

The Changing Role of Caste in Northern Sri Lanka

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Thiruchandran, Selvy. *Caste and its Multiple Manifestations: A Study of the Caste System in Northern Sri Lanka*. Colombo: Bay Owl Press, 2021, pp. 231 + xii

Caste in Sri Lanka is something of an enigma to social critics and social researchers alike. People do not justify, refer to or even openly talk about caste in day-to-day conversations. Yet caste seems to operate at various levels in Sinhala and Tamil communities in marriage partner selection, recruitment to some branches of the labour market, recruitment to higher levels of priesthood in Buddhism, Hinduism, and even Christianity, fomenting social unrest, and certain alliances formed in electoral politics.

Many commentators refer to caste as something from the past that has already lost its vitality except for some remnants (Gunasinghe 1975; Sivathamby 2005). What survives in a few isolated areas will, in their view, also likely decline or even disappear completely in time to come, as younger generations reject caste hierarchies and inherited graded inequality that comes with them, because of growing faith in equality, merit, and social justice.

Social reality, however, is considerably different from, and more nuanced than, these popular perceptions and expectations, with caste seemingly reappearing, or even reviving in some sectors as evident in the case of post-war Northern Tamil society. Recent episodes of conflicts over access to burial grounds reported in the Jaffna Peninsula is just one manifestation of the re-emergence of caste – meaning caste sentiments coming out in the open – despite the routine silence around the institution, relaxation of rigidity of caste in instances such as inter-caste dining, and class differentiation among and within castes.

This is the paradox that Dr Selvy Thiruchandran tries to resolve in her most recent publication, which is on caste in Northern Sri Lanka. She satisfactorily resolves some of the puzzles, partially addresses others, and raises more questions than answers in respect of still other conundrums, as I will explain in this review.

Caste has been a relatively under researched topic in Sri Lanka, following a spurt of anthropological research by Edmund Leach (1960), Michael Banks (1960), and Kenneth David (1975) in the 1960s and 1970s. Certainly caste research in Sri Lanka has neither received the visibility nor produced intellectual debates comparable to vibrant discourses on caste in India. Against this background, one can certainly see a resurgence of academic and social activist interest in caste during the past two decades both in the Sinhala South and the Tamil Northeast. The widespread perception that caste disadvantages did play a significant role in youth uprisings in the South (see Jiggins 1979; Moore 1993) and the North (see Pfaffenberger 1990; Thiranagama 2018) was perhaps an important trigger for the renewed interest in caste.

Thiruchandran's book, however, is one of the more comprehensive of the recent studies in that it

seeks to provide a holistic picture of caste as it operates among Sri Lankan Tamils from the pre-war to post-war era. Unlike most other recent studies, Thiruchandran's is not limited to a detailed ethnographic or cross-sectional analysis of one community or one caste (see Räsänen 2015) or one aspect of life; but covers the entire gamut of caste-related social behaviour among Sri Lanka Tamils from top to bottom in the caste hierarchy, ranging from compliance to social protests and cultural rootedness, to the impact of modernisation and globalisation.

Three Questions

The analysis pursued in the book revolves around three research questions, each approached using different data collection techniques.

The first is "to examine how the caste system through its codes and multiple manifestations affected some sections of the peoples reducing them to an inferior subject position" (30). According to the author, "(t)his task was undertaken through a systematic study of historical texts, customary laws and discussions carried out with scholars, historians and a selective group of floating organic intellectuals" (30).

The second is to ask, "how much of the caste codes are prevalent in the post war context and to what extent they have resurged" (30). In the words of the author, "I try to find out how and through what process the war has affected caste relations. Has the war through its violence, destruction and loss of lives, disturbed the equilibrium of society and silenced caste consciousness? What is the role of the LTTE in the so-called transition as both the members of the LTTE and its supporters have laid claim for the disappearance or weakening of caste regime?" (31). The researcher has utilised interviews, focus group discussions, and in-depth interviews to investigate this research question.

The last of the three questions is related to the concept of modernity. "How the transition to post-colonial modernity, political, cultural and economic, play a role in affecting caste relations and caste order. Is there a shifting emphasis to class? Have modern political theories of representation democracy, equal access theory, equal rights of citizens and opening up of cultural and economic public spaces led to loosening of the caste regime?" (31). No specific research methods are mentioned in relation to this question, but one can presume that examination of anti-caste novels by Tamil vernacular authors such as Daniel (2016/1986) was one of her methodologies (69-83).

In answering these research questions, the book contends that the caste system in Northern Sri Lanka has been produced by the dominant *Vellalar* land owning caste/class in ways that serve their vested interests vis-à-vis subordinate caste groups in Tamil society. Heavily drawing on the Gramscian concept of hegemony, the author argues that the caste system received a degree of consent from the subordinate groups or subalterns as Gramsci would characterise them, because of their collective faith in Hinduism and Tamil culture, upheld by the literate *Vellalar* group who actually invented and consolidated the relevant hegemonies. The resulting subordination, however, is neither fixed nor permanent but constantly subjected to contestation and renegotiation as pointed out by Gramsci in relation to hegemony.

One of the key contentions of the book is that protests against the Hindu caste system in Northern Sri Lanka have been part and parcel of the caste system at least from the 12th century onwards. Thiruchandran cites many examples of resistance against caste, for instance, in the domain of creative writing by Tamil novelists, equal seating and eating campaigns in schools in the 1930s, temple entry struggles by the *Panchamars* in the 1960s, so-called banning of caste by the LTTE during the war, and anti-caste and pro-caste mobilisations in the post-war era. According to her, the entrenched power of Vellalars in land ownership, education, bureaucracy, and politics has served to suppress resistance against caste and efforts to demolish the caste order despite modernisation, the

spread of egalitarian values, introduction of democratic governance, and access to education for those from the lower end of the caste hierarchy.

One of the key questions that calls for satisfactory explanation is why the Northern caste system remains relatively intact despite the colonial and post-colonial modernisation projects that escalated in Jaffna, with the establishment of some of the best schools in the country under the American Ceylon Mission from 1813 onwards; nearly three decades of armed struggle from the late 20th century where the middle-level castes and *Panchamars* were heavily involved primarily as foot soldiers in militant organisations; demographic changes from the large scale exodus of *Vellalars* during the war and a relative increase in the *Panchamar* presence in the resident population; and war related involuntary population movement and subsequent waves of resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) that can be expected to destabilise the existing social arrangements. Thiruchandran does provide a range of answers to this larger analytical question, and I will take up some of them in the next part of this review.

***Vellalar* Hegemony**

First is the hegemonic role of some key *Vellalar* leaders such as Arumuga Navalar (1822-1879), a moral crusader for Saiva Siddhanta and the founder of Tamil nationalist ideology in Sri Lanka. In his campaign against Christian conversion of Hindus, Navalar redefined Tamil identity and Tamil culture in a way that reaffirmed its uniqueness and rootedness and consolidated *Vellalar* hegemony over the subaltern castes in all respects such as religious mobilisation, social segregation, physical separation, and the doctrine of pollution.

However, the book does not make the argument that it was Saiva Siddhanta that provided the ideological and moral justification for the Hindu caste system in Northern Sri Lanka, except in a rather loose sense of recognising karma as a determinant of one's situation in life and placement within the cycle of rebirth, perhaps in the same way as in Buddhism in Sinhala society. Rather it had to do with Navalar's contribution towards the identification of *Vellalars* as the genuine bearers of a purified Tamil Hindu culture, that needs to be carefully protected against all forms of adulteration whether external to, or from within, Tamil society. Navalar's efforts at refining Tamil language also involved a series of interventions that rationalised caste-specific personal names of individuals and justified the caste order as part of a cleansed Tamil culture, perceived as superior to western culture introduced via colonialism and westernisation. Instead of questioning hereditary caste inequality as a regressive social institution, his literary work served to sanctify caste as a social institution intrinsic and morally binding to Tamil society.

Referring to Navalar, Thiruchandran says; "his image as someone who played the regressive role as caste practicing and caste preaching social elite has not been highlighted or studied. This part of Arumuga Navalar was hidden from history and not spoken of by the Tamil scholars. The damage he has done to the Tamil community was immense in the sense that his ideas on caste were very categorically upheld in a series of text books he wrote for children on religion and as texts for children" (59). His textbooks were replete with disparaging references to 'untouchables' and pollution caused to so-called pure groups through any kind of contact with them.

The regressive role of Navalar, however, was not limited to his casteism. Like his Sinhala counterpart, Anagarika Dharmapala, Navalar was also noted for his entrenched patriarchal views. In a controversial statement he declared that the *parai* (drum beaten by the *paraiyar* caste in funerals and other social events), the women, and the *Panchamar* "are all born to get beaten" (Ravikumar 2002: 11). This also relates to an important theme in the book under review that caste and gender are parallel social institutions that reinforce each other. The implications of this for social activism among anti-caste social forces and feminists need closer attention than given by the author. Also,

how Navalar's ideas are connected with hegemony in the sense that subalterns provide a degree of consent to such ideas requires adequate attention in light of the overall theoretical argument in the book.

Role of Hinduism

The second has to do with the role of the Hindu religion in legitimising caste in local Hindu culture. Here Thiruchandran completely rejects the structuralist argument in Louis Dumont's *Homo Hierarchicus* (1970) that the Hindu caste system is deeply influenced by the ideology of purity and pollution attributed to the Hindu religious belief system: "The caste system in the Jaffna Peninsula has no religious foundation, although scholars ... influenced by the Indian system and Indian theories of caste see a direct connection between caste and Brahmanical Hinduism, try to project religion as a determinant of the caste system" (14).

Thiruchandran uses a range of evidence to support her view. The relatively insignificant position of Brahmins in Jaffna society vis-à-vis the Vellalar elite both in terms of wealth and dominance, the absence locally of a religious-legal framework justifying caste as in the *Manusmriti* ('Laws of Manu') and the absence of a *Kshatriya* (that is, royal caste) presence in the local caste hierarchy at present or anytime in the past, non-availability of any local Hindu religious texts sanctifying observed local caste hierarchy, the irrelevance of caste for salvation in the abstract doctrine of Saiva Siddhanta, and the failure of Christianisation of Northern Hindus from the Portuguese era to negate caste, are among the reasons given by the author for rejecting the structuralist argument put forward by Dumont in respect of Hindu India - an argument also contested by many Indian authors on caste (Gupta 2000).

Thiruchandran's view of the socio-economic and dominated nature of caste hierarchy is also in line with many recent writings on caste in India (see Basile 2013). However, her rejection of any religious foundation of caste poses problems for her analytical model of hegemony that calls for a degree of consent to the idea of hierarchy on the part of the subaltern caste groups as well. If religious ideology is not implicated in the formation of consent from below, what replaces it in providing a degree of legitimacy to caste must be brought out in the analysis.

Her contention that "it is not possible to find traces of caste dynamics, in the type of Hinduism practiced in Sri Lanka" (15) can be questioned in the light of her own findings relating to temple entry struggles by the *Panchamars* and the efforts by the *Vellalar* elite - including those well-educated and highly westernised - to reaffirm the purity and sanctity of inner chambers in the main deity shrines from possible threats of pollution triggered by the entry of *Panchamars* into their *mulastanas* (sanctum sanctorum). While there is by no means total consensus between *Vellalars* and *Panchamars*, the decision by some *Panchamar* groups to visit and worship from the outer periphery of the main deity shrines, as well as the worship of different caste-specific non-agamic deities by different caste groups sometimes with their own priests, may be seen as aspects of consent and consensus of a hegemonic character.

Caste during the War

Thirdly, the book under review has particular merit in examining the role of caste in the Northern Province during the war, and in the period that followed the end of war, in an evidence-based rather than ideological manner. The LTTE obviously denounced caste in a number of ways but did not move to raise consciousness against caste for the fear that such an effort will divide the Tamil community along caste lines, ultimately weakening the Tamil liberation struggle vis-à-vis the Sinhala state.

However, as Thiruchandran illustrates, the LTTE's seemingly silent campaign against caste was

multi-stranded and included severe penalties for any practice of caste discrimination or assertion of caste-based distinctions, among LTTE members and the community at large. This obviously had the effect of not so much eliminating caste consciousness but submerging it, where it was hidden and “smouldering underneath the ashes” (160).

Moreover, changing place names (e.g. from Karainagar to Hari Nagar, apparently imitating the Gandhian renaming of Dalits as *Harijans*, meaning ‘children of God’) and mandatory unionisation and professionalisation of services by barbers (*Ambattars*) and washers (*Vannars*) vis-à-vis *Vellalars* can be seen as important symbolic gestures by the LTTE towards de-recognising caste. One could add here, non-discrimination on the basis of caste in LTTE burial grounds and in the award of *Mahaveerar* (‘heroes’) status; and a tendency towards positive discrimination towards landless *Panchamars* in the allocation of excess land acquired from Vellalar landlords who migrated overseas.

Thiruchandran, however, argues that “(u)nlike other movements of reform, the LTTE did not mobilize the *Panchamars* and others towards strategies or to raise their consciousness against the caste system” (160). Whether the LTTE strategically used caste affiliations in its recruitment drive despite its denunciation of caste is not explored in the book even though one female leader of the LTTE interviewed by the author around 2002 admitted that her *thalaivar* (‘leader’, that is Velupillai Prabhakaran) “had recruited many of his cadres from the lower rung of society, more specifically from [the dominated] caste and class” (158).

This also relates to the issue of hegemony central to the book in the sense that strategic use of caste in recruitment of cadres would be tantamount to accepting and working within the existing hierarchy instead of rejecting the system altogether. While Thiruchandran is certainly correct when she says, “what is instituted at gunpoint does not last when the guns are removed” (161), it may be equally correct to say that what is instituted morally and ideologically and sustained for centuries in the mentality of people cannot be successfully removed even at gunpoint.

Unity and Diversity of Caste within the Northern Province

Fourth, the book reveals that the Hindu caste system is not uniform throughout the Northern Province, but varies between the Jaffna Peninsula, Mullaitivu, and Vavuniya depending on the local context, caste composition, land ownership pattern, specific experiences during the war, and illusive post-war recovery. For instance, the dominant position of *Vellalars* in Jaffna in land ownership, educational advancement, public sector employment and bureaucracy, and administration of Hindu temples is not found to the same extent in the other two sites where population dynamics, economics, and mediation by the central state are vastly different.

Caste continues to operate in all three locations where field research was conducted not only in social interaction among people in matters such as addressing each other, caste endogamy, inter-dining, home visits, and participation in weddings and funerals, but also in vital domains like politics, access to services, education systems, public sector employment, access to land, and internal and international migration. *Vellalar* domination is most pronounced in the Jaffna Peninsula, particularly in their efforts to maintain their monopolies and advantages in preservation of land rights, educational advancement, politics, administration of key temples, and access to professions and public sector employment.

The study also found several ruptures in the caste system in domains such as toddy taverns where *Vellalars* may be served in the same utensils used by other customers. The system of employing servants and housemaids in *Vellalar* households from appropriate caste groups (*adimai*) has collapsed with some elderly *Vellalar* people with no family care due to the outmigration of family members having to turn to Panchamar women to cook and provide care for them disregarding

concerns about pollution altogether. In this process “(t)he untouchables have become ‘touchables’, entering their houses, the sacred space which was forbidden for entry before” (127). Friendship across caste barriers have also become significant particularly among school children from more affluent backgrounds. Educational opportunities have increasingly become open to children from non-*Vellalar* caste groups as well, even though economic barriers have inhibited the progress of *Panchamar* groups, in particular. It appears that the observed structural changes are more due to the combined effect of modernisation processes, progressive welfare policies of the State, and the positive interventions of organisations such as the Jaffna Youth Congress from the 1920s to 1930s and the Communist Party in the 1960s, rather than due to the interventions of the LTTE as such, even though there is no conclusive evidence presented by the author to support this view.

Intersectionality of Caste and Gender

Finally, this book brings out the intersectionality between caste and gender much more convincingly than any previous studies. In each caste there is preoccupation with preserving the sexual purity of women against possible pollution by men from lower caste backgrounds. In other words, the caste system involves double standards in relation to the sexuality of men and women, a more permissive attitude being granted for men, and the sexuality of women being vigilantly supervised by the male leaders of kin groups, so as to safeguard the honour and dignity of caste and kin groups.

“While a woman’s chastity is closely watched and controlled, a man is openly allowed a concubine” (120). In other words, while a hypergamous union between a high caste woman and a low caste man was strictly prohibited, hypogamous union between a high caste man and a low caste woman who then becomes a concubine was permitted without entering a cross-caste marital relationship. This is a clear instance where patriarchy resonated with caste inequality in ways that caste superiority went side by side with male domination in society.

Another instance was while remarriage was allowed for *Vellalar* men whose wives died, there were some restrictions against remarriage of *Vellalar* women who lost their husbands, despite this restriction being a later introduction that came with Sanskritisation of *Vellalar* customs. In the past, women also had specific caste duties not applicable to men of identical caste background. For instance, in *Vellalar* funerals, unrelated *Koviar* women served as professional mourners who were paid for this *adimai* service. It is also revealed that many of the war widows are from subordinate caste groups, with the combined effect of caste and gender serving to enhance their vulnerability in post-war society. The implications for intersectionality between caste and gender for persistence of inequality, however, requires closer scrutiny and empirical validation.

Conclusion

In sum, this book digs deep into the changing role of caste in Northern Sri Lanka. This is a welcome addition to the sociological literature on Sri Lanka as regards the play of hegemonic and anti-hegemonic tendencies in Northern society over pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial eras. Even though gender, caste and class discrimination were suppressed by the LTTE during the war, clearly there is a resurgence of these inequalities in the post-war period, even though there appears to be a greater convergence of caste, class, and ethnic marginalisation particularly where *Panchamar* disadvantages in economy, society, and politics are concerned. It points to the need for social reformers, social activists, policymakers, and political parties to take stock of the complexities and intersectionalities involved.

The author rightly brings out the specificity of caste in Northern Sri Lanka and is keen to avoid projecting the Indian caste system onto Northern Sri Lanka; but in the process disregards important parallels between caste in India and Sri Lanka, except for a brief reference to Sanskritisation at the

end of her book. There also appear to be important similarities and differences between caste formations in Northern and Southern Sri Lanka, inclusive of caste dynamics in Sinhala and Malaiyaha Tamil communities, with the role of *Vellalar* among Northern Tamils and *Govigama* among Sinhalese being an important point of comparison. These are important issues that should be taken up in future research. Whether we can identify 'a caste system' that operates as a *system* jointly accepted by all parties concerned remains an open question requiring more critical attention. The book raises many issues that must engage researchers and social activists working on diverse issues such as democratic reform, human rights, social justice, and humanitarian concerns.

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