

## **Egalitarianism and Social Stratification: An Overview of the Caste System among the Southern Muslims of Sri Lanka**

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**Abstract :** This paper describes how caste-based differentiation functions among the Southern Muslims of Sri Lanka despite Islamic egalitarian principles. Such differences are not promoted by religious teachings, mosques, or the various Islamic religious denominations. Instead, it underpins a hereditary, hierarchical stratification in social structure. Since Islam is against social stratification and promotes egalitarianism, what are the persuasive social structures that organize the existing caste system among Southern Muslims? To answer this puzzle, this paper discusses and analyses the caste system under these five subsections: ancestry; marriage; geography; mosque ownership or trustees; and occupation. The study of caste in Sri Lanka is generally compartmentalized into separate Sinhala and Tamil systems. Most caste studies have focused on the characteristics, upward mobility, or discrimination of specific castes in relation to other castes within ethnic systems. As an operational definition, in this paper, by “southern” or the south of Sri Lanka, I refer to the Kalutara, Galle and Matara Districts. This research was conducted in these three districts, and the respondents were selected purposively. Community history interviews were used as a tool for collecting information, and grounded theory used for analysis. Caste stratification among the Southern Muslims of Sri Lanka is directly connected to whether they are descended from Arab or South Indian ancestors. Arab ancestors are considered upper caste and South Indian ancestors are considered lower caste. Endogamy is the most serious driving factor keeping caste system functioning among Muslims while the other factors—geography, mosques, and occupations—work as supporting factors.

**Keywords :** caste, social stratification, Sri Lanka Muslims, endogamy

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