

## *The British Attitudes Towards the Caste System and Social Relations In Sri-Lanka during the 19th Century\**

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The 19th century has been an era of remarkable change in socio-political, economic and cultural activities in Sri-Lanka. Some of these social changes were influenced to a certain extent by the ideas of the British officials and non-officials in the colonial government in Sri-Lanka. It is important to note that the criticisms they made on the long rooted social and other local institutions in the country were very helpful to create a favourable background for the new reforms introduced in this era.

The great interest paid on the caste system in Sri-Lanka by British writers in the 19th century can be clearly seen in almost all their works. According to them, the caste system had played a major role on the formation of economic and social customs and thus it assumed the foremost factor in the Sri-Lankan society during this period.

The Britishers who investigated the sources of history of Sri-Lanka commonly share the view that the caste system and other social institutions had their origin in India.

“Amongst the aboriginal inhabitants caste appears to have been unknown: it was introduced to this island by the Indian emigrants who came here in the fifth century B.C.”<sup>1</sup>

They have also identified the similarities and differences between the Indian and Sri-Lankan caste systems. They view the caste in Sri-Lanka as a special one which is slightly similar to that of India. According to the writers like Harward, Binning and Selkirk, the Indian caste system is rigid and is based on the religion of the Brahmins and Hinduism. In contrast, the religion of the majority of Sri<sup>2</sup>Lankans is Buddhism which did not recognize caste as a social institution. Consequently, it has been overthrown by the Buddhist priesthood too. Unlike the Brahmins, the Buddhist priests did not belong to a separate caste and maintain close connections with the society.<sup>2</sup>

\* See 'References'

1. BINNING—Two Years Travel.....p. 46: and following writers present the same view differently.  
BERTOLACCI—Ceylon.....pp. 46-47  
Tennent—Ceylon. Vol. 1 p. 426
2. HARWARD—*A Narrative*.....pp. x-11  
SELKIRK—*Recollections*.....pp. 57-58  
BINNING—*Ibid.* p. 13

According to these analytical records, the influence of the caste system has been mainly felt in political and social activities but not in the religious life of the people.<sup>3</sup> Some British writers have tried to identify the reasons that are responsible to such a situation. The interpretations given by the government officials such as Bertolacci, Davy and Tennent are very valuable in this respect. They too have accepted that the caste is an Indian concept. The reason that they have put forward for the development of a special system in Sri Lanka is a historical one. That is an economy based on an agricultural society, the govigama caste or tillers of the soil were given the first rank in such a society. The other castes got their ranks according to the respective trades they were engaged in.

Tennent's definition on this topic is as follows :

“The early Sinhalese settlements were by the rivers. They had a rural society. Agriculture was their chief livelihood.....Organization of the society was according to the seniority of the castes. Each village was governed by the chieftains and the craftsmen of each caste. ....With the progress of the society, the caste developed as a social custom rather than a religious one. The highest rank was given to the Goviwanse or Vellalas.”<sup>4</sup>

There is another point that should be considered. That is (according to some writers) even Buddhism did not favour the caste, when the society was stabilized socially and politically, the caste system received religious recognition. Different sects or 'Nikayas' of the Buddhist priesthood are clearly revealed this situation.

Bertolacci has connected this historical development with that of the barter system. His opinion was that :

“The caste system was the best method in getting the services in a society where the economy was based on barter rather than trade. In the past, cultivators, goldsmiths and others renders their services to the government free of charge. The rulers too tried to employ as many people as they could according to the needs of the country. The people of the different castes could not come to the front by ignoring the limits and the duties of their castes when the population increased and the needs grew more.....”<sup>5</sup>

3. BINNING—*Ibid.* p. 47 for similar ideas see  
BERTOLACCI—*Ibid.*

DAVY—*Interior of Ceylon*.....p. 84

TENNENT—*Ibid.* pp. 157-158

HEBER, REGINALD—*Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India* (London, 1828) Vol. 3 p. 195

4. TENNENT—*Ceylon*. Vol. 1. p. 426 Vol. 2. p. 157

5. BERTOLACCI—*Ibid.* pp. 48-49

So he has described it in detail.

Davy too, like Bertollacci, has shown that the development of caste system which originated for the needs and the use of society has been confirmed by the customs, royal patronage, religious proclamations, and human pride. Consequently, this institution has come to rule and guide the Sri-Lankan society for several centuries.

Some British writers have compared the position of the caste system in Sri-Lanka with the Indian Hindu castes. They have observed that the Vaishya and Sudra castes here in Sri-Lanka did not oppose other civilizations as the Hindus in India do. With regard to this Binning's opinion was as follows:

“There is no Ksathriya caste in Ceylon and there are very few Brahmins who have come from India. The other two castes, Vaishya and Sudra do not follow rigid Hindu customs and they do not object to eat food which had been touched by Europeans”<sup>6</sup>

Yet for all that, the Britishers have concluded that the caste system in Sri-Lanka has helped to maintain rigid divisions in the society at the beginning of the 19th century. However, most of them had not been able to present a satisfactory analyses on the caste stratification as Bertollacci, Davy and Binning has done. As many writers have shown, that the caste system was one of the major institutions which has closely affected the formation of the Sri-Lankan society. Their descriptions have confirmed that caste divisions were among the Sinhalese as well as the Tamils in Sri-Lanka. Let us examine the views of the missionaries on this subject. According to Selkirk:

“The caste takes an important place among the social institutions that are in power in the island. It rules all the groups of people and fixes the status of the individuals. It defines the trades, occupations and responsibilities of each person. . . . . It goes down from generation to generation.”<sup>7</sup>

These writers paid their attention to the way in which an individual inherited his caste by birth. They could not approve it as a descent method according to the social values that prevailed at the beginning of the 19th century in Britain. This system helped to continue the social divisions and have a good control over them. Most of the writers argued that it was a social

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6. BINNING—*Ibid.* p. 47

7. SELKIRK—*Ibid.* p. 294 : See also

DAVY—*Ibid.* pp. 86-87

CUMMING—*Two Happy Years*. . . . . Vol. 2. p. 85

LEITCH, MARY & MARGARET—*Seven Years in Ceylon* (London, 1890) p. 12

characteristic of a backward society. The caste of a person was determined by birth; furthermore, there were limits to the connections among different castes; the marriage always had to be within the same caste; meals had to be taken with the people of the same rank; much concern was paid to the pollution of the caste; besides, when making dresses and ornaments caste had to be considered.....and so were the customs.<sup>8</sup>

It had been estimated that there were nineteen to thirty castes in the Sinhalese areas and about sixty-five castes in the northern Tamil areas in Sri-Lanka. One finds that there was a descending order of ranks in the list such as Vellalas or govigama, Karawe alias fishers, Durawe or toddy makers, Salagama or cinnamon peelers, Nawandanna or goldsmiths and blacksmiths, Kumbal or potters, Rajaka or washers, Badahela or tom-tom beaters etc. There were many sub-divisions within a particular caste. Sir Fredrich North, the Governor of Ceylon in 1799, has described the highest privileges of the govigama caste as follows:

“The Sinhalese are divided into many castes which are sub-divided into many groups again. The govigama is the highest one from which the Mudaliyars and the major government officials are selected. Soldiers are selected from the lower rank of it.....”<sup>9</sup>

He further mentioned that,

“The second rank is given to the karawe caste, they are noted as traders. This caste is powerful and their number is great.....”<sup>10</sup>

Regarding this matter, the opinions of the writers like Percival, Rev. Cordiner, Viscount Valentia, Harward and Davy were similar to that of former writers.<sup>11</sup> As one's rank was decided by the one's occupation, some writers have tried to

8. VALENTIA—*Voyages and Travels*.....pp. 258, 259 and see

DAVY—*Ibid.* p. 85.

HEBER—*Ibid.* p. 195

LEITCH—*Ibid.* p. 12 and

DANIEL, SAMUEL—*A Picturesque Illustration of the Scenery, Animals and Native Inhabitants of the Island of Ceylon* (London, 1808) Picture No. 3 and its Description.

9. NORTH, FREDRICH —“The People of Ceylon in 1798”

—*Times of Ceylon—Centenary Year: 1846-1946*

10. *Ibid.*

11. VALENTIA—*Ibid.* p. 257 : and see

DANIEL, SAMUEL—*Ibid.*

CORDINER—*Ceylon*. Vol. 1 p. 93

DAVY—*Ibid.* pp. 86, 91, 92

HARWARD—*Ibid.* pp. x/11-x/111

DE BUTT—*Rambles*.....p. 141

CUMMING—*Ibid.* pp. 94, 257 and

PHILALETHES, A. M.—*The History of Ceylon from the Earliest Period to the Year 1815* (London, 1817) pp. 325, 334

compare the rank of the Muslim traders with that of the karawe rank. Some writers like Bartollacci, have pointed out that the salagama caste is not a local one. The people of that caste have been brought here from India for cinnamon peeling, as it was one of the major cash-crops in Sri-Lanka during that period. The people of other castes worked under their respective leaders according to their ranks. The leader of each caste worked as the mediator between the king and the subjects. It is clear from the writings of the 19th century that the British writers have not given detailed accounts about the lower castes.

In addition to the higher and the lower ranks of the caste structure there was another group of people who had been dismissed from their ranks. In the Sinhalese areas they are known as Rodiyahs and Gattaru while in the Tamil areas they are known as Chandalas alias Parayas. Out of these two groups more attention had been paid to the rodiyah caste. It also appears that the writers of this period had obtained information from Robert Knox. Therefore, it is useful and opportune to discuss his observations on this caste. According to Knox:

“The Rodiyah people have been degraded as a punishment by the king for supplying human flesh in place of meat. After degrading their rank, the king had prohibited them from cultivation or any other business, to go to any place with the other citizens, and to draw water from wells for drinking purposes. So they had to beg for a living. On the other hand, it is a shameful act to drive them away without giving anything.....”<sup>12</sup>

Knox had noted that they were better off than a good portion of the rest of the population of the country. The writers of the 19th century had shown a keen interest to the accounts presented by Knox.

Gorden Cumming has pointed out that the word “Rodiyah” has been derived from the Sinhalese word ‘rodde’ or filth.<sup>13</sup> Tennent, Davy and De Butts have also accepted this definition. According to their views, Rodiyahs have no special statutes or human rights in the society.<sup>14</sup> These writers failed to see that Rodiyahs enjoyed a better living condition which Knox had seen earlier. As they were not permitted to engage in economic activity, they lived by begging. They were a burden to the society. As they had to depend on others, the cultivators kept aside a small portion to the Rodiyahs during the harvesting season: sometimes, it was a very small quantity.

12. KNOX, ROBERT—*An Historical Relation*.....Part IV, Chapter 2.

13. CUMMING—*Ibid.* p. 99

14. DAVY—*Ibid.* pp. 97, 98

DE BUTTS—*Ibid.* p. 142

TENNENT—*Ceylon.* Vol. 187-188

SELKIRK—*Ibid.* p. 58

Some writers have pointed out that, the caste system in Sri-Lanka had been utilized to grade the ranks of the people and to control the society. Viscount Valentia's opinion on the social rights of the high and the low ranks is as follows:

“The high caste people are very careful to protect their privileges. They have seized the rights of the low caste people; they think that they have a right to do so. . . . .”<sup>15</sup>

The writers who have analysed the caste stratification in Sri-Lanka during the 19th century have shared the above point of view. Valentia has forwarded some examples to prove his arguments:

“Once a person who had not cared for the rules and regulations of the caste system had tried to build a tiled roofed house for him. The result was that the house was completely demolished by the high caste people. . . . . In another instance, a bride-groom who was a tailor had worn a crimson colour dress for his wedding has been murdered at the church door.”<sup>16</sup>

These accounts support the view that the caste system as a means of administration of the society has been used by the high rank people to safeguard their privileges.

The marriage which is controlled by the caste is one of the important fundamental social connections. According to the Britishers, the foremost factor in a marriage proposal is the caste. In spite of these rigid limits, if a high caste girl elopes with a low caste man her relatives certainly kill her to wipe off the dishonour that falls on the family.<sup>17</sup>

Furthermore, Tennent has recorded that there were sub-divisions within high and low castes in addition to the general social connections:

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15. VALENTIA—*Ibid.* p. 258  
CUMMING—*Two Happy Years*. . . . . Vol. 1. pp. 85, 86
16. VALENTIA—*Ibid.*
17. CORDINER—*Ibid.*  
Philalethes—*Ibid.* p. 233  
DAVY—*Ibid.* p. 87  
HARWARD—*Ibid.*  
LEITCH—*Ibid.* p. 12 and  
SIRR, HENRY CHARLES— *Ceylon and the Singhalese* (London, 1850)  
Vol. 2 p. 167

“ They never meet and mix-up even on the occasions of weddings or funerals. This custom can be seen even in the groups of sub-divisions of high and low castes because the society has been formed according to the ranks of the caste. For example, the people of the high vellala condemn the connections with that of the low vellala caste in the same way. Connections between the washer caste and the salagama caste is not approved.”<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Tennent has observed that although the society was graded according to the caste system, there has been some customs to amalgamate different castes for certain necessities. Those records describe the way in which the caste system has been used to maintain the divisions of the society, to control and to fulfil the necessities of the society.<sup>19</sup>

Besides, these descriptions further revealed that the caste of a person had its control over the usage of clothes, ornaments, hats and umbrellas. Clothes similar to that of the members of the royal family and the nobles, as described by the writers, were not allowed to be worn by the common people. Nobles were permitted to wear any dress that they wished. A high caste man could wear a cloth below the knee and a woman upto the heel. They were allowed to cover their upper parts of the body. However, the low caste people might wear a piece of cloth upto the knee, Only the privileged people would wear ornaments made out of gold. According to Davy, the privileged class was the group of people who received gold ornaments from the king.<sup>20</sup>

At the beginning of the 19th century, the Britishers thought that the dress and the ornaments that they wore would protect the aesthetic values and the code of behaviour. These writers have said that the dress and the ornaments had been utilized to protect the dignity of a few privileged people under the law of rigid separatism in Sri-Lanka.

It is useful to find out reasons that the Britishers had to investigate into the customs of the caste system during the 19th century. Unfair customs of the caste and some other factors have compelled them to do their investigations. The sole interest of the British missionaries in Sri-Lanka was to establish Christianity. The customs of the caste, however, obstructed the missionary works. They were unfamiliar to those customs. Their main idea was ‘to serve those people who had not realized the value of it.’<sup>21</sup>

18. TENNENT—*Ibid.* p. 158 and see  
PHILLALETHES—*Ibid.* p. 327

19. TENNENT—*Ibid.* p. 462

20. CORDINER—*Ibid.* pp. 93-96

VALENTIA—*Ibid.* pp. 258-259

DAVY—*Ibid.* 86, 87

SELKIRK—*Ibid.* pp. 57-58, 61

CUMMING—*Ibid.* p. 119

21. DANIEL, E.—*Jungles of Ceylon*. . . . . Introduction

The missionaries had observed that the high caste children did not like to line up with the low caste children even in the church or at the well. They refused to drink water from the same well and the same cup. Even at the annual functions, the high caste children did not want to have relations with the low caste children.<sup>22</sup>

That problem cropped up even in the boarding schools which were in the places where the custom of the caste were powerful. As a result, missionaries often failed to achieve their objectives. On some occasions, the natives had to give up their ideas of embracing Christianity and learning English when customs of the caste stood against them. The pupils refused to have their meals prepared in the missionary premises, and there were some occasions, asking to get the cooks from the same caste to prepare their meals.<sup>23</sup> In this situation, the missionaries have taken an interest on the caste stratification. They have seen the high rank pupils trying to keep away from the low caste pupils even in schools and churches. So, they too had tried to protect the customs of the caste. On some instances, they had brought mats to sit separately. In those occasions those children had said that they were the customary habits of the country.<sup>24</sup>

The missionaries who had paid their attention to those events had recognized that the caste system was a hindrance to the progress of the society. They believed that it was easy to christianise low caste people. They were aware of that their European predecessors too had realized that. Tennent, who had gone through history has said that during the Portuguese and the Dutch periods low caste people had embraced christianity to better their social status.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is seen that they have paid more attention on the low caste people and had tried to uplift and give a social training to the degraded people like Rodyahs, Gattaru and Chandalas. Also the Britishers at that time could not accept the Rodyah peoples lazy begging way of life. They thought that the Rodyahs would be better after getting accustomed to the society. Further they saw that the poverty prevailing in the country was due to the caste system. Generally, the missionaries thought that they could improve the status of the people through Christianity and English education connected to the religion. They could not accept the hereditary caste system and the division of people into castes and the second place that had been given to religion and education. According to Bertollacci, it was a useless custom.

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22. SELKIRK—*Ibid.* p. 418  
 CUMMING—*Two Happy Years* . . . . . Vol. 2. 0. 97-98  
 LEITCH—*Ibid.* pp. 12-14
23. SELKIRK—*Ibid.* pp. 325, 433-466
24. LEITCH—*Ibid.* pp. 14, 15
25. TENNENT—*Christianity* . . . . . Chapter 3



This is how Harward had described it;

“The grouping of the people according to the caste is quite different from the developing countries. It is similar to some extent to that of England where the people are divided into some groups such as Lords, Nobles, Economists, Traders, Cultivators, and Technicians. But England is capable of devising it through the religion and education. Yet, the condition of Ceylon is different, always the thinking of the people is controlled by low mean desires.”<sup>26</sup>

Furthermore, let us consider an idea put forward by Cumming on the power of caste in the world of trade. It is in a Tamil speaking place where that incident had taken place. That example shows how the caste of an individual stands against his freedom during the 19th century.

“A toddy-tapper by birth had found a job in a plumbago mine and had become rich. He had given his son a good education and the son had become a lawyer. But the other high caste lawyers did not allow him to sit with them. So the former had to go to another town for practice as the lawyer.”<sup>27</sup>

With these examples, Cumming has explained that such an incident had not taken place in England, where money is the powerful factor that govern everybody.<sup>28</sup> The background was the same when writers like Harward expressed their ideas.

In contrast, some writers in this period have reported that the traditions of the caste system had been advantages to the society. As Davy points out:

“The caste system protects arts and crafts stopping their further deterioration. . . . . It improves peace and co-operation of the people. . . . So its power is favourable.”<sup>29</sup>

Colebroke too had pointed out that the government had considered an individual's caste when selecting officials to the government service. Special reference has been given to the govigama caste. The ‘Rajakariya’ was in power till 1831 and it was based on the caste system. Colebroke's proposals to delete rajakariya, amendments to the Jury system in 1843 and the selection of the officers to serve at the Governor's Gate in 1845 and 1853 other than the govigama caste people show the gradual removal of the caste beliefs. Yet it seems that the British government at the beginning had been benefitted by the traditional customs of the caste system.

26. HARWARD—*Ibid.* p. x/11

27. CUMMING—*Ibid.* p. 86

28. *Ibid.*

29. DAVY—*Ibid.* p. 100

Even in 1850's, the writers like Tennent and Harward have pointed out that there were people of other castes as knowledgeable and capable as those of the govigama caste, yet they were not as efficient.

Finally, some writers have reported that the very low caste people like Rodiyahs and Gattaru were allowed to cultivate lands, use household utensils, and enter religious places as the result of the special attention that had been paid to them. Tennent and Cumming have pointed out that these people in the middle and at the end of the 19th century were not different from what it was at the beginning of that century. Tennent in 1850's has recorded that although the material position of those two castes were fairly satisfactory, their social status remained the same as it was earlier, on account of their low birth. They had to bow down timidly as a homage, in front of the high caste people.<sup>30</sup> Cumming has kept similar records in 1890's.

Leaving aside the ideas of the missionaries, at the end of the last century, the officials have pointed out that the high caste people had been given a respectable place in order to get their loyalty to the British power.

#### References :

For this paper, I have selected a few Publications of the 19th century British Writers as follows:

BERTOLLACCI, ANTHONY—*A View of the Agricultural, Commercial, and Financial Interest of Ceylon: with an Appendix Containing some of the Principal Laws and Usages of the Kandyans* (London, 1817)

BINNING, ROBERT W. M.—*A Journal of Two Years Travel in Persia, Ceylon etc.* (London, 1857)

CORDINER REV. JAMES A. M.—*A Description of Ceylon* (London. 1807) 2 Vols.

CUMMING, GORDEN C. F.—*Two Happy Years in Ceylon* (Edinburgh & London 1892) 2 Vols.

DANIEL E.—*Missionary Labours in the Jungles of Ceylon* (Ceylon Kandy Baptist Mission Press, 1843)

DAVY, JOHN—*An Account of the Interior of Ceylon and of its Inhabitants with Travels in that Island* (London, 1821)

DE BUTTS, LIENT.—*Rambles in Ceylon* (London, 1841)

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30. TENNENT—*Ibid.* p. 189

31. CUMMING—*Ibid.* p. 87

HARDY, ROBERT SPENCE—*The British Government and the Idolatry of Ceylon* (London, 1841)  
—*Eastern Monarchism* (London, 1850)

HARWARD W. M.—*A Narrative of the Establishment and Progress of the Mission to Ceylon and India: with an Introductory Sketch of the Natural, Civil, and Religious History of the Island of Ceylon* (London, 1823).

SELKIRK REV. JAMES—*Recollections of Ceylon* (London, 1844)

TENNENT, JAMES EMERSON—*Christianity in Ceylon* (London, 1850—*Ceylon* (London, 1859)  
2 Vols.

VALENTIA, GEORGE VISCOUNT—*Voyages and Travels to India, Ceylon, the Red Sea, Abyssinia, and Egypt in the Years 1802, 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (London, 1809)

➤ Among those writers, E. Daniel, Hardy, Harward and Selkirk were the missionaries who performed religious activities in Sri-Lanka during this period. Binning, Cumming, and Viscount Valentia were short term travellers while Bertollacci, Rev. Cordiner, Davy, De Butts and Tennent were government officials during the period. As a secondary source, I, have used the following Book;

KNOX, ROBERT—*An Historical Relation of the Island of Ceylon in the East Indies* (London 1681)