

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE HISTORICAL IDENTITY OF THE KARAVA CASTE IN BRITISH - SRI LANKA

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INTRODUCTION

The caste system was an elaborate as well as complex social system in pre-colonial Sri Lanka. This system was important to the kingship in order to administrate the society and keep social balance while gaining the loyalty of the public. There was a hierarchy system prevalent among castes and that depended on their historical identity. Especially under the colonial powers, the caste system had gradually transformed but in some instances like economic activities, the higher authority used the feudal caste system and *Rajakariya* (uniformed state duties) to collect more labour capacity. With the emerging economic and social classes in colonial Sri Lanka, some castes had debated about their historical caste identity. *Karava* caste was one emerging powerful caste that emphasized and questioned its historical value in the Sinhalese society. The main objective of this research is to analyze that new historical debate about the origin of the *Karava* caste while considering opposing arguments in some publications of the *Goviyama* community.

METHODOLOGY

The main methodology of this research is the identification and analysis of historical sources. Data which belongs to primary and secondary sources were categorized and analyzed considering current theoretical and historical discourse. Especially data which has been collected from the Sri Lankan National Archives and the library of the University of Peradeniya was important.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In the encyclopedia of Sinhalese, there are a few definitions of the word "*Kara*". Those meanings are 'near', 'toward', 'coastline' or 'the sea side'. According to that, *Karava* people mean those who live around the coastal area. This *Karava* caste normally consisted of fisher- groups in maritime areas who had become lower in the Sinhala Buddhist as well as Tamil caste hierarchies. This subordinate social status of the *Karavas* was due to many factors. The reason for this was not only the unpleasant job they were doing in the Buddhist society. But the social beliefs about their origin and behaviors were also led to condemn them. As a result of that, many *Karava* families started to converse to the Christianity and engage with the colonial activities. Considering few palm leaf books like *Janavansa* and *Kula Nithiya*, can identify enough evidence to prove this ignoble social level. According to the *Janavansa*, the *Karavo* was considered as in low level than *Goviyo*, *Salagamayo*, *Navandanno* and *Vadivo*. According to that description, even *Radav* and *Duravo* were higher than *Karavas* in that pre-colonial Sri Lanka. In addition to that, *Janavansa* stated the story about the origin of the *Karavas* in Sri Lanka with combining the *Vijaya* legend. Many families migrated from *Kanchi Pura*, *Kaveri pattanam* and *Kelakkare* of South India in various periods (Roberts, 1995, p. 28). But *Janawansaya* agreed with the nobleness of the first *Karava* migrants. According to that, Prince Vijaya offered the title as vice king to the first *Kewatta* prince. Sri Lankan *Karavas* were originated by him. However the general opinion about these *Kewatta's* (*Karavas*) was unpleasant in the age of *Janavmsa* was written. The *Janavansa* clearly stated that this *Kewatta's* are naturally brutish people unafraid to commit any sin. However it also has appreciated their brave qualities, militarism, smart exploits and skills for industries. Therefore, during that time King Buvanekabahu awarded some land grants to the *Karavas* and settled them near the coastline to protect the kingdom by invaders (Buddharakshitha, 2003, pp.31-33).

With the establishment of colonization, the *Karava* caste and other low castes were gradually able to prevail upon the hearts of colonial masters. Consequently, the caste population increased. There were some recognized South Indian connections with the Malabar and Coramandel coasts in Portuguese and Dutch era in order to increase trading and religious and political contacts. Thus, *Karavos* ascended to the second place in the caste hierarchy in *Niti Niganduwa* (1810-1840). Also in the Rev. James Cordiner's island description (1807) and in John Davi's book (1821), *Carawe* was in the third place. This emerging advantageous situation of the *Karaves* caused them to gather more social capital and economic wealth than other *Sinhalese* families. There were obvious rivalry among lower castes for gather prosperities and the social popularity. Not only *Karavas*, the *Salagama* (Cinnamon Peelers) and *Durawa* (Toddy tappers) communities also attempted to gain new opportunities in dynamic political and economic trends. Moreover, the *Govigama* caste (Paddy cultivators) had engaged in valuable economic activities considering their social limitations. Low castes were more eager to engage with the Arrack trade, rent system and other small business than *Govigama* families. They were faithful members of colonial administration and their military system. Nevertheless, after they became a high social class as the petty bourgeoisie and the national bourgeoisie, they became more concerned about their prestige and began comparing themselves with the social status of other higher castes. They contributed to public life and social movements to show their interest in public welfare. Moreover, they attempted to get British administrative designations. Subsequently, the high castes attempted to challenge them by spoiling their social capital and questioning the historical origin of low castes. This debate, which tried to reconstruct and reread the cultural and historical values of *Karava* caste, was a valuable fact in the historiography of Ceylon.

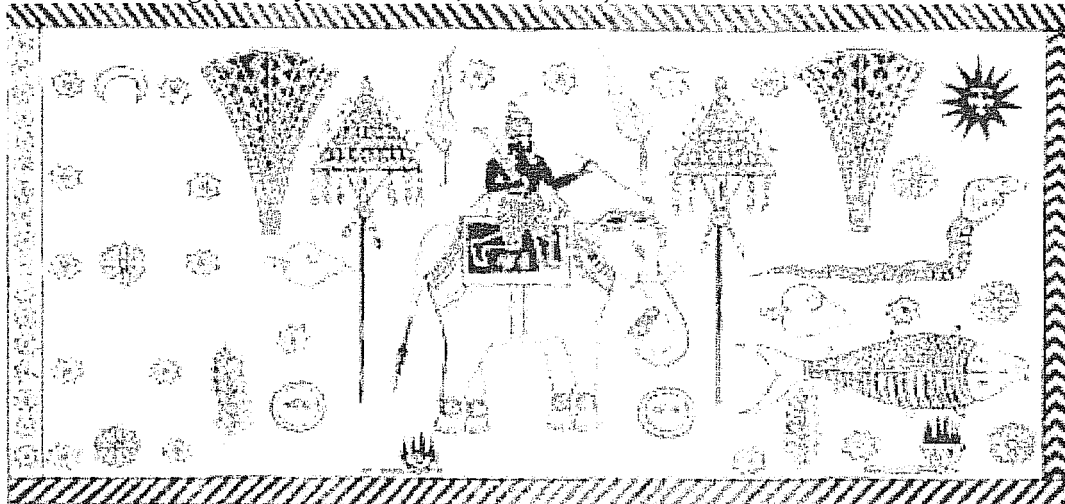
New Historical Identity of *Karavas*

In a few pamphlets, which were published during the British period, there was an obvious attempt to develop the historical identity of *Karava* caste. One of these attempts is the insults about contemporary social and poor economic conditions of petty *Govigama* families. On the other hand they tried to rebuild and reanalyze the historical value of castes. In these pamphlets, one common argument is that the *Karava* caste did not belong to such low social origin as it did in ancient India. They argued that *Karavas* were people originated from royalty and noble people. In this argument, they used the emerging scholarly concept in the British period about Aryans (Mihindukulasooriya, 1915, p.16).

According to that, with migrations of 'Aryans', these *Karavas* belonged to the *Kuru* tribe. After the war of *Kuru* and *Pandavas*, they migrated to Southern India and other places outside India, like Ceylon. To prove their nobility, they used and described their flag and other insignias as royal symbols. According to them that flag holds within its borders, a unique collection of antique emblems. Some of these symbols are the sun, moon and stars, the pearl umbrella, the *chamara* (flywhisk), the *chank* (conch-shell), the torches, the fans (*Alawattam*), the shields, the snake, the fish, the sunflowers, the sprigs, the lotus. The Rajput clans of India adopted the emblems of the sun and the moon, according to their descent from the Solar or Lunar race. These emblems were not depicted on grants, as is sometimes supposed, as "symbols of perpetuity" - the phrase so common in grants "as long as the sun and moon endure", being derived from the royal emblems, not the emblems from the phrase. The sun-and-moon flag was also the flag of the Four *Korales*. The Pearl Umbrella, Indian monarchs often styled themselves as Brother of the Sun and Moon, and Lord of the Umbrella. The *chamara* or ceremonial flywhisk is also a royal symbol of the great olden times. The *chank* or conch-shell was in its origin a martial emblem. As a religious symbol, it was particularly associated with Vishnu, who is declared to have used it in war. Its use as a trumpet in war is constantly spoken of in the Mahabharata. The chief bears in his right hand a sword, and in his left hand a trident. These again were emblems of royalty. The *dawalapandam* or daylight torches were used by the Karave people on ceremonial occasions in the British period.

The fans (*Alawattam*) used as an emblem of honor has a respectable antiquity. The snake on the *Karave* flag has every appearance of being a full-blooded Cobra. The fish was one of the emblems of royalty in India, Among the Hindus; the fish was regarded as a sacred animal. The Lotus is also a sacred and royal symbol (Kshatriya Maha Sabha, March, 2012).

The *Karava* flag (Kshatriya Maha Sabha, March, 2012)



Debate about Caste History in the Contemporary Writings

Many writers have argued that these *Karaves* were the *Kshestria* or military caste and they were highest caste in Sri Lanka and second caste in India. (Darmarathna, 1890, pp.16-26). There were ten insignias of *Karawe* people which they donate to be a military race. Some of these are represented the flags. Pearl umbrella, *Alawattung*, Sun and Moon Flag, *Makara* (dragon) flag, Trident, Sword, *Daula*, *Thammattama* (indigenous drums) and Bugle are them. These insignia had used as ceremonial symbols in *Karave* weddings in Moratuwa area in Sri Lanka. That shows their nobility in the British era. (Fernando, 1941, p. 25). Also the word 'Kewatta' applied as a parallel identification of *Karavaes* and another pamphlet called *Kewatta-wansaya* was written. In one book called *Ithihasa-Warnenawe* which was published in 1879 by John Fernando Weerawarna Kurukulasooriya Appohamy, it is clearly stated that *Govias* belong to the *Shudra* division. Some *Krave* writers roughly questioned various social behaviors and ethics of *Govigamas*. Most of these arguments are emotional and irrational. A few old pamphlets like *Ithihasa*, *Kaurawa Rrjawansaya*, *Charitra Mala Dama Chedaniya* are clear attempts to rebuild *Karava* caste history by challenging *Govigamas*. Among these books, *Kaurava Rajawansaya* (1915) was a keen attempt to rebuild *Karawe* history combining the colonial class system. The author has used some historical sources such as *Mahabaratha*, *Vanni Rajawaliya*, *Rajathrangani*, *Rajawaliya* etc. to prove arguments. Emphasizing the loyalty to the rulers and ability to engage with regime works as educated people, this author listed many *Kavrawas* as historical characters (Ragavan, 1961, p. 23). However, these compliments were questioned by *Govigama* writers in their books. *Ithihasa Mulachchedaniya* was that kind of pamphlets. *Keul Rodi Kolama* was another controversial one, which was written by a *Karava* woman called Warshahannadige Elizada de Soysa. As she mentions in the cover page, this slim pamphlet was a direct reply to the pamphlet called *Charitra Mala Dama Chedaniya*, which was written by D.E.D.S. Jayasooriya. As she mentioned, she is a daughter of Warshahannedige Joronis De Soysa and her husband was D.E.D.S. Jayasooriya. Warshahannedige Joronis De Soysa family was from a rich family which belonged to the National bourgeoisies in Ceylon and they had much economic and social capital with their wide spread business in 18th and 19th century. Also her occupation was mentioned as selling food items in a small poor coffee shop near the Panadura railway station. It can be argued that with such a lowly occupation this woman could not have been a member of the Soysa family which belonged to the richest capitalist class. The only son of this popular Soysa family was Sir Charles Henry de Soysa. In 1904, he was able to obtain an

appellation from the British Government as a Justice of Peace(Soyza,1904, pp.4-6).In addition to that she criticized her husband's book and his character and was sarcastic about the attempt to re-write the *Karava's* so-called noble history. Though she was a *Karave* woman, she clearly stated that the *Karave* caste never belonged to the Moon ancestry (*Chandra Wansha*). She also argued that *Karave's* are part of *Rodi* or lowest caste in Sri Lanka. She used obscene and indelicate language and aggressive arguments (Bastian,1904. pp. 80-110). Consequently, these pamphlets obviously prove the objection of the *Govigama* caste about newly constructed historical ideas of *Karavas*. Clearly *Karava* writers have challenged traditional Sinhalese history, which were dominated by *Govigam* writers. This debate was a smart challenge to the traditional historiography in the dynamic social,economic and political context in the British-Ceylon.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

With the gradual participation of *Karava* people in the economic, administrative, military and social activities in colonial administrative system they also became part of the new class in Ceylon which is known as the bourgeoisie. They were sensitive about their social level and willing to collect remarkable social capital in order to change it. However, traditional remains of caste system in the transitional rural societies, looked down upon them. There were many attempts to reanalyze their social history and the origin. This paper broadly observed the importance of the historical rewritings as a part of the *Kara-Govi* contest in the British period. It can be concluded that one of the major factors in the transition society of the colonial era, was the reproduction of cultural and social values of traditional communities.

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