



## **DOES CASTE MATTER ?**

A Study of Caste and Poverty in Sinhalese Society

Shakeela Jabbar

May 2005

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The **Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA)** was established in 2001 as an independent institute providing professional services on poverty related development issues. CEPA provides services in the areas of applied research, advisory services, training and dialogue and exchange to development organisations and professionals. These services are concentrated within the core programme areas that currently include: Poverty Impact Monitoring, Poverty and Conflict and Poverty Assessment & Knowledge Management.

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# 1. Introduction

This study was carried out to answer the question: Is there a link between caste and poverty? There is limited data on caste but influential scholars have argued that in comparison with the significance of social class differences in culture, life opportunities and economic interests, caste seems “a wan and anaemic institution in Sri Lanka” (Ryan, 1953). However, fragmented evidence indicates that considerable caste discrimination continues to exist in certain spheres of life among lower caste communities.

This study was undertaken to address this gap in knowledge and update our understanding of whether and how caste and poverty interrelate in today’s social context. While caste systems prevail among several communities in Sri Lanka, this study focuses on the majority Sinhalese community.

The objectives of the study were:

- To analyse the impact of caste on poverty;
- To provide a qualitative perspective on the poverty situation of lower caste communities; and
- To inform the formulation of policies for poverty alleviation regarding the caste dimension of poverty.

The study grew out of field research conducted in rural areas during the Poverty Consultations<sup>1</sup> carried out on behalf of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) by the Poverty Impact Monitoring (PIM) programme at CEPA. The field researchers noted that several villages are inhabited by lower caste groups such as the *Berawa* (drummers or “tom-tom” beaters) and *Bathgama* (palanquin bearers for officials) communities who live in abject poverty. Their living standards were noticeably worse than that of their higher caste neighbours and their participation in socio-cultural and political events in their areas was minimal. In addition to this, lower caste communities appear to experience both social and economic discrimination and be excluded from networks that provide access to power and resources. During the Poverty Consultations, *Berawa* caste villagers in the Moneragala and Badulla districts spoke of discrimination by state hospitals when they sought medical treatment and also by prospective employee when seeking employment opportunities.

Such observations pointed to the possibility of caste as a hidden dimension of poverty in Sri Lanka. This comparative study was conceptualised to examine this hypothesis, and specifically to understand the depth of discrimination, isolation and level of poverty amongst lower caste communities. Their economic situation and living conditions were compared to those of their higher caste neighbours in order to determine the extent to which caste, rather than other factors such as class and geographical isolation, contribute to poverty.

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<sup>1</sup> Poverty consultations with the poor was the fieldwork component for the study “Perceptions of the Poor”. They took place from April to June 2001 in the Trincomalee, Hambantota, Moneragala and Badulla districts.

## Methodology

This study focuses on six aspects in relation to caste, namely, income, employment, education, social mobility, political involvement and social organisation of the lower caste communities, to assess if and how these differ from those of their higher caste neighbours. Other aspects investigated in this study are how development and social change have transformed caste-based occupations and the quality of life of the lower caste communities, as well as respondents' perceptions of caste and their aspirations for the future.

The findings of this study are largely based on primary data collected through semi-structured interviews with individual households and focus groups, which were complemented by participant observations. As far as possible, 'open-ended' questions were used to ensure that the respondent and the interviewer had maximum flexibility during the interview. Fieldwork was conducted during the course of one month, covering one village per week. The total sample size for the study was 59 households, that is, a total of 34 interviews with lower caste respondents and a total of 25 interviews with higher caste respondents. The lower caste sample was larger because they are the main focus of this study.

### Interesting Experiences from the Field...

During data collection a number of interesting observations were made:

- The concept of caste is a sensitive issue and it was somewhat difficult to discuss it openly with the respondents. Sometimes it took time to build rapport with respondents by asking general questions about the village and their families. The most affected lower caste respondents used this as an opportunity to explain the caste-based discrimination they faced.
- Some of the younger respondents, especially the males, were less willing to answer questions that dealt with caste. On one occasion, an inquiry into the prevalence of caste consciousness in their locality resulted in the respondent, a young male, who initially displayed enthusiasm in the exercise, leaving his wife to complete the interview.
- In one village, the researcher was mistaken for a government official, sent to the village undercover to find out the income of the villagers. Presumably, they feared that this information would be used to discontinue their Samurdhi grants. However, this notion was dispelled upon establishing a rapport with the respondents.
- In some areas, the information provided by the respondents was not completely reliable. However, every effort was made to crosscheck such data and to supplement it with extensive references to secondary data.

- Owing to the prevalence of alcoholism in one village, the researcher had to complete the interviews before 4 pm.

In order to maintain the anonymity of the respondents and the confidentiality of the information provided, pseudonyms have been used in this report. However, the names of the villages have not been changed.

## 2. The Sinhalese Caste Structure

The structure of caste among the Sinhalese in Sri Lanka was regulated in the past according to the occupation of each caste, which is known as *rajakariya* (services to the king). Each caste was bound to a principal occupation, which was associated with the concept of pollution. That is, caste is expressed as *pirisudu* (pure) and *honda* (good) as opposed to *apirisudu* (impure) and *naraka* (bad). The traditional hierarchy of caste begins with the *Govi* or *Goigama* (cultivators) who are also numerically the majority being 49% of the Sinhalese community (Ryan, 1953). The caste structure continues in descending order on the basis of the status given to each caste, ending with the *Rodi* (outcasts) who were prescribed to earn a living by begging. However, various castes dispute this order of the hierarchy and, as pointed out by Jayawardena, “even a hierarchical system based on caste considered to be unchanging, [has undergone] many shifts and changes in the 19<sup>th</sup> century” (Jayawardena, 2003:161).

Although the hierarchy itself is disputed, many agree that the highest caste is the *Govi*. There is a strong dispute about the second place in the ranking, between the *Karawa* (fishermen), *Durawa* (liquor makers) and *Salagama* (cinnamon workers) groups. There is also disagreement with regard to the ranking of the *Vahumpura* (sweet/jaggery makers) who believe that they have better social status and should be placed higher than the *Rada* (laundrymen) caste. Among the higher caste groups too there are differences of opinion concerning the order of ranking between the lower caste groups, especially with regard to the position of the *Berawa* (drummers) and the *Bathgama* (porter) castes. The *Rodi*, who are the lowest in the hierarchy are the only untouchables in the Sinhala caste hierarchy. They were the only marginalised group in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy, although since around the 1960s they have gradually entered the mainstream Sinhala caste hierarchy (Weeratunge, 1988).

Within the caste hierarchy, *Vahumpuras* are perceived as the cut off point: those who are placed above are perceived to be of a high caste and those who are placed lower are perceived to be of low caste groups.

A distinctive feature of the Sinhalese caste structure is that the percentage of the lower castes is numerically low, around 25%. This is unlike in India where the majority of the population are from the lower castes and where there are many caste-based conflicts. Being numerically small has put lower caste communities in Sri Lanka in a disadvantaged position as they do not have the numbers to raise their voices or put

forward their problems. Another important aspect of caste in Sri Lanka is that some castes such as the *Bodhi* (caretakers of the Bo Trees) are in a process of disappearing while some, such as distillers and ship owners, have already disappeared. Certain sub caste groups, such as *Porowakara*, are losing their differentiation within the larger caste hierarchy (Ryan, 1953).

Table 2.1 shows the structure of caste hierarchy in Sinhala society. The population aggregated within each caste was estimated on the basis of the official census of 1911, the last population census conducted which gathered information on caste. Therefore, it is possible that the actual figures today are somewhat different to the values given in the table.

**Table 2.1 Caste Composition of Sinhala Society**

Rank (contested)	Caste Name	Caste Occupation	Estimated Share of Population (%)
1	Govi		
	- <i>Radala</i>	Aristocracy	0.001
	- <i>Govi</i>	<b>Cultivators or free peasants</b>	<b>49.000</b>
	- <i>Patti</i>	Herdsmen	0.001
2	Karawa	Fishermen	5.000
3	Salagama	Cinnamon workers	3.000
4	Durawa	Liquor-makers	1.000
5	Hunu	Limestone workers	0.002
6	Achari/Galladu/Navandanna	Smiths	0.500
7	Hena/Rada	Dhobi workers (Laundry)	3.000
8	Vahumpura/Hakuru	Sweet/Jaggery makers	12.500
9	<b>Kumbal/Badhala</b>	<b>Pottery makers</b>	<b>2.500</b>
10	Bathgama/Padu	Servants/Porters	18.000
11	Panna/Bodhi	Mahouts/ Caretakers of the Bo Tree	0.001
12	Nakati/Berawa	Dancers/Drummers	3.000
13	Kinnara	Mat weavers	0.300
14	<b>Rodi</b>	<b>Beggars/Broom makers</b>	<b>0.001</b>
	Other*		2.494
	TOTAL		100.000

\* Other smaller and geographically scattered Sinhala castes include *Porowakara*, *Oli*, *Gattara* and *Gahala*<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Source: Prof. K. Tudor Silva (lecture notes), 2001

The *Govi* (cultivators), *Kumbal* (pottery makers) and *Rodi* (beggars/broom makers) are the three caste groups discussed in this study. Numerous terms are used to name each of these caste group by various researchers but in this study, the term *Govi* is used instead of *Goigama* and *Rodi* is used instead of the term *Rodiya*.

The *Rodi* occupy the fourteenth position in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy. There was no indication of the existence of the *Rodi* caste in ancient historical sources and the first mention of the *Rodi* was in the *Janawamsa*<sup>3</sup> attributed to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In the *Janawamsa* the *Rodi* are described as people who belong to Sudra division - the lowest caste in the Hindu caste structure - who weave nooses and ropes. The *Rodi* were also described as beggars and were associated with uncleanness in the *Janawamsa*, according to which the name *Rodi* was a combination of the terms *roga* (disease) and *dali* (stubborn). In his writings, the 17<sup>th</sup> century British traveller Robert Knox, has described the *Rodi* as hunters who were required to supply the king with venison. According to Knox's version, one day instead of venison they bought human flesh to the king. The king learnt of this and expelled them from the village, necessitating that they earn their living by begging. When Nevill carried out an ethnographical study of the *Rodi*, he found that by the 1980's the *Rodi* were considering themselves to be Buddhist (Weeratunge, 1988:5-8).

The *Kumbal* caste occupies the ninth position in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy. The caste occupation of the *Kumbal* was to furnish the king and chiefs with earthenware and pay for their land by small tax money (Ryan, 1953). Making new pots for priests and for the temple and kovil rituals is also part of their duty for which no payment is made. Unlike the *Rodi*, who are mainly found in the Sabaragamuwa and North-Western provinces, the *Kumbal* are scattered throughout most parts of the country. As they mostly tend to settle close to farming villages, they frequently work in paddy land as labourers. They do not own paddy land but usually have ownership of the house and plot of land on which they live. Most of them live in a group within the same compound. The caste activity, pot making, remunerates well as earthenware is sold for money. Although hand-potting is still an important caste occupation in some *Kumbal* caste villages, small ceramics-based industrial enterprises such as crockery, tile and brick production have entered the scene. However, these businesses and related activities have no caste significance or caste affiliation.

The term *Govi* or *Goigama* literally means "cultivator of the soil" and it is the cultivator or farmer caste, which is at the peak of the Sinhalese caste hierarchy (ibid 1953:95). Although cultivation is not the sole occupation of the *Govi* caste, the term *Govi* is used because no demeaning services or cultural practices are ascribed to them. Further, the *Govi* people were considered as "'the good people' as opposed to lower castes" (David cited in Pieris, 1956:171). The *Govi* constitutes one half of Sinhalese society which makes the caste hierarchy numerically larger at the peak than at the base. They are the most numerous caste throughout the interior, both in the low country and Kandyan region, except in the coastal zone, where the *Karawa* and *Salagama* caste communities are

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<sup>3</sup> Contains a set of theories or myths with some detail about the social structure of the island, specifically the castes.

predominant. Further, their proportion has probably increased slightly in recent years through a tendency for individuals or families to achieve anonymity and thus move into the ranks of the most esteemed (ibid. 1956:96).

There are sub-castes within the *Govi* or *Goigama* caste, such as *Radala* (aristocracy), *Goigama* (free peasants) and *Patti* (herdsmen). The Veddas, Sri Lanka's aboriginal race, are also considered to be a sub-caste of the *Goigama*. The term *Goigama* indicates the "highest status and a 'genus' within which there are various species (different caste communities)" (Ryan, 1953:102).

### 3. Village Profile

The fieldwork for this study was carried out in four villages in the Kegalle and Kalutara districts. The sample villages were selected in pairs for comparative purposes. Each pair of villages was selected on the basis of presence of high and lower castes and the proximity of the two survey villages. Also, a semi-urban and a rural location were selected in order to assess the influence of the locality on the poverty situation of the communities. In this way, two semi-urban villages were selected in the Kegalle district while two rural villages were selected in the Kalutara district for the study sample.

**Table 3.1 Profile of sample villages**

Village Name	Mahayala	Madurawela	Thalpitiyagama	Kongamuwa
District	Kalutara	Kalutara	Kegalle	Kegalle
Predominant caste	<i>Kumbal</i>	<i>Govi</i>	<i>Rodi</i>	<i>Govi</i>
Caste- Based occupation	Potters	Cultivators of the soil	Beggars/Broom producers	Cultivators of the soil
Total population	530	680	700	1300
Number of males	248	345	325	600
Number of females	292	355	375	700
Total number of households	80	155	90	200
Total number of families	185	170	120	200
Avg. size of the family	5.3	4	5.8	5
Number of female-headed households	10%	12%	10%	5%
Sinhalese (%)	100%	100%	95%	95%
Muslims (%)	-	-	-	5%
Mixed ethnicity (%)	-	-	5%	-

Source: Field data (Key person interviews), 2002

**Mahayala** and **Madurawela** are two adjacent traditional villages located four miles away from the town of Horana in the Kalutara district. While the two villages are separated by paddy fields, the houses in both villages are located on rugged, hilly terrain. Both are primarily Sinhalese villages.

**Mahayala** is predominantly a *Kumbal* (potter) caste village where, for generations, the main economic activity of the villagers has been pottery. According to the *Gramma Niladhari*, there are approximately 185 families, comprising 530 residents. It was reported that 80% of the villagers belong to the *Kumbal*, 10% to the *Vahumpura* (jaggery maker) and 10% to the *Govi* (cultivator) castes. The village has approximately 10 acres of high land, which is used mainly to construct houses. The recent increase in population has resulted in a decline in the extent of land owned by each household. Nearly 45% of the households have five to ten perches of land, 15% have 10 to 20 perches of land and 20% have between 20 to 30 perches. Around 75% of the villagers live on jointly-inherited land, while others have individual titles to their land which are also inherited. Most houses are small, semi-permanent or partly-constructed structures, with no plastering of the walls. The road leading to the village is partly tarred and gravelled. The village has a primary school but for secondary education children have to attend a national school in Horana.

The neighbouring village **Madurawela** is predominantly a *Govi* village whose residents have been traditionally cultivators. According to the President of the *Sanasa* Society, the village is inhabited by 170 families with an estimated 680 residents. In addition to these families, five *Rada* (washer caste) households are situated at the edge of the village and have almost no contact with the other villagers. Most houses in the village are brick houses built during the mid-1950s and the size of the houses are, on average, medium-sized or large. Madurawela is reached by a road, which is mainly tarred. All households own more than 30 perches of land, the boundaries of which are demarcated and fenced. A 20-acre paddy field, owned by the Madurawela villagers, separates the two villages of Mahayala and Madurawela.

The other pair of adjoining villages, **Thalpitiyagama** and **Kongamuwa** are situated in the Kegalle district within the Mawanella Divisional Secretariat (DS) Division and are located on two hills which face each other and are separated by the main road that runs between Mawanella and Hemmathegama.

**Thalpitiyagama** is solely a *Rodi* village located a kilometre away from the Mawanella town. In 1986, the village was improved by a village development scheme<sup>4</sup>. The total land area of the village is three acres and each house owns between five to ten perches of land. A few houses have fences and many of the houses do not have clearly demarcated boundaries because the houses were built on joint land. The village lacks an adequate roadway and villagers are forced to use footpaths or cross other villagers' compounds to reach their homes. Except for about 10 average size houses situated by the main road, the rest are comparatively smaller and are either wattle and daub structures or small non-plastered cement houses. However, all the houses had tin or tile

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<sup>4</sup> This scheme was facilitated by the late President R. Premadasa, who was himself from a lower caste, and is considered by lower caste communities as a champion for the lower castes.



roofing. The average household size is somewhat high being 5.8 members per household.

About 40% of the houses do not have electricity, 20% do not have sanitary facilities and only 2% of the houses have telephones. The village, especially households at the summit, faces a garbage disposal problem. The garbage has to be brought down to the main road, 200 to 300 metres away from their homes, for disposal in the common garbage disposal pit. The villagers complain that because their private land area is very small they are unable to dispose of their garbage within their compounds as people do in most neighbouring villages.

**Kongamuwa** is a predominantly *Govi* village, which dates back to the Kandyan kingdom. It was reported that 20 to 30 years ago most houses in the village were either cadjan or wattle and daub structures and few were manor houses (*walauwas*). However, over time, a majority of the houses in the village have become cement houses. The village consists of 200 households and a total population of 1300 residents. Around 75% of the villagers belong to the *Govi* caste, 15% to the *Vahumpura* caste while the others are distributed amongst the *Berawa* (drummer), *Kumbal* (potter) and *Galladu* (blacksmith) castes. The village has 30 acres of paddy land and 30 acres of high land. A large proportion of the high land is used for constructing houses and for home gardening. Spices such as pepper, nutmeg and coconut are grown in these home gardens. Twenty to thirty years ago most of the paddy land was utilised for cultivation using the *aththam*<sup>5</sup> cultivation method. However, at present, most villagers are employed in the public sector and do not want their parents to continue in farming. They argue that in the modern occupational structure farming is considered a blue-collar, low status occupation. As a result, some paddy land has been abandoned. The paddy fields that are currently under cultivation are those cultivated under the tenure system. A large proportion of the houses have electricity while 10% have telephone facilities.

Hereafter in this report, the sample population will be referred to as follows:

- Mahayala village (*Kumbal* caste): "lower caste rural";
- Madurawela village (*Govi* caste): "high caste rural";
- Thalpitiyagama village (*Rodi* caste): "lower caste semi-urban"; and
- Kongamuwa village (*Govi* caste): "high caste semi-urban."

#### 4. Perception of Income and Poverty

Income poverty remains high in Sri Lanka. Based on the 1995/96 Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) calculations, at least one-fourth of the population is estimated to be living below the poverty line (Gunewardena, 2000). In order to ascertain

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<sup>5</sup> Aththam : An exchange of labour, where a group of cultivators come together as a group to work on each other's land.

whether an income disparity exists between the caste communities in the study sample, the family income levels were studied within the communities. The table below shows per capita income levels of the sample population.

**Table 4.1 Income levels of the sample population by poverty lines**

	<i>Rural</i>				<i>Semi-Urban</i>				<i>Sri Lanka</i>
	<b>Lower caste</b>		<b>High caste</b>		<b>Lower caste</b>		<b>High caste</b>		
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%	
Lower poverty line									
Below Rs. 791 per month	4	24	1	8	6	33	3	23	<b>25.17</b>
Upper poverty line Rs.									
792-950 per month	8	47	2	17	4	22	3	23	<b>14.03</b>
Rs. 951 and above, per month	5	30	9	75	8	45	7	54	<b>60.80</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field data (household interviews), 2002

Among the high castes - irrespective of location, a majority (75% and 54%) have an income level above the upper poverty line. In contrast, among the lower caste villages, only 45% of semi-urban and 30% of the rural villagers are of this income level. The difference in income between the low and high caste villages is wider in rural areas than in semi-urban areas. This may indicate that caste exerts a large downward influence on income levels when low caste and rural location exists together. This is linked to availability of employment opportunities for those living in rural areas compared to those living closer to urban centres. The rural lower caste village has the highest percentage below the higher poverty line, and their income levels appear to be adversely affected by both their caste status as well as their location.

**Table 4.2 Perceptions about income status**

<b>Income level</b>	<i>Rural</i>				<i>Semi-Urban</i>			
	<b>Lower caste</b>		<b>High caste</b>		<b>Lower caste</b>		<b>High caste</b>	
	<b>Low %</b>	<b>Mid %</b>	<b>Low %</b>	<b>Mid %</b>	<b>Low %</b>	<b>Mid %</b>	<b>Low %</b>	<b>Mid %</b>
Below Rs. 791 Lower poverty line per month	100	-	100	-	67	33	100	-
Rs. 792-950 Upper poverty line per month	88	12	100	-	50	50	67	33
Rs. 951 and above, per month	20	80	-	100	50	50	-	100

Source: Field data (household interviews), 2002

Table 4.2 shows how respondents perceive their income and poverty status, which can be compared with the actual income and poverty status shown in Table 4.1. In both high caste villages irrespective of location, a correlation can be observed between the perceived income group and the actual income group. For instance, 100% of respondents who live above the upper poverty line of Rs.951 felt that they were of middle income status, and 100% of the respondents who live below the lower poverty line of Rs.791 perceive their families to be of a low income status.

However, in the semi-urban lower caste village a considerable number of respondents, whose per capita income is higher than the higher poverty line, consider their economic standing to be of the low income level.

*"We have a house, vehicle and telephone but we are poor because we don't have status in society." (Siripala, 40 years, mattress businessman, monthly income is approximately Rs.2000/=, lower caste semi-urban)*

Here, although the two lower caste communities referred to their economic standing on the basis of income, to a certain degree it is evident that their perceptions have been influenced by their social status as well. Some poor people irrespective of their caste background, considered their economic standing in relative terms, such as the size of their house, housing conditions and assets.

*"We are poor because we don't have a telephone at home and we are unable to save money." (Kusumawathy, 34 years, municipal worker, income is Rs. 2300/=, lower caste semi-urban)*

On the other hand, 50% of lower caste semi-urban respondents with an income level below the lower poverty line consider themselves to be within the middle-income group. The reason cited for such a perception was that they have a stable income from a state sector job and the ability to manage household expenses.

Income was also studied at the level of the household. When respondents were asked what they considered to be the desired minimum income for a four-member household to overcome poverty, more than 70%, irrespective of caste or area, mentioned Rs. 8,000/= to Rs. 10,000/= as a minimum requirement.

*"Nowadays without Rs.10,000/= at least one can't live a decent life." (Chandralatha, 41 years, "low-income", lower caste semi-urban)*

*"Rs.8,000/= is the minimum income. Now everything is expensive. We have to buy even firewood. We get only water for free." (Somawathy, 28 years, "low-income", lower caste rural)*

*"With the current cost of living a family of four would need at least Rs.10,000/= to feed and educate the children." (Dammika, 35 years, "low income", high caste semi-urban)*

**Table 4.3 Income levels of households in sample population by income groups**

Income Group (Rs.)	<i>Rural</i>				<i>Semi-Urban</i>			
	Lower caste		High caste		Lower caste		High caste	
	Low %	Mid %	Low %	Mid %	Low %	Mid %	Low %	Mid %
2000-3000	2	13	-	-	3	17	-	-
3000-4000	9	56	2	17	2	11	3	25
4000-5000	1	6	2	17	6	33	2	17
5000-6000	1	6			3	19	3	25
6000-7000	2	13	4	33	2	11	1	8
7000-8000	-	-	1	8	-	-	-	-
8000-9000	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
9000-10000	1	6			1	6	2	17
11000-12000	-	-	2	17	-	-	-	-
12000 +	-	-	1	8	1	6	1	8
Total	16	100	12	100	18	100	12	100

Source: Field data (household interviews), 2002

From the table above, it can be seen that more than 60% respondents in lower caste villages, irrespective of location, earn less than Rs.5,000/= per month. In the sample, the lower caste rural village had the highest number of poorer households (75%). The second highest income poverty was found in the lower caste semi-urban village where 61% of the sample households earn less than Rs. 5000/= per month. With regard to household income, the high caste villages seem to be more affluent in comparison with the two lower caste villages.

Overall, it appears that the lower caste villages are not as well off in terms of income as the high caste villages but those that live close to urban areas are slightly better off than those who live in rural areas.

## 5. Employment and Social Mobility

Social mobility is a term with wide connotations. It refers both to the vertical and horizontal movement of people from one class or stratum to another and from one occupation or profession to another (Singh, 1987). According to Gunasinghe (1990) "there is a disintegration of the caste system as a division of labour without necessarily leading to the disappearance of caste as a social group or caste consciousness. Both modes of stratification are reproduced in a distorted manner class due to the presence and interpenetration of caste and caste due to the presence and interpenetration of class" (Gunasinghe cited in Jayawardena, 2003:160).

This study examined occupational change in the life of three generations of the study community to explore the relationship between change in occupation over time and overcoming poverty.

**Table 5.1 Main economic activity of the sample communities**

Economic activity	% of households involved							
	<i>Rural</i>				<i>Semi-Urban</i>			
	Lower caste <i>Kumbal</i>		High caste <i>Govi</i>		Lower caste <i>Rodi</i>		High caste <i>Govi</i>	
Year	2002	1980s	2002	1980s	2002	1980s	2002	1980s
Pottery	30%	75%	-	-	-	-	20%	40%
Farming	5%	40%	10%	40%	-	-	20%	50%
Casual wage labour	75%	5%	25%	30%	10%	15%	-	-
Sanitary worker	5%	-	-	-	60%	60%	-	-
Trader	-	3%	10%	10%	5%	2%	10%	5%
Private sector	-	-	10%	-	-	-	-	-
Teacher/clerk	0.5%	-	30%	5%	1%	-	15%	-
Gov. labourer	2%	5%	-	-	-	-	-	-
Middle-East employment	2%	-	5%	-	10%	-	7%	-
Factory worker	5%	-	6%	-	2%	-	10%	-
Armed forces	1%	-	8%	-	5%	-	30%	5%

Source: Field data (Focus Group discussions), 2002

Table 5.1 shows the extent of social mobility within the villages, aggregated at the level of the village. It shows that over the years there has been a clear shift from caste-based occupations to other types of occupations. This may be due to industrialisation, the open economy and occupation diversification. Most of the *Rodi* (lower caste semi-urban) however, despite the many changes around them, are still tied to low status jobs such as sanitary work, which indicates that they have not benefited much by the social and economic structural changes taking place in the country. In the meantime, employment in new sectors, such as in garment factories and the Middle East, have emerged by 2002 as important sources of employment. Although these are not necessarily white-collar jobs, they remunerate well and people from all four villages, irrespective of their caste background, have taken up these types of jobs.

In the following sections, we attempt to trace these changes by taking a closer look at the main economic activities/occupations over three generations.

**Table 5.2 Occupation of the respondents' grandfather**

Economic activity	% of households involved			
	Rural		Semi-Urban	
	Lower caste <i>Kumbal</i>	High caste <i>Govi</i>	Lower caste <i>Rodi</i>	High caste <i>Govi</i>
Pottery maker	82%	-	-	-
Farmer		75%		62%
Producer of broom sticks, coir rope and drums	-	-	55%	-
Hospital attendant	-	-	17%	-
Casual wage labourer	6%	-	6%	8%
Trader	12%	17%	-	8%
Village headman	-	8%	-	15%
Teacher	-	-	-	8%
Do not know	-	-	22%	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field data (Households interviews), 2002

The table above shows that two generations ago, occupations were closely linked to caste. In the two high caste *Govi* (cultivator) villages, 75% and 62% of the respondents' grandfathers were occupied in farming. Among the lower caste villages, 82% of the *Kumbal* respondents' grandfathers were pottery makers. Similarly, 55% of the *Rodi* respondents' grandfathers were drum and broom producers and another 17% were employed as hospital attendants, giving a total of 72% engaged in caste-based activities (It must also be noted that 22% of the *Rodi* respondents did not know their grandfathers' occupation). Overall, more than half the respondents' grandfathers seem to have followed caste-based occupations, which highlights the fact that caste-based occupations were followed rigorously up to 50 to 60 years ago.

The above table shows that a generation ago caste based occupations were also followed, although a substantial decline is visible. Among the high caste villages, 25% and 38% of the respondents' fathers continued to perform their paternal occupation - farming. Among the lower caste villages, the rural village showed a considerably higher percentage of 71% as continuing to earn a living from their caste-based occupation. Among the semi-urban lower caste village however, only 17% were still engaged in broom and coir production while a further 11% were engaged in sanitary work.

By the respondents' fathers' generation, a diversification of occupations can be seen and more persons were engaged as public sector office aides and town council labourers. Across all caste groups a movement away from caste dependent to independent occupations such as trade, teaching, driving and store-keeping is noticeable.

By the third generation, as shown in the table above, caste-based occupations have substantially declined in importance and in some instances, have disappeared altogether. In the lower caste rural village, caste-based occupations have declined from 71% in the

**Table 5.3 Occupation of the respondents' father**

Economic activity	% of households involved			
	<i>Rural</i>		<i>Semi-Urban</i>	
	Lower caste <i>Kumbal</i>	High caste <i>Govi</i>	Lower caste <i>Rodi</i>	High caste <i>Govi</i>
Pottery maker	53%	-	-	-
Door to door pottery vendor	18%	-	-	-
Farmer	-	25%	-	38%
Producer of brooms, coir rope and drums	-	-	17%	-
Hospital attendant	12%	-	11%	-
Wage labourer	6%	-	-	-
Trader	-	25%	6%	15%
Mason	-	-	-	8%
Carpenter	12%	-	-	-
Store-keeper	-	-	-	8%
Supply officer	-	8%	-	-
Security guard	-	8%	-	-
Public sector office aide	-	-	28%	-
Peon	-	-	11%	-
Town council labourer	-	-	22%	-
Teacher	-	17%	-	8%
Clerk	-	8%	-	8%
Driver	-	-	-	15%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Source: Field data (Household interviews), 2002

second generation to 42% in the third generation. In the semi-urban lower caste village, caste-based occupation has gone down from 17% to 11%, although a further 15% had taken up a related trade. Among the high caste villages, farming has gone down from 25% and 38% respectively to none and 23%.

The number of occupations has diversified substantially. In the lower caste rural villages, about 20% are engaged in blue-collar work outside of their caste-based occupation, as welders, watchers and drivers. There was one clerk and an ex-army soldier in this village. In the lower caste semi-urban village, many have shifted from their traditional occupations to low status work in hospitals, the town council, and public and private sector organisations. 17% are involved in social work, which is organised by the temple priest. Their work involves collecting money for an orphanage and for this service they are paid an allowance by the orphanage. One respondent had worked as a housemaid in the Middle East and now runs a small shop in the village. Similar diversification can be seen in the high caste villages. In both these villages, 36% of the respondents are employed in the public sector doing white-collar jobs, 24% engage in manual work as drivers, mechanics, construction workers and carpenters and about 20% are in the army.

It appears therefore that in the semi-urban environment, caste-based occupations are gradually disappearing by the third generation. In the rural high caste village, they have been abandoned completely. In all, 80% of the respondents have changed their hereditary occupation by the third generation, which leads to the conclusion that regardless of caste, a high proportion amongst the current generation have renounced their traditional caste occupation.

Among the two *Govi* (high caste) caste communities, it was reported that the foremost reason to move out of farming was its non-profitability. In addition, in contemporary society, unlike in traditional societies, farming is identified as a blue-collar occupation. As an occupation without high status, it is less attractive to the younger generation. A similar trend can be observed among the lower caste communities as well. Some lower caste respondents pointed out that caste-based occupations are abandoned, not merely because they lacked a market and profits, but also because of the stigma associated with these occupations.

*“When I was in school I was ridiculed by my peers because my parents produced pottery. I felt shy to bring my friends home because they would discover my parents’ occupation. I do not want my children to go through what I went through. That’s why I became a driver.”* (Siripala, 28 years, lower caste rural)

Among the *Kumbal* (lower caste rural) community, about one fourth of the population are still involved in the production of pottery but the scale of production has reduced. A large part of this work, from making the mud suitable for pottery production to producing and drying the finished products, was traditionally undertaken by women. Males have the responsibility to bring home the raw materials in time and to sell the final product. At times, they help the women to fire the pottery in the kiln. Female respondents reported a sense of frustration that their traditional occupation was disappearing because more males were opting to do wage labour, sometimes as a subsidiary occupation. A 54-year old mother of four, who has given up the traditional occupation owing to the scarcity of raw material and a low market price, said that;

*“Those days we had money in our hands all the time. We didn’t have to ask the men for anything. Now it has changed. We have lost employment. It’s not only a loss of employment; it is also a sense of helplessness. We do not have any other skill.”*

During field visits it was observed that often girls help their mothers in this caste-based occupation.

Among the *Govi* (high caste), the emergence of a large number of public servants indicates a growing inclination towards white-collar jobs. However, none of the lower caste semi-urban villagers reported having white-collar jobs, while in the lower caste rural village, one person was reported to have secured a white-collar job but at the time of this study, this individual had moved out of the village. This shows that although



these castes have diversified into new occupations, the abandoning of caste-based occupations is not a sufficient indication of an equal upward movement on the social ladder.

When lower caste semi-urban villagers were asked about their level of satisfaction with their present job, 46% of the respondents who were sanitary workers expressed dissatisfaction as they neither receive a satisfactory income nor are they accorded a good status. One respondent said;

*“I quit my job as a road sweeper in the town council because I am constantly insulted owing to my occupation”.*

Another said,

*“We are always given cleaning work regardless of it being a company, government office or Town Council. We are never given office work although some of us are O/L and A/L qualified. It is believed that we are suitable only for low status jobs (“Pahath rassavata”).*

None of the high caste respondents engage in low status work associated with the pollution concept. In a focus group discussion conducted in the high caste rural village, it was revealed that every house in that community has at least one person in the public or private sector doing a white-collar job. Similarly, in the high caste semi-urban village, two-thirds of the households were reported to have members employed in the public or private sector. A comparison of the occupational change with social status shows that those from the higher castes have a tendency to opt for jobs that are of high social standing, such as teachers, clerks and supply officers. At the same time, those from the lower castes tend to end up in lower status occupations that are associated with the pollution aspect of lower caste. For instance, some respondents among the lower castes are occupied as hospital attendants, sanitary workers and office aides. Therefore, while there is considerable occupational mobility, it does not seem to be a vertical upward movement for the lower caste groups – unlike for their high caste counterparts.

In both lower caste communities, respondents felt that it was only when applying for a job in the armed forces, that their caste background is irrelevant. However, from Table 5.4 it is evident that although all four groups have members in the armed forces, it is more popular as an occupation among the high caste communities. It appears therefore, that although the military profession is open to all, lower caste communities do not choose to go into the military.

In conclusion, although the practice of hereditary caste occupations has declined substantially, it appears that the type of work and status available under the modern occupational hierarchy continues to reflect a caste dimension.

## 6. Education

This chapter examines the educational achievements of the communities, access to educational opportunities, the main factors leading to drop-outs and the relationship between caste on the one hand, and education, capabilities and career aspirations on the other.

### 6.1 Educational attainments

For a developing country, the literacy rate in Sri Lanka is very high with 89.6% of the population being literate. There is a slight gender disparity with 87% of females, compared to 92.2% of males, being literate (Gunewardena, 2000). This high level of literacy, in comparison with other South Asian countries, is attributed to the universal provision of free primary and secondary education, which was introduced in the 1940s. Prior to this, education was largely the privilege of the affluent and those higher up in the social hierarchy. However, the introduction of free education made education more accessible to all citizens irrespective of their class, caste, gender or ethnicity.

Although Sri Lanka has achieved a high level of literacy nationally, the average number of schooling years for males and females is low – at roughly around 7 years (Gunewardena, 2000). As shown in Table 6.1 below, the literacy rate and the average number of schooling years per person vary by sector, district and the economic background of the individual.

**Table 6.1.1 Literacy rates and schooling years, 1995/96**

	Literacy rate		Average years of schooling	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
<b>Urban</b>				
Very poor	90.40	84.80	6.90	6.30
Poor excluding very poor	90.20	89.80	7.60	7.10
Non poor	97.20	94.10	9.50	9.10
<b>All</b>	<b>95.80</b>	<b>92.40</b>	<b>9.00</b>	<b>8.50</b>
<b>Rural and Estate</b>				
Very poor	87.50	81.70	6.30	6.20
Poor excluding very poor	90.70	83.70	7.00	6.60
Non poor	93.60	88.40	8.20	8.00
<b>All</b>	<b>91.70</b>	<b>86.00</b>	<b>7.50</b>	<b>7.30</b>
<b>National</b>	<b>92.20</b>	<b>87.00</b>	<b>7.70</b>	<b>7.50</b>

Source: Gunewardena, 2000

There is a considerable difference between the literacy rate and number of years of schooling for the poor and the non-poor. The non-poor category, irrespective of gender and location, has considerably higher literacy rate and more years of schooling than the

poor category. On the other hand, literacy rates and educational attainment are lower among females, compared to males, irrespective of being located in the urban, rural or estate sectors.

At the district level, according to the National Human Development Report (1998), Nuwara Eliya district has the highest illiteracy rate (22%) and Gampaha has the lowest illiteracy rate (4.9%), which indicates a possible correlation between educational levels and place of residence. The districts covered by this study - Kegalle and Kalutara - have an illiterate population of 9.3% and 7.8% respectively (UNDP, 1998), which is a little lower than the national average.

Table 6.1.2 shows the educational attainment among different villages in the study sample.

**Table 6.1.2 Educational attainment of the study sample.**

Educational level reached	<i>Rural</i>		<i>Semi-Urban</i>		<i>Sri Lanka</i>
	Lower caste %	High caste %	Lower caste %	High caste %	%
Never been to school	15	3	10	5	5.41
1-5	15	5	20	15	24.81
6-8	25	12	40	20	21.55
9-11	30	30	18	20	20.55
O/L pass	10	32	8	25	17.98
A/L pass	5	15	4	10	7.22
University	1	3	0	5	2.47
Attended the village school	80	60	95	5	
Attended a school outside the village	20	40	5	95	

*Source:* Field data (Focus Group discussion), 2002 and Gunewardena, 2000

The above table shows that a relatively high percentage of those from lower castes have never been to school. A high proportion - between 55% and 68% - of the lower caste community have dropped out of school at the secondary level, which is substantially higher than the drop-out rate at the national level. Within the lower caste communities too, there are interesting differences. Among the *Rodi* (lower caste semi-urban) community, which is lower in caste status than the *Kumbal* (lower caste rural) community, the level of primary school attendance is higher compared to the *Kumbal*, which indicates that at least as far as access to primary level education, is concerned, location is more important than caste status.

The high drop-out rate among the lower caste communities may be linked to their economic status rather than their caste. In the lower caste rural village, the village school provides only primary level education and if parents want their children to continue their education, they have to send them to a school four kilometres away from the

village. Since the majority of the parents are poor, sending their children to a secondary school in town is - often prohibitively - costly and children are more likely to drop out of school during this period because of economic problems.

The caste-dimension of education was revealed in the interviews with the communities. When asked about the standard of teaching in the village school, parents from the lower caste rural village complained that the quality of teaching is poor in comparison to the schooling in the neighbouring villages, which are of higher castes. A parent from the lower caste rural village stated that,

*“Teachers who want to idle get a transfer to our village school. They come around 9 am and leave by 12 or 1 pm. They bring their children along with them. Always there are 10 students in the playground. Our school is like a government office; all the time teachers chat, no teaching is done.”*

The lower caste semi-urban village did not have their own village school but sent their children to the village school in the neighbouring high caste village. Because these lower caste children come to their school, most of the parents in the high caste village do not send their children to the village school. According to the lower caste parents, the higher caste parents do not like their children to be sitting next to lower caste children, because that would imply an equal social status between the two castes. The lower caste parents emphasised that the quality of teaching at the high caste village primary school is good although there is a shortage of teachers and teaching facilities are inadequate.

Anecdotal evidence shows that lower caste community children face discrimination at the hands of their teachers and peers during their schooling years. While some parents in the lower caste semi-urban village felt that teachers in the neighbouring village school were sensitive to the children’s needs despite not being from lower castes, most parents and children cited instances of discrimination by teachers.

*“Teachers insult our children using our caste occupation. They say, you all are matti mola or you have mud in your brains.”* (Parent, lower caste rural village)

*“Teachers assume that our children are not intelligent. So they do not pay good attention to our children.”* (Parent, lower caste semi-urban)

*“We are always made to sit in the back row of the classroom. Even if we go and sit in front, the teacher asks us to go to the back”.* (Child, lower caste, semi-urban)

Several instances of caste-based insults were also mentioned. One parent spoke of how her son was insulted and called a “Rodiya” by his peers.

*“When my son complained about this to the teacher she said that rather than calling a Rodiya, a “Rodiya” what else can they call you?”*

Another mother stated,

*“My daughter refuses to go to school because last week in the home science practical class, the students were taught how to make a potato curry. The teacher has grouped the class, but my daughter wasn’t grouped. She had to cook on her own. At the end of the practical class the teacher tasted all the cooked potatoes except my daughter’s. Later my daughter asked her peers the reason for this. Then they said that the teacher said, “How can we eat what Rodiyas cook?” The whole of that evening my daughter was crying and now she refuses to go to school. How can I force her to go to school? How do I console her and say that what happened is fair?”*

Several parents from the lower caste semi-urban village had complained about these incidences to the nearest education office. However, no action has been taken.

Not surprisingly, the percentage of individuals with an Ordinary Level (O/L) qualification is very low in the lower caste communities (8% and 10%) compared to the high caste communities (32% and 25%). A negligible percentage in the lower caste communities (4% and 5%) possesses an Advanced Level (A/L) qualification. However, while the overall educational attainment is low among the lower caste communities, there is still a degree of variation between the different caste groups.

## 6.2 Education and aspirations

Education is often perceived as a means of obtaining employment and therefore, there appears to be a close link between education levels and career aspirations (Sri Lanka Youth, 2002).

**Table 6.2 Parents’ aspirations regarding their children’s employment**

Preferred type of job	Rural				Semi-Urban			
	Lower caste		High caste		Lower caste		High caste	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
White-collar only	6	37.5	8	66.7	6	33.3	7	53.8
Blue-collar only	4	25.0	0	0	3	16.7	2	15.3
Any of the two	6	37.5	4	33.0	9	50.0	4	30.7

*Source:* Field data (household interviews), 2002

Over 50% of high caste parents stated that they prefer their children to have white-collar jobs. On the other hand, a majority of lower caste parents want their children to choose any job they preferred.

Among the lower caste, the aspirations of a white-collar job are comparatively low, which correlated with their lower education levels and economic status. Except for a

single graduate from the lower caste rural community who is in public sector employment, none of the lower caste communities could obtain jobs that are perceived as of socially and economically higher ranks. When two young respondents, one high caste and the other lower caste, of a similar age, from similar educational and economic backgrounds were asked about their career aspirations, the high caste youth stated that she was looking forward to getting a job in a garment factory as a supervisor, whereas the lower caste youth said that she had tried her best to get a job in the hospital as an attendant but had failed because she did not have the right political links. She has now had to take up her caste-based occupation of pottery even though it provides neither a higher income nor status. This example shows that even though these two young persons have the same educational background and reside in neighbouring villages, their job prospects and aspirations differ from one another - possibly because of their different caste backgrounds.

## 7. Social Organisation and Structure

### 7.1 Marriage

Marriage is a social union. In Sri Lanka, there are various customs and practices associated with marriage, mostly based on ethnic origin and the region in which people live. The majority of marriages in Sri Lanka are monogamous. "Class formation in Sri Lanka was also closely linked to the dowry system and to alliances between families. Marriages arranged with great foresight were important in order to expand property and wealth, consolidate class status and widen contacts... Caste was, however, the determining factor in both social relations and reproduction..." (Jayawardena, 2003:285).

There are four types of marriage law in Sri Lanka. Generally, Sri Lanka adopts Roman Dutch Law for marriage. This law is applied to all those not governed by customary law (Kandyans, Jaffna Tamils and Muslims); it covers the non-Kandyan Sinhalese and gives women equal inheritance rights to both their father's and mother's property.

According to Kandyan law, there are two types of marriages. One is the *binne* marriage, where the husband moves to live with his wife and her family and the wife has the same rights as her brothers in relation to ancestral property. The other one, *diga*, is where the wife moves to the husband's house. She cannot claim equal inheritance with her brothers (Agarwal, 1994). Furthermore, until the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, in some parts of rural Sri Lanka, polyandry<sup>6</sup> (*eka ge kema*) was practised among the Sinhalese in order to retain control over property within the family. There is a tendency to live near the husband's family in most areas of the country. Among all the variations of inheritance and descent, the husband is typically the manager of the nuclear family's property and represents his family in most public duties and functions.

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<sup>6</sup> Unions between one woman and more than one man.

In the research areas, Roman Dutch Law was mostly adopted for marriage. Furthermore, the type of family that prevailed in most cases was nuclear<sup>7</sup>. For the most part, inter-caste and inter-racial marriages were not socially accepted.

The lower caste communities felt that choosing a partner and getting married was not a complex process as it was simply a matter of obtaining the consent of the families for marriage. In such cases, the caste of the two partners was not seen to be a strong determinant. On the other hand, for a high caste person of a higher income bracket, marriage is a more complicated process and they are conscious of factors such as caste, wealth and status of the prospective marriage partner.

In order to ascertain the perceptions of the respondents with regard to matrimonial alliances, the respondents were asked about their priorities in selecting marriage partners for their children and whether they would give their children the freedom to choose their marriage partners.

**Table 7.1 Considerations for selecting a marriage partner**

Considerations <sup>8</sup>	<i>Rural</i>				<i>Semi-Urban</i>			
	Lower caste		High caste		Lower caste		High caste	
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Caste	13	20	67	46	17	22	54	62
Wealth	20	13	33	15	17	22	30	30
Good character	47	60	33	15	50	28	15	30
Education			33	15	11	11	23	
Employment	67	0	46	46	17		62	23
Individual's consent	40	33			33	33	8	15

*Source:* Field data (household interviews), 2002

In Table 7.1 we can observe that “caste” followed by “employment” are important factors in the arrangement of marriages among high caste respondents. However, among the lower caste communities, the considerations of “good character” followed by “individual's consent” gain high priority. Here “good character” refers to being a teetotaler, being well-disciplined and remaining faithful to one's partner. It is interesting to note that “wealth” is not strongly expressed as an essential or fundamental necessity for marriage across all the communities.

With regard to inter-caste marriages, a strong unwillingness and disapproval was expressed by higher caste communities in both villages. When asked why, about 80% said that they want to preserve their identity and social status. However, a large percentage of the older generation of higher caste villagers feel that their younger generations do not consider the caste of their marriage partner to be as important as they do.

<sup>7</sup> Father and mother - or single parent - and the children live in a single housing unit.

<sup>8</sup> Respondents mentioned multiple considerations as being important.

*“Nowadays the younger generation is obstinate. They do what they want. Parents have less control over the children when compared to our time. So we have to accept their actions. Otherwise we might lose our children.”* (Samarasiri, 62 years, retired supply officer, rural higher caste)

When the same question was raised with the lower caste communities, only a few respondents stated that they did not welcome inter-caste marriages, mainly because they felt that their children would suffer hostility from their in-laws. A young mother of two children who was married to a higher caste person said,

*“I was ill treated not only because I belong to a lower caste but also as I am low in terms of wealth.”*

Nevertheless, a high percentage of inter-caste and ethnically mixed marriages was noted among the semi-urban lower caste community. Most of these marriages are not arranged. When asked about their attitudes regarding inter-caste marriages, one semi-urban lower caste respondent stated that,

*“If you cut anyone it’s all the same blood, we don’t have antagonism towards anyone but if they marry within our community their life will be less complicated. They won’t have problems.”*

One respondent stated that through inter-caste marriage with the higher castes one can gain social mobility and the status in the community will also increase. This respondent had given up pottery work and become a carpenter. In addition, he had also bought a piece of land outside the village and was building a house. He explained,

*“I married a Govi girl because I also like to keep my spine straight and live like others.”*

Among the semi-urban lower caste community, marriage is most often at a young age and is not arranged. Males generally marry between the ages of 20 and 24 years while females marry between the ages of 17 and 21 years. The rural lower caste community also practice early marriage but not at such a young age as the semi-urban lower caste. Among the rural lower caste community, the age for marriage is between 20 to 30 years for males and 18 to 27 years for females. However, when compared to both lower caste communities the majority from the two higher caste communities practiced late marriages in which the marriage age for males was always over 25 years and for females over 22 years.

Several respondents from the semi-urban lower caste community stated that one of the main causes of poverty in their community was marrying and having children at a young age. They pointed out that when their sons, who are still dependent on them, find a bride, it becomes an additional burden for the parents to feed an extra mouth. Furthermore, in terms of housing there is a problem in accommodating a new couple as the space in the house is limited and the house is often already occupied by more than one family.



**Table 7.2 Preference for the type of marriage**

Type of marriage	Rural		Semi-Urban	
	Lower caste	High caste	Lower caste	High caste
Arranged marriage only	6%	33%	33%	62%
Non-arranged marriage only	56%	17%	28%	23%
Any of the two	38%	50%	39%	15%

Source: Field data (household interviews), 2002

Table 7.2 shows that 62% of the semi-urban high caste respondents prefer arranged marriages for their children compared to only 33% among the rural high caste respondents.

*“Children’s marriage should be done according to the parents’ wishes. Only parents know how to select the right person for the child who suits them in all aspects.”* (Karunawathi, 48 years, housewife, semi-urban high caste)

*“Arranged marriages are prestigious and less complicated.”* (Suwarnakanthi, 45 years, “beedi” maker, semi-urban high caste)

A majority of rural high caste villagers consider that matrimonial arrangements should rest on the individual’s choice and consent and any of the two types of marriage, i.e. arranged or of their own choice, was acceptable to them. However, most of these parents also pointed out that children should be able to select the right partner, one who is socially and economically suited to the family.

*“It does not matter whether it’s an arranged or non-arranged marriage as long as the person belongs to the same caste and has a good character as well as a stable job.”* (Gamage, 52 years, businessman, rural high caste)

A high percentage of rural lower caste villagers welcome non-arranged marriages for their children.

*“I have asked my daughter to choose her own partner after getting a job. If they marry after getting to know each other well, their life will be easy. If we find somebody for her she might complain later.”* (Seneviratne, 47 years, potter, rural lower caste)

*“We have given them the freedom to choose their life partners because it’s their life.”* (Siriawathi, 39 years, potter, rural lower caste)

Parents who prefer non-arranged marriages feel that their children would have an opportunity to get married after getting to know each other or with mutual consent. In addition to helping to build mutual understanding between the two partners, non-arranged marriages are preferred because they also help the economically depressed lower caste communities to find partners who are of a higher social rank or higher income level.

*"In a non-arranged marriage, parents needn't give dowry."* (Nimal, 40 years, wage labourer, rural lower caste)

The semi-urban lower caste villagers' viewpoints are almost equally distributed between the three types of responses. Although currently a higher percentage of non-arranged marriages are taking place among the semi-urban lower caste, a good number of parents prefer arranged marriages for their children.

*"Children are not capable of making the right choice with regard to marriage at the age of 18 to 20 years."* (Priyangani, 32 years, municipal worker, semi-urban lower caste)

Thus, it appears that there is no strong caste-based preference for a particular type of marriage - be it arranged or non arranged - but there are differences between the high and lower castes regarding the characteristics of the ideal marriage partner. The high caste communities place more emphasis on selecting an economically and socially better-off partner of the same caste while the lower caste communities place more emphasis on finding a partner with good morals, irrespective of the caste background.

## **7.2 Inter-caste relations in society**

"If members of two different social strata come to have intimate social relationships, there would develop among them a sense of mutual acceptability as equal or near equals. If the members of two social groups maintain social distance and not interact as equals, they would avoid and even resist social relationships with each other." (Singh, 1987:53)

The traditional pattern of social interaction between higher castes and lower castes was based on the ideology of inequality, in other words, inferiority and superiority. Therefore, a considerable social distance was maintained particularly between the highest caste (*Govi*) and the lower caste members. In order to study the pattern of inter-caste relationships, the respondents were asked to indicate whether or not they would accept the presence of lower caste members on certain social occasions like weddings, funerals and other ceremonies. Except in the case of funerals, 90% of the higher caste respondents expressed their unwillingness to have any social interaction with the lower castes. A middle-aged businessman from the rural high caste village stated,

*"We visit them only on the occasions of funerals. We eat betel, that's all we consume from their house."*

Another young businessman stated,

*"Caste is not as powerful as it used to be, but we use it as a weapon depending on the circumstances."*

A rural high caste woman said,

*"We give food items to the Vahumpura when there is a ceremony in our house. They accept it, but they do not give anything in return"*

*because they know that we won't accept it. They also know that it is sinful to give their leftovers to us because it's against our tradition".*

Furthermore, it was revealed that there is an acrimonious relationship between the lower caste *Rodi* community and high caste *Govi* community in the studied semi-urban area. A member of the *Rodi* community has a private bus but none of the neighbouring high caste villagers travel by this bus. The lower caste villagers complained,

*"The bus also has become Rodi. That's why the Govi people do not travel in our bus."*

Another semi-urban lower caste villager stated that although they would like to buy goods from the nearby boutique, the higher caste shop owner does not like to sell goods to them. A school teacher of higher caste mentioned that even the teachers in her school do not share food with the lower caste teachers.

### **7.3 Religion, access to temples and religious ordination**

Traditionally, the lower caste communities were not allowed to enter temples that belonged to and are attended by the higher castes, although in urban areas today the lower caste communities are permitted to worship at temples maintained by the higher castes. However, in many rural areas restrictions still exist in terms of access to village temples.

Sirisumana Viharaya, which is located in the rural lower caste village of Mahayala, is an ancient temple. Until the early 1980s, the temple had been divided with one side for the *Kumbal* caste members and the other for the *Vahumpura* caste members. Although the division does not exist any longer, today Sirisumana Viharaya is visited solely by the *Kumbal* caste. The *Govi* and the *Vahupura* have their own temple in the adjoining village of Madurawella. Both communities seemed very much attached to their own temples.

There was a clear consensus in both villages with regard to the ordaining of monks and serving in the temple. In the rural lower caste villages only the lower caste laymen are ordained in their temple while in the rural high caste village, high caste laymen are ordained. Furthermore, the higher caste villagers made sure that even if they secure a monk from outside for their temple, he belonged to the higher caste (*Govi*). Although the rural lower caste villagers stated that the caste of the monk is not important, when they were asked whether they would mind having a monk of a lower caste, such as a *Rodi*, a strong dislike was expressed. They said that no monks of a caste other than their own caste (*Kumbal*) are willing to serve in their temples.

The semi-urban lower caste (*Rodi*) villagers did not have a temple of their own until last year. Although there is a temple just one kilometre away from the village, they still cannot use this temple as it belongs to the higher caste community. The villagers stated that even if they invite the monks from the higher caste temple for a *dhana*, *pirith* or to deliver funeral sermons, the monks do not visit their houses. On such occasions, the lower caste community has to bring a priest from Kadugannawa (another area in which

the *Rodi* community was concentrated), which is 12 km from the village. One year ago, the *Rodi* managed to build a temple for themselves. When asked what inspired this, the president of the temple society stated,

*“Since we do not have a temple or daham pasala in the village, our community is in the process of conversion to Christianity. There is a Christian priest in the village. He has Sunday class for the kids. Some of the children who go to his classes have been converted. There are about 15 families already converted. Every Sunday free transport is provided for those who wish to go to the church in the town.”*

Discrimination by neighbouring temples when enrolling *Rodi* caste students in the *Daham Pasala* (Sunday classes for Buddhist children) was also reported. A mother of four children said,

*“Since the Kongamuwa temple is discriminatory, I took my three children to another temple in the neighbouring village last year. I pleaded with them and fought with them to enrol my children in their Daham Pasala because I want my children to learn religion and morals. But they did not enrol my children. Now I am sending my children to the Sunday school in the church.”*

Some of the semi-urban lower caste villagers expressed their disappointment with regard to the difficulties in maintaining the village temple, as they are unable to retain the monks. They mentioned that the majority of the villagers drink alcohol in the evening and then go to the temple and shout at the monks for no reason. As a result, the monks leave the temple. It would appear that, on the one hand, the semi-urban and rural lower caste members want monks to serve in their temples, but on the other hand, as they have not had a good relationship with monks in the past, they do not treat them with the respect that upper caste villagers customarily show. This has caused difficulties in keeping monks in lower caste village temples.

Although there are no open restrictions on entering temples on the basis of caste in the urban areas, in semi-urban and rural villages, caste discrimination still continues to exist. Lower caste parents are disappointed about not being able to enrol their children in the temple's *Daham Pasala* – more so than they are about not being able to worship in the temple. Furthermore, the discrimination practised regarding entry to the temple has resulted in religious conversion among the lower caste communities.

It would seem therefore, that the social relationship between the high and lower castes is somewhat limited. It is most limited between the highest and lowest castes in the hierarchy – the *Govi* and the *Rodi*. The *Govi* caste members maintain a high degree of social distance and, in some instances, discriminate against the *Rodi* with some *Govi* caste members using caste as an instrument of their privilege as well as of control of the lower castes. However, the older generations within the high caste communities feel that their influence in maintaining the caste system was declining as the younger generation in modern Sri Lanka is not as concerned about the caste system as they are.

## 8. Perceptions of Caste

In modern Sri Lanka, it is generally perceived that the phenomenon of caste is increasingly giving way to ethnicity. However, according to a recent article by K. Tudor Silva, “what appears to be happening in parts of South Asia is that the basis of the explicit primary identity of individuals is shifting from caste to ethnicity... However, there is no evidence that with social change caste simply gives way to ethnicity” (Silva, 1999). In Sri Lanka, the intervention of class and ethnicity has made social stratification more complex and with development and socio-economic changes, new ways of accumulation of wealth have led to an upward mobility of certain caste communities and individual caste members, especially of the lower castes. There are changes in relation to educational and employment opportunities available for lower caste communities. And yet, there is a clear indication of the continuity of the caste system, particularly in the domain of marriage. Therefore, it would seem that “with the spread of capitalist relations, caste, which had been openly acknowledged in the public sphere as an accepted form of occupational differentiation and hierarchy, retreated to the private domain where it survived as an ideology” (Jayawardena, 2003: XII).

In order to understand the significance of caste consciousness, respondents were asked if caste matters in the context of the past, present and future. The following table shows the significance of caste consciousness as perceived by the respondents.

**Table 8.1 Perceptions of the caste consciousness among the study communities**

Attribute	Rural						Semi-Urban					
	Lower caste			High caste			Lower caste			High caste		
	Pa %	Pr %	Fu %	Pa %	Pr %	Fu %	Pa %	Pr %	Fu %	Pa %	Pr %	Fu %
Strong	53			83			100			46		
Fair	29	29		17	42			44		54	38	
Slight	18	47	35		58	50		56	56		62	69
Not at all		24	24			33			11			31
Might disappear			41			16			33			

Source: Field data (household interviews), 2002

Most respondents, especially those from semi-urban areas, feel that caste consciousness was strong in the past. They refer to the past in relation to their grandparents or parents' generation rather than to their own experiences in the past. They believe that caste-based discrimination existed in the past in relation to social interaction, access to employment and access to public services such as education and transport.

*“Earlier, in the eating establishments we were served tea and food in separate cups and saucers. We were not allowed to travel in vehicles. We had to walk. But now we can go to any shop and eat and drink. In another 10 to 20 years we would be able to see more and more changes.”* (Suresh, 42 years, coir products seller, semi-urban lower caste)

Significantly, none of the respondents, irrespective of caste, feel that caste consciousness in society is strong at present. The majority felt that it exists only slightly in the present generation. Furthermore, they felt that caste discrimination today mostly exists within their own villages. For example, in the semi-urban area, the lower caste (*Rodi*) members cannot get access to the village store that is run by higher caste members. Higher caste and lower caste communities have separate areas for bathing in the river and higher caste members also refrain from using the private bus owned by a lower caste villager.

Equal access to public services remains an issue. For example, the semi-urban lower caste members said that the police do not respond adequately to their complaints.

*“When we have a problem and inform the police, they do not come quickly. If we go to the police station to make a complaint we are treated like dogs because we are Rodi.”*

More than 50% of the respondents from both high caste villages feel that caste would continue to exist to some extent in the future. A majority of the lower caste members feel that as they do not go to the affluent higher caste people to ask for work, nor bow down to them for anything, the higher castes people will find it difficult to maintain the caste hierarchy. A significant number of the lower caste communities (41% and 33%) felt that the caste system would disappear altogether in the future.

To what extent caste matters was also discussed specifically in relation to wealth, education and intermarriage. Some lower caste and higher caste respondents feel that education and wealth could overcome caste differences.

*“Everything is now subordinate to money.”* (Dammika, 32 years, potter, lower caste, rural)

*“Caste matters a lot if you are poor and lower caste.”* (Siriyalatha, 38 years, housewife, lower caste, rural)

The biggest threat to a continued strong caste hierarchy is the growing numbers of non-arranged marriages, some of which are taking place between the lower caste and high caste members.

*“In the future our society will become casteless because of intermarriage and education. Caste-based occupations no longer exist and money has taken over everything.”* (Kamani, 43 years, high caste, rural)

However, with regard to the *Rodi* (semi-urban lower caste) respondents, a considerable degree of social distance is still maintained by other castes. Some of these caste members felt that their caste group would never be able to overcome this barrier of caste identity.

*“No matter how much money one has, caste will still last in the future. There is no way out of this caste.”* (Siripala, 31 years old, driver, lower caste, semi-urban)

This view was echoed by some high caste villagers too.

*“When it comes to the Rodiyas, we are very strong on that - not a lot of changes.”* (Nimal, 41 years, businessman, high caste, semi-urban)

Nevertheless, all the lower caste respondents feel that their social status has improved, in comparison to their parents' time.

*“Things started to change positively especially for us after independence. However, changes took place rapidly after Bandaranaike's<sup>9</sup> government. Before 1958 we had to be half naked but after 1958 we were given permission to cover the upper part of our bodies and dress like the rest of society.”* (Chandrasiri, social worker, 35 years, lower caste, semi-urban)

## 9. Conclusions

This study attempted to understand if there is a caste dimension to poverty in Sri Lanka. The focus of the study was the Sinhalese community and data was collected from four areas; a high caste (*Govi*) semi-urban community, a lower caste (*Rodi*) semi-urban community, a high caste (*Govi*) rural community and a lower caste (*Kumbal*) rural community. The research covered issues such as social discrimination and exclusion with respect to income, employment, education and access to public services.

Our findings confirm that the importance of caste is reducing among both the higher and the lower caste groups within the Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka. A large percentage of persons were no longer occupied in caste-based employment; among the urban communities, caste-based employment had almost completely died out while among rural communities, less than 25% of the population was still engaged in caste-based employment. There was also evidence that lower castes are no longer openly discriminated against when accessing public services such as transport facilities or accessing public places such as restaurants.

However, the benefits of social and economic changes in the country during the past century have not always reached the lower castes to a greater extent. In our sample, most of the lower caste respondents were also of a lower socio-economic status with 55% of rural lower caste community and 71% of the semi-urban lower caste community living below the poverty line (compared to 25% to 46% for higher castes). They continue to experience difficulties in accessing employment, with a substantial number of lower caste members still engaged in lower-status employment.

Several respondents from the lower-caste groups spoke of caste-based prejudices experienced when trying to access education facilities for their children. Their lower-caste identity prevents them in accessing schools with good facilities and better quality education. Within the classrooms too they face discrimination from teachers and peers

on the basis of caste. As a result, the lower-caste communities' attitude towards education is pessimistic, which contributes to lower educational attainments and comparatively higher dropout rate at the secondary education level. Poor educational attainments, in turn, prevents these lower caste communities from improving their capabilities, acquiring better employment and achieving social status and recognition through education.

While lower-caste groups access to community life has improved significantly mainly with regard to social interactions with higher-caste groups, in some rural areas they continue experience difficulties in accessing public services and spaces such as places of religious worship.

It appears therefore, that caste matters if one is of a lower caste as well as poor. The poor from the lower castes feel that their caste is to blame for their inability to move out of poverty. They spoke of discrimination in accessing employment as well as in schools. Caste may matter more or less depending on whether one is a *Rodi* or a *Kumbal*, or whether one lives in rural areas or urban areas, but the findings of this study indicate that if one is poor, being from a lower caste is an added obstacle to overcome.

While caste-based discrimination appears to be gradually disappearing from Sinhalese society, action can be taken on several fronts to expedite this process:

1. *Diversify employment opportunities.*

Assist low-income, lower-caste groups to enter new employment areas through the promotion of economic activities such as industry and agriculture and provide financial assistance for entrepreneurship such as through microfinance schemes.

2. *Build awareness among teachers and educators to eliminate discrimination within the classroom.*

Caste-based discrimination practised by teachers, particularly at the primary and secondary school levels, can have a highly detrimental effect on children's future development, and strict action needs to be taken against such teachers. Complaints of caste-based discrimination against teachers and educators need to be taken seriously and dealt with swiftly and effectively by the education authorities and law enforcement officials.

Popular view that caste no longer matters in Sri Lankan society is not always accurate when considering the condition of the lower caste poor. However, their condition is not readily apparent as they are voiceless, being few in number and mainly from the poorer segments of society. This does not mean that their problems can be ignored. Despite several attempts to improve their conditions - mainly by politicians interested in enlarging their voter base - lower caste poor still face a number of problems as discussed in this report, which contribute to their poverty and which prevent them from benefiting from the economic and social changes in the country.



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