SRI LANKAN CASTES DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

Posted on

Senior Researcher, and Anthropologist, Sunimal Fernando, explains that Sri Lanka had two distinctly different kinds of economic arrangements in the predominantly Sinhala areas, which resulted in two caste orders fundamentally different from one another along the coast and in the interior of the country, respectively.

The caste order of a country or a region within a country reflects the control and distribution of its economic resources at a given point in time. The socio– economic structures of Sri Lanka as they functioned in the Portuguese, Dutch and British periods are reasonably well documented in original Portuguese, Dutch and British sources to which we have access.

A Senior Researcher, and Anthropologist, Sunimal Fernando, has conducted extensive research on this topic. He explains, interestingly, Sri Lanka by and large had two distinctly different kinds of economic arrangements in the predominantly Sinhala areas, which resulted in two caste orders fundamentally different from one another along the coast and in the interior of the country, respectively. The caste systems that prevailed in the country before the Europeans' arrival have neither been documented nor researched.

In the interior of the island, the economic resource base was land. On the other hand, the coastal economy's resource base was much more diverse and hence more complex. The ownership of land was by no means unimportant; additional resources and economic opportunities based on them rendered the coastal economy complex and multi-faceted.

Fisheries provided another resource base for the people. The sea provided trading opportunities with countries across the ocean, which gave rise to boat construction, including trading ships (Yaatra Oru) and the profession of carpentry. Using these other skills not related to agriculture, there arose, side by side with agriculture, several new industries and new modes of production and exchange. Construction, transport and trade, and the cultivation and harvesting of cash crops such as cinnamon, which was traded across the seas, had soon become essential to the coast's economy. So had the production of

processed fish (Jaadi) both for export and local consumption, and the distilling of liquor (Arrack) on a semi- industrial scale rendered the coastal economy even more diverse and complex.

Therefore, in terms of the coastal economy, the Karava, Salagama, Goyigama (also known as Govigama), and Durava castes enjoyed a more or less equal status at the head of the caste hierarchy, similar for all practical purposes but competing at the same time with each other for greater recognition and acclaim. Depending on the local economic context in different parts of the coast, one caste rather than another enjoyed at the ground level a slightly higher rank in terms of status and honor. At the same time, the overall hierarchical picture remained complex and confused. The dynamic and essentially entrepreneurial Karava caste dominated most parts of the coastal seaboard, which today comprise, the North-Western, Western and Southern Provinces of the island. In contrast, the Salagama caste dominated the economic, social, and cultural lives of those parts of the coast where cinnamon was traditionally grown and traded. The Goyigama caste of agricultural landowners and cultivators dominated those other parts of the coast where subsistence farming of traditional food crops, such as rice, was the rule. The Durava caste had their pockets of economic power and influence and status in the North-Western and Southern provinces' coastal areas. Dutch colonial records

show, for instance, that the Rajaka or Rada caste (traditionally washermen) were settled apart from other parts of the country in a series of adjacent villages of rich rice-producing lands in the lower parts of the Walawe basin in the Ambalantota region of the Hambantota district. Here, they were an economically, politically, and socially dominant community, even presenting a challenge to Dutch power in that area.

On the other hand, in the country's interior, the land was the village economy's dominant economic resource. Unlike the coast, the country's interior had not been too exposed to influences – economic, cultural, and social – coming from outside. It, therefore, presented a socio-economic reality very different from that of the coastal seaboard. The so-called 'progressive' castes of the coast – Karava, Salagama, and Durava – were not present in the interior, which remained 'Goyigama dominated' in its castes' hierarchical ordering.

In the country's interior, the dominant economic resource, namely land, was owned

principally by members of the Goyigama (Govigama) caste and by temples following large- scale land grants made to them by earlier kings. Labor for the cultivation of land was provided by the Goyigama caste itself, by the numerically strong Devavansika/Wahumpura caste, and by the Bathgama caste of agricultural laborers. The Wahumpura caste, mainly located in the Sabaragamuwa Province and neighboring parts of the Southern and Western Province, is also known to provide the service of producing Jaggery/Hakuru (unrefined sugar) for the community. In stark contrast to the coastal seaboard, the country's interior displayed a socio- economic and ideological order in which the Goyigama caste dominated. The 'service castes' who are economically dependent on them arrange themselves in positions of relatively lower status along a uniform caste hierarchy to which they all subscribe.

In the interior and coastal seaboard, specific services were attached to par- ticular service castes. The Rajaka caste, also known as the Rada/Hena caste, provided laundry services to the com- munity and delivered special ritual services to a family at childbirth, puberty, marriage, and death. The Nekati caste, also known as the Berava caste, were astrologers, drummers, and ritual dancers. In contrast, providing services as goldsmiths, silversmiths, jewelers, brass workers, coppersmiths, and ironsmiths (which includes the forging of agricultural tools and imple- ments) was the function of different categories of persons within the Achari or Navandanna caste. The Kumbal or Badal/Badahala caste provided potters' service while the Hunu caste provid- ed lime for the community. The caste society of the country's interior based as it was on a rule of Goyigama caste economic and ideological hegemony left little or no room for its challenge or defiance within the framework of democratic governance in the circum- stances of traditional society. The coastal caste order, on the other hand, with no single locus of power or au- thority but with four dominant castes (Karava, Goyigama, Salagama, and Durava) contending in the open for status, power and control provided a supremely healthy environment for the growth of democratic governance within a caste-based society.

The coastal and the interior variants of Sri Lankan caste society are Sri Lankan in spirit and content. They have to be analyzed and understood on their own terms and not compared with the caste societies of village India based on-premises drawn largely from Hindu religious belief and practice, which are primarily foreign to Sinhala social reality. Most scholars of the Sinhala caste system have made the fundamental error of adopting a model of a Hindu caste order from village India as their point of departure and by imposing this model on a very different empirical reality ending up with a largely falsified analysis of what caste is all about in rural Sri Lanka. The British started this practice by projecting a theory

that there ‘has to be one caste order’ for the whole of Sinhala society. Their officials and scholars’ responsibility was to identify its contours, while the ground reality remained entirely different. Soon, they found this effort to falsify the actual contours of the caste reality of rural Sri Lanka to be rewarding. Because in trying to fit the Sinhala castes along a single, consistent hierarchy and basing many of their governance practices on such a glaring falsity, they created conflict where earlier, there was none. It is much easier for them to govern the colony by resorting to their well- known practice of ‘divide and rule.’

Nurturing of caste conflict by distorting the analysis of Sri Lankan society’s fundamental social institution, namely caste, and by then using that distortion as a basic tool of governance (or ‘misgovernance’) helped the British colonizer to get our people to fight each other rather than to live in peace and amity. While doing so the colonizer skillfully drew our resources away from us to their own country. In their study of caste, Sri Lankan scholars have continued to use the same premises and follow Colonial British Anthropology traditions.

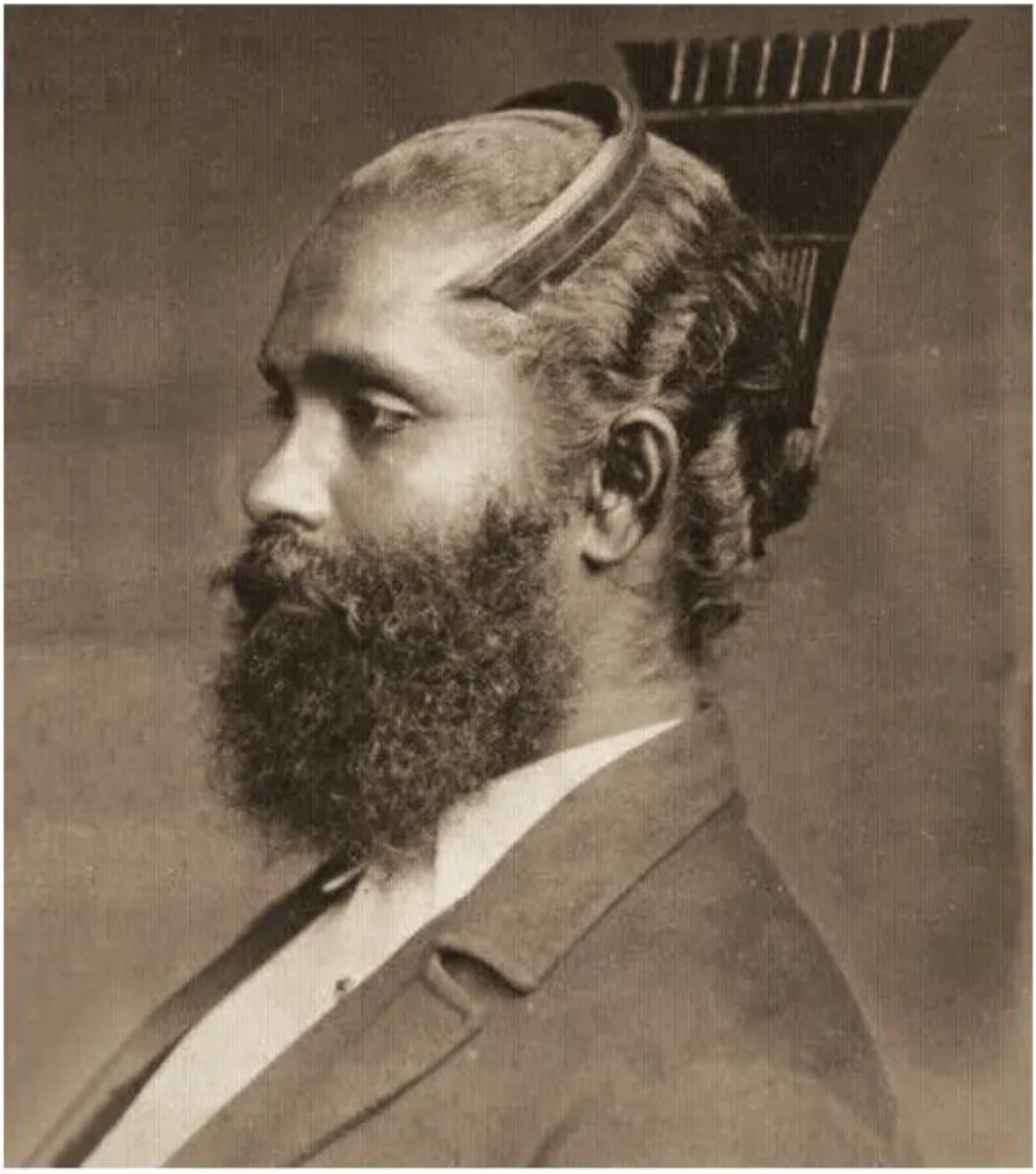
Sunimal Fernando completed his secondary education at Royal College, Colombo after which he proceeded to the UK to complete his higher education at the Universities of Cambridge and London where he received two Masters degrees. In the 1970s he was appointed as the Coordinating Secretary to the then Prime Minister Madam Sirimavo Bandaranaike before joining the University of Peradeniya as a lecturer in Sociology. He later became the Head of the Sociology Department.

From thereon he worked in differ- ent international organizations and for nearly ten years was the Asian Regional Director of the Geneva based IRED – Development Initia- tives and Networks. Subsequently he became the Deputy Secretary General of the same organization working in the field of development.

Sunimal Fernando was in charge of two national initiatives, both in the field of Language Planning; namely, the National Initiative for ‘English as a Life Skill’ and, the National Initiative for ‘Taking the Country Towards a Trilingual Sri Lanka’. He was also an Advisor to President Mahinda Rajapaksa. He held these positions till 2015.



Kandyan Chieften and his family from interior of the country (Photo credit: Sri Lankan Govigama Caste Marriage Introductions & Information).



A Mudiliyar from the coastal region of Sri Lanka (Photo credit: Old Ceylon).



A Southern Karava wedding as seen by a western artist in 1885. Note white canopy and foot cloth of royalty (Photo credit: Old Ceylon).



Nekati caste, also known as the Berava caste, were astrologers, drummers, and ritual dancers (Photo credit: Wikipedia).



An 18th-century illustration of a Goyigama officer of the kandyan king supervising a man extoring a fine (Photo credit: Wikipedia).



Artisans such as brass workers were of the Achari or Navandanna caste (Photo credit: Old Ceylon).



The Salagama Nambudiri flag (Photo credit: Old Ceylon).



Salagama caste dominated the economic, social, and cultural lives of those parts of the coast where cinnamon was traditionally grown and traded (Photo credit: Old Ceylon).



The Durava caste engaged in toddy tapping (Photo credit: BT Images).



The Kumbal or Badal/Badahala caste provided potters' service (Photo credit: Old Ceylon).