 1920 while in Calcutta, "they keep up their position by a smattering of Pali Grammar and Sanskrit prosody." Yet, from his Sinhalese writings, Dharmapala

specifically chooses caste to explain how he believed the monkhood went astray. Complaining about bad monastics in a note from 1923, he singled out the Siyam Nikāya (“Siam Sect”)—which drew its membership exclusively from the Govigama community—to highlight his point. The Siyam Nikāya monks, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 339) explained, were preoccupied with accumulating *dhana* (wealth) rather than religious concerns. The following year, however, Dharmapala turned his attention to the island’s other monastic fraternities.

He attacked the Amarapura Nikāya (“Amarapura Sect”), composed primarily of non-Govigama monks, for following the Siyam Nikāya in chasing wealth. In a diary entry from 1921, Dharmapala (2014e, pp. 359–60) lambasted senior Amarapura monastics for striving to enrich themselves while having *anukampawak nēta* (no sympathy) towards *asaraṇa bauḍayō* (helpless Buddhists). The Rāmañña Nikāya (“Lower Burma Sect”), originally founded by low-country Govigama who claimed that the Siyam Nikāya privileged only the Govigama who hailed from the Kandyan highlands, also found its way into his wrath. Dharmapala (2014e, pp. 359–360) insisted that the *wæḍi koṭasa* (majority) of Rāmañña Nikāya monastics *goṭu atu pāvichchi karati* (used palmyra leaves), implying that they cared more about distinguishing themselves from other monastic sects than working for the benefit of other Buddhists. All three major Buddhist orders in Ceylon, he believed, failed in their mission to serve the wider Sinhalese Buddhist community. For Dharmapala, competition based on caste status ravaged the Ceylonese monkhood and rendered its members useless.

From his analyses of Dharmapala’s English-language writings, Steven Kemper (2015, p. 419) highlights Dharmapala’s tendency to criticise virtually everyone he encountered. From his Sinhalese-language documents, a similar pattern again emerges. Despite his criticisms of Sinhalese caste communities, Dharmapala nonetheless clarified that these specific criticisms reflected his rejection of the Sinhalese caste system *as it then existed* during his lifetime. Key to the present degradation of the Sinhalese caste system, he argued, were the caste-based monastic fraternities themselves. In a Sinhalese-language article from 1922, Dharmapala (2014f, p. 105) explained that Buddhism had flourished in Ceylon for two millennia because of its focus on *maitrī dharmaya* (philosophy of loving kindness). The problems that he felt later emerged in Ceylonese Buddhism, he suggested, emerged following the foundation of the Siyam Nikāya in the eighteenth century. With higher monastic ordination restricted only to the Govigama, Dharmapala wrote that these circumstances gave rise to both the Amarapura Nikāya and Rāmañña Nikāya to democratise the pursuit of higher ordination.⁷ Clerical cleavages thus emerged, he implied, when caste communities avoided participating in the religious activities of other caste groups, which, in turn, created divisions amongst the wider Sinhalese laity and so ultimately weakened Ceylonese Buddhism.⁸ When castes gained economic clout, Dharmapala (2014f, p. 105) concluded, they discarded

⁷For a comprehensive account of the origins of the Rāmañña Nikāya and of its difference from both the Siyam Nikāya and Amarapura Nikāya, see Malalgoda (1976), pp. 161–172.

⁸For detailed analysis on the foundation of Ceylonese monastic sects, their practices, and their organisational structures, see Malalgoda (1976), pp. 106–172.

samyakdrusṭiya (true vision) for *mithyādrusṭiya* (improper vision) and thus worsened caste divides.

Dharmapala, therefore, criticised the wider current Sinhalese caste system for its perceived role in creating divisions that diminished Ceylonese Buddhism. These developments, he believed (2014f, p. 105), served only to consolidate the status of other ethnic and religious Ceylonese communities at the expense of the Sinhalese. Yet he did not urge the Sinhalese to eradicate or discard caste altogether. Rogers (2004, p. 65) notes how the British, fearful of any action that could lead to unrest, concluded during the early nineteenth century that Buddhism did not preach caste and thus chose not to directly interfere or engage with the workings of caste. Dharmapala, though he did not cite Britain's influence, took a similar approach. In an educational booklet addressed to "every English-speaking person throughout the World" published in 1917, he (1965c, pp. 155–169) maintained how even the Buddha stressed the necessity of "observing [pre-existing] caste rules" and of abiding by the "laws laid down by ancestors." Despite this serving as one of the few examples of Dharmapala referencing caste to foreign audiences, it is again in his Sinhalese writings where he provides more detail on his visions for the practice of caste.

Indeed, in the same 1922 article where he blamed the Ceylonese monastic sects for fostering caste division, Dharmapala curiously rebuked those whom he believed plotted to eliminate the Govigama caste. He (2014f, p. 106) wrote how it was *dukkhadayakayi* (quite sad) that there existed those who plotted to destroy the Govigama and offered his own reasoning as to why this was an extremely concerning development. Dharmapala (2014f, p. 106) declared that *siṃhala jātiya naetivē* (the Sinhalese race will be lost) should the tactics used to destroy the Govigama succeed. He did not, unfortunately, elaborate on what precisely he meant here, and we do not know what specific tactics and schemes Dharmapala had in mind, nor how exactly the elimination of the Govigama would serve to annihilate the Sinhalese race itself. Nevertheless, the remainder of the article provides us with a deeper insight into how exactly he valued caste and its wider purpose in society.

The crux of Dharmapala's message here was that the various castes which existed among the Sinhalese all had functions and were therefore all a critical component of Sinhalese society. The fishing folk who cast their nets and caught fish for a living possessed a different *śarīrika dhātu* (bodily makeup) from those whose livelihoods consisted of climbing palm trees and tapping toddy (2014f, p. 107). Disregarding Dharmapala's questionable biological calculus here, we see instead his belief that there was no need to rank which activities were more beneficial or valuable than others. Rather, Dharmapala wanted the Sinhalese to concede that they had always participated in different industries and trades. As Sinhalese castes were traditionally occupation-based, all castes therefore had their part to play in the everyday functioning of society. Moreover, his followers did not need to rely on him alone to accept the truth of his claims. The Buddha, Dharmapala (2014f) argued, explained the very same thing in the Pali Canon's *Samyutta Nikāya*. As Dharmapala insisted to his supporters, it was Buddhist practice itself that was of value and not the elevation of one caste group at the expense of others.

Brahmin-ising Buddhism

Despite these sentiments, however, Dharmapala himself *did* elevate one caste over all others. Yet this was a caste which was not then present in Sinhalese society. “The most significant factor for an understanding of Sinhalese caste structure”, Ryan (1953, p. 8) emphasises to his readers, “is not...that the Sinhalese preserved Buddhism, but that the Sinhalese did not preserve the Brahmin.” Different Sinhalese caste communities had begun referencing their supposedly Brahmin lineages long before the colonial period. Yet it was only from the mid-nineteenth century that the supposed *varṇa* status of the various castes became used to produce “relative rankings” (Rogers, 2004, p. 69; Kannangara, 1993, pp. 118–126). Born in 1864, Dharmapala thus emerged into a Sinhalese society where connections to Brahmin-ness and, by extension, social prestige were becoming commonplace. Indeed, Dharmapala deeply respected—if not idolised—the status that Brahmins held both during Buddhist antiquity and also during his own lifetime.

Spending most of his adult life based in India, Dharmapala was keenly aware of the reach and influence of Brahmins across the mainland. Indeed, his admiration for the Brahmin community largely emerges not from his Sinhalese output but instead from his writings and speeches to audiences beyond the island. Dharmapala repeatedly described what he labelled as a “pure” Brahminism which existed alongside and complemented early Buddhism. This pure Brahminism he separated from what he termed “degenerate” Brahminism, which he firmly connected with contemporary Hindu practice. In 1904, Dharmapala (Diary, 26 July 1904) clarified how “Brahmanism pure is renunciation of passions and ascetic life”, while “Brahmanism degenerate is abnormal sensuality”, which resulted in “intellectual degeneracy and sensual development.” A decade later, he insisted further that “[t]he Aryan people of India had a most spiritualizing code of ethics for several thousands of years.” Dharmapala (1965g, p. 261) noted how the “philosophers of ancient India had penetrated into the heights of the Brahmaloḥa [and found] an impetus for higher thought” but conceded that this period had ended long ago.

Hinduism split into an idealised past and a polluted present, Dharmapala further highlighted what he believed were the commonalities between Buddhism and the uncorrupted Hinduism as it existed during Buddhist antiquity. Describing the Buddha’s life and his teachings, he maintained, “[t]he Buddhism of the people of India was of native origin, the gods of the Buddhist were the gods of the Brahman.” Dharmapala (1965f, p. 85) insisted, “[s]o far, history is silent as to a war between Buddhists and Brahmans but of persecutions to annihilate each other, we find no signs in contemporary history.” This untainted Brahminism diverged from Buddhism and gave way to the debased Hinduism of the present “after the religion of the Buddha Kasyapa had disappeared.” As Dharmapala (1965g, p. 259) emphasised again to his supporters, “[t]he pure Brahman philosophy untainted by the doctrine of egohood is in no way antagonistic to the Dhamma of the Tathagata.”

⁹According to the Theravāda Buddhist tradition, Kāśyapa Buddha is believed to have been the third Buddha of the present *kalpa* (“aeon”) before the arrival of Gautama Buddha.

Dharmapala therefore aimed to equate Buddhism with a form of Hinduism, though moral and ethical, no longer existed and threatened the Buddhism he championed throughout his career. Indeed, his objective in his discussions and analyses of Hinduism was to convince Hindus that Buddhism's teachings formed a compelling alternative to the vices he believed pervaded their contemporary religious practice. As Dharmapala (1965i, p. 41) proclaimed in 1918, the Buddha "appeared in Middle India at a spiritual crisis to lead man from the slough of ignorance and ignoble sensualism to the loftier heights where love and an infinite happiness reign supreme." He did not, however, suggest here that Buddhism was merely a reformulation of the no longer extant pure Brahminism. To say that the Buddha "borrowed His religion" from ancient Brahminical beliefs, Dharmapala (1965f, p. 106) retorted, "would be like saying that Darwin borrowed his philosophy from the Christian Bible and the Aristotilean [sic] ethics, and that Herbert Spencer got his philosophy from the treatises of medieval theologians."

An extended analysis of Dharmapala's interpretation of the historical development of Hinduism is, of course, beyond the scope of this article. That this analysis emerges almost exclusively in his English-language material also should come as little surprise. As the subcontinent's dominant religion, and as an obstacle to both the reclamation of the Mahabodhi site and enticing conversions to Buddhism, Hinduism greatly preoccupied Dharmapala throughout his career. While Hinduism, of course, remained an influential minority religion in Ceylon during his lifetime, Dharmapala felt no immediate threat to his wider Buddhist mission from Ceylonese Hindus who corresponded in Tamil and largely avoided involving themselves in the affairs of Ceylonese Buddhists. Ever since his appearance alongside Swami Vivekananda at the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893, Dharmapala, however, faced constant opposition from Indian Hindus. From discourses on Buddhism's degradation aimed at diminishing Buddhism's appeal to Westerners to the legal wrangling over the Mahabodhi complex involving the colonial judicial system, Dharmapala debated Indian Hindu opponents throughout his career (Harris, 2024; Kemper, 2015; Trevithick, 2006; Amunugama, 1991). Without proficiency in the Indian languages of his antagonists, and battling them to win over Western publics, Dharmapala resorted to the English language to present his arguments. What *is* of special importance here, however, is Dharmapala's near exclusive focus on the Brahmin caste as representative of the wider Hindu religious system.

Indeed, in his discussion of degenerate Brahminism, it was the activities of the Brahmins themselves that came in for the greatest criticism. Its entire structure, Dharmapala (1965m, p. 578) claimed, revolved around "arrogant Brahmans" who sacrificed animals, consumed alcohol, and cursed the gods when grievances arose. The system became so corrupt, social uplift was possible only for a select few. As Dharmapala (1965h, p. 221) reminded his Bengali audience during a lecture at Calcutta in 1911, the "Brahmanical laws of social polity" excluded all those who were not "twice-born" from meaningful participation in Hindu religious life. To the many millions who fell into the excluded category, he argued, "the Buddha's law of love, and

the Discipline which He had in his mercy inculcated and called the Aryan discipline were meant.” For the very first time, Dharmapala continued, “the[se] teeming millions of India received a Religion” (1965h, p. 221). Hinduism, because of the machinations of the Brahmins, thus only catered towards specific categories of people. Buddhism, Dharmapala insisted, was for everyone.

Nevertheless, Dharmapala often looked past the harmful role Brahmins played in corrupting Hinduism and preferred instead to focus on the aspects of Brahmin-ness themselves that he considered exemplary and deserving of emulation. In a Sinhalese-language article from 1894, Dharmapala (2014c, p. 206) explained how the Sinhalese should follow *āryya* (noble) customs concerning filial piety, hospitality, and propriety. According to Dharmapala, during the Buddha’s lifetime, Brahmins had a duty *āryya sirit kaḍa nokara* (not to disregard noble decorum). If the Brahmins of antiquity followed these noble practices, he reasoned that the Buddhists of his day should copy them. Around this same time, Dharmapala emphasised again to other Buddhists the similarities between their religion and that of the Brahmins. Buddhism, as Dharmapala (1965e, p. 791) declared in one of his earliest English-language journal pieces, “is Brahminism without caste.” A decade later, he again implied that the social status accorded to Brahmins in the *varṇa* system was compatible with Buddhist teaching. “He who does good kamma, he is the Brahm[i]n”, Dharmapala (1965k, p. 144) noted in 1909, “he who does evil, he is the menial.” For Dharmapala, Buddhism therefore taught that karmic merit decided one’s profession and thus—by extension—the caste to which one belonged.

As mentioned earlier, Dharmapala curiously associated the fate of the broader Sinhalese ethnicity with the prosperity of the Govigama caste. He similarly connected the fate of the Buddhist religion to the continued existence of the Brahmin caste. The “next Buddha will be born in the Brahman caste...and only righteousness will reign” Dharmapala (1965f, p. 113) proclaimed to his readers in 1917 in a booklet published in Madras. He did not, however, explicitly mention or reference how he came to what was—and remains—an unorthodox and controversial view among Buddhists themselves. To those who “now” engaged in good conduct and deferred “to holy men and good Brahmans”, he further promised an ideal future rebirth (1965f, p. 113). That the Buddha himself would choose rebirth into a society that still clung to caste allegiances was not a source of shame. As Dharmapala (1965l, p. 65) insisted the following year, the Buddha merely “spiritualized the idea of Brahm[i]nhood” for all regardless of caste background. The Buddha, he continued, “upheld the social policy of caste differentiations among the laity” but ensured that the “low caste man” always found value and a meaningful place within the broader Buddhist fold.

Any cursory overview of Dharmapala’s writings and speeches, whether in English or Sinhalese, reveals his tendency to compare himself to the Buddha and his resolve to work towards Buddhahood. He, therefore, naturally maintained a vested interest in ensuring that caste, as an established institution of subcontinental society, survived the attacks of those who sought to do away with it in its entirety. The future Buddha, as Dharmapala mentioned, was destined to find rebirth in the Brahmin community. If

he were to become the Buddha, Dharmapala, too, required rebirth into the Brahmin caste. Indeed, his dying words in 1933 expressed something to this very effect. As Dharmapala (2014a, p. 250) fervently proclaimed, *magē adhiṣṭhānaya maraṇin matu indiyawē brāhmaṇa pavulaka ipida śasanika kaṭayutu yaḷit karagena yēmaṭayi* (my desire after death is to be born into a Brahmin family in India to again continue Buddhist activities). Dharmapala's truly sensational declaration here appears only as a footnote—if it even features at all—across most biographical analyses of his life. In Guruge's introduction to the collection of Dharmapala's English-language writings and speeches, he also transcribes Dharmapala's dying wish. Yet, strangely, Guruge (1965, p. xliii) uses ellipsis in the introduction to hide Dharmapala's references to rebirth as a Brahmin in India.

Dharmapala's parting wishes are, of course, difficult to stomach for those who remember and idolise him as a Sinhalese patriot who cared as much about Ceylon as he did its traditional Buddhist faith. Dharmapala rejected and became alienated from the new political class that emerged on the island during the later years of his life (Amunugama, 2016, pp. 524–527). His dying words perhaps represent his wish to distance himself from a Ceylon where nationalist and Marxist ideologies were beginning to capture attention away from his Buddhist messaging. Yet these final words—when taken with Dharmapala's idolisation of the Brahmin community throughout his career—perhaps also demonstrate to others his insistence that caste, for all its criticisms, continued to have a function in Buddhist circles. For Dharmapala, noble conduct and adherence to that considered *samyakdrusṭiya*, guaranteed rebirth into what he considered a superior caste. As *the* supreme caste, which he believed even the Buddha conceded, Brahmins—with their spiritually sanctified status in both Buddhism and pure Brahmanism—were the community every Buddhist needed to emulate. As the Sinhalese had not “preserved” the Brahmin in Ceylon, Dharmapala's wish for a Brahmin rebirth in India thus appears more comprehensible.

The valorisation of the Brahmin community on the island, of course, did not begin or end with Dharmapala. Gananath Obeyesekere (2015) writes about how earlier Brahmin migrants to the island, primarily from South India, seemingly transitioned into the upper echelons of the Govigama caste as elites. Yet to this day, other Sinhalese caste groups such as the Beravā—traditionally associated with drumming, maintain memories of poems and songs linking *them* with ancient Brahmin lineages who seemingly passed down ritual knowledge and novel forms of religiosity during the island's precolonial period (Simpson & de Silva, 2025, pp. 45–53). Nevertheless, as Praveen Tilakaratne (2025) illustrates, references to and identifications with the Brahmin community were not always positive—especially in postcolonial Ceylon, where ideas of Brahmin-ness became associated with unequal epistemic hierarchies and structural injustices. While Dharmapala himself did not directly link Brahmins with any specific Sinhalese caste grouping, association with Brahmin-ness was a definite source of honour and not shame.

Dharmapala further connected the Brahmin caste to his beliefs regarding the existence of “higher” castes and correspondingly “lower” castes. This terminology of

“high” and “low” groups, of course, had existed in Ceylon long before Dharmapala’s emergence, with chronicle authors from the island referring to the “simple bifurcation” of Sinhalese society into two groups based on various characteristics by the fourth century CE (Winslow, 2024, pp. 107–108). Nevertheless, Dharmapala’s understanding of what constituted this elevation proved unique. For him, good social conduct resulted in rebirth into a higher status. Poor social conduct instead led to rebirth into a lower status. He, however, specifically connected *samyakdrusṭiya* practices with the Brahmin community, while *mithyādrusṭiya* acts he firmly linked with Abrahamic religion, especially Christianity and Islam. In turn, these Abrahamic religions he associated with what he deemed lower caste communities, though he curiously declined to name them. In 1922, Dharmapala (2014d, p. 139) penned a piece titled “*Kalisam Kristiyāniya*” (“Trouser Christianity”) in which he mocked those he considered the Sinhalese of lower status who flocked to Christianity and aped Westerners in their dining and sartorial practices. Christianity, he claimed, was *sāradharmayak nēti* (of no useful teaching) and for three hundred years in Ceylon prevailed among *hīna jātika manuṣyayan* (lower caste peoples).

Islam, too, did not escape association with low caste status. In a 1923 article aimed at providing advice to Sinhalese Buddhist children, Dharmapala (2014g, p. 66) explained how in Ceylon, *gavamas kēma hīna kulavalaṭa ayiti dharmayaki* (the lower castes are accustomed to eating beef). In India, he continued, *gavamāṃśa sataravarṇayaṭa ayiti aya allannē nēta* (those from the four *varṇas* refrain from beef). Only Indian Muslims, Dharmapala insisted (2014g, p. 66), *gavamāṃśa anubhava karat* (consume beef). Disgusted at what he felt was the growing trend of meat consumption among Sinhalese Buddhists, Dharmapala (2014e, p. 362) commented in a diary entry during the following year that *apē bauddhayanget hamba mahamat kārayanget venasak nē* (there is no difference between our Buddhists and treacherous Muslims). Lamenting that Buddhists *anubala deti* (give support) to animal slaughter, he (2014e, p. 362) noted further that there was also *væḍi venasak nēta* (not much difference) between Ceylonese Christians and Buddhists. In a 1925 letter addressed to a Western supporter, he further noted the attempts of both Christians and Muslims to convert Indians who languished beyond the caste system. Implying that these Dalits who converted to both religions were “barbarians”, Dharmapala (1965d, p. 778) concluded that they were “satisfied with the low-caste gods and the fetish priests.” Moreover, he (1965b, p. 571) presumed in 1932 that it was “only the very low-castes” that became Muslim during the Islamic conquest of India, thus demonstrating again how characterisations like these continued throughout his career.

Caste, as Dharmapala understood it, therefore had its functions. These functions, for Dharmapala, primarily emerged from his own binary assessment of the phenomenon. There were meritorious acts that all could engage in and discreditable acts from which everyone should refrain. Conduct associated with the former resulted in rebirth into a higher social standing while practices connected to the latter augured rebirth into a comparatively lower social status. While Brahmins—in what he considered was their historical and traditional role—exemplified the zenith of this broader system, Christians and Muslims, given the caste backgrounds of those whom he presumed formed the

bulk of their communal numbers, represented the nadir. Nevertheless, Dharmapala continually stressed that it was not all doom for those who found themselves at the lower ends of this social spectrum.

Indeed, in his landmark address at the 1893 World's Parliament, Dharmapala emphasised that the value and worth of caste lost all religious significance when one became Buddhist. "Virtue was the passport," Dharmapala (1965j, p.19) claimed to the audience, "not wealth and rank." All Buddhists, as Dharmapala (1965m, p. 580) urged in an English-language article much later in 1924, should actively promote Buddhism to those who toiled at the bottom of the caste pyramid so that they, too, could discard the social stigma which arose from the ritual status accorded to their caste position. Righteous Buddhist conduct, he claimed, was that which formed the foundations of the social prestige and ritual superiority which Brahmins enjoyed. Karmic demerit explained the lowly position of some segments of subcontinental society. Yet Buddhism promised these groups an escape from social disadvantage—provided they engaged in *samyakdrusṭiya* behaviour—even if this did not actually remove these communities from their caste status or practically elevate them to the standing of Brahmins. For Dharmapala, caste therefore mattered in the organisation and functioning of society. However, that which was associated with caste was not necessarily absolute or final. Crucially, from his own interpretation of the phenomenon, caste had no ultimate bearing on soteriological progress under Buddhist teaching.

Conclusion

Caste status, for Dharmapala, therefore emerged from karmic merit and possessed social value but held no religious reward. The various components that formed his understanding and acceptance of caste, of course, appear contradictory. In a Ceylonese context, he maintained that caste cleavages caused splits among Buddhists and so weakened the overall position of the religion. Yet he maintained that these same cleavages, based around inherent differences in traditional and historical occupations, were justified given their centrality to the functioning of Sinhalese society. In a wider subcontinental context, he looked to the Brahmins as a community from whom all should model their social conduct and targeted Christian and Muslim communities for what he considered unconscionable social behaviours, which he keenly attributed to the caste backgrounds of their members. Nevertheless, he insisted that everyone, regardless of background, could escape from whatever social disadvantage caste brought them by embracing Buddhism. How then can we make sense of these contradictions?

In her description of the social structure of Ceylon's Kandyan region, Deborah Winslow (2024, p. 115) calls for a visualisation that includes "not only high and low, but also center and periphery, more cartwheel than ladder." In categorising Dharmapala's own visualisation of caste specifically, Winslow's "cartwheel" imagery seems especially apt. At its centre lay Buddhism, Dharmapala's primary focus and concern throughout his life and career, and the chief lens through which he negotiated

its trappings. On the periphery lay the claims of various castes regarding origins, status, and functions, of which Dharmapala remained keenly aware but largely disinterested. The spokes connecting the centre to these peripheries were the different avenues—the various monastic fraternities, specific social behaviours, and religious commitment, among others—that linked these claims to Buddhism. This cartwheel was, of course, highly adaptable in Dharmapala's case, as those who were considered high and low could alter their status by embracing and adhering to Buddhist teaching, even if they could not shed the specific labels themselves of the castes to which they belonged. The contradictions themselves are not essential in helping us understand how Dharmapala considered caste. Instead, Buddhism's role in mediating them is what is more significant. As mentioned earlier, and according to Dharmapala's interpretation, caste had no final bearing on one's soteriological progress provided one engaged in appropriate Buddhist conduct.

Despite Dharmapala's musings on the matter, especially in his lesser-studied Sinhalese writings, caste did not form a fundamental pillar of Dharmapala's dual objectives of achieving Buddhahood by serving humanity through Buddhist welfare work. His positioning on caste here, therefore, distinguished him from later generations of Buddhist activists who centralised caste reform and abolition in their career trajectories (Hewage, 2025). BR Ambedkar, who worked not just to fight caste discrimination but also to abolish the institution in its entirety for the harm it caused to subcontinental society more generally, perhaps remains the greatest exemplar of these later activists. Indeed, beyond offering encouragement to convert to Buddhism, Dharmapala did not prioritise participation in any meaningful social, legal, or political campaign—either in Ceylon or India—specifically aimed at uplifting those who faced caste disadvantages and social stigma because of their caste status. With Dharmapala still best remembered in Sri Lanka today for his countless appeals to the wider Sinhalese public, it thus remains apt to characterise his consideration of Buddhism on the island as an “ethnocentric hegemonic ideology” which concealed rather than addressed social inequalities (Silva, 2017, p. 230).

Indeed, it was this influence Dharmapala held over the wider Sinhalese populace that later generations of Sinhalese leaders manipulated to secure their own positions through pushing policies which were ostensibly pro-Sinhalese and pro-Buddhist (Karunaratna, 1965, p. 135; Jiggins, 1979, pp. 8–16; Rambukwella, 2018, pp. 73–101). While Dharmapala did not cater his appeals in Ceylon towards specific caste groups, he undoubtedly attracted the strongest support from those who did not belong to the upper echelons of Sinhalese caste communities—hence his alienation from political elites discussed earlier (Hewage, 2025, pp. 121–26). Ever since SWRD Bandaranaike's electoral success in 1956, political aspirants recognised the effectiveness of the language of Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism to make those from non-elite caste backgrounds believe that they had a meaningful role to play in Sri Lankan life. Just as the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms exactly a century earlier opened new opportunities for those from the middle and lower rungs of the Govigama caste and from other Sinhalese caste communities, universal franchise from 1931 again provided new

avenues for these caste groups. When these groups protested that their voices were not being heard, and when those from excluded minority communities similarly protested about their own positions in society, conflict emerged. Indeed, conflicts—such as the Marxist-Leninist uprisings of the JVP in 1971 and from 1987 to 1989 and the civil war with Tamil militants from 1983 to 2009—can all find their origins in the Sinhalese Buddhist nationalism of which Dharmapala is so often considered a founding figure (Jiggins, 1979, pp. 5–7; DeVotta, 2007; Rambukwella, 2018, pp. 102–136).

In sum, while Dharmapala primarily tended to treat the Sinhalese as a uniform ethnic community and privileged the ethnoreligious over all other forms of belonging and association, caste nonetheless remained a factor in his wider social calculus. The significance of caste for Dharmapala remains difficult to ascertain from his voluminous English-language writings, addressed primarily to those beyond the island and focused more on Buddhist propagation than social reform. Yet in his Sinhalese-language material, specifically targeted towards addressing all aspects of the lives of his Sinhalese kin, caste remained an ever-present aspect. Indeed, caste proved a useful instrument for Dharmapala to distinguish, more generally, that which was good in society from that which was bad. Though Dharmapala largely addressed both the Sinhalese ethnicity and Buddhist religion in singular terms throughout his career, he was forced to negotiate and could not ignore the various caste-based components that lay within.

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