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Caste and its Systemic Challenges in Sri Lanka within a Multispecies Perspective

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Abstract

Building on earlier research (Silva, 2025), this paper argues that caste in Sinhala society is not merely a human affair, but a multispecies entanglement in a tropical setting involving humans, animals, plants and spirits. It follows that dynamics within these other species are equally relevant for understanding the nature, extent and the challenges of caste in contemporary society. Drawing from a variety of ethnographic research in different contexts, the paper elaborates how human-spirit, human-animal and human-plant relations are mediated by caste in Sinhala society and the challenges resulting from the breakdown of hierarchies in each of these domains, the reluctance of young people from subordinate castes to perform what they perceive as demeaning tasks in public and the decline in domesticated elephant stocks needed for sustaining elaborate rituals such as the Kandy Asala Perahara involving a public display of human and non-human hierarchies.

Keywords

Hierarchy, Caste, Multispecies approach, Temple of the Tooth, Sri Maha Bodhi

Introduction

Caste is typically understood as a frozen hierarchical arrangement operated and transmitted intergenerationally among humans. This paper interrogates this long-held view by demonstrating that caste in Sinhala society can also be viewed as an established but potentially malleable framework defining exploitative relations between humans as well as between humans and non-humans inclusive of animals, plants and spiritual beings. Drawing from ethnographic studies in several communities in Sri Lanka at different points in time, this paper argues that animals like fish, cattle, and elephants,

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and plants like the bo tree, palm trees, paddy and cinnamon form a larger interactive process where humans interact with nature as well as culture inclusive of spirits who inhabit their real and imagined universe. Anthropocene is evident in the taxonomies of people, plants and animals. At the same time, agency of animals has exploded in recent episodes or human-elephant conflicts, problems caused by stray animals, and the depletion of fish in popular fishing grounds in the Indian Ocean. Furthermore, continuation of certain caste occupations is increasingly challenged by the progressive decline in biodiversity with reduced availability of plants such as palm trees utilized by toddy tappers and endemic hana (*Crotalaria juncea*) plants artistically assembled by mat weavers posing serious threats to the survival of these hereditary caste groups. This is indeed a positive trend in terms of deconstruction of caste and the breaking down of its barriers. However, it has the effect of disempowering subaltern caste groups like Wahumpura toddy tappers and Kinnara mat weavers too. Finally, these threats must be viewed as the fallout of global disorders entangled with Anthropocene ultimately rooted in caste, class and overarching species hierarchies.

In this paper we explore how spirits, animals and plants relate to the Sinhala caste system in Sri Lanka. In some ways the caste system can be seen as a device for exploiting not only humans but also other agents such as spirits, animals and plants. This becomes an Anthropocene to the extent various caste groups serve as intermediaries in exploiting natural as well as spiritual resources for human benefit. However, in this paper we argue that the caste system provides only limited opportunities for asserting the agency of non-human actors as well as human actors at the lower end of the caste hierarchy. First, we will elaborate how the non-human actors align with the Sinhala caste system in a way that reinforces the caste order as a certain natural order in the world. Next, we will deal with certain ruptures in this social and natural orders that interrogates both these orders and indeed the Anthropocene that underlie both types of orders in the world. Finally, we will take up the issues of social transformation and liberation as a potential remedy for current global problems.

Human Hierarchy and Non-Human Extensions

We argue here that the human hierarchy in Sinhala society is aligned with three non-human hierarchies, namely spirit hierarchy, animal hierarchy and plant hierarchy. A hierarchical framework is used in Sinhala society not only to establish divisions among humans but also among animals and plants. Among these different hierarchies not only there is an alignment with each other but also mutual reinforcement or weakening. In the multispecies research so far, the focus has been on how humans interact with plants and animals in ways that interrogate the Anthropocene characteristic of social order and corresponding social analysis (Harraway, 2015; Tsing, 2015). We however need to introduce spirit hierarchy into the social analysis particularly in South Asia where spirits are connected with humans not only in terms of social interaction but also in

terms of cosmologies connected with rebirth particularly in the case of humans, spirits and animals. In Buddhism and other South Asian religions while spirits and animals are considered living entities with a life of their own, plants are not considered living organisms (*jeeveen*) similar to humans. For instance, a human cannot be reborn as a plant in the Buddhist, Hindu or Jaina cosmologies. However, it is recognized that plants give life to humans and animals and, therefore, are closely connected with the survival of both humans and animals. Thus, the multispecies approach used in our analysis incorporates both spirits not included in the conventional multispecies approach used in social analysis and plants not included as living beings in the same sense as humans and animals in South Asia cosmologies. Already there are some useful multispecies initiatives to unpack caste in South Asia, so far they have focused on how animals such as pigs (Narayanan, 2021) and oysters (Fernando, 2021) are connected with human caste dynamics, to the neglect of plants and spirits. In contrast, in the current study animal, plant and spirit species are analyzed jointly in relation to the caste dynamics among humans (see also Silva, 2025).

Sinhala Caste System

Historically, the Sinhala caste system had a feudal character with status, hereditary occupation and position in landownership and tenure reinforcing each other in a way the dominant upper caste commanding the services of the so-called service castes. This pattern is presented in Table 1.

As evident from Table 1, in Sinhala society there is an alignment between hereditary caste status and position within production relations. Aristocratic Radala authorities are typically non-working landlords, the next levels in the caste hierarchy are owner farmers, tenants and workers respectively. The Radala landlords had their farmlands cultivated by the service caste tenants/sharecroppers who often were required to provide a distinctive caste service, e.g. supplying pottery to the Radala and other households as a hereditary caste obligation. The real feudal character of the Kandyan Sinhala society rested on the fact that the Radalas and often ordinary Goigamas (referred to as 'rate aththo' in core Kandyan areas) that they could influence their subjects in multiple ways through their official positions (e.g. as dissavas, korales, Basnayaka Nilames, village headman, etc.), as landlords and dignitaries in general. In other words, they could exert extra-economic pressure on those subordinate to them in the caste hierarchy. Another important feature of the Sinhala caste system was that those at the lower end of the caste hierarchy were numerically smaller groups, their smaller size, (with the possible exception of Bathgama and Wahumpura castes in Sinhala society) giving them a certain bargaining power vis-à-vis the numerically large Goigama caste in society as elaborated by some analysts (e.g. Leach, 1960). Another important feature of the Sinhala caste system was that Karawa, Salagama and Durawa castes of South Indian origin with effect from the tenth century onwards and who

were largely concentrated in the South-western coastal belt known as the low country, were primarily engaged in commercial activities not connected with the subsistence economy of rice farming where caste-based land tenure and social relations prevailed (Pieris, 1956; Silva, 1982; Ryan, 1993).

Table 1: Guesstimated Caste Composition in Sinhala Society, 2026

Caste Name	Traditional Occupation	Hereditary Position in Farming	Guesstimated Percentage of Population
Radala	Aristocracy	Landlord	.001
Goigama/ Rate Atto	Farmers	Owner Farmer/Landlord	49
Patti	Herdsmen	Owner Farmer	.001
Karawa	Fishermen	Limited involvement in farming	5
Durawa	Toddy makers	Limited involvement in farming	2
Salagama	Cinnamon work	Owner farmer/ worker	3
Navandanna	Smiths/crafts	Owner farmer	0.5
Wahumpura	Jaggery makers	Tenant/owner farmer	
Kumbal	Potters	Owner farmer/ Worker	2.5
Rada	Washers	Owner farmer	3
Berakara	Drummers	Tenant/owner farmer	12.5
Bathgama	Farm worker, palanquin bearer, royal guards, domestic helper	Tenant/owner farmer/ farm worker	18
Welladura	Guardians of the bodhi tree	Worker	.005
Pannadura	Elephant catchers & handlers	Workers	
Kinnara	Mat weavers	Workers	0.3
Rodi	Garbage handlers, beggars	No involvement in farming	.001
Other			4.0
Total			100.0

Source: Adapted from Silva, 2025.

The multispecies nature of the Sinhala caste system stems from its intersectionality with three other hierarchies, namely, spirit, animal and plant. In the next three sections we will explore the interplay between the human hierarchy and these three forms of non-human hierarchies. This will help us understand the ways in which and the extent to which human caste hierarchy relies on human engagements with these other species.

Human Hierarchy and Spirit Hierarchy

In this section first we will explore how human hierarchy is broadly aligned with the spirit hierarchy in Sinhala Buddhism, the predominant religious ideology in Sinhala society. Second, we will examine what this alignment means in multispecies terms in understanding the Sinhala caste system. As identified by Obeyesekere in 1966, the Sinhala Buddhist pantheon consists of several layers inclusive of benevolent or malevolent spirits and those with mixed qualities. Its alignment with caste is illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2: Distribution of Spirits, their Quality and Association with Different Castes in Sinhala Society

Caste	Category	Quality
Ksastriya	Buddha	Benevolent
Radala/ Goigama	Deva	Benevolent
Berawa	Deva/Yaksha/Preta/Bhutha	Mixed
Oli	Yaksha/Preta/Bhutha	Malevolent
Rodi	Yaksha/Preta/Bhutha	Malevolent

Source: Adapted from Obeyesekere, 1966

According to Table 2, Radalas are aligned with Deva category of spirits. This is reflected in mandatory assignment of managerial positions in Devales and also the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy to Radala officials offering them positions such as Basnayaka Nilame responsible for governance of Devales and Diyavadana Nilame responsible for the administration of the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy (Silva, 1982). This entitled them to administer temple/shrine lands as well as securing the services of all categories of temple service providers under the Rajakariya scheme. This defines the position of Radala as a land-owning aristocracy in Kandyan society. Similarly, Kapuralas in deity shrines (*devales)* perform services to the visitors to these shrines and this is a hereditary position held by Goigama caste people who hold landholdings in temple lands in view of their positions. Kapuralas are basically brokers between humans and spirits, enabling the former to negotiate with the deities (*devas*) who are benevolent spirits who can heal, bless or help overcome hardships faced by the humans.[1] On the other hand, the drummer caste berawas are engaged in drumming and dancing, healing rituals such as bali ceremonies or exorcisms and anti-sorcery rituals for the benefit of those superior or inferior to them in the caste hierarchy (Silva, 1982, 2011; Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges, 2009). They are in rituals connected with Temple of the Tooth and deity shrines with hereditary landholdings assigned to them by the relevant establishments in lieu of the respective services. Oli and Rodiyas serve

[1]Similarly the word kapuwa is used to refer to marriage brokers in Sinhala society. These kapuwas need not necessarily come from Goigama caste as they arrange marriages between those outside Goigama caste as well.

as ritual specialists dealing with yaksas, pretas and bhutas, namely inferior categories of spirits who afflict persons and cause *apala upadrava* (bad fortune, distress and disease) to these people (Silva, 2011). Rodi caste specialists conduct rituals (generally referred to as *yanthra matra gurukam)* or different type of charms under the request of those suffering from the specific ailments. Mostly they engage in exorcisms and charms and anti-sorcery work for the benefit of their paid clients; Rodi therapists possess the relevant knowledge in dealing with the malevolent spirits who cause suffering among humans. In their advertisements for these occult services in print and electronic media and social media, they identify themselves in caste terms and refer to the black magic and white magic they advertise as "secret charms performed by the powerful lowest of the low castes" (*nichakula rahas gurukam*) in one of the few instances of publicly self-recognizing the low caste status in modern Sri Lanka. The fact that the Rodiyas are located at the lowest end of the caste hierarchy has enabled them to interact with evil spirits and manipulate and master them using their hereditary secret knowledge and the subaltern lowest position in the Sinhala caste hierarchy.

In the same way that the Radala position is perceived as a karmic consequence, so is the position of Rodi. In other words, birth as a Radala is an outcome of good karmas committed in the past births. Similarly, birth as a Rodiya is the result of accumulated bad karmas inherited from previous births (Obeyesekere, 2002). Malevolent spirits such as yakshas, pretas and bhutas are condemned to the respective positions as they cannot escape these positions by themselves. Humans must transfer merits earned by them to these subaltern categories of spirits so that the latter can be redeemed from their plight. This is in some ways similar to the plight of Rodiyas in the human world as beggars who at least partially survive on donations given to them by those in better-off castes. These rituals involve exorcism, anti-sorcery activities connected with evil spirits. They may or may not have their own shrines (*devales*) which are different from community devales where the priests often hold the position of kapurala on a hereditary basis. In this case the human caste system may be seen as a set of formula for negotiating or interacting with spirits who may be helpful or harmful to humans depending on the context.

All humans, high caste and low caste, are vulnerable to the attacks by yaksas, pretas and bhutas, which in turn hang around the world invisibly causing humans multiple ailments that call for the intervention of ritual healers. This is when specialized Rodi services are needed in the form of performing healing rituals, the removal of spells and bandana (bond). This may be seen as an affirmation of the caste order in which a low status caste performs a service to a person typically from a higher status. At the same time, persons of higher caste status are compelled to appeal to and reward the lowest of the low. This may be seen as a reversal of the hierarchical caste order in the sense that a person of highest status seeks the help of a person of the lowest status. In a sense this paradoxical situation is built into the Sinhala caste system, undermining

the stability of the hierarchical order. This is one instance where a high-status person is compelled to seek the assistance of a low status person in the hierarchy to overcome a personal calamity caused by yaksha or bhuta attacks or a preta spell. Thus, while the power and authority of benevolent devas are in line with the caste hierarchy, the capacity of yaksha, preta and bhuta to harm humans irrespective of their caste position makes us realize that it can jolt the caste order and subject higher status humans to the authority of lower status spirits and humans from time to time. This is, however, not a case of communitas, a reversal of status limited to a particular ritual occasion but a permanent feature of society seen as a multispecies entity where humans and non-humans including spirits interact with each other (Turner, 1969).

The spirit hierarchy overrides the human hierarchy, so that even the lowest in the spirit hierarchy, such as pretas or bhutas can cause harm to even the highest in the human hierarchy like Radalas. In other words, humans are subject to the authority of the spirit world[2]. Some community healing rituals like Kohomba Kandkariya were invented to heal distresses and ailments in royal families caused by spirits (e.g. *dividos*). This in turn implies that Anthropocene was not possible under this scheme. Even royal families were subjected to the spiritual world and laws of nature (*sanathana dharma*) in a way they could not disregard the non-human species as well.

On the other hand, all people irrespective of their caste should have equal opportunities for spiritual liberation as Buddhism was open to all castes. However, this was obviously not the case with Sinhala Buddhism. Anybody could become a novice monk but higher ordination was initially limited to those of Goigama caste inclusive of its three subdivisions (Radala, Rate Aththo and Patti). Later the community leaders from other castes campaigned for opening of higher ordination for members of their castes too. This campaign was successful in establishing two new sects in Buddhist Sasana in Sri Lanka, namely Ramanna Nikaya and Amarapura Nikaya, which opened the opportunity for higher ordination for selected members of other castes as well. Even though this has opened up higher ordination prospects for all castes, as of now this remains largely restricted to the upwardly mobile middle-level low country caste groups like Karawa, Durawa and Salagama with those from lower castes still having difficulties in entering the monastic order. Similarly lay opportunities for alms giving to the Sangha may or may not be open to the subaltern castes in an area depending on the caste status of the monks. Unlike in India where Buddhism actually became a pathway for liberation of the Dalits under the leadership of Dr. Ambedkar spiritually, socially and politically, Sinhala Buddhism has failed to bring members of different castes into a level playing field in regard to participation in Buddhism and, indirectly, salvation. This has also affected the secular liberation including paths of upward social mobility through education and government employment through entry to the monastic order as

[2]This, however, does not necessarily dilute Anthropocene as humans can influence and ultimately redeem the spirits through the mechanism of merit transfer.

a regular means of working towards upward social mobility, especially by rural youth from disadvantaged backgrounds (Spencer et al., 2016). In other words, even though multispecies dynamics are at work and caste is not merely a human affair driven by human interests, the spirits have replicated the caste order among themselves instead of opening up a pathway out of the caste order.

Human Hierarchy and Animal Hierarchy

Animals have become an important part of the Sinhala caste system at several points in the caste hierarchy. These animals include elephants, cattle, fish, and pigs. Of these, elephants are considered sacred animals, cattle utility animals, pigs and fish used for human consumption. There are specific caste groups in Sinhala society responsible for the capture, protection, and harvesting of these animals. The relevant industries have encountered some serious challenges in recent times due to a variety of legal, environmental and logistic issues we will take up in this section. Finally, we will consider the implications of these challenges in respect of continuation of the Sinhala caste system.

Table 3: Animal Alignment with Sinhala Caste System

Caste	Animal Alignment	Role
Radala	Elephants	Owners of herds of domesticated elephants as a status symbol
Patti	Cattle and buffaloes	Raising them for milk and as draft animals
Karawa	Fish	Fishing in sea and inland waters and fish processing
Pannadura	Elephants	Handlers of elephants for ritual purposes and as draft animals
Rodi	Pigs and elephants	Raising of pigs as a livelihood in some areas, Setting traps to catch elephants in the wild before it was legally banned

Several caste-based livelihoods are connected with animals in different ways. Cattle belonging to different castes were branded with specific caste symbols identifying the caste of the owners in the dry zone areas as an extension of the multispecies conceptualization of caste in Sinhala society.

We analyze the role of elephants in Sinhala caste system, because several Sinhala castes are connected with elephants in one way or the other.

Elephants

In Sri Lanka elephant (*Elephas maximus maximus*) is considered a sacred animal because elephants figure in Buddha's life story and elephants perform sacred functions in the Kandy Asala Perahara where the casket containing a replica of the sacred tooth relic is carried by one of the decorated tusker elephants. Elephants connect with the Sinhala caste system in numerous ways. Elephants are an essential component of the

Kandy Asala Perahara, two weeks long celebration and a procession along the streets of Kandy, parading decorated drummers and dancers, and decorated elephants along with officials connected with the Temple of Tooth and the four devales in a full display of the Kandyan caste hierarchy consisting of the Radala aristocracy and its retinue along with their respective flags and insignia (Seneviratne, 1978). The decorated and illuminated elephants majestically march to the tune of drumming and human dancing, carrying religious insignia and sacred objects venerated by Kandyan society, identifying them as the core of the course of celebrations considered essential for ensuring their fertility and prosperity inclusive of timely rain, good harvest, and control of epidemic diseases. In this sense the value of elephants in Sinhala society exceeds their economic utility and touches on the very survival of all entities including humans, animals, plants and even spirits. Second, elephants have been seen as a part of the symbolic capital of the Kandyan aristocracy responsible for governance at central and provincial levels. From the angle of the Radala aristocracy, larger the herd of elephants in one's possession, higher the status entitling them for prestigious administrative positions like Diyawadana Nilame in the Temple of the Tooth and Basnayayaka Nilame in deity shrines (*devales*). Elephants add to the legitimacy of the aristocracy so far as these elephants perform their expected duties in the Perahara and other rituals. Elephants, however, are not merely a symbolic capital as they are also deployed as draft animals in Kandyan areas particularly for carrying of logs for various purposes on a terrain where motorable transport is inhibited due the steep slopes in the mountainous landscape. Third, historically the Rodiya caste was involved in the capturing of elephants in the wild by setting traps for them, using locally available plant material and hereditary knowledge about making elephant traps. This is how the royal family and the Radala aristocracy recruited new elephants for embellishing their herds in the precolonial era. Capturing of wild elephants was made a punishable offense in the British period and since then Rodiyas have been relieved of this function. Finally, Pannadura caste in Kandyan society has been responsible for taking care of domesticated elephants by feeding them with the necessary plant leaves, washing them in the rivers, and navigating them during events like Peraharas. Thus, at least four different castes in Kandyan society were connected with the mobilization of elephants for ritual and at times military operations by the ruling elites. In the Kandyan period, there was a separate arm of the state called Kuruwe Badde to coordinate these diverse activities and deploy elephants along with their keepers in military and ritual operations as needed by the establishment (Pieris, 1956). With the demise of the Kandyan kingdom Kuruwe Badde was abandoned and presently the ruling establishment in Kandy faces several challenges in securing of elephants for ritual operations (Fernando, 2015; Gunawansa, 2023). The decline of the elephant population has posed a serious problem for all the Sinhala castes connected with them as well as sustaining the traditional Kandy

Perahara that legitimizes the caste order and the multispecies coexistence built around it (Seneviratne, 1978; Pieris, 1956).

Presently the Kandy Asala Perahara has become a major attraction for local visitors as well as foreign tourists, quite apart from its significance as a cultural pageantry. The Perahara continues to be the largest parade of domesticated elephants anywhere in the world. According to records in the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy roughly about 80 domesticated elephants are currently available with a pool of elephants available in the elephant herd kept by the Temple of the Tooth, elephants available with other temples, and Radala owners of elephants. The temple authorities experience difficulties in retaining adequate number of elephants for the annual procession due to a combination of factors, including the gradual reduction of the available stock of domesticated elephants, the inability to capture wild elephants for domestication purposes due to legal barriers, backed by the environmental lobbies, the poor reproduction of elephants in captivity and the difficulty of feeding large elephant herds due to gradual decline in the number of kittul palm trees producing the staple food of elephants. An elephant orphanage was established in Pinnawela in 1975 to accommodate elephants including baby elephants displaced by developments projects such as the Mahaweli Development Program and attract foreign tourists and local visitors to see the large herd of elephants in captivity but it has not been able to add to the stock of domesticated elephants available for economic and ritual purposes. The Temple of the Tooth continues to employ Pannadura caste mahouts from around Kandy to look after and utilize the elephants in their herds, but the younger generations in these communities have become increasingly reluctant to take up the position of mahouts due to status considerations. In many instances, the temple authorities have been compelled to replace hereditary mahouts with non-hereditary hired personnel hurriedly trained for the purpose. Elephant attacks on elephant keepers and elephants suddenly breaking away from processions causing stampede in some instances have become a recurring problem. In the meantime, the human-elephant conflict in areas bordering wild elephant reserves has led to many human deaths and even more elephant deaths in recent years (Gunawamsa et al., 2023). This has served to undermine the sanctity of elephants at least in some sections of the population. Together these diverse developments point to the new challenges encountered in the deployment of elephants for Perahara and other purposes as well as a tendency towards weakening of the hold of caste on popular ritual activities in society. In spite of the challenges faced in securing elephants and mahouts who handle these elephants, the Temple of the Tooth has continued to function and the annual Asala Perahara has continued largely due to its popularity among local visitors as well as international tourists who bring foreign currency into the country. While Perahara is much in demand among tourists and Sinhala Buddhist nationalists in particular, groups such as environment lobbies, human rights and animal rights activists have come forward at times to protest against the abuses and animal right violations caused by these rituals (Fernando, 2015; Reed, 2010).

Human Hierarchy and Plant Hierarchy

Plants are used in several caste occupations in Sinhala society. For instance, Durawa toddy tappers tap coconut flowers to obtain toddy, Salagama cinnamon peelers peel cinnamon bark and produce cinnamon for export and local use, and Panna Dura mahouts obtain kitual leaves for feeding elephants. A list of castes by plant material used in their caste occupations is given in Table 4.

Table 4: Plant Alignment with Sinhala Caste System

Caste	**Plant**	**Role**
Goigama	Paddy	Cultivation of paddy
Durawa	Coconut	Manufacture of toddy extracted from the coconut flower
Salagama	Cinnamon	Peeling of the cinnamon bark and processing it
Wahumpura	Kitul palm tree	Manufacture of toddy and a local sweetener called jaggory
Welli Dura	Bodhi tree	Looking after Sri Maha Bodhi against predatory birds and wild animals
Kinnara	Hana plant	Used to produce Dumbara mats

Thus, extracting some value and applications from locally available mostly tropical plant material or plants cultivated by the respective castes is important for a number of castes in Sinhala society. Each such caste has a body of hereditary knowledge about the relevant plants, hereditary skills about harvesting and processing the relevant products, an inherited practical knowledge about their cultivation and processing and a set of tools needed to do the tasks (for instance tools used by cinnamon peelers) are possessed by the respective castes. The plants used are mostly endemic to Sri Lanka. For instance, cinnamon (Silva, 2025) is endemic to Sri Lanka and grew in the wild before cinnamon cultivation began during the Dutch period. All the caste groups engaged in cultivation of a crop as their main livelihood, such as Govigama, Bathgama, Salagama, have their caste names ending with the suffix, gama (village), perhaps indicating a settled livelihood, as against castes collecting plant material or animals in the wild such as Kinnara or Rodi caste. Similarly, in the Indian case, there was a clear distinction between caste and tribe, the latter primarily engaged in collection and processing of forest products as pointed out by Kosamby (1944). In the analysis pursued here we will concentrate on the bodhi tree because of its historical relevance, ritual significance and cultural role in Sinhala Buddhist society.

Jaya Srimaha Bodhi

The Bodhi tree (*Ficus religiosa*) is sacred in Sri Lanka because of its association with Buddha's life story. The Jaya Srimaha Bodhi (JSB) located in Mahameuna Uyana in Anuradhapura is particularly sacred to Sri Lanka as it is believed to have grown from a cutting of the sacred bodhi tree under which Buddha achieved Buddhahood in India. Sri Maha Bodhi tree became politically significant in the same way as the tooth relic of

Buddha as the ruler who was the custodian of these two sacred objects was recognized as the legitimate heir to kingship in the country. After achieving Buddhahood, Siddartha Gautama himself performed Animisa Lochana Puja (Sanctification of the bodhi tree by the gaze of Lord Buddha} after he achieved Buddhahood, as a mark of gratitude and respect. The history of JSB constitutes an important chapter in the history of Sasana in Sri Lanka. Sinhala Bodhi Wamsa was composed in 10th century AD in order to narrate the story of how the sapling of the Bodhi tree was sent to Sri Lanka by the great Indian emperor Darmasoka under the guardianship of his daughter Sangamitta thera as a part of his campaign to disseminate Buddhism throughout the region. The Bodhi tree was accompanied by 16 clans of humans (Wamsa) from India, who were responsible for protecting the sapling during its transmission according to some Buddhist chronicles. Some of them were settled in the area and continued to serve the Bodhi tree once it was established in Anuradahapura. One such group came to be known as Bodhi Wamsa as they were assigned the responsibility of taking care of the Bodhi plant by watering it, protecting it against wild animals and birds, and regularly reporting any problems to the relevant authorities. Some scholars have identified this as the beginning of the Sinhala caste system way back in the third century BC. If this was indeed the case, the Sinhala caste system began as a sanctified hierarchical order serving the sacred Bodhi tree itself (Gombrich and Obeyesekere, 1988). In any case the present-day care takers of the Bodhi tree, the Welli Dura caste, has a legendary history connecting their origin to the arrival of the Bodhi sapling from India. We must remember that JSB and the Tooth relic are officially recognized sacred objects where mandatory caste services continue to prevail despite abolition of Rajakariya in secular domains in 1832. Some villages assigned to the service castes performing rituals in the sacred Bodhi tree such as Vihara Tirappane, Vihara Kallanchiya and Vihara Bulankulama, continute to exist near the Anuradhapura city until today.[3]

A living bodhi tree worshiped by devotees is a central landmark in any Buddhist temple in Sri Lanka.[4] Since late 1970s Bodhi puja consisting of lighting of oil lamps, watering of the root of the Bodhi tree sometimes using milk, shared collective chanting of popular Sinhala verses about the Bodhi tree led by animated monks became a popular ritual particularly among youth (Seneviratne and Wickremeratne, 1981). These chants may be punctuated by drumming conducted by the drummer from the relevant caste from the appropriate villages. However, Bodhi Pujas are by no means

[3]Personal communication with Mr. Jayalath Bandara from Anuradhapura.

[4]The bodhi trees that are actually venerated by the Buddhists are referred to as 'Bodhin Vahanse' (venerated one) as distinct from 'kaka bodhiya' (bodhi tree occupied by the crows) inhabited and polluted by the ubiquitous crows in Sri Lanka. The venerated bodhi trees are cleaned of fallen leaves and other debris by sweeping (*bomaluwa athuganawa*) by the devotees. This is, however, different from mandatory caste services assigned to land holders in establishments like the JSB.

a caste ritual as young people from different castes are likely to participate in these prayer-like collective rituals. What is important, however, is that the Bodhi tree figures in the collective consciousness of history among Sinhala Buddhist as well as in the Wamsa history of at least one caste, namely Bodhi Wamsa or Welli Durayi. In a recent study focusing on coming of Brahmin migrants to Sri Lanka from the fifteenth century onwards, Obeyesekere (2013) reported that some of these families too claim that their original ancestors came to Sri Lanka as part of the larger entourage accompanying the Bodhi tree from India. Thus, it appears that the caste histories of several groups in Sri Lanka is entangled with the arrival of the JSB and the tooth relic from India. The fact that the royal family was considered the custodian of the JSB and the tooth relic and routinely venerated them indicates that humans were subjected to the power and authority of the plant kingdom with the Sri Maha Bodhi identified as a companion species of the royal family and indeed the nation as a whole. The sacred Bodhi tree encountered a series of problems such as land tenure issues in the relevant villages, infection of plant diseases from time to time, a terrorist attack from the LTTE in 1985, protecting the Bodhi tree from hordes of predatory wild animals and birds. and administrative and management difficulties relating to caste-based service providers catering to the ritual complex. Despite these difficulties, the popularity of the ritual complex seems to have increased over time.

What is important is that plants are associated with the history and the upkeep of certain castes in Sinhala society. JSB is particularly significant as it solidifies the Buddhist heritage in Sri Lanka and continues to sanctify the caste order, complimenting and supplementing the role of the Temple of Tooth already described. In the same way animal kingdom including elephants brought under the purview of Buddhist cosmology through the sacred Temple of the Tooth, the plant kingdom in Sri Lanka inclusive of the Bodhi tree is incorporated in the Buddhist cosmology of Sri Lanka through the history of the JSB. A significant number of castes in Sinhala society are connected with these two ritual complexes highlighting their symbolic significance in perpetuating the caste order quite apart from the material base of temple lands and other resources. Further research is necessary to identify how genealogies of other Sinhala castes listed in Table 1, may be connected with various local plants in the plant kingdom.

Conclusion

This paper identified how spirits, animals and plants are connected and aligned with specific caste groups in Sinhala society. This in turn points to the importance of a multispecies interpretation of the Sinhala caste system as identified in prior studies (Silva, 2025; McKinley, 2024; Fernando, 2021). Thus, the caste system is not merely a human taxonomy based on whatever criteria people use. Rather it is a mix of human, spirit, animal and plant taxonomies prevailing in the local culture and related human behaviors. Historically the Sinhala caste system has been legitimized and sustained by

four factors, namely ideological, cultural, economic and environmental. Its ideological foundations include religious ideas such as karma, rebirth, dharma and spirit cult firmly rooted in popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka. While the early Buddhist doctrine in India was highly critical of caste as stressed by Ambedkar (1957) prior to his conversion to Buddhism and its adoption as the ideological foundation of the Dalit struggle in India, popular Buddhism in Sri Lanka legitimized and adopted caste in its religious ideology, ritual complex, service extraction and as documented by multiple authors (Pieris, 1956; Seneviratne, 1978; Reed, 2010; Silva, Sivapragasam and Thanges, 2009). The cultural refers to Sinhala Buddhist rituals such as Kandy Asala Perahara, Bodhi Puja, life cycle ceremonies and the monastic order in Buddhism. The economic parameters include land tenure and caste-based livelihoods, resource use patterns and inter-caste exchanges at the community level. The environmental basis has to do with natural resource utilization, reliance on tropical plants of Sri Lanka like bo tree, coconut products, palm trees and cinnamon as well as indigenous wildlife including elephants, marine resources including fish and local species of cattle and buffaloes. The multispecies approach to the Sinhala caste order pursued in this essay stressed the significance of hither to unexplored role of animals and plants in the formation and functioning of the Sinhala caste system.

The stability and durability of the Sinhala caste system have rested on its firm foundation in all these domains and its localized nature and embeddedness in popular culture and the ecology of local plant and animal species. As multiple studies have highlighted some of the Sinhala castes in the coastal areas (e.g. Karawa, Salagama, and Durawa) as well as interior regions (e.g. Radala layer of the dominant Goigama caste) evolved from various migrant groups from India particularly after the tenth century or so (Obeyesekere, 2013; Silva, Sivpragasam and Thanges, 2009; Ryan, 1993). Their successful adaptation to the Sinhala caste system and assimilation to Sinhala society often involved the adoption of indigenous animals like elephants, or indigenous plants like coconut, cinnamon and Bo tree as the basis of their caste-based livelihoods as well documented in the literature (Silva, 2025; Obeyesekere, 2013; and Ryan, 1993). The present study points to the way in which human hierarchy was aligned with and reinforced by hierarchies of spirits, animals and plants recognized locally. There were also some Anthropocene tendencies within the Sinhala caste system (Syke, 2018). Certain castes were assigned the task of handling endemic animal categories like cows, buffaloes, elephants and fish or endemic plants like coconut, palm trees and cinnamon. There were also counter tendencies, including rulers being subject to the authority of spirits of all kinds, The veneration of the Bodhi tree by all humans including the ruling elite is another feature of human subordination to nature. The tendency to consider all components of nature as subject to human will, desire and interventions was certainly not inherent to the Sinhala belief system.

That said, this study also brought out several systemic challenges confronting the Sinhala caste system stemming from political, social and environmental constraints. There is a strong resistance against caste inequality and caste occupations on the part of educated youth, including those from the lowest end of the caste hierarchy (Reed, 2010; Silva, Sivpragasam and Thanges, 2009). This is particularly evident in political mobilizations such as Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, National Peoples Power and Frontline Socialist Party which are in the forefront of national politics in Sri Lanka at present. The rapid decline of biodiversity as an outcome of developments over time has undermined some hereditary livelihoods among caste groups like Karawa fishermen, Wahumpura, Bathgama and Kinnara castes. These factors have contributed to radicalization of youth at middle and lower levels of the caste hierarchy in particular (Douglas, 2017; Jiggins, 1979). While caste continues to play an important role in the selection of marriage partners, ritual domains and politics, its hold in other domains has gradually declined in contemporary Sri Lanka. Beside humans, animals, plants and spirits too have posed new challenges to the continuation of the caste order in livelihoods, politics, ritual life and social relations in general. For instance, the annual conduct of the Asala Perahara in Kandy has been affected by a complex array of issues. They include growing refusal of people from different castes to perform in the perahara as drummers, dancers, mahouts, whistle blowers, etc., perpetual debates about astrological determination of perahara schedule and routes, progressive decrease in the number of elephants who parade in the perahara, shortage of elephant feeds, including leaves of the tropical kitul tree to feed a large number of elephants, agitated elephants who occasionally stampede people during the performance of perahara, and implications of all these for attracting sufficient crowds to participate in perahara. The systemic nature of these constrains arise from their association with human, animal, plant and occasionally spirit domains. Similar systemic constraints have arisen in respect of the governance of JSB, Dumbara kalala industry associated with the Kinnara caste and the Laksha industry in Matale District associated with the Nawandanna caste whose livelihoods are connected with a range of craft industries. In the post-human world, people must learn to live with each other and non-human species in a spirit of equality, peaceful coexistence and planetary pluralism (McKinley, 2024).

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