

THE INNER COURTYARD: POLITICAL DISCOURSE OF CASTE, JUSTICE AND EQUALITY IN SRI LANKA

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Introduction

An intriguing question of Sri Lanka's political culture is the absence of a conscious social or political striving towards social reform. This peculiarity of Sri Lanka's contemporary politics was brought into sharp focus last year (1999) when the People's Alliance government aborted its project of introducing legislation for a public policy framework of equal opportunity. Briefly stated, the government's draft Equal Opportunities Bill generated some resistance from Sinhalese nationalist forces, associated with such organizations as the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress and National Movement Against Terrorism. Their resistance was grounded on the argument that the notion of equal opportunity would favor ethnic and religious minorities as opposed to the majority community of Sinhalese Buddhists. In the face of that resistance, the Cabinet of Ministers decided to drop the draft law, without making any attempt to even explain why, in the first place, the government decided to bring legislation for social equality in the public realm. Reports suggested that many Cabinet Ministers were worried about the possibility of Buddhist monks agitating against the government, seizing the equal opportunity legislation as a new rallying point. Their fear seemed to be that the Buddhist forces might have perceived the proposed law as favoring ethnic minorities in education and employment. No one seemed to have bothered to ask the question: Is modern Sri Lankan Buddhism against equality? The very fact that an administration committed to reforms decided, after deliberation at the Cabinet, to capitulate before the forces of conservative social opposition to reform raises some fundamental questions about issues of justice, equality, fairness etc., in Sri Lanka's public domain.

In the Sri Lankan context, social reforms presuppose public interventions towards equality and social justice aimed at eradicating inequalities embedded in the social structures. In Sinhalese and Tamil societies, extreme forms of social inequalities are practised in caste relations that seem to reproduce themselves under conditions of the post-colonial state, post-colonial capitalism, and liberal regimes following the rule of law. However, one peculiarity of the Sri Lankan experience is that the question of caste-based inequality, injustice, and social marginalization has not been openly addressed in the country's political agenda of progress. Neither has multiple caste composition of society been considered a legitimate ground for political pluralism. The pluralistic political imagination begins and ends with ethnicity and it has no reference to caste. In this, one can find a distinct paradox which continues to be present in the political discourse of social justice in Sri Lanka. The post-colonial discourse of progress has always been open to the question of class inequality, but less so to social practices of injustice emanating from caste and ethnicity. The focus of this paper is on the vicissitudes of Sri Lanka's public discourse on caste distinctions and social equal-

Equality and its Discursive Categories

Sri Lanka's public discourse of social equality is derived from three ideological sources; they are socialism, social welfarism, and Buddhism. The Sinhalese term *samaja samanathmathavaya* (social egalitarianism) is a synthetic representation of the norms of social equality inherent in those secular and religious ideologies. However, the political discourse of social egalitarianism does not specifically refer to equality of caste relations; nor does it provide a caste-emancipatory idiom. The categories of equality, justice etc., found in egalitarian ideology are ones that are supposed to subsume both class and caste distinctions. Society allows public conversations on class-based inequality and injustice, but not caste-based inequality and injustice. As a consequence, the idea of caste emancipation has been relegated to the status of a silent partner in a macro-social class project of equality. For example, the notions of *peeditha gemi janathawa* (oppressed rural masses), *paegena janathawa* (downtrodden masses) and *dugi gemi janathawa* (poor village masses) are covering terms that refer to 'the rural poor' which is constructed as a socially homogeneous and caste-neutral social entity. Or they can also be considered as sanitized, or even clinicalized, discursive categories invented to describe the rural poor of oppressed caste communities, without making a direct reference to caste oppression.¹ Then, the upliftment of downtrodden rural masses is the only social reformist notion that the Sinhalese political discourse of social progress and social emancipation has managed to produce in relation to marginal castes. In this backdrop, an important point that should attract the attention of the student of Sri Lanka's political culture is the absence of a political language of caste emancipation.

A peculiarity of the sociology of Sri Lanka's politics is that there has not been a political movement in Sinhalese society to openly confront caste-based social inequality and discrimination. Not even the Left movement or the radical JVP has taken up the question of caste oppression as an explicit component of their political agenda, although their political messages of social equality, hidden in the class-derived emancipatory category of socialism, attracted the attention and support of depressed caste communities. The absence of a social emancipatory discourse directly linked to a political project of social equality, perhaps explains why there is so much political violence concentrated in the countryside at times of heightened political activity like elections and insurgencies. This experience of Sinhalese society's politics stands in some contrast to the political struggles in Sri Lanka's Tamil society against caste discrimination. With the intervention of the Communist Party, there have been in the 1950s and 1960s, campaigns for the right of depressed caste communities to enter Hindu temples, eating houses, and use wells that had traditionally been restricted to upper castes.²

However, in Tamil politics too, the same contradiction that was present in the politics of Sinhalese society has found its expression. No political party or movement has directly and openly organized oppressed caste communities in a political project of social emancipation. Even in Tamil insurgent politics, the issues of caste oppression and emancipation are epiphenomenal to the rhetoric of national liberation.

Caste Politics in Colonial Society

From the 1920s onwards, ethnic as well as caste minorities began to imagine their political futures through the prism of political representation in the colonial legislature. Gaining access to the structures of power of the colonial state meant not only securing political recognition for communities with shared identity interests, but also influencing the colonial state in the distribution of economic resources and employment opportunities. Group identity, based on 'race' as well as 'caste,' appears to have played a crucial role in shaping inter group-majority-minority-relations in this period. Among ethnic and caste minorities there were fears that ethnic and caste majorities would dominate the representative institutions. The fear of the Sinhalese majority exercising domination over the minorities in legislative politics prompted Tamil political leaders to counter that threat by appealing to the colonial state to alter the existing system of representation. Their proposal—the so-called 'balanced representation' — was to have the effect of restricting the share of the Sinhalese majority's representation to 50 per cent of legislators while the remaining half would be shared by all the minorities. Similarly, caste minorities, too, sought safeguards from the possibilities of majority domination.

For example, a representative of the Sinhalese *karava* community proposed proportional representation among caste communities to the colonial legislature while several marginal caste communities, particularly *karava*, *durava* and *vahumpura*, argued for special and separate representation for their interests. The caste claim for minority status came from Gate Mudliyar W. F. Gunawardena, a leading intellectual at the time who belonged to the *karava* caste community. In the 1920s when there emerged a campaign to abolish communal representation and replace it with territorial representation, Gunawardena sent a memorandum to the Colonial Secretary in 1922, proposing that "each of the minority castes or groups have its elected member" in the Legislative Council. Interestingly, Gunawardena argued for official recognition of the existence of caste in Sri Lankan society. Then he suggested that "as a first step in a homeopathic cure, let each caste, or a group of castes where they are small, be recognized as a corporate body with interests of its own which require public attention and promotion." Gunawardena's rationale for such a radical measure of minority recognition emanated from the fear that territorial representation would ensure majority caste domination of politics, namely the *goyigama* caste. Gunawardena wrote: "[T]erritorial franchise will throw all the power in the country—the power of directing the Government—into the hands of one Sinhalese caste equal in numerical strength to all the rest of the politically effective population of the island together, with its strong caste organization which at any time may be converted into a most powerful political machine."³ In the evidence

placed before the Donoughmore Commission in 1929 and the Soulbury Commission in 1944, the minority ethnic and caste representatives strongly argued for electoral safeguards against majority domination. To quote the Donoughmore Commission's report on this theme:

We might have been encouraged to suggest the extension of some communal representation if there had been evidence of any diminution in the supposed necessity of it... We found, however, that not only did those who already had communal seats desire that the number of these should be increased, but also that a number of other communities, religious, caste and special interests, not at present represented, came before us claiming that it was necessary for them to have seats in the Legislative Council and that they were as such entitled to this privilege as those who already possessed it.⁴

When the Soulbury Commission came in 1944, caste groups too urged special legislative representation.⁵ Delegates from depressed caste communities, and associations of both Sinhalese and Tamil societies appeared before the Commission to complain of their grievances and disabilities and seek a place in the emerging constitutional scheme and the political order. The All Ceylon Minority Tamil Sabha, an association of depressed caste communities in Tamil society, asked for representation by nomination on the ground that the adult suffrage in itself did not enable them to exert any influence on the legislature for the redressing of their grievances. The All Ceylon Scheduled Castes' Federation demanded separate electorates with a separate electoral register for depressed caste members belonging to the plantation Tamil community. The remedy they suggested was that the Scheduled Castes should be recognized as a distinct and separate entity of constitutional safeguards and that they should be given representation in the legislature.

The *karava* community, too, sought a special scheme to enable its representatives to be preferentially elected to the legislature. The Central Fisheries Union expressed the grievance that the *goyigama* interests had overwhelmed the interests of their own caste. The Union representatives told the Commission that the fisheries industry received scant attention from the government while agriculture was loaded with favors. They asserted that the fisheries industry was the victim of religious and caste prejudices, pointing out that the *goyigama* caste which dominated the legislature, "did not wish the *karava* caste, to which the fishermen mainly belonged, to prosper and become a menace to its ascendancy."⁶ The Fisheries Union proposed a system of electoral demarcation which would guarantee the *karava* community 15 to 20 seats. Representatives of the *bathgama* and *vahumpura* communities complained to the Commission of the disabilities, discrimination and inequality they suffered. They pointed out that their two castes represented one-third of the total Sinhalese population—*bathgama* with some 400, 000 people and the *vahumpura* with a million. On that basis, they complained that the way in which the territorial electorates were demarcated under the Donoughmore Constitution, prevented even a single of their members being elected to the legislature. Their demand was to provide them special representation. Meanwhile,

the Catholic Union of Ceylon suggested that areas should be specially demarcated to provide an opportunity for Catholic representation. Representatives of the Catholic Union also proposed that such area demarcation can be effected by extending districts along the coast, instead of merging them with the hinterland where the population was almost exclusively non-Catholic.⁷

However, the Soulbury Commission was not in favor of the demands for separate representation or separate electorates made by any of these small minorities, because of the Commission's apparent commitment to decommunalizing legislative representation. The Commission characterized the demands for separate representation of minority communities as "unreservedly communal" and reiterated its "desire to discourage a reversion to communal representation."⁸ Nevertheless, the Commission responded positively to the suggestion made to them that minority representation would be strengthened by the creation of multi-member constituencies. The rationale for multi-member constituencies was that the only chance of representation for small minorities depended on their concentrating all their strength on candidates of their own choice in such a constituency. The Commission thought that "it might be advantageous to adopt this method of representation in certain localities, for instance, in the City of Colombo, in the Jaffna Peninsula, and particularly where divisions of caste in the same community are prominent."⁹ The Delimitation Commission was to undertake the creation of such constituencies in appropriate areas.

Caste in Post-Independence Politics

Sri Lanka's political order in the immediate post-independence years was a secular one. The first post-independence constitution, drafted by British constitutional experts with the consent of the local political elite, contained the principle of the state's non-identification with any ethnic or religious community. In that sense, the Soulbury Constitution did not express or represent any decolonizing nationalist aspirations. The Constitution indeed sought to outlaw group discrimination by making legislation discriminatory of the minorities *ultra vires*. Similarly, the Constitution did not accept the principle of granting special opportunities to underprivileged minorities, ethnic or social. The question of legislative representation of the social minorities was supposed to be addressed in an indirect manner through two mechanisms. The first was the delimitation of multimember electoral constituencies in such a manner that where there was a large concentration of members of a distinct caste, they would have a chance of electing an MP of that community. Ambalangoda-Balapitiya and later Bentara-Elpitiya were created to provide opportunities of representation to *karava*, *salagama* and *vahumpura* caste groups. The other mechanism was the nomination of 'Appointed Members' to the House of Representatives or of Members to the Senate. But, here the principle of caste representation was never a clearly laid down one. It was merely understood that once unrepresented caste groups placed their case before the political leadership, there were chances of such communities being given representation. What is most significant is the absence in the prevailing constitutionalism a language or categories of social equality.

Parallel to the absence of a language or discourse of social reform has been the relative silence of public policy on the question of caste oppression. This absence can be detected at a variety of levels. Firstly, the independent Sri Lanka's legislature has not demonstrated any particular inclination towards addressing public policy issues emanating from caste oppression, although caste oppression is generally viewed as a social and political obstacle to social progress of the country. Even then, the Sinhalese belief expressed in the public sphere, contrary to what is often admitted in private, is that caste is not a major social problem any more, unlike in the past or in the Tamil society. What this particular public attitude to caste in Sinhalese society meant also had an implication on Sri Lanka's public policy discourse in constitutional, legislative and administrative spheres.

Unlike India, Sri Lanka does not possess a constitutionalist doctrine to recognize caste-based social disabilities to be addressed by constitutionally recognized principles of positive discrimination and affirmative action. The only instance where Sri Lanka's constitution recognizes caste as a category in the public sphere is the non-discrimination clause of the Fundamental Rights chapter. The Article 12 of the 1978 Constitution, having declared that "all persons are equal before the law," elaborates the non-discrimination principle as follows: "No citizen shall be discriminated against on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex, political opinion, place of birth or any one of such grounds." Then, the subsection (3) Article 12 specifies how discrimination may be excluded from the public sphere. It says: "No person shall, on the grounds of race, religion, language, caste, sex or any one of such grounds, be subject to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to shops, public restaurants, hotels, places of public entertainment and places of public worship of his own religion." Then, strangely, the subsection, which enables state action to take corrective measures in the spheres of discrimination, excludes caste. The provision reads: "Nothing in this Article shall prevent special provision being made, by law, subordinate legislation or executive action, for the advancement of women, children, or disabled persons." And indeed, both in 1971 and 1978 when the fundamental rights in provisions in the draft Constitutional Bills were debated in the legislature, no reference whatsoever has been made to caste discrimination as a specific theme, except the mere mentioning of caste as a source of discrimination.

In Sri Lanka's post-independence legislature, although references to caste have been occasionally made in a derogatory spirit, there have been only three instances, where the question of caste discrimination figured as having some merit in drawing the policy attention of the legislature. In the first two instances, where a group of Left-oriented Senators, Sinhalese and Tamil, attempted to pass legislative motions banning caste discrimination, the motions were defeated. The third instance was in 1957 when the Senate initiated a Bill to outlaw caste-based social discrimination and it was passed into law as the Prevention of Social Disabilities Act. Interestingly, this law primarily addressed the question of caste discrimination in Tamil society, where it has been the social practice to exclude members of extremely marginalized caste communities from such places of public sphere as temples, restaurants, government offices,

places of employment, public vehicles, schools and so forth. The entire tenor of this legislation is that state intervention was necessary to reform Tamil society.¹⁰

Meanwhile, there has been hardly any administrative measure adopted by the state to explicitly rectify caste injustices in Sinhalese society. It may be noted that the administrative discourse, just like the political and legislative discourse, has been one of denial of the presence of caste injustices, except in the case of two excluded communities, *rodiya* and *kinnara*. The *Report of the Kandyan Peasantry Commission of 1951* illustrates this point. The Commission was appointed in 1949, within a year of independence, to inquire into the grievances of Kandyan Sinhalese peasantry and to make recommendations for the improvement of their economic and social conditions. In the questionnaire that the Commission sent out to solicit information about the conditions of Kandyan peasants, there was a section on 'Social Conditions' which included a question on caste. In its one-and-half page discussion on caste, the Commission Report presented the conclusion that the Commission members had "happily observed in all village areas that the outward forms of caste differences had disappeared to a great extent and what remains is also fast disappearing." Indeed, the Commission felt that state intervention was called for only with regard to the status of *rodiya* and *kinnara* communities. To quote the Report:

It is an observable feature that except in the case of 'Rodiya' (Sweepers) or 'Kinnaraya' (mat-weavers) communities, caste has ceased to impose any appreciable handicaps now. These two particularly backward communities will require some special assistance and attention, even given special protection to prevent them being exploited and in order to improve their present economy.¹¹

The assumption inherent in this analysis is that with regard to the conditions of other subordinate castes in Kandyan districts, public policy intervention was not necessary. Indeed, the Commission believed that "[the] spread of education and modern trends of development [had] created conditions of equal opportunity and equal rights, which in itself is perhaps the biggest advance that could have been made towards the abolition of caste differences."¹²

The Kandyan Peasantry Commission's conclusions on caste in Sinhalese society are representative of a major political myth constantly reproduced in the Sinhalese public realm. This myth presupposes that Sinhalese society is relatively free of caste injustices and the modernity's agencies—free education, the welfare state and democracy—have basically rendered irrelevant and unnecessary a State interventionist policy to initiate social reforms. This myth waited for nearly four decades to be challenged by another State Commission, the Presidential Commission on Youth which was set up in the aftermath of the bloodiest rural explosion in Sinhalese society, the second JVP insurrection of 1987-89. The Commission in its report used the terms 'caste oppression' and 'caste discrimination' in relation to the conditions of violent conflict in Sinhalese society, a clear departure from the dominant administrative discourse on social conditions in Sinhalese society. The report also named two Sinhalese castes, *vahumpura* and *bathgama*,

whose villages had been involved in the heaviest fighting during the insurgency. It also identified the belt from Tissamaharama through Sabaragamuwa to Matale and the North Central Province touching some parts of Ampara as areas where non-*goyigama* castes had been involved in the rebellion. Concluding that caste had "played a contributory role in contemporary youth unrest" the Commission observed: "We are convinced that certain castes still suffer from a great deal of social and political oppression and tend to remain in pockets or enclaves. Rebellion comes easy to the youth who are often victims of this discrimination."¹³

But, Sri Lanka's public culture of politics even at present does not possess a discursive apparatus to propel public policy to accept caste oppression and discrimination in Sinhalese society as sites for public policy concerns. Interestingly, the mechanisms adopted to ensure at least a minimal measure of justice to subordinate caste groups have not been openly identified as state policy initiatives, necessitated by caste-based inequalities. Under the Soulbury Constitution, which was in operation from 1947 to 1972, when appointing members to the Senate and selecting candidates to parliamentary seats, caste representation in the legislature was in fact considered. But this practice remained essentially an unwritten political law and not as one mandated by the Constitution or any other written law concerning equality of representation. It has also been the practice among all political parties, even at present, to select candidates to match caste demography of the electorates, on the same principle of an unwritten political law which considers electoral victory of parties, rather than socially just political representation as the crucial consideration. In this context, one recommendation made by the Commission on Youth on caste representation in parliament, should make significant political sense. The Commission proposed the delimitation of certain areas, especially in Northern and Southern provinces and parts of the Central Province where *vahumpura* and *bathgama* caste communities are concentrated, so that minority caste representation in parliament could be increased.¹⁴ But this proposal remains unimplemented. It is not likely either, because in Sri Lanka's political culture caste is present as a subterranean force.

The secret presence of the principle of caste justice, even occasionally, in Sri Lanka's political culture may be best illustrated by some of the reform policies implemented by President R. Premadasa, during his tenure as both the Prime Minister and President from 1978 to 1993. Premadasa was the first member of a non-dominant ruling caste to hold high political office in Sri Lanka. He implemented a programme called 'village reawakening,' specifically directed towards rural society. The aim of this programme was to provide housing facilities and some material resources to the 'poorest of the poor' in the countryside. For about fifteen years, Premadasa tenaciously utilized public resources and the state machinery to make this programme a legitimate public policy intervention in social upliftment, rural development, and poverty eradication. But, little did Premadasa acknowledge in public that he was consciously and deliberately assisting the extremely marginalized and poverty-stricken caste communities in the Sinhalese countryside.

The above discussion delineates the backdrop against which caste and politics appear to interact in the politics of Sri Lanka. Ironically,

caste is both present and absent in Sri Lanka's politics. It is absent in the public discourse of politics and present in subterranean narratives of group identity and social justice. The public denial of caste in political competition and conflict does not necessarily mean that caste is absent in politics. It merely means that caste's place in politics is affirmed by a public political practice of its negation. This logic of affirmation by denial of the importance of caste in politics has in recent years given rise to two major dimensions of Sri Lanka's political culture. Firstly, in multi-caste electoral districts, competition for representation and political power among dominant and numerically strong subordinate castes has become violent. This tendency is particularly visible in Hambantota, Matale, Kurunegala, Kegalle, Matara, Matale, Galle, Gampaha, and Ratnapura districts. Under the electoral system of proportional representation and its principle of preferential voting for individual candidates, subordinate caste communities have found space to elect their own caste leaders to legislative bodies, thereby challenging the traditional hegemony of *goyigama* political elite in the countryside. Given the secrecy and subtlety of caste mobilization in electoral campaigning—rarely does it occur in the public platform—the space is also created for conflict and violence among politically active caste¹⁵ groups.

The second dimension relates to the intensity of ethnic identity in contemporary Sri Lankan politics. In both Sinhalese and Tamil societies, the leadership of militant ethnic mobilization has passed on to subordinate caste communities. This transition of social composition of nationalist leadership has been almost complete in Tamil society, with the decline of the *vellala*-dominated Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF) and the ascendancy of Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), which is primarily based on the *karayar* (fisher) community in Jaffna. In Sinhalese nationalist politics, a parallel transition is taking shape with a number of non-*goyigama* caste groups actively taking part in militant ethnopolitics. These castes include mainly *karava*, *durava*, *vahumpura*, and *bathgama* communities. Intellectual leaders of all these castes have produced caste-specific ideologies with quasi-historical accounts of the origins of each caste, along with a historicized mission to be actualized in contemporary times. The *karava* historical myth is that this caste has in the past been the ruling caste (*kshatriya*) in Sri Lanka, while the *durava* caste historians also claim for their caste *kshatriya* status. Meanwhile, *vahumpura* and *bathgama* communities, much more marginalized in Sinhalese society than *karava* and *durava* castes, do not claim the ruling class status, but believe themselves to be martial castes in a noble tradition whose historical mission has been to protect Buddhism from foreign invaders.

Debates among different Sinhalese castes for supremacy began in the late nineteenth century and intensified during the second and third decades of this century. In recent years, there has been a revival of the production and reproduction of caste histories by intellectuals of all these caste communities. Some are published and others remain in oral history. In caste debates in the English press—interestingly, the Sinhala press does not carry these debates—ideologues of *goyigama*, *karava*, *salagama* and *navandanna* castes have been presenting competing claims for the authenticity of status of their respective castes. A representative sample of this caste

literature is Dharmabandu, T. S. 1962, *Kaurava Wansa Kathawa* (Chronicle of the Kaurava), Moratuwa: D. P. Dodangoda and Co.; de Silva, D. W. Richard, 1995, *Lameni Raja Kulaya* (The Royal Caste of Lameni), Colombo: Sahana Publishers; all the issues of the journal *Kurukhestra*; Fernando, Mihindukulasuriya Susanth, *Halawatha Urumaya* (The Legacy of Chilaw); Karunauni, Sawliyas, 1991, *Amunu Dolaha*, Warakpola: Ariya Publishers. The last named is a novel, written with the objective of presenting an origin myth of the *salagama* caste community. This myth says that the *salagama* community originated from a group of North Indian Brahmins who were invited to Sri Lanka to be royal advisors by King Vijayabahu in the eleventh century. To give this origin myth a contemporary relevance, the novel says that these Brahmins assisted King Vijayabahu to defeat Tamil invaders from South India.

At one level, the production of caste myths as historical claims is a direct response to social-structural conditions of inequality, injustice, and marginality that these caste communities have been experiencing. A belief in a glorious, golden past is usually a strategy among oppressed communities to come to terms with the present status of inescapable deprivation. That is why the ideologies of the self-conscious marginal communities, caste as well as ethnic, posit the idea of historic 'fall'. In this particular ideological logic, the denial of equality at present is compensated through a historicized belief in a greater status in the pre-colonial past. At another level, such myths are propelled into contemporary political projects concerning nationhood, assuming for each caste a new historical role of nation-maker or nation-protector. When there are political-cultural injunctions against caste-specific politics in the public sphere, the idea of nation is invoked as an acceptable and legitimate discursive category. In this logic, one doesn't speak of public injustices suffered by one's own caste community; one merely speaks of the dangers confronted by the nation.

Caste and Representation: Current Trends

One mechanism through which caste has found new political significance in Sri Lanka is the system of Proportional Representation (PR), with its component of preferential voting. Under the PR system, representation is decided largely on electoral units. For parliamentary and provincial council representation, the unit on the basis of which the members are elected is an administrative district which normally contains a number of electoral divisions that existed under the previous first-past-the post-electoral system. In local government elections, the unit of representation is the entire local authority area. This enables caste communities spread over a fairly large area to work out common interests in electoral politics. The preferential voting system has further reinforced this tendency. A caste group spread over an entire district or an entire local authority area can now single out its own candidate and rally around him/her. Candidates, in turn, have developed the habit of appealing to caste identity and loyalties.

The experience at past elections held under the PR system demonstrate that there has emerged secret culture of caste-based electoral mobilization. In parliamentary, provincial and local elections, it has been the general pattern that caste appeals intensify during the last

few days of the election campaign. The competition for preferential votes, even among the candidates of the same party list, can be so intense that caste loyalties are often canvassed to compensate for inadequacies of party support. Caste canvassing can be both negative and positive. Negative in the sense that a candidate of a particular caste would negatively campaign among his own caste voters against the competitor candidates of other castes. Positive caste campaigning usually takes place between candidates and voters of the same caste. A simple language of caste identity has also been invented for caste canvassing. The Sinhalese words *ape ekkena* and *ape kenek* exactly mean what is used in English —“He is our man, no?” This tendency could be observed in almost all provinces and districts in Sri Lanka. The metropolitan Colombo district is no exception. For example, *durava* candidates know that *durava* voters in Colombo-East, Colombo-West, Dehiwela and Ratmalana would hardly cast their preferential votes out of the caste. Similarly, *karava* candidates are assured of *karava* preferential votes in such areas as Moratuwa, Ratmalana and Dehiwela. In Kurunegala, Gampaha, Kegalle and Ratnapura districts, caste campaigning takes place mainly among *goyigama*, *vahumpura* and *bathgama* candidates. In Matara, Galle, Kalutara and Hambantota, the range of caste loyalties would be much wider encompassing *karava*, *goyigama*, *durava*, *salagama* and *vahumpura* castes, their candidates and their voters.

Some castes are quite dissatisfied with the number of positions their elected representatives have been given in the Board of Ministers of Provincial Councils and in the central Cabinet. The *Bathgama* caste in the Sabaragamuwa and North Western provinces provides a leading example of this tendency. In these two provinces, there is a fairly large concentration of the *bathgama* community. The politicized elements of this caste are aware of the importance of numbers under the PR system. One of their grievances is that the *bathgama* caste has not been given positions by either UNP or PA proportionate to their numerical strength. In fact, when the PA government's Cabinet was formed in 1994, there was no *bathgama* representation, except three Deputy Ministers. This immediately led to protests by *bathgama* caste associations. In a subsequent Cabinet revision, one of the Deputy Ministers was made a full Cabinet Minister.

Conclusion

The presence of caste in Sri Lanka's politics has had a remarkably dynamic life. Caste has closely associated itself with practices of electoral democracy, despite its denial in the public discourse. The notion that caste distinctions would disappear with the development of capitalism and because of the intervention of the welfare state does not hold valid. What the Sri Lankan experience of democratic political modernity demonstrates is that caste has domesticated democracy. But there is also a paradox in this. Caste is never given acceptance as a legitimate sphere of political action and mobilization. Hence the virtually underground nature of caste in democratic politics. Neither has it been accepted as a legitimate base for

political pluralism. Hence the violence in caste politics. Subjected to the violence of the modernity's democratic politics—denial and delegitimation—caste interests and caste politics often work in a manner that further delegitimizes caste-based discourses and practices against inequality, injustice and 'undemocracy'.

Notes

1. For example, when it is said that the former Prime Minister S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike and former President R. Premadasa served the rural down-trodden masses, the real meaning is that these two political leaders worked for the welfare of oppressed caste communities.
2. For details of caste struggles in Jaffna, see Sanmugathan, N, 1993, "Caste Struggles in Northern Sri Lanka," *Pravada*, Vol. 2., No. 3, March/April, pp. 19-23.
3. Gunawardena, W. F. (1922), "Ceylon Council Reform and Minorities," reproduced in *Kurukhestra*, 1975, Vols, I and II, pp. 46-65.
4. *Ceylon: Report of the Special Commission on the Constitution*, 1929, p. 99.
5. Data for this discussion on small caste minorities is obtained from Rees, 1955-56.
6. Rees, Sir Frederick, *ibid*, p. 44.
7. Rees, Sir Frederick, *ibid*, pp. 31-32.
8. Soulbury Commission Report, p. 83.
9. Soulbury Commission Report, pp. 73-74.
10. See, the Senate debate on the Prevention of Social Disabilities Bill, *Parliamentary Debates, Vol. 10, Senate Official Report*, February 19, 1957, Columns 1283-1301.
11. Government of Ceylon, 1951, *Report of the Kandyan Peasantry Commission—Sessional Paper XVIII*, 1951, p. 214.
12. *Ibid*, p. 214.
13. Government of Sri Lanka, 1990, *Report of the Presidential 14. Commission on Youth, Sessional Paper No.1-1990*, p. 84.
14. Government of Sri Lanka, 1990, *ibid*, p. 85.
15. This observation is based on my field interviews conducted in Kurunegala and Kegalle in 1995 and 1996.