

Metamorphosis of Caste: An Examination of the Transformation of Caste from a Material to Ideological Phenomenon in Sri Lanka

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Abstract : The fluid, ambiguous, and often elusive existence of caste among the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka has inspired many scholarly endeavours. Originally, Sinhalese caste was organized according to the occupational functions assigned to various groups in society. Hence cultivators came to be known as Goyigama, washers Dobi, drummers Berava, smiths Navandanna and so on. During pre-colonial times the specialized services of various groups were deployed to build water reservoirs, cultivate the land, and/or sustain the Buddhist order by material means. However, as to how and why caste prevails today in Sinhalese society when labour is in ideal terms free to move where it wants, or in other words, occupation is no longer strictly determined or restricted by birth, is a question worth exploring. Hence this paper explores how, and perhaps more interestingly why, when the nexus between traditional occupations and caste status is fast disappearing, caste itself has managed to survive and continues to be salient in politics in Sri Lanka. In answer to this larger question, the paper looks at caste from three perspectives: 1) Buddhism, whose ethical project provides a justification of social stratifications that transcends economic bases 2) Capitalism that has reactivated and reproduced archaic relations in a process of 'accumulation by subordination', not only by reinforcing the marginality of peripheral caste groups, but also by exploiting caste divisions to hinder any realization of class interests and 3) Democracy whose supposed equalizing effect expected through its 'one man-one vote' approach has been subverted precisely by itself, whereby the aggregate ultimately comes down to how many such votes each 'group' in society has. This study draws from field work carried out in Dedigama (in the District of Kegalle, Central Province) and Kelaniya (in the District of Colombo, Western Province) in Sri Lanka over three years. The choice of field locations was encouraged by the need to capture rural and urban dynamics related to caste since caste is more apparently manifest in rural areas whose material conditions partially warrant its prevalence, whereas in urban areas it exists mostly in the ideological terrain. In building its analysis, the study has employed a combination of objectivist and subjectivist approaches to capture the material and ideological existence of caste and caste politics in Sinhalese society. Therefore, methods such as in-depth interviews, observation, and collection of demographical and interpretive data from secondary sources were used for this study. The paper has been situated in a critical theoretical framework of social inquiry in an attempt to question dominant assumptions regarding such meta-labels as 'Capitalism' and 'Democracy', and also the supposed emancipatory function of religion (focusing on Buddhism).

Keywords : Buddhism, capitalism, caste, democracy, Sri Lanka

Conference Title : ICCTE 2018 : International Conference on Critical Theory and Enlightenment

Conference Location : Vienna, Austria

Conference Dates : June 14-15, 2018