

# **Navigating Tradition and Transformation: A Study on Social Change among the Thelingu Caste in Sri Lanka (Special reference to Anuradhapura Mihinthale Siyabalagaswewa Thelingu community)**

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## **1. Introduction**

The Caste system in Sri Lanka is considered one of the major key measurements of social stratification. This concept is nourished by the traditional hierarchy and it is mainly connected with marriage, occupation, social interactions and so on. Even though the Sinhala caste system is considered to be connected with the Indian caste system, it showcases differentiations from the Indian system. According to social anthropologists like Ralph Peris and Bryce Rayan 'caste is a social institution which emerged through feudalistic society' (Peris, 1956). Ralph Peris stated that the most systematic caste system in Sri Lanka was established in the Kandyan era. The Sinhalese caste system dominated the society while becoming a legal and systematic social institution during the Kandyan period. However, with the period the concept of caste is playing an invisible role in contemporary society (Peris, 1956). When evaluating the statuses of the Sinhalese caste system, mainly two castes represent rigid positions in the hierarchy. The castes belonging to these positions are higher castes and lower castes. But when it comes to the intermediate castes those show some controversy for their own places. Based on anthropological studies done about the caste system in Sri Lanka, the caste system and its function have been bound to the village structure. Considering the implications of the Sinhalese caste system, there are can be identified four stands out levels such as, *Govigama caste, Down South caste, Service caste, socially marginalized caste*. The Thelingu caste in Sri Lanka is one of the discriminated castes that have been traditionally engaged in the lowest-paid jobs and are discriminated within the large Sinhalese and Tamil populations. They are from the intricate multilayered structure of the caste system that is prevalent in Sri Lanka, although it differs from the Indian caste system by having a gentler slope, social and all-encompassing implications that shape men's lives do not differ significantly from the Indian one. Traditionally, most of the depressed castes in Sri Lanka, including the Thelingu, performed low-status work. In Sri Lanka's traditional caste system, occupations usually place people into categories such as agricultural labourers, fisherfolk, fortune telling, monkey dancing or snake charming, and ritual workers. Forcibly, certain castes were compelled to perform very lowly jobs considered ritually "unclean". This is traceable through the broader social hierarchies imposed by the wider Sinhalese and Tamil communities, for whom, more rural areas have limited social mobility and more commanding traditional caste identities (Pfaffenberger, 1982).

### **1.1 Changing Patterns of Caste System**

In the earlier period in Sri Lankan history, the caste system stood out as a main feature of society however colonialism, globalization, modernization and social reforms have changed caste relations in Sri Lanka in many ways.

**Colonial Influence and Transformation:** With the colonization, colonial power impacted the Sinhalese caste system. Duncan stated that, with the colonial era, the caste system became more formalized and rigid. Also, in the period of British colonialism, some recognized castes becoming a part of their administration by reinforcing caste boundaries more fluid (Ducan, 1984). Colonial rulers especially the British, used the division of caste to control natives, by

imposing several rules, placing certain castes in positions of power while marginalizing other castes. Due to this propaganda, caste-based inequality enhanced in Sri Lanka and at the same time, lower castes were often engaged in duties which are considered impure or lower and they were relegated to the margins of society (Rogers, 1982). Moreover, colonialism fostered class polarization in a way that caste became increasingly related to wealth and education. Such a shift weakened the traditional occupations of many lower castes and made them dependent on the colonial economy.

**Urbanization and Modernization:** With Sri Lanka's urbanization, especially in the post-colonial period, rigid caste hierarchies have loosened up in cities and towns where occupational boundaries are blurred. For the most part, social mobility continued to increase, especially among the youth with access to education and higher opportunities within the formal economy (Gunawardena, 2017).

**Political and Social Movements:** With the rise of Buddhist Nationalism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, several social justice movements have challenged the traditional caste system. Many social groups in Sri Lanka including lower castes and traditionally marginalized, have decided to acquire political representation in the country and voiced for rights and equal opportunities in education and employment. For example, political parties like the Sri Lanka Freedom Party and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna have advocated anti-caste policies.

**Intermarriage and Social Interaction:** Marriage is considered to be an intra-caste factor in the historic period in Sri Lanka. This is a discipline well defined and protected by the ancient people. But today, marriage has become the most important factor contributing to the decline of the Sinhalese caste system and the young generation tends to do inter-caste marriages, which are increasingly common, particularly in urban areas.

## 2. Materials and Methods

- **Study Area:** The research was carried out in Thelingu village, which is situated in Siyabalagaswewa within the Mihinthale Divisional Secretariat of the Anuradhapura District. The area has always been recognized for its special socio-cultural dynamics, hence being an appropriate site to study the processes of modernization on caste-based communities.
- **Main Research Objective:** *Examine the effect of modernization on the Thelingu caste community.*
- **Sub Objectives:** Analyze changes over time in social and economic conditions of the community, identify factors influenced by modernization that have shaped these changes
- **Methodology and Sample:** Methods of data collection included participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and life history narratives using ethnographic methods. This approach allowed a rich comprehension of daily life practices, customs, and shifting relations in this community. A comparative method analysed historical and contemporary conditions within the community by contrasting various practices, roles, and structures between past and present. The research involved a purposive sample of 10 from the Thelingu community, ensuring that representatives were drawn from both genders and roles. That is, 5 males and 5 females characterized the purposive sample, with a focus on key informants such as the village leader, Kali Amma, to provide comprehensive insights into the socio-economic and cultural transitions experienced by this community.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The Thelingu community's transformation over the years offers a well-documented sociological case study that encompasses the changes in social structure, legal systems, economic practices, and cultural identity. These changes can be considered via sociological approaches such as modernization theory, structural functionalism, and symbolic interactionism showing the correlation between tradition and modernity. The transformation of the Thelingu community creates a valuable sociological case study, reflecting shifts.

*The transition from Nomadic to Settled Life:* In the past, the Thelingu community was largely a nomadic society, a lifestyle often linked with subsistence economies and wide networks through kin (Lenski, 1966). They were involved in a movement from one place to another along with the establishment of temporary shelters near the lakes for hunting cloves and scallions which harmonises with the functionalist perspective that structures are erected to solve the survival needs reflecting the ends in society (Durkheim, 1893). Nevertheless, it is now the reality due to the process of modernization which has made them embrace a sedentary lifestyle. Adopting land ownership and having a legal title with them represents a movement towards full integration into the formal institutions which as mentioned in the modernization theory traditional societies become more structured which is in effect bureaucratic (Rostow, 1960).

*Changes in Social Structure:* The transition from extended family systems to predominantly nuclear families are a reflection of wider sociological trends in transitioning communities. The shift towards nuclear families, as explained by structural functionalism in Parsons & Bales (1955), is a result of new economic and social demands that better accommodate the labour and mobility needs of modern societies. The existence of 52 nuclear families in Thelingu village indicates a lack of extended family members, reflecting changes in social organization due to environmental and economic factors.

*Changing Legal Frameworks and Authority:* The legal transformation of the community from traditional customary (chief-based) to engaging with the formal legal institutions of the state to solve disputes marks the process of dissolution of *Gemeinschaft* (community) relations, to make way with *Gesellschaft* (society). This is consistent with Tönnies (1887). The decreasing adherence to traditional authority by the younger generation structurally characterizes the dialectic of tradition and modernity that leads to greater engagements with state institutions, such as the police, to ensure the order for inter-generational interactions.

*Modernization of Livelihoods:* The economic diversification of the Thelingu people shows how modernization has affected the profile of traditional occupations. Earlier occupations like fortune telling, monkey dancing, and snake charming were too deeply entrenched into their cultural identity. But today, the community has taken to fishing, incense stick business, and labour, reflecting economic shifts. This transition is in line with Weber's theory of rationalization and refers to how traditional economic systems adapt to more formalized and efficient ways to obtain maximum profit (Weber, 1905). Despite this transition, the continued domination of fortune-telling by women witnesses the power of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986), whereby inherited practices remain current in contemporary situations.

*Education and Social Mobility:* Education is an intergenerational mirror of change in the community. The older generation of Thelingu community relied on non-formal, practice-based knowledge but, parents now aspire to formal education for their children. This is consistent with the human capital theory (Becker, 1964) which argues that investment in education increases productivity at both an individual and societal level. The attendance of children at

Siyabalagaswewa Primary School, and Thammanawa School demonstrates how the community is integrated into wider educational systems.

*Marriage and Rituals:* Marriage traditions have morphed from simple traditional rites to officially recognized registrations and extravagant present-day ceremonies, reflecting the complex balance of tradition and modernity. The inclusion of such practices as pre-wedding photo shoots and legal registration attest to the altering notions of identity and status in place of modernity foreseen by the market economy.

*Cultural Retention Amid Modernization:* Despite significant modernization, the community retains strong cultural ties, as seen in the continuity of traditional practices like fortune-telling. This duality resonates with Giddens' (1991) concept of reflexive modernization, where individuals and communities navigate tradition while adapting to the demands of modernity.

#### 4. Conclusion

The transformation of the Thelingu caste in Sri Lanka represents a valuable case study regarding dynamic social change, blending tradition with modernity. The community's evolution from a nomadic lifestyle to a settled lifestyle showcases the intricate interplay between sociological theories and lived realities. At the same time, modernization also redefined their legal frameworks, social structures, and economic patterns aligning with modern society. However, the existence of some cultural practices like fortune-telling illustrates the resilience of traditional identity apart from these shifts. Both situations reflect the tension between change and continuity, demonstrating the role of agency in navigating transformation. The adaptation of the Thelingu community to formal institutions like education, and legal and economic institutions encompass the universal applicability of modernization and structural functionalism. The experience of the Thelingu community merely underscores that reflexivity-a necessary adjustment in every instance of social transformation-always remains important. Meeting modern systems while hanging on to the cultural core, they are an embodiment of tradition and progress going hand in hand, an enviable balancing act that plays a part in proving how flexible humanity can be.

#### 5. Keywords

Modernization, Thelingu Caste, Transformation, Tradition

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