

Caste and sri lankan marriage



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In the modern day Sri Lankan society, the concept of caste with its pre-historic background plays different roles in human life, and its role becomes dominant at the juncture of the typical Sri Lankan marriage.

The research will open up doors to show the typical Sri Lankan community being traditional and outdated, the concept of caste is still one of the major determinants of leading a happy and successful marriage life.

The society we live today is complex and all of us have to live with different ideas and attitudes. These diverse ideas and attitudes come into light in different occasions and stages in our lives. The concept of "Caste" is a phenomenon unique to the countries in the Indian Sub Continent and it is fossilized in the society. Gender, age, caste, ethnicity and class play major roles in the establishment of the Sri Lankan society. While gender, age, caste and ethnicity are decided by one's birth, class is decided by one's ability.

In the present Sri Lanka society, caste does not play a significant role. Caste, which is decided by birth comes into action in different occasions and stages in one's life in different ways and caste becomes a dominant figure in the Sri Lanka context when it comes to marriages. According to Robert Knox,[1]" Sri Lankans are very selective and careful about marriages. It is a tradition not to get married to a person from a lower caste. Sinhalese would never sacrifice their dignity for an unsuitable marriage even it brings out wealth."

A person from Colombo might hear that caste is not as important as it was in the past and that it is subjected to deterioration. Nevertheless, the following extract suggests that it is not so.[2]" Sinhalese are highly concerned about the concept of caste and boundaries around it and that at least in the dry

zone the concept of caste and boundaries around it are significant' The above description indicates though caste is not highlighted in the surface level, it becomes a very important concept for the Sinhalese in practical situations.

According to E. R. Leach,[3]'The deterioration of the caste system leads to the deterioration of an establishment. Marriages between different ethnicities can still be seen in the society '. E. R. Leach helps one to identify the modern nature of the caste system. The notice on marriage proposals on week-end Sri Lankan newspapers highlight caste consciousness still plays a major role in the contemporary Sri Lankan society.

Careful studies show the concept of caste which hails from the colonial period has undergone slight changes after the independence in 1948. As job opportunities are allocated based on academic qualifications, the caste system faces its deterioration. After the changes brought up to the constitution in 1997 and the society being exposed to the open economy made the modern society look into matters based on money. It is evident that the nature of caste has changed, but it does not indicate that the identity one gains through caste has totally been rejected. It clearly depicts the caste consciousness of the traditional Sri Lankans comes to the surface in marriages.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

AIM

The aim of the research is to study the role played by the Sri Lankan caste system in determining a marriage and the importance of a caste to lead a happy and successful marriage life.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Although caste seems on old fashioned and unscientific basis for determining whether two people are compatible for marriage, historic evidence shows that it is a predictor of maintaining success.

THE RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

Caste system is a reliable determinism of successful marriages.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The sample is a randomly selected set of twenty married soldiers from the Sri Lanka Army representing different areas around the island and different castes.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

10. The collection of data and information for this research will be highly based on the following.

Interviews done with the twenty soldiers.

Questionnaires given to the twenty soldiers.

Books related to the research topic.

The Internet.

11. The books related to the research topic and the information gathered through the Internet opened avenues to identify the caste system in Sri Lanka and it led to write a review of literature on the nature of the Sinhala marriage in chapter three. While the fourth chapter describes the impact of caste in determining the marriage of the selected sample, the fourth chapter deals with impact of social, economic and family conditions on deciding a caste. The conclusion is done at the fifth chapter.

CHAPTER 3

BACKGROUND

CASTE SYSTEM AND THE NATURE OF THE SINHALA MARRIAGE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF CASTE

12. The caste system is perhaps the world's longest surviving social hierarchy . A person is considered a member of the caste to which he or she is born and remains within that caste until death, although the particular ranking of that caste may vary among regions and over time.

13. The caste system in Sri Lanka is a division of society into strata. Ancient Sri Lankan texts such as the Pujawaliya, Sadharmarathnavaliya and Yogarathakaraya and inscriptional evidence show that the hierarchy prevailed throughout the feudal period. Caste as we know it today appears to have been introduced to Sri Lankans by Prakrit language speakers from North India. The introduction of Buddhism in the third century BC blunted the edge of the system to a certain extent. However, there is a reference to king Abhaya's son, Saliya choosing to lose caste by marrying Ashokamala, a

Candala or outcaste woman, in the second century BC, indicating that caste taboos remained in place.

14. Studies based on caste have allowed the society to come up with different definitions on caste, and these definitions have allowed people to identify the impact of caste on marriage. The concept of caste, the nature of its expansion and the definitions put forward under different areas pave a pathway to understand this concept.

15. According to Peiris Reif,[4]" The cruel nature of our ancestors led to the origin of a caste system. Thirst for power and land made them fight with each other. As a result, a need arose to appoint a leader who is physically and intellectually balanced to resolve the conflicts."

16. The sources indicate that Aryans from India during their visit in the fifth century have brought down their caste system to Sri Lanka. The legend shows that the ancient Sri Lankan society had different castes such as Raja, Bamunu, Welanda and Govi and the base for these was provided by the different castes like Brahmans, Shathriya, Vaishya and Sudra in ancient India.

THE CONCEPT OF CASTE AND DEFINITIONS OF CASTE.

17. Caste is a phenomenon in the society and culture. According to Edmancy Leach, " A caste cannot stand on its own. It has a close bond with its members through a network."

18. Mr: Amarasekara Daya in his book titled, The Sri Lankan Society elaborates L. L. Kroeber's (an anthropologist) ideas. " Caste is a unit. It

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consists of indigenous sub units. Such a unit enjoys the privileges of the society. Based on that, we can differentiate one sub unit from another sub unit."

19. Mr: Amarasekara further elaborates on caste by bringing forward measuring instruments introduced by Hutton, an anthropologist. They are,[5]

Caste is an indigenous concept.

There are specific boundaries between different castes.

A caste is a collection of situations which depicts bureaucracy.

It is accepted that through food, physical relationships, customs and by touching a member of a privileged caste by a member of a discriminated caste will corrupt the privileged caste.

Caste is related to traditional occupations.

Caste is decided by birth.

Caste in totality, is a system based on prestige.

20. W. M. Waister, an anthropologist bringing out his views on caste says that keeping laundry, making gold and silver jewellery were the duties of the discriminated castes and these services were rendered only to a privileged segment of the society.

21. Though a man from a privileged caste can keep a woman from a discriminated caste as his mistress, he is not allowed to take meals with her. As Mr: Bryce Rayan elaborated people were allowed to share the same well

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for drinking water and eat together with farmers from different castes in the paddy field, but at a wedding, people from Govi caste were never allowed to sit with people from other castes at the table. This clearly indicates the effect of caste on marriage.

MARRIAGE

22. The concept of marriage differs from country to country, society to society and culture to culture. Marriage simply means the joining of the two sexes who maintain a socially approved or accepted sexual relationship for reproduction. Since marriage is given so many definitions it is believed that studying all these definitions will help one to understand the concept of marriage.

23. According to Mr: Tuder Silva[6]" Marriage is the union of two or more people of both sexes for a socially accepted sexual relationship for the purpose of reproduction. Marriages are of two types, monogamy and polygamy." The above definition gives an idea of a marriage. According to a statement by the British Anthropology Society, " Marriage is a unit which authorizes the children the rights of their biological parents."

24. According to Mr Kumara Hemantha[7]" Marriage is a special bond between two elders of both sexes based on norms, ethics, rules and regulations. Both the elders maintain a sexual relationship for reproduction. Further, marriage is a unit made up of a husband, wife and their children."

25. The society and time are the deciding factors of rules and regulations of a marriage.

26. The ancient traditions of marriage and the caste have a dinosaur effect on the relationship between the Sinhala marriage and the caste. The Sinhala society by Mr: Ralph Peiris is a suitable example for it. Through his book he talks about the different types of marriages, different methods of getting married, reasons for a marriage and the openness of marriages in ancient Sri Lanka.[8]" Marriage to a person out of the caste was strictly prohibited. The ancestors did not want their sons and daughters to marry a person with a lower status though that person is from the same caste."

27. The above description shows that the ancient society considered caste an important factor in the marriages, and it also indicates that the Sinhala marriage is a lose bond.

28. According to Robert Knox, in 1600's caste had a prominent place in the Sinhala marriage. Further, he elaborates that caste was given priority than wealth in ancient Sinhala marriage.

29.[9]" Caste discrimination is there because of the system of family. The need for a family arose to provide security and satisfy different needs of people. Therefore people began to think about their castes in marriages."

TYPES OF CASTES IN SRI LANKA

30. According to Bryce Rayan in his book, Caste Discrimination in Sri Lanka, " Relationships between different castes began due to the nature of occupations and breaking up of the society into small units." Jana Wanshaya which is the oldest text on caste discrimination shows that there are twenty six different castes in Sri Lanka.[10]They are,

a. Govigama

b. Salagama

c. Kamburu

d. Waduwo

e. Hannala

f. Rada

g. Ambettayo

h. Sommarayo

i. Durawo

j. Kumbhakarnayo

k. Karawo

l. Weddo

m. Berawayo

n. Hakuro

p. Hunno

q. Pannayo

r. Samanno

s. Welwaduwo

t. Gahalayo

u. Paduwo

v. Malakarayo

w. Kinnarayo

x. Rodee

y. Olee

z. Indrapalanagayo

aa. Chandalayo

31. According to Mr. Kalinga T. Silva's research on castes,[11]there are fifteen castes in Sri Lanka. Though there is a compromise about the top and the lower levels of the caste system in Sri Lanka, there are several arguments about the middle level. According to Mr. Silva, Sri Lanka is divided into two parts as up country and low country. While people from Patti and Gahala castes live in the up country, people from Karawa, Salagama, Durawa and Hunnu live in the low country.

Order (This is not yet been finalized)

Name of the Caste

Traditional Occupation

Percentage of Sinhala population

Level

01

Govigama

Radala

Land Owners

0. 001

01

Govi

Farmers

49

Patti

Herdsman

0. 001

02

Karava

Fishermen

5

02

03

Salagama

Cinnamon Peelers

04

Durava

Toddy Tappers

3

05

Hunu

Quicklime Industry

0. 002

06

Achari / Galladu / Navanandana

Traditional Artisans

0. 0005

3

07

Hena / Rada

Traditional Washmen

3

08

Wahumpura / Hakuru

Traditional Makers of Jaggery

12. 5

09

Kumbal / Badahela

Traditional Makers of Pots

2. 5

10

Dura/ Wellandura/ Bodhi pannadura

Safeguard Srimaha Bodhi

0. 001

11

Nakathi / Berawva

Traditional Dancers and Astrologers

3

12

Bathgama / Padu

Servants and Porters

18

13

Gahala

Traditional Drum Beaters

0. 001

4

14

Kinthara

Weaving Mats

0. 3

15

Rodi/ Hulawali

Traditional Beggars / Traditional Makers of Ekel Brooms

0. 001

Other*

1. 493

* Castes which belong to the other category are Porava, Kara, Olee, Palee, Barber and Ganthara and the number is very low.

33. Mr. Kalinga Silva in his analysis says,[12]'Though caste is subjected to deterioration, that in the Asian community it becomes dominant at three occasions. Marriage is one of them. A survey conducted with estate workers who have an Indian origin indicates that caste is a major determinism for 90% of their marriages." Climbing up the economic and social hierarchy is the second occasion the caste becomes important. The concept of caste is highlighted at this occasion.

34. Usage of the concept of caste as a weapon in the political battle field is the third occasion where this concept becomes prominent. The following extract taken from Jamnis Tiggin's studies about Sri Lanka shows the way, the concept of caste dominated the Sri Lankan political arena.

" W!; a l= mdÆh uq; a l= mdÆh

. fà l= mdÆhg ckaoh fouq"

35 This was taken from a leaflet distributed during an election campaign and " Gama" here means a caste.

CHAPTER 4

DATA

REGIONAL REPRESENTATION AND CONCEPT OF CASTE

36. The following table shows the randomly selected set of twenty soldiers from the Sri Lanka Army representing different regions around the island and different castes to conduct a research on the role played by the Sri Lankan caste system in determining a marriage and the importance of a caste to lead a happy and successful marriage life.

Husband's caste

Wife's caste

Number of families

Govigama

Govigama

09

Karawa

Karawa

02

Bathgama

Bathgama

01

Hakuru

Hakuru

01

Govigama

Hena

01

Govigama

Salagama

01

Govigama

Padu

01

Padu

Govigama

01

Karava

Salagama

02

Achari

Govigama

01

Total

20

37. The sample represents 45% of Govigama, 10% of Karava, 5% of Bathgama, 5% of Hakuru and 35% of mixed castes.

Chart 4. 1 - Cast of sample

38. The regional representation of the sample is as follows.

Srl no

Husband's caste

Wife's caste

Region

01

Govigama

Govigama

Mahiyanganaya

02

Govigama

Govigama

Bibile

03

Govigama

Govigama

Badulla

04

Govigama

Govigama

Padaviya

05

Govigama

Govigama

Welioya

06

Govigama

Govigama

Hakmana

07

Govigama

Govigama

Kanthale

08

Govigama

Govigama

Horana

09

Govigama

Govigama

Puswellawa

10

Karawa

Karawa

11

Karawa

Karawa

12

Bathgama

Bathgama

Puttalam

13

Hakuru

Hakuru

Kegalle

14

Govigama

Salagama

Kamburupitiya

15

Govigama

Hena

Veyangoda

16

Govigama

Padu

Kurunagala

17

Padu

Govigama

Matale

18

Achari

Govigama

Ambanpola

19

Karava

Salagama

Elpitiya

20

Karava

Salagama

. Galle

SRI LANKAN MARRIAGE AND THE IMPACT OF RACE AND RELIGION ON IT

39. Eighteen soldiers of the sample emphasize the importance the importance of equality between races 90%in marriage. The nature of family and demands of the society have made them think that way. As the majority of the sample represents the rural areas of the island, they think that if they do mix marriages they would be neglected by their parents and relatives, and thereby end up in unsuccessful and unhappy marriages.

Chart 4. 2 Marriage and races

40. Eighteen (90%) soldiers representing the sample think equality between religions is very important to have successful marriages. According to them, the Sri Lankan village is based on temple, and when the husband and wife

are from two different religions it is impractical to go to two different religious places simultaneously. Further, they believe that it is hard to practise diverse observances under one roof.

Chart 4. 3 Marriage and religions

SRI LANKAN MARRIAGE AND CASTE

41. Sinhalese believe that race and religion are important factors in marriage. Typical Sinhalese confide in equality between castes in their marriages. While thirteen (65%) soldiers of the sample believe their partners should be from the same caste, seven (35%) soldiers do not believe so.

Chart 4. 4 Marriage and caste

42. Arranged marriage is still commonly practised in Sri Lanka, but an increasing number of young people today refuse arranged marriage. In arranged marriage caste becomes an important consideration. In love marriages the couple thinks only about matching their races, religions, ideas, views and interests. For them, caste is a minor matter and the survey shows that most of the couples have received the blessings of their parents.

43. The marriage proposals on weekend newspapers highlight the fact that caste is a major determinism in arranged marriages. The following table is taken from a survey conducted by Mr. Daya Amarasekara on marriage proposals in newspapers.

Caste Male Female Total Percentage

Govi 31 48 79 67'5]

Karawa 06 07 13 11'0]

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Durawa 03 02 05 4'3]

Salagama 02 02 04 3'5]

Deva - 02 02 1'7]

Rajaka 02 02 04 3'4]

Wellala 01 02 03 2'5]

Hetti - 01 01 0'9]

Other 01 03 04 3'4]

Total 46 69 115 100'0]

44. According to the table, the majority is Govigama and the minority is Hetti. Mr. Amarasekara tells that this table depicts the spread of castes all around the island.

45. When asked from Sri Lankan women about their views on marriage and caste it is evident that women from higher castes do not want to get married to men from lower castes. These women do not want their children to be treated differently by the society because of their fathers' surnames.

OTHER FACTORS WHICH INFLUENCE MARRIAGE

46. Another factor which influences modern marriage is the economy of each individual. The research shows that people are interested in getting married to people from the same economic level or above. People expect to lead simple and comfortable marriage lives by getting married to a person from the same economic level or above.

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47. Most of the women in the modern society prefer to get married to men who are more educated than them.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS

MATCHING CASTE AND ITS INFLUENCE TO A SUCCESSFUL MARRIAGE LIFE

48. While thirteen soldiers out of the sample have married women from the same caste seven soldiers have married from different castes. The following table depicts the present status of the marriage lives of the thirteen soldiers whose spouses are from the same caste.

Srl no

Husband's caste

Wife's caste

Region

Present status of marriage life

01

Govigama

Govigama

Mahiyanganaya

Unsuccessful

02

Govigama

Govigama

Bibile

Successful

03

Govigama

Govigama

Badulla

Divorced

04

Govigama

Govigama

Padaviya

Planning to get divorced

05

Govigama

Govigama

Welioya

Unsuccessful

06

Govigama

Govigama

Hakmana

07

Govigama

Govigama

Kanthale

08

Govigama

Govigama

Horana

09

Govigama

Govigama

Puswellawa

10

Karawa

Karawa

11

Karawa

Karawa

12

Bathgama

Bathgama

Puttalam

Unsuccessful

13

Hakuru

Hakuru

49. According to the table, the marriage lives of the two families representing Govi caste (Row 1 and 5) and the family representing Bathgama (Row 12) are unsuccessful.

50. The following reasons have made their marriage lives unsuccessful.

a. According to the soldiers from rows 1 and 5, their marriages are a failure because of their wives' illegal affairs. Since these soldiers come home once in every two or three months, there is enough freedom and opportunities for their wives to have illegal affairs and this has ended their marriages in divorces.

b. According to the soldier from row 12, the reason for his marriage being unsuccessful is the mismatch of ideas between himself and his spouse. He says that his wife never agrees with his suggestions and works according to her own plans and ideas. They have decided to get divorced after being married for eight years because of mismatch of ideas.

51. The above study shows that though the castes match, these people have decided to get divorced because of external forces. This is a very common phenomenon in the present day Sri Lankan society.

52. The following table shows the present status of the marriage lives of seven soldiers of the sample who have married out of their castes.

Srl no

Husband's caste

Wife's caste

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Region

Present status of marriage life

01

Govigama

Salagama

Kamburupitiya

Unsuccessful

02

Govigama

Hena

Veyangoda

Unsuccessful

03

Govigama

Padu

Kurunagala

Unsuccessful

04

Padu

Govigama

Matale

Unsuccessful

05

Achari

Govigama

Ambanpola

Successful

06

Karava

Salagama

Elpitiya

Successful

07

Karava

Salagama

. Galle

Successful

53. Though the families from rows 1, 2, 3 and 4 have done their best to lead a happy and successful marriage lives, the insults by the parents and relatives of the party which represents Govi caste have made their marriages scatter. In family gatherings, the partners who represent the lower caste have been subjected to inferiority. Two females who represent Govi caste in rows 4 and 5 have been outcasted by their families because of their marriages to males from lower castes.

54. Parents and relatives of the soldiers in rows 1 and 2 totally ignore the presence of their daughters in law at family gatherings and even invitations to special occasions are sent only to the male partner. This indicates how embarrassed the wife becomes in front of her husband's parents and relatives.

55. The couples from rows 5, 6 and 7 lead happy and successful marriage lives though they are from two different castes. Parents and relatives of both the parties have mutual understanding and they respect each others ideas, views, attitudes and interests.

56. The research unveils that people from Govi caste are interested in dominating the society, and the interest on the concept of caste by the other castes are very low when compared with Govi caste.

57. However, the caste consciousness of the Sinhalese in arranged marriage is at a higher level.

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY

58. The objective of this sociological research is to study the role played by the Sri Lankan caste system in determining a marriage and the importance of a caste to lead a happy and successful marriage life. The ancient traditional Sinhala marriage and its relationship with caste and the role played by caste in present Sinhala marriage were studied in depth to come to a conclusion.

59. The sample of randomly selected twenty soldiers from the Sri Lankan Army representing different regions and castes help to discuss in detail a sensitive topic which people very rarely speak in public. Interviews with the sample assisted to reveal the following facts.

a. Race and religion have played a dominant role in deciding the marriages of the sample.

Sinhala and Buddhist back grounds of the sample have motivated the sample to avoid marriages with different ethnicities.

60. Caste plays a major role in Sinhala marriage. People from Govi caste want to maintain their authority while other castes make less efforts to maintain authority. It is evident that Govi caste is considered as the top caste but no conclusion has been made about the positions of the other

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castes. It is evident that people from higher castes reject people from lower castes and people from lower castes always try to select partners from higher castes in marriages.

61. In the past, most of the marriages were arranged ones , but today many are love marriages. In the modern society, people are interested in finding their own partners according to their level of education, interests, economic status, regional differences and attitudes. Though it seems that caste is not considered as a major determinism in marriage, it becomes prominent when one look at the reactions of parents and relatives of a higher caste partner who has selected a lower caste person. Though the system of caste is subjected to decay it has a dinosaur effect in marriages, and leading a happy and successful marriage life.

62. The research also reveals that when compared with men, women are more interested in marrying a person from the same caste or a higher caste. As the surname of the father automatically goes to the children, women make sure that they do not marry men make from lower castes. The women also do not like to live with the parents and the relatives of their husbands' because they are scared of the insults of the husbands' parents and relatives.

63. The above facts depict that caste plays a major role in the Sri Lankan marriage, and the attitudes of parents and relatives of the two partners are important in deciding a marriage.

CHAPTER 7

RECCOMANDATION

63. The study shows that in marriages, the concept of caste is dominant. As the citizens of a democratic society, people have been given the rights through the constitution to live freely within the accepted rules and regulations of the government. Caste is not a barrier to a person to get proper education and move up the social hierarchy. Further, a person has the legal authority to change one's surname which is a determinism of his or her caste.

64. Though caste is considered in marriage, it is not a barrier to have love affairs and sexual relationships. A person from a lower caste who is at the top level in the