

Casteism specification in Mutturajawela Swampy area in Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Mutturajawela is the largest coastal swamp which is representing the quaternary landscape evolutions and sea level aggradations. It is extending about 6,232 ha and is located 10 km away north of Colombo along the western coast of the country. The boundaries of this marsh are the Negombo lagoon on the north where it creates a coastal ecosystem and *Kelani* River on the south connecting to the sea is via the lagoon. Physiographically the swamp belongs to the low country wet zone. Mutturajawela swamp is a highly attractive natural feature to human through its natural resources and beauty, all over the history of Sri Lanka. From the period of King *Gajabahu*, Mutturajawela was colonized under the casteism regarding to the distribution of rich natural resources.

Methodology

Map reading was a preliminary work used to identify the boundaries of the study area and to recognize the distribution of the natural resources. To understand the ethno archaeological and cultural changes which related to the environment and putable errors, used desk based surveys, field surveys and personal discussions too. Personal discussions are mostly done by using pictorials and voice recorders. For a reliable interpretation about the relevant ethnological condition, spent more than 200 hours with the dwellers of various

castes. It was a heavy time under the naked sun and abandoned banks with much more experiences which was capable to create a scientific frame. Preliminary and secondary literal sources, administrative reports and recent publications were also used to identify casteism specification due to Exploitation pattern of the natural resource in Mutturajawela swampy area.

Results and discussion

Mutturajawela swampy area were filled with natural resources for early man; Natural resources such as salt water, fresh water, brackish Water, sea shore, Marshy environment, peat, mangroves, river mouth and fish, fruits and grains for meals and manmade creations such as Hamilton Canal, sub canals were able to develop settlements in this area. After agriculture developed, swampy land had their uses with peat being cut for use as fuel, reeds for thatch and the continuation of hunting and fishing to supplement farming economies.

According to the preliminary literal sources such as *Mahavamsa*, Mutturajawela swamp was a fisheries zone and an ample land of agriculture in the early *Anuradapura* period. The first caste which recognized in the study was *Salagama*. It is said that of Wattala main town was founded by a community

weavers (ĒÇ of cloth) who migrated from *Shāligrāman* of the *Salisa Mangalam* region of Kerala (South India). After this weavers colony the middle area of Muturajawela was named as “*Wath+Hala*” - place of cloth weaving.

In the left bank of *Kelani* river to the seashore three major castes can be identified as Fisherman caste (*Karawe*), Washer caste (*Radau/Rada*), Cultivators (*Goigama*). Fisherman caste is the commonest in the coast areas of Muturajawela. The coastal line of Muturajawela has a large catholic Tamil community of fisher folk, the *Karawe*. They are reputedly a warrior clan who migrated centuries ago from south India (in the reign of King *Gajabahu*) and took the fishing to survive. During the Portuguese era of colonization, the *Karawe* embraced Catholicism almost without exception. Those people do fishing in both sea and lagoon. They use two types of ancient traditional fishing craft, the dugout outrigger canoe (*Oruwa*) or the western ‘Catamaran’ and the true catamaran, which is a raft of logs lashed together. This is known as ‘*Theppan*’ in Negombo but its Tamil name, *Katti-Maram*, donates this precisely. The fisherman caste was evidently divided into considerable number of sub groups. The fisherman caste can be divided into two geographical groups namely; Coastal low land *Karawe* and Inland *Durawe*. *Karawes* are still dwelling in the coastal areas of Muturajawela and three-fourths of the *Karawe* are today the owners of extensive lands and also they have changed their occupation into different area such as planting, trading. And also identified some sub castes of *Karawe* in the area and their caste names such as Timber-fellers, Bird-snarers, Boat-fishers, Fishers who do not use casting nets or skate fishers, Net fishers in the sea and River mouth fishers were derived from their occupation and resource utilization.

Washers or *Radau* are one of the oldest castes in Muturajawela swampy area. The physical divisions of *Palliyawatta* (a village by the river mouth) was the area where washers caste lives. *Hinnawo* were the washers for cinnamon peelers and the lowest caste which is still common in the left bank of *Kelani* river.

Cultivators or the *Goigama*, are the great cultivating caste of the Sinhalese. In Muturajawela, the area between the Hamilton canal and the sea where most of the paddy land was forcibly taken by the bus owners and the rest of the land belonged mainly to people of the cultivator caste although there was no farming in the village in present.

Berawayo or drummer caste is the dancers and drum makers. Caste *Berawa* is common in the present colonies of Muthurajawela. Specially in *Weliamuna* (Grama Niladari Division 170) and *Hekitta* (Grama Niladari Division 169) too.

The caste of lime-burners or *Hunno* has been designated by variety of names in this area. In the border lines of the old Muturajawela, lime-burners caste is still very common. *Hunupitiya* is the lime-burners village, but there is no evidence about the origin of this country. But still they can be easily recognized by their ‘ge’ names (is a surname used before the personal name) namely *Bulathwelage*, *Sunnak* *Brahammanage*, *Annakkarage*, *Gonsalge* etc.

Conclusion

The swampy landscape of Muturajawela was significantly modified during the late Holocene as a result of the rising and lowering of sea level. It is well noted that the society of Muturajawela area is multicultural because of the complex sociological and environmental setting. In the Muturajawela area and the proximity area around Wattala, some evidences for the traditional casting system can be

traced. Study reveals that it was based on the exploitation pattern of the natural resources of the area by different ethnic groups and later they became various casting divisions. According to the ethno archaeological data collected during the study it is found that the most of castes were migrated to Mutturajawela from the beginning of the historic period of Sri Lanka till the end of colonial administration period. Some imperative characteristics about casteism are still visible. During the early years of the 20th century native farmers purchased blocks of land at cheap rates for paddy cultivation. Although Mutturajawela is getting polluted, still it is prospective area for finding evidences on the formation of casteism in Sri Lanka.

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