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978-0-521-13378-4 - Caste and Family in the Politics of the Sinhalese 1947-1976

Janice Jiggins

Excerpt

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I

Introduction

I first went to Sri Lanka* to study the *bhikkhus*' (Buddhist monks) involvement in national politics. From the early years of the nineteenth century Buddhist monks had been active in rousing the Sinhalese to awareness of their Buddhist heritage. I wanted to discover the nature of the continuity lying beneath the years of colonial rule and the slow, peaceful emergence to formal Independence in 1947 which would explain the paradox of 1959. In that year the man who had articulated and shaped, first in his Sinhala Maha Sabha (Great Council of the Sinhalese) and then electorally in the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the aspirations the *bhikkhus* had so long championed, was shot dead by a Buddhist monk.

The event seemed the more inexplicable because of the way it was treated in the academic literature, which described Sri Lanka in terms of its constitution and the structure of its Westminster-style parliamentary democracy. In this distinctly exterior view of the island, S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's electoral landslide at the general election of 1956 was seen merely as a notable example of a general observation: that indigenous leaders tend in time to replace the westernised, bourgeois elites confirmed in power by departing colonial rulers.

Some flavour of the dynamics of contemporary Sinhalese society is to be found in the writing on ancient Sri Lanka, but as scholarship approaches the last few hundred years the Sinhalese disappear behind the activities and concerns of their colonial rulers, first the Portuguese, then the Dutch, and finally the British, till we can find the Sinhalese only behind the presence of military men, administrators, missionaries, and planters, whose energies and loyalties rarely were concentrated on the island, being claimed at least equally by imperial economies and directives, or by the higher authority of the Christian Church.

Most of the chroniclers are too busy telling us of the acts, amendments, reforms, and councils of the British to spare much thought for

* Ceylon became Sri Lanka under a new constitution proclaimed in 1972. The term 'Sri Lanka' is used throughout.

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the impact of their rule on the daily lives of the villagers, or to describe how tradition was superseded or in turn absorbed the new ways. Then, as the years pass, we begin to hear of lawyers educated at the British Inns of Court, of merchants grown rich on government carting or provisioning contracts; we see new families emerge and take their place beside the old and aristocratic families in the seats of the Legislative Council. We catch glimpses of a solid middle class emerging, largely professional, and we become familiar with the major figures of post-Independence Sri Lanka as they patiently debate the stages to constitutional maturity. Yet the literature remains oddly gentle, urbane, comfortable. A picture emerges finally of a polity governed under a Westminster-type two-party constitution, with an independent judiciary, regular elections, and periodic exchange of power between groups recognisable as parties, where the freedom of an energetic and outspoken press is encouraged, the whole underpinned by a welfarist economic liberalism, sustaining a well-fed, healthy, and increasingly literate population. As Sir Charles Jeffries, who as Deputy Under-Secretary of the Colonial Office was at the heart of the Independence negotiations, has commented, Ceylon was regarded as 'the prototype and model for the new Commonwealth of the latter part of the 20th century'.¹ Many Sinhalese echoed these sentiments, and with Sir Oliver Goonetilleke asserted that as far as parliamentary government and political stability went, Sri Lanka was 'the best bet in Asia'.²

The reality of the 'prototype' gained credence in my mind the first day I spent in Colombo, the capital city. It was getting shabby, not yet blessed (or desecrated, depending on one's point of view) by the international hotels which have been built in the last few years, but in the autumn of 1969 it looked prosperous and settled, with a gleaming white neo-classic Town Hall, and an imposing sandstone Parliament gracing the wide open space known as Galle Face Green which stretches along the sea front. Stuccoed colonial buildings, cavernous mahogany-and-teak hotel lobbies, and a famous emporium purveying fine goods in continuing Victorian splendour – these were solid evidence of an absorbed western tradition and stability. The seal of reassurance was set by the red ex-London Transport double-decker buses that roared and boiled their way along the tree-lined streets.

I began to read through the haphazard collection known as the National Archives, then temporarily housed at Vidyodaya University to which I was nominally attached. Formerly one of two leading centres of higher learning for the *bhikkhus*, it had not as yet succeeded in transcending a monkish, narrowly scholastic tradition that imposed on its students large doses of learning by rote and the memorising of lecture notes. The

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Archives were largely inaccessible due to the slow process of cataloguing, but the staff were unfailingly helpful. I began reading the notes and reports of Government Agents, Revenue Officers, and Special Commissioners from the earliest years of the British administration, trying to get a feel for their problems and a reflected outline of the world as the Sinhalese saw it. Mostly I concentrated on the problems that arose between the administration and the Buddhist laity and *Sangha* (community of Buddhist monks), partly matters of a practical kind, as this or that edict threatened or was felt to threaten religious interest. More serious problems arose because British understanding of their rights and obligations towards the 'heathen rites and beliefs' of the Buddhists was incomprehensible to the *Sangha*, which clung to the precedents of ancient times and its own definitions of the special relationship between the king, the *Sangha*, its members, and their temporalities.³

I spent nearly a year reading about the *bhikkhus*, visiting their temples, interviewing *viharadhipatis* (chief monks of the temple) and lay Buddhists active in the years leading to 1956. The National Museum Library yielded rich veins of interest in the records of Executive and Legislative Council debates. Lake House (Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd) newspaper archives gave insight into old scandals, described the *personae* and the detail in recurring complaints and litigation. In the continuity of public utterance, old newspaper reports gave shape to the policies and aims of the various pressure groups, and flesh to the claims of the chief temples to speak authoritatively. I travelled about the country, checking on the extent of temple revenues and temporalities against returns given to the Public Trustee in recent years, and against the acreages and other assets recorded in the nineteenth century by the Commissioners appointed at different times to investigate and define these matters.

I learned a great deal and acquired a sense of the life of the country that was not to be found in any academic book or scholarly article: I was beginning to be able to see the universe as a Sinhalese Buddhist might see it, and to define it in his terms and priorities. But by the end of 1970 I had realised two things of importance to my further studies. One was simply that, as a woman, my ability to become close to the monks and their way of life was limited; certain avenues of investigation were not open to me, and the strangeness of a female research student was too great to establish a useful rapport with many of those I wished to interview or work with.

The second was the discovery that there was no defined, direct institutional relation between the power and influence of the Buddhists and the secular centres of power. The relationship was wholly personal, based

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on family and caste loyalties and antipathies, a loose nexus whose lines of demarcation were often fluid and rarely primarily doctrinal, ideological, or indeed rational from an external point of view. The relationship appeared often irrational, that is, if one defined the political structure as it was defined in the prototype, and assessed its inner working according to its familiar formal outline. The problem of analysis became infinitely more fascinating; no longer a question of something miraculously akin in Sinhalese and British natures that ensured the easy transplant of Westminster to Galle Face Green, but a question of how and why the framework suited the indigenous society, a question of the style of the Sinhalese way of doing things. How did the formal structure and its constitutional provisions contain and accommodate traditional loyalties, and what were those loyalties? Did they operate within parties and cabinets, or spill over in family blocs and caste groupings? Were electorates aware of these personal characteristics in their representatives, and were they ever a necessary and/or sufficient condition of their support?

In 1971 I began to pursue these questions, talking to Government Agents and Civil Servants, and listening to university students as they tried to get employment; I went again to the villages and up-country towns, but this time to listen to teachers, co-operative store owners, village headmen, kachcheri clerks, and police sergeants. I sat on many hospitable verandahs, listening to family histories. I heard of intercaste and intracaste feuds and rivalries, of alliances sealed by marriage, of the lesser and the great, till the web became familiar to me. I began to see Sinhalese society as it had appeared to the 4.5 million who entered into Independence, as a parochial, closely known society, when its leaders were visible, their allegiances understood in terms of their family history, and when it was enough to ask, 'Where are you from, what is your village?' to establish an intimate profile of a man's antecedents, his rank, his influence. Among students, this knowledge was less certain, partly an affectation of their new knowledge, but mostly because in twenty-five years the Sinhalese population had doubled and had become increasingly mobile geographically. This enormously important demographic burst had loosened and was beginning to break the tight established order, so that ties and relationships were less well known and more difficult to establish correctly. As I later realised, this change was beginning to be reflected in attitudes to parties and party leaders as the *persona* of caste-and-kinship became of less importance, and secular characteristics (party image as defined ideologically, for example) became primary in many situations.

I carried out some preliminary fieldwork to see if my initial interpreta-

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tion was valid, and to ascertain if certain methods of enquiry were practicable and trustworthy. I moved from Vidyodaya and became affiliated to the beautiful Peradeniya campus in the hills around Kandy, the last capital of the Sinhalese kings. By this time I had become aware of the deep concern of the young for their own future, and had listened attentively to their various critiques of the hitherto ruling parties which, they felt, were incapable of leading the country to prosperity and were incapable of providing jobs for the 60 per cent of the population who were under twenty-six years old in 1969.⁴ They distrusted the radical pronouncements of Mrs Bandaranaike's left-wing SLFP-led United Front which had gained power in the 1970 general election⁵ as merely the necessary electoral sayings of a socially traditionalist and conservative elite living comfortable bourgeois lives in the capital. Many of the young feared that the United Front would prove unwilling to act radically to solve the problems of rural unemployment.

The insurgency which broke out in April 1971, largely among the young, took the government by surprise in its ferocity, and the fact of its occurrence came as a shock to a nation which had experienced no widespread police or military activity since the early years of the British conquest. Any number of explanations and justifications followed, from the class analyses of the left to Mrs Bandaranaike's own assessment that the majority were misguided youths who had been led astray by criminals and subversive elements.⁶ For my own part, I was sure that a major impulse had been provided by the social dynamic between the castes. The continuing depressed status of two of the largest up-country castes, combined with the political frustrations of the south- and west-coast fishing caste (denied adjustment within the existing political parties despite, since 1956, an increasingly populist stance by governments proclaiming the 'age of the common man') formed a core of disaffection to be exploited by the insurgent leaders. Delineated in these terms, the bitterness among the insurgents, the fears of the political and social elites, and the brutality of the repression by the armed services and the police become a reflection of the social psychology of the movement, unaccounted for either in the explications of the Communist and Maoist left, or by overdue reliance on the supposed ideology of the insurgents themselves.

The year 1971 was a tragic and disturbing year, but not uninformative to an outsider. Events exposed the inadequacy of the purely constitutional model. The vulnerability of the political system was not simply the vulnerability of all open parliamentary systems to armed violence; the response of the parties, their leaders and their rank and file, and the various extra-parliamentary groups that make up the body politic, revealed

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something of the underlying tensions among the Sinhalese, not overtly expressed in the structure of the constitutional prototype.

Towards the end of 1971 and in the early months of 1972 I embarked on a programme of extensive fieldwork among the electorates of Sabaragamuwa. The interest and curiosity of nearly everyone I met made these trips both stimulating and demanding, as my thoughts were time and again discussed knowledgeably and vociferously by those who gathered round. One is struck on such occasions by the oral traditions of the Sinhalese, where facts remembered and opinions reiterated from generation to generation remain present and alive, and set a standard for current events and personalities. Perhaps it is the tradition of listening to the *bhikkhus* in the *bana* (preaching) halls, perhaps it is the climate, so inimical to careful preservation of paper, that makes precious strict remembrance. Certainly their tales, if not always historically accurate, were richly illustrative and seemed to indicate that the Sinhalese view politics as a splendid arena for the absurdities and futilities of life; abundant in shrewd character sketches, realistic if not cynical toward large promises, tolerant of ostentation, and unsentimental about the common lot of man, their tales were neatly turned for good-humoured scorn at some ill-adept politician, and yet justly admired the clever tricks of the triumphant manipulator.

I give as examples the following verses:

Ūth kupadiyā
Māth kupadiyā
Gamē kupādiyata chandē denda!
 (He's a blackguard
 I'm a blackguard
 So vote for the village blackguard!)

Apē Ammā langa enavā
Hāl sēru deka denavā!
 (Our 'Mother' is coming along
 She gives the two measures of rice!)

'*Apē Ammā*' refers to Mrs Bandaranaike – 'our Mother' – and illustrates the affectionate and familiar identity of the SLFP to the ordinary people of the village. The second line hints at the attempt during her 1960 government to cut the second measure of rice given to every household at a subsidised price, emphasises her promise to restore the full two measures (cut to one in 1966 by Dudley Senanayake) if elected in 1970, and underscores the reciprocal trading of votes for material benefit.

I left Sri Lanka in the summer of 1972 but returned for nine months

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in 1973 in time to witness the extraordinary mourning for Dudley Senanayake (three times Prime Minister) on his death in April, and the fascinating by-election at Dedigama which followed.⁷

The story that is told here is of discovery, and of an enlightenment that is possible only when one has received the privilege of entering the lives of a people. To all those who gave me goodwill, their friendship, and a gentle understanding of my frequent bewilderment, my thanks.

The importance of caste and family

This book is not intended to be a general political history of modern Sri Lanka⁸ but a description of two elements that interact with modern political ideologies, parties, and platforms, and a tentative analysis of their role within a parliamentary system. Those two elements are caste and family. It is generally supposed among scholars and among the Sinhalese themselves that caste is 'very important'. However, as is not the case in India, where caste has been the subject of extensive and detailed study, caste studies in Sri Lanka have been largely confined to anthropologists' village studies. Few writers on the politics of Sri Lanka have attempted to describe (indeed, few have even mentioned) the interaction of caste and politics at either the village, the constituency, or the national level, often merely indicating a few instances where caste factors have intervened, then resting content with a short section asserting their general importance. The reticence on the part of Sinhalese scholars is more understandable, for caste, like sex in Victorian society, is a 'taboo' subject, and rarely spoken of openly. A great number of allusive phrases exist, both in Sri Lankan English and in Sinhala, to describe the various caste groups and their respective hierarchical status. Thus 'the fishing interest' refers to the *Karava* caste of the south and west littoral and *oḷḷoma nādā* (all kinsmen) can indicate that the speaker is referring to his own caste group. Writing of the 1947 elections, H. A. J. Hulugalle, for many years a close observer of the political scene, expresses the typical embarrassment of the westernised, educated, urban Sinhalese: 'This (caste) is not a subject which educated Ceylonese like to talk about, especially if they have been to schools in which there is a good mixture of races, religions and castes, though everyone seems to know to which caste a friend belongs.'⁹

The village Sinhalese will rarely speak openly to urban Sinhalese on caste matters, still less if that stranger is thought to have a caste interest in the outcome of his enquiry. Sinhalese sociologists have been constrained in their own work precisely by the accusations and counter-accusations of bias and ulterior motive that have attended their attempts to clarify even

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the historical aspects of caste. Investigations of the kind described in this book are perhaps possible at the present time only for an outsider. Reticence in public discussion must not be taken for lack of interest, however; few topics generate so much heat as the precise status or affiliation of this or that person or group.

Family and kinship are, of course, closely related to discussions of caste, and family membership, ancestry, and marriage alliances rouse as much interest as caste affiliation, but they are openly spoken of and are the subject of exhaustive enquiry and much gossip. Such matters can, and often do, stand as a surrogate for discussion of caste, for many members of the different caste groups retain a caste-distinct name, and lineage can make plain a person's caste without actual reference to it.

Diaries, documents, and memoirs which are intended to 'prove' the descent and status of a particular family are extremely popular, and are published in limited editions and circulated to 'bona fide' members. An example from 1911 begins with a foreword by the editor: 'It is perhaps correct to say that there is nothing which stirs up so much animosity and bitterness among the Sinhalese people as a whole, as questions of caste, class and family.' The foreword ends:

My chief object in placing before my kinsmen a portion of the information which I have collected during the last twenty years is to show them, as far as lies in my power, the truth about ourselves . . . This book is strictly for private circulation. All copies are numbered and a register is kept of the parties to whom copies are issued. It is earnestly requested that it may not be allowed to reach unworthy hands.¹⁰

Parties and programmes

The leaders of the two major political parties of the Sinhalese, the United National Party of the Senanayake clan, and the Sri Lanka Freedom Party of the Bandaranaiques, have all been *Goyigama*, the highest in status and numerically the largest caste, and they have all come from upper-class families, the Senanayakes being a low-country family of good background who accumulated wealth and rose to the highest status under the British, and the Bandaranaiques/Ratwattes being of feudal descent from the most powerful families of the traditional Kandyan aristocracy. In the following chapters I shall be following the implications of these identities, but it is perhaps as well to begin here by briefly outlining the history of the various parties and their major political programmes.

The UNP was formed in 1946 by the merger of the Ceylon National Congress and the Sinhala Maha Sabha (SMS) of S. W. R. D. Bandaran-

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aike, and with the support of other minor political elements and individuals willing to adopt its general outlook. The Ceylon National Congress had completed its main task of winning self-government for Sri Lanka, and a new vehicle was needed to carry the country into Independence. The only political parties which hitherto had been constituted as, and functioned as, recognisably modern parties were the minority Lanka Sama Samaja Party (Trotskyist) and the Communist Party (Marxist). The UNP was formed as a coalition of interest with an island-wide appeal to fight the first general election of 1947. Its inspiration and figurehead was D. S. Senanayake, long active in the political struggle for Independence, and widely known to the people for his irrigation schemes and agricultural projects which had opened up vast new tracts for cultivation and settlement from the 1930s onwards. A large number of independent candidates stood in 1947, but the UNP took over from the departing colonial power without great difficulty, winning forty-two seats in a Lower House of ninety-five elected members (a further six being appointed by the Governor-General), and formed a government with D. S. Senanayake as Prime Minister.

In 1951 S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike led his Sinhala Maha Sabha out of the UNP, when the government refused to adopt a number of resolutions passed by the SMS at its annual sessions at Madampe. These included the adoption of Sinhala as the official language and the recognition of Buddhism as the religion of the Sinhalese. In September 1951 S. W. R. D. formed the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, translating into political terms the appeal he had made under the SMS for a new Sri Lanka based on the aspirations of the Sinhalese, Buddhist masses. He promised the overthrow of the westernised, English-educated elites of Colombo, and the revival of the traditional virtues and values of the Sinhalese villager.

S. W. R. D.'s defection removed only six supporters from the UNP's strength in parliament. A more serious blow occurred in 1952 when D. S. Senanayake fell from his horse whilst riding on Galle Face Green and died. His son, Dudley Senanayake, who had worked with D. S. in the State Council preceding Independence, took over the leadership of the UNP, and went to the polls in April 1952 on a platform which promised to continue to uphold the 'ideals' of his father. It would be realistic to suppose that, over and above the affection people had felt for D. S. as the 'Father of the Nation', the most important element in the son's appeal as far as the mass of the people were concerned was his continuance of the food subsidies. These had been introduced some years earlier at a time when Sri Lanka had ample foreign reserves and domestic resources to buy food, chiefly rice, on the world markets and to distribute it at a much

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reduced price to every household on a weekly ration. By 1952 rice was offered at less than a third of its imported cost; in the financial year 1951-2 one-third of government expenditure went into transfers and subsidies on a range of goods and services, with food subsidies as the largest single item.¹¹ In 1952 the UNP captured fifty-four seats, to the SLFP's nine. But Dudley suffered from a prolonged period of ill-health, and he resigned from the premiership – and at that time also from active politics – in October 1953. His uncle, Sir John Kotelawala, Leader of the House and Minister of Transport, took over, after a short struggle with J. R. Jawardene, then Minister of Finance.

The events leading up to the next general election in 1956, when the SLFP came 'from nowhere' to sweep the polls on a landslide, have been well documented elsewhere; suffice it to say that they related increasingly to a conflict of style and identity, Sir John being all for an open, westernised society, and S. W. R. D. playing on the traditionalist sentiments of the mass of the people, moving the political game for the first time away from the caucus politics of the Colombo elites to mass-based electioneering and populist policies. S. W. R. D. joined forces with an offshoot of the LSSP led by Philip Gunawardene, who had a strong trade union base, and with the Sinhala Bhasha Peramuna, or Language Front, led by W. Dahanayake, which was pressing for the adoption of Sinhala as the official language. The Mahajana Eksath Peramuna – People's United Front – won fifty-one seats, the SLFP alone taking forty-three; the UNP were left with a rump of eight.

S. W. R. D.'s appeal was expressed in terms very like those now used by his widow, Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike. To illustrate both the emotional flavour of the message and the continuity of the tradition which S. W. R. D. established I will quote briefly from the broadcast to the nation made by Mrs Bandaranaike after winning the elections in 1970:

The victory that was won yesterday is not my victory or that of my party. It is the victory of the men and women of this country, of the common people . . . The forces that have brought me to this high office, which I have today with deep humility accepted, were not set in motion by the tears of a weeping widow. They were created by the agony and the anguish of the forgotten millions scattered throughout this country, who suffer in silence, without a roof over their heads, or four walls to call their own; without one proper meal to nourish or sustain them, without the bare essential amenities of a decent life . . . There are many problems which the Government will be called upon to face in the next five years. The great social revolution led by my late husband which began in 1956, must be taken on its proper course to its logical end. Many radical reforms will have to be initiated. Massive development projects will have to be launched.¹²