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978-0-521-05285-6 - Caste Conflict and Elite Formation: The Rise of a Karava Elite in Sri Lanka 1500-1931

Michael Roberts

Excerpt

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## I

*Introduction*

This book describes and analyses the emergence of an elite of capitalists and Western-educated men and women among the Karāva people in Sri Lanka during the colonial era. It seeks to explain how the Karāva caste produced a significant proportion of the Sinhalese elite and the Sinhalese capitalist class in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Many of these Karāva families rose from relative obscurity. In pre-British times only a handful of Karāva *mudaliyars*, or chief headmen, possessed a significant degree of status and power. The principal indigenous landholders and officials in the Kotte Kingdom as well as the Portuguese and Dutch colonial states had been drawn from the aristocratic ranks of the Goyigama caste – a caste which not only commanded the highest ritual status among the Sinhalese, but also enjoyed a numerical superiority and a monopoly of access to the highly influential Buddhist monastic Order, the Sangha.

In common with such castes as the Salāgama and Durāva, the Karāva possessed the mixed disadvantage of being mostly made up of relatively recent Dravidian migrants. Their position contrasted with that of other non-Goyigama castes whose specialist functions involved ritual services to the Goyigama caste people or to the local temple. In further contrast, it would appear that, initially, they did not control much wet paddy land and were not involved in rice cultivation to the same degree as either the Goyigama or the other non-Goyigama castes. Nevertheless, they were slotted into the structure of caste-regulated corvée services known as *rājakāriya* (king's service) and came to be regarded as Sinhalese castes. Since the principal occupations which they were constrained to take up were assessed in the light of pollution concepts and Buddhist

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values, they found that they were saddled with a distinctly subordinate and low caste status, especially in relation to the Goyigama. This structural situation provided both the incentive and the leeway for some Karāva, Salāgama and Durāva families to make use of new economic and political opportunities to improve their circumstances. In this sense their elites were produced out of, and involved in, the dialectics of caste competition, both with each other and with the Goyigama. But in challenging the Goyigama and resisting the disabilities which had been applied against them, they tended to adopt the status symbols and the idiom favoured by the Goyigama aristocracy. Their very challenges, therefore, encouraged their further integration into the heterogeneous body of Sinhalese culture.

Though much of the detail embodied in this book is fashioned out of individual case histories, the argument outlined above emphasises the group situation of the Karāva. The focus is not solely upon achievement-oriented individuals and families. The incentives and the opportunities for socio-economic advance and the strategies of upward social mobility utilised by individuals were influenced both by the structure of caste interaction among the Sinhalese as well as economic and political developments. In spelling this argument out in a variety of ways, this book suggests that the emerging Karāva elite could not easily forget their Karāva-ness. It is for this reason that their material advances were eventually directed towards status-raising strategies and political goals. For this reason, too, any analysis of the Karāva elite's emergence must explore the position of the Karāva people as a whole in pre-British times, even though the historical information that is available for this period is limited.

The scanty information relating to the migration of those people who came to be described as the Karāva is assembled in chapter two. They appear to have trickled in over a period of time extending from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Till the eighteenth century, they were only found within the coastal districts in the south and west of the island; and, within these districts, they were concentrated in the strip of land bordering the sea. The Durāva and Salāgama were also con-

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fined to these coastal districts till the eighteenth century<sup>1</sup> and for this reason these three castes are widely referred to as 'the Low-Country Sinhalese castes', that is, in contradistinction from those castes that are found in both the Low-Country and Kandyan Sinhalese districts. This distinctiveness became all the more pronounced as these three communities succeeded in producing a number of successful entrepreneurs and English-educated men and women in British times. In bracketing these three castes together such a phrase provides a convenient shorthand. Such a shorthand is often necessary. In this study the symbols KSD will be employed as a convenient means of embracing all three castes. This should not be interpreted to mean that the Karāva, Salāgama and Durāva acted in concert or replicated each others' successes and attributes in every way. On the contrary, they often came into sharp conflict and in certain localities the enmities between these castes were virtually endemic.

It will be evident from this sketch that the Karāva migrants entered upon a two-way process of acculturation and integration into local society. Along the southwestern coast this meant an adoption of Sinhala Buddhist culture. It was a road which the Karāva appear to have taken in a hesitant manner. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries large numbers converted to Catholicism. Had Portuguese rule continued it is likely that this fissiparous, less-acculturative route would have led the Karāva to a position that was broadly analogous to that of the Maronite Christians in the Lebanon or the Armenians in Asia Minor. However, following the overthrow of the Portuguese by the Dutch in the 1650s, this fissiparous tendency was partially arrested. Many Karāva reverted to Buddhism, especially in the southern districts. As the Sinhala language gained ascendancy, many indigenous cultural practices (e.g. healing rituals) were widely adopted. Even the significant minority of Karāva Catholics were not immune to this process of indigenisation.

<sup>1</sup> Some Karāva and Salāgama people are known to have resided in the Kandyan districts by the eighteenth century, and in British times this number increased. While, therefore, it can no longer be said that they are confined to the Low-Country, their population concentrations still are centred therein. According to Ryan (1953, p. 94), the Hinnā and Demala Gattara castes are also 'Low-Country castes'.

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Since the structure of caste interaction in Sinhalese society is central to the analysis presented in this book, chapter three devotes considerable attention to a description of the morphology of Sinhalese caste. This description is set against the background of caste in the Indian sub-continent and a brief description of caste ideology. Inevitably, such a description underlines the differences between caste in India and caste among the Sinhalese. Most of these differences are too well known to justify their repetition in this introductory chapter. But it is pertinent to recall Louis Dumont's suggestion that Sinhalese caste was a 'quasi-caste' export from India, a conclusion reached on the ground that the Sinhalese state was 'markedly bureaucratic' in nature and because there was 'an extremely fully worked out "liturgy" centred upon the king', so that the Sinhalese monarch was central to both the 'group religion' and to 'political and economic life'.<sup>2</sup>

Scholars are agreed in the view that the Sinhalese state regulated the caste system and upheld caste principles.<sup>3</sup> It served as a font of legitimation and its resources entered into the calculations of ambitious individuals and social groups. In these circumstances an understanding of Sinhalese kingship ideology is pertinent to the analysis of the interrelations between individuals, castes and the state, and to the socio-political symbolism which was an important part of these interrelations.

The Sinhalese state was influenced by Asian conceptions of kingship. These ideas centred upon the notion of a *dēvarāja* (god-king), or *dharmarāja* (righteous ruler) or a syncretist combination of the two. In the Buddhist polities these ideas were heavily influenced by the Buddhist teachings and *Jātaka* stories. What is striking about this corpus of religious literature is the centrality of the *dharmarāja* or *cakkavatti* for the pursuit and prevalence of the Dhamma or Buddhist doctrine. Having achieved transcendence (*nibbāna*), Buddha was not available as an intercessionary power within this world. The Buddhist scheme therefore 'raised up the magnificent *cakkavatti* world ruler as the sovereign regulator and the ground of society'. The Buddhist teachings also used rich imagery to depict the force of

<sup>2</sup> 1972, pp. 262–3.<sup>3</sup> Ralph Pieris, 1956, p. 180; and Malalgodā, 1976, p. 46.

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morality and the weight of royal power. As Tambiah notes, 'the rhetoric of kingship reached a high point in the early Buddhist kingdoms'.<sup>4</sup>

The most notable of these kingdoms was that of Asoka Maurya. He bequeathed to southern Asia a model of kingship that has filtered down the ages into the political conceptions of the dynasties and the literati in many lands. Though the Asokan Empire was probably confederative or multi-centred in form, Asoka made 'a total claim for the role of kingship' and portrayed principles of political absolutism and wide-scale regulation with Orwellian connotations.<sup>5</sup> As both Tambiah and Romila Thapar suggest, outgoing Asokan Buddhism was not only a pacification policy, it was an ideological cement and a validation of the monarchical state. It was centripetalising in intent.<sup>6</sup>

Similar centripetal tendencies were generated by the emergence of relic worship among the Buddhists. Though Buddha's teachings contain a strong devaluation of rites, already in Asoka's time there flourished the cult of the *stupas*, the veneration of shrines containing the relics of the Buddha and great men. It is important in this regard to remember that in a wide range of countries religious shrines became sacred enclaves containing the palladiums of the groups residing in their environs. In this and other ways, as Paul Wheatley illustrates, the ceremonial centre had a 'centripetalizing function'.<sup>7</sup>

These traditions and tendencies entered Sri Lanka. By the late Anuradhapura Period (fourth century A.D. to eleventh century) the Sinhalese king was not simply the greatest among the barons. His position was pivotal. He was widely regarded as a source of prosperity and disaster. He was a divine being comparable to Siva and Vishnu in their might and glory. He was a god charged with the protection of the island and the Buddha *Sāsana*. He came, increasingly, to be viewed as a *bōdhisattva*, or incipient Buddha; and by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the title of *cakkavatti* had also come into vogue. In consequence, the Sinhalese king was surrounded by sanctity,

<sup>4</sup> 1976, chaps. 4 and 5; quotations, p. 52. Also see Reynolds, 1972; Sarkisyanz, 1965; and Bechert, 1973.

<sup>5</sup> Tambiah, 1976, pp. 69–71.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60–3; and Thapar, 1961, pp. 144–5.

<sup>7</sup> 1971, pp. 257–330 esp. pp. 257, 304–5, 311.

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hedged around by taboos and glorified by court ceremonies. The 'commands emanating from him demanded implicit obedience as the expression of the will of the gods'. Elaborate conventions emphasised his superordinate role and marked out the distance between king and subjects.<sup>8</sup>

The practical limitations on the power of the kings must be assessed in the light of this ideology. Though the organisation of land rights created a multi-centred society in which there was some devolution of power to the Buddhist monasteries and the Goyigama gentry, it remains debatable whether we can follow Leach and Gunawardana in describing the Sinhalese polity as a feudal order.<sup>9</sup> Individual and corporate land rights were conditioned by a working alliance between the king and the Sangha, and by the political overlordship of the king. Those aristocratic lords who ran his administration and governed his territories received legitimacy from their connection with the king. They did not bestow authority on the king.<sup>10</sup> And just as he could make or break individuals – in principle at least and sometimes in fact – the king could make or break castes: he could make people *gattara* (degraded).

From medieval times the omnicompetence of the Sinhalese king, as well as his pivotal and integrative roles, were exemplified in the annual politico-religious pageant known as the Āsala Festival, at which the tooth relic of the Buddha, the palladium of Sinhalese monarchs, was carried in procession (the Āsala Perahāra) around the streets of Kandy. H. L. Seneviratne's detailed description of this series of events reveals the symbolism which graphically conveyed these messages. For instance, the festival is inaugurated by the *kap* ceremony where a *kapa* (or pole) is planted in the premises of each *dēvala*. The *kapa* has multivocal meanings and is associated with a centre, permanence, fertility and prosperity. At the four *dēvala*, a ritual functionary acting on behalf of the king circumambulates the *kapa* in a proper manner – thereby proclaiming symbolically the king's capture of the kingdom. Seneviratne also shows that

<sup>8</sup> Dewaraja, 1972, pp. 208–21. Cf. Hettiarachchy, 1972, chap. v and pp. 163–87.

<sup>9</sup> Leach, 1959; and R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, 1971.

<sup>10</sup> This is also stressed by Peebles (1973, pp. 27–32, esp. p. 29, but cf. p. 36), but solely in relation to the Low-Country districts under the Portuguese and Dutch.

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the Perahāra was ‘a microcosmic representation of all the salient features of Kandyan society’. As such, it was ‘a pre-eminent representation of the caste system’ and ‘a validation of the existing hierarchical order’. In its careful allocations of space, moreover, those sections representing the provinces were hemmed in and ‘engulfed by the sections representative of the central government’. In short, ‘the spectacle was undoubtedly one of overwhelmingly strong state power’.<sup>11</sup> In the Āsala Festival, therefore, one sees the ceremonial festival functioning in the centripetal manner highlighted by Paul Wheatley. Herein, too, one finds the embodiment of what Clifford Geertz has identified as ‘the Doctrine of the Exemplary Center’ and ‘the Doctrine of the Theater State’.<sup>12</sup>

Against this background it is not surprising that the state has figured prominently in Sri Lankan history in the processes by which rewards and statuses were allocated, and social gains were legitimated. The colonial conquests did not alter this situation.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, in bending the *rājakāriya* system to their own purposes, the colonial powers emphasised the patronage power of the state and added value to the nodal administrative position held by indigenous intermediaries, the headmen.<sup>14</sup>

Nevertheless, as widely recognised in the historiography on Sri Lanka, the period of colonial rule witnessed institutional amendments and economic developments which began to transform the political economy of the island. The period of Portuguese rule in the Low-Country extending from the 1590s to the year 1658 was marked by warfare, political disorder and a decline of population. While it is probable that social relations in these districts were profoundly influenced by these circumstances, there is inadequate historical data to chart their effects. Rather in contrast, the Dutch and British periods of rule were characterised by relatively ordered administrations. In referring to a specific trade deficit resulting from a period of warfare with the French, in 1675 the Dutch Governor, Ryckloff Van Goens sen., observed: ‘it can easily be seen what a

<sup>11</sup> Seneviratne, 1978, pp. 71–4, 89–114; quotations, pp. 110, 112, 114.

<sup>12</sup> 1968, pp. 26–9, 36–43. Also Geertz, 1963, p. 103.

<sup>13</sup> For interesting and early examples of attempts to secure state legitimation, in this instance with regard to the titular headship of new Buddhist *nikāyas* (monastic fraternities), see Malalgoda, 1976, pp. 147–8.

<sup>14</sup> Peebles, 1973, pp. 38–74.

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mischievous and horrible thing war is, and what prejudice this Government has suffered thereby<sup>15</sup> – a statement which captures the commercial objectives of the Dutch and gains in significance from the fact that Van Goens sen. was one of the more aggressive Dutch governors. But while they both emphasised order and organisation, the British forms of order differed from those of the Dutch and moved in a different direction, especially from the 1830s. Nor did caste norms impinge on their administration to the same degree as that of the Dutch. Indeed, they did away with many of the social and political disabilities that had prevailed previously.

These changes provided the opportunity for families from outside the Goyigama aristocracy to improve their economic and social position, whether in collaboration with the colonial power or through independent economic activity. The period of colonial rule also furthered the process of occupational diversification and specialisation which the KSD castes had entered upon from the time of their migration to the island. Chapter three assembles the available information on occupational diversification among the KSD castes and relates this to the structure of caste interaction in the Low-Country Sinhalese districts. It calls attention to Ralph Peiris' description of the way in which the Sinhalese kings channelled the early migrants into specific occupations as a process of secularisation because they were not bound to serve the Goyigama aristocracy, the local temple or the state in a ritual capacity. Chapter four elaborates further on this information by describing the trading patterns in Portuguese and Dutch times, and by providing evidence that the Karāva were engaged in a wide range of occupations. It also reveals that a number of Karāva were engaged in regular trading activity by the eighteenth century, though the principal traders were the Moors. In this way, the chapter indicates that the foundations for the emergence of a Karāva elite were laid in Portuguese and Dutch times, both in an experiential sense and in the sense that primary capital was created for investment in entrepreneurial ventures at a crucial point of time: the early nineteenth century.

Chapter five briefly catalogues the changes that occurred in

<sup>15</sup> *Memoirs of Ryckloff Van Goens, 1663–1675*, 1932, p. 31.



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the island's economic framework in the early nineteenth century, before proceeding to describe the growth of a Karāva elite in the period of British rule by providing illustrative case material as well as statistical detail. Not only did a number of Karāva families achieve considerable upward social mobility, but some of them accumulated enormous wealth. Such developments took place in the wake of an expansion in the capitalist mode of production within a context which permitted pre-capitalist forms of production and interaction to persist. The expansion of capitalism in its turn was symbiotically associated with the modification of the pre-British administrative structures, a modification which entailed the withdrawal of state interference in certain areas, and an extension of state agencies in other fields. Perhaps the most significant instrument of capitalist expansion was that of the plantation. Plantation ownership was not confined to Europeans. Indigenous residents took to cash crop cultivation (especially coconut) on plantations from an early date.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the presence of numerous indigenous-owned cash crop plantations is one of the ways in which Sri Lankan history diverged from that in British India. It also meant that the emergence of the Western educated *in significant numbers* among the Sinhalese, Moor and Tamil communities (but not among the Burghers) was facilitated and even preceded by the emergence of a capitalist class of plantation owners and merchants.

For Sri Lanka as a whole, therefore, it is possible to refer to the growth of a capitalist class in British times. But any unity that was fostered by the mode of production was severely qualified by the colonial context and by numerous social cleavages. The capitalist class was split by the colour line and the racial prejudices among the British. The dominant segment always were the British merchants and planters. The coloured capitalists in their turn were divided into those with indigenous roots and those Asian migrants of recent arrival who maintained their distinctiveness (e.g. the Chetties, Borahs, Parsees and Sindhis). The indigenous capitalists also had loyalties to their respective communities: Sinhalese, Moor, Tamil and Burgher. And, as this book will illustrate, the Sinhalese

<sup>16</sup> See Roberts, in *UHC*, 1973, pp. 103–6.

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capitalists sometimes came into conflict with each other in their capacity as spokesmen or leaders of their respective castes. Not even in the early twentieth century was there a sufficiently active, cohesive and class-conscious proletariat to bring the capitalist class together and to enforce its unity in political action.<sup>17</sup> In such a context, therefore, the concept of an 'elite'<sup>18</sup> is regarded as a more serviceable tool for the purposes of this study than the concept of 'class'.

As a result of their economic successes, the status and power of the Karāva elite at the end of the nineteenth century stood in contrast with their situation in late Dutch and early British times. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the economic strength of the Karāva elite was highly localised and there was a mere handful of Karāva notables, none of whom matched the leading Low-Country Goyigama aristocratic families in their control of landed wealth.<sup>19</sup> Nor did they challenge the caste primacy of the Goyigama with the same gusto as they displayed in the attacks they mounted in the late nineteenth century. Insofar as there was caste conflict at this stage, early British observers singled out the Salāgama, that is the Salāgama elite of that day, as the most assertive of the 'lower castes' and the most inclined to challenge the Goyigama.<sup>20</sup> What one sees in the nineteenth century, therefore, is a process whereby the Karāva elite outpaced the Salāgama elite, whereby they extended and generalised their economic, political and social influence and whereby they gathered sufficient strength to contest the validity of the prevailing caste hierarchy in a persistent fashion, while reaching out at the same time for the most prestigious and powerful positions in the system of governance that were open to indigenous entry (chapter six).

These challenges were induced by a dilemma in which the Karāva elite found themselves after achieving positions of affluence: a situation of status inconsistency, that familiar, yet significant, historical moment when one's social status is not

<sup>17</sup> See Roberts, 1974c and 1974d.

<sup>18</sup> A convenient summary of the literature on this subject can be found in Geraint Parry, 1969. Also see Bottomore, 1970; and C. Wright Mills, 1956. For a definition tailored for Sri Lanka, see Roberts, 1974a.

<sup>19</sup> Peebles, 1973, pp. 93–117. Also see below, pp. 47, 84. <sup>20</sup> See below, pp. 90–1.