

SOCIAL JUSTICE IN SRI LANKAN TAMIL SOCIETY - HISTORY & THE FUTURE



Prof. Dr. S. Sivasegaram
Retired Senior Professor, University of
Peradeniya, Sri Lanka

Abstract

Social justice in the Sri Lankan Tamil society has many regional variations that makes it a daunting task to understand and apply across the spectrum. Besides ethnicity, class and region have been decisive in determining the nature of issues of social justice. Gender oppression, Class oppression & Caste oppression – have all contributed to the injustice prevalent in the Sri Lankan Tamil Society, and hence Social Justice has to be delivered on all the above fronts. Caste prejudices run deep in the form of social identity.

The caste structure among Sri Lankan Tamils stands in significant contrast with Tamil Nadu, and interestingly, the caste hierarchies among the Sinhalese and Tamils are much similar. The dominance of feudal ideology still exists, and caste consciousness still plays a role in electoral politics and social preferences, especially in matrimonial matters. This paper walks through the basics of caste system and structure in Sri Lanka, how these structures are prevalent in the Sri Lankan Tamil society even today, historical insights into the anti-caste movements of Sri Lankan Tamils, and concerns for the future towards the path to Social Justice.

Introductory Understanding: society is inseparable form that in
Social justice in Sri Lankan Tamil the whole country and has regional

variations that make it hard to talk of the subject as a unified whole. There are three Tamil speaking nationalities in Lanka, each with its own historical, cultural and even linguistic markers. To use the term 'Tamil Nation' or nationality to refer to them as a group is erroneous as they have been distinct entities for centuries, and, in the case of Hill Country Tamils, their geographic isolation from the Tamils of the North and East has meant that there has not been a shared social or political leadership for the two nationalities. The Muslims, unlike in Tamil Nadu, have maintained a separate cultural identity and integration with the Tamil nationality (the term that is commonly used for the Tamils of the North and East), except in the Jaffna peninsula, where there is no predominantly Muslim region and their relatively small numbers encouraged close ties with the Tamils. But the vast majority of Muslims live among the Sinhalese, a reason being that a substantial section of the Muslims is of mixed ancestry, which is partly Arab. Tamil nationalist attempts to impose a linguistic identity on them proved counterproductive. Besides, the picture of the ethnic geography of Tamil speakers has

changed drastically since displacement by state oppression and later civil war, with a substantial part of the Tamils of North and East settling in India, Europe, North America and Australia.

Besides ethnicity, class and region have been decisive in determining the nature of issues of social justice. I will confine myself to issues of social justice related to serious social oppression.

Caste, Class & Gender Oppression:

Gender oppression cuts across nationality, and has mostly changed in form than content by the impact of the drift from a feudal mode of production to backward capitalism, by urbanization accompanying the capitalist mode of exchange and by the expansion of the state and the mainly urban based capitalist sectors. Struggle for gender equality has been only partly successful, despite the country being among the first globally to grant women the right to vote. Female literacy and employment in the professions has been remarkably high by the second half of the last century. But the cultural burden weighs heavily on the plight of women. Female illiteracy is worst among Muslims and Hill Country Tamils. Interestingly, the Tamils of the North

(especially Jaffna), still considered the most literate in the island, apply very repressive social rules for the place of a woman society. The civil war led to a rise in the number female-headed families and, despite its economic and social damage, had a favourable impact on the place of women in society but still far from adequate. It is hoped that modernization will have further favourable impact, but limited by the accepted norm of seeing the female as a commodity to serve and place the male.

Class oppression is production related and victories won by the rising Left movement since the 1930s led to remarkable gains in workers' rights and even political power exercised through their trade unions. Much of these have been reversed since the opening up of the economy under the semi-dictatorial executive presidency installed in 1978 under a new constitution. Given the complexity of class oppression in the context of changes to the economy and the transformation of a semi-feudal colonial society into a neo-colony with a complex of modes of production, inclusion of that aspect of social injustice in this talk will be overambitious. Thus, the talk will from

here on be confined to caste hierarchy and oppression among Tamil speaking people, with emphasis on the section of the Tamil speakers among whom caste oppression was most severe and hence struggle against it was most forceful. That is no promise of a comprehensive comment.

Caste System in Sri Lankan Tamil Society:

The caste system of South Asia is unique to the region. The caste structures of different societies got integrated into the 4+1 Varnas referred to in the Hindu sacred texts thus justified and defended as God-given. The categories of the Varna system are ranked as: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudhra, followed by a fifth category of Dalits defined by omission.

Not all societies have all five categories, and the caste hierarchy does not necessarily coincide with the Varna hierarchy. Among Lankan Tamils of Jaffna, the pecking order is Vellaala, several lower rungs of Sudhras, and then Dalits. The Brahmin and the Chetti (Vaisya) exist, but have a marginal role. No caste group seriously claims to be Kshatriya.

In the East (in Batticaloa and

adjoining regions) the Mukkuvar (once associated with fishing) own land and dominate society at least on par with the Vellalar. There are Dalits, but not repressed as severely as in Jaffna. In regions in between, like the Vanni and Trincomalee, the hierarchy varies but with visible Vellala dominance. Repression of Dalits is, however, weaker than in Jaffna.

In the Hill Country a majority belong to some Dalit caste groups which worked in the plantations directly under British owners and later local and Asian owners so that the caste structure did not play a role in production relations. But living quarters in many plantations are segregated based on caste hierarchy. There are the higher castes such as the Vellalas and Chetties employed in middle management besides serving as traders and in other professions. The higher castes still hold dominant positions in some major trade unions. Although repression by caste is weak if not absent, caste prejudices run deep in the form of social identity.

The Muslims do not have a caste system, but a wealth-based hierarchy exists.

The caste structure among Sri Lankan

Tamil speakers thus stands in significant contrast with Tamil Nadu, where again, while the Brahmin presided over the caste hierarchy, and castes claiming Kshatriya and Vaisya Varna identities exist, the caste hierarchy and the oppressing castes and the oppressed castes have regional variations. The hierarchy itself has changed with time through struggle and the initiative of community leaders, as well as impact of Christianity.

Interestingly, the caste hierarchies among the Sinhalese and Jaffna Tamils are much similar. The Govigama (equivalent of Vellala) dominance has been strong in the central Kandyan regions and parts of what was the Kandyan kingdom and caste oppression was moderately strong well into the 20th Century. Caste hierarchy yielded to wealth and learning in the coastal regions which had contact with colonial rulers for nearly four and a half centuries. Three caste groups (the Karawe or fishers, the Durawe associated with toddy taping and the Salagama who were brought into the island by the Dutch and engaged in

trades such as cinnamon peeling) stood up to the Govigama domination in key sectors of social activity. Communities with late South Indian origin have jealously preserved their 'Hindu' or pagan traditions in matters like weddings and ritual healing and worship Hindu gods while placing the Buddha centrally among a pantheon of gods.

Caste Names & Production Relations:

Another interesting feature concerns caste-based names. Tamils of Tamil Nadu retained their caste identity as the last part of the name, until the Self Respect Movement intervened to do away with it in Tamil Nadu, while in many states the caste name lingers on as the surname or part of it. The Tamil speakers (with the exception of Brahmins) have as a whole discarded caste identity in their names. Even the name of one's village that occurs in Tamil names of India is absent in the registered name, although a few add it for sentimental reasons. The Sinhalese name offers a more comprehensive identification to include in the 'wasagama' (a descriptor), most if

not all of, the name of village, traditional house name (like the 'il' names of Malayalis), clan, standing of the family in society, given names and family name. What is interesting is that the caste identity is also emphasized in the way a family name is spelled in English. (For example, Jayawardana has variants spelled as Jayawardhana, Jayawardhane, Jayawardene, Jayawardena all pronounced alike in Sinhala, but with a strict caste identity to each spelling.)

Caste oppression always had a strong bearing on production relations. Even when the feudal mode of agricultural production yielded to the capitalist mode, there have been pockets of resistance. The system of loyalty on which the feudal mode relied persisted and features of feudal social relations can still be seen in much of South Asia. In Sri Lanka, the system of universal franchise and unhindered access to universal free education, in the mother tongue initially and in English as well later on, helped to elevate political and social awareness. However, the dominance of feudal ideology was stubborn, and

caste consciousness still plays a role in electoral politics and social preferences, especially in matrimonial matters.

Short History of the Anti-Caste Movements:

Caste-based discrimination in public places was made a punishable offence by the 'Prevention of Social Disabilities Act' introduced by the Bandaranaike government in 1957, which helped the Dalits (the preferred term in Lanka being Panchamar) of the North to advance socially. But legislation was inadequate to change caste-based discrimination in the North, especially Jaffna, where caste-based rituals and ceremonies continued, and Dalits were obliged to provide certain services to the higher caste households. Dalits continued to be denied entry to temples and eateries. In tea boutiques, seating (if offered) was separate and vessels in which tea was served were different, with Dalits served either in small tin cans or coconut shells.

Caste discrimination also meant resistance. The Jaffna Youth Congress (1924 to late 1930s) was the first public voice against caste-based social discrimination, and was inspired by the Vaikom campaign of Periyar who visited the North in 1925 on JYC's

invitation. Dalit organizations emerged in the North to assert the rights of Dalits. Their campaign, backed by progressive forces like the JYC, enabled the right to schooling for a section of the Dalit children who were earlier denied the right as well as the right of other Dalit children to be seated in class. Discouragement of Dalit children by school authorities and teachers persisted, although less visibly since independence.

It was in such context that the 'Movement Against Untouchability' backed by the Left Communist Party (also known as the Peking Wing) was launched in October 1966. The campaign used armed struggle to battle armed suppression by goons hired by the upper caste elite and even the police siding with them. The campaign went on until the early 1970s, and succeeded in opening all public temples and eateries to everyone regardless of caste. That was a major victory. But caste discrimination still exists, less visibly.

There was a brief spell during the civil war when the Tamil nationality was persuaded by the LTTE to leave the peninsula so that they could

fight the armed forces unhindered. The exodus from the peninsula to Kilinochchi in pouring rain was a painful sight. During the time, there was no sign of caste difference. People received support and gave support to the old, the sickly and the frail, and shared food and water. Anyone who imagined that adversity has knocked sense into a caste-ridden population had only to wait until the procession reached Kilinochchi. People regrouped according to caste and members of the higher castes cleansed themselves of contamination by contact with the untouchables by washing themselves and the clothes that they wore. This was nothing unique. Similar experiences have been reported of other occasions.

The myth that the LTTE's Eelam Wars had eliminated caste discrimination was exploded by several other experiences including the denial of access to untouchables to what are called 'private' temples. A more recent example was when caste-ridden bigots sought to reactivate a crematorium that was long in disuse and a large community had grown in its vicinity over the decades.

The entire community and people of nearby villages mobilized to stop resumption of cremation. The matter went to court and the court suspended the use of the crematorium. But when the protesters sought support from political leaders they met with excuses for not associating with their demand, for fear of losing precious upper caste votes.

Proportional Representation:

It will be worth noting that, while in the South parliamentary representation has been in fair proportion to caste identity; it was weaker in the East and poor in the North. In the Jaffna peninsula with 9 seats and a Dalit population of at least 25%, the first Dalit to be elected MP since 1947 was one in 1977 that was after the Dalits showed their muscle in 1966-72. A Dalit entered parliament as an appointed MP in 1970, thanks to persuasion by the Moscow Wing Communist Party in the ruling alliance. His presence helped at least a modest number of Dalits to secure places in education and employment which would otherwise have been denied to them. Marriage outside the caste is still taboo and mostly punished by exclusion from the family and

community. Killing or maiming as punishment is rare. As economic and educational standards rose among Dalits it has become harder to humiliate them even in private by reference to caste. But the more reactionary sections of the upper castes miss no opportunity to deny appointments and promotions to those of 'lower birth'. Also, the large Lankan Tamil community in self-exile in Europe and North America are notorious for their tendency to cling to obsolete customs and rituals which are out of fashion at home. Caste consciousness is an important aspect so that more Dalit groups have emerged in exile than at home. Thus, the struggle has to continue on every front and by every necessary means.

Summary & Future:

Among important differences between the caste structures, caste oppression and resistance in Lanka and Tamil Nadu comprise:

- The absence any of the top three Varnas (particularly the Brahmin) in the caste hierarchy in Lanka
- A faster decay of feudal production relations in Lanka

- Bigger social and political exposure of villages to alien cultures including Christianity and Islam during advancement to modernism
- Relatively stronger penetration of the Dalit community by left and progressive ideology.
- Successful presentation of the struggle against caste-based oppression in Jaffna as an aspect of class struggle, thus enabling enlightened sections of the upper caste to press against caste-based discrimination and oppression.
- Struggle against caste oppression was not harmed by divisions among Dalits on caste lines.
- The absence of a preferential quota system.
- The courage of the Dalits of Lanka to resist armed oppression with armed resistance.

Warnings for the future concern the following tendencies:

- The tendency to see caste oppression in terms of advancing the social standing of an individual, a clan or a caste alone (This stands in the way of bigger need to eliminate caste hierarchy as a whole.)

- The tendency to conceal one's identity in order to identify with 'socially higher' strata (Notably, Periyar remarked: "Caste will cease to exist only when a Parayan can announce chest erect "I am a Parayan".)
- The tendency to isolate the struggle against caste oppression from other forms of oppression, especially gender and class oppression, and at times national oppression.

(The above paper was presented at the 3rd International Humanism Conference on Social Justice – Toronto during Sep 2022).

About the Author:

Dr. S. Sivasegaram (BSc Eng., MSc, DIC, PhD, FIESL, FIMechE, CEng) is a retired Senior Professor

of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Peradeniya, Sri Lanka. He also served as a professor in Mechanical Engineering at Imperial College, London. He is also a creative writer, political commentator, and a well-known contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil poet. In addition, Sivasegaram is a renowned Tamil Scholar.

Sivasegaram is a deep observer and an acclaimed scholarly writer on various social justice challenges in Sri Lanka and also on its racial complexity and the demographics of the minorities. Sivasegaram's voice is decidedly a Third World voice, the voice of the oppressed and the downtrodden, not only in the Sri Lankan Tamil society, but societies everywhere where the underprivileged people are clamoring for justice and freedom. He has been extensively writing on Sri Lankan and International Politics for more than four decades. He has published over 35 books in Tamil and English.)