

Dalits of Sri Lanka:

# Caste-Blind does not mean casteless

**IDS**N

International Dalit Solidarity Network

## Taboos Make Discrimination Hard to Fight

Sri Lanka has three parallel caste systems, one for each of the country's three population groups: the majority of Sinhalese; the Sri Lankan Tamils to the north and east; and the Indian Tamils who are mainly found in the tea plantations and at the bottom of the social hierarchy in towns.

Most people will know to which caste they belong, but the issue is nevertheless rarely discussed publicly and is widely regarded as taboo. There is a number of reasons for this: caste-based discrimination is mild compared to other countries in South Asia and to a large extent detached from religion; there are few examples of untouchability left; and during decades of civil war there has been a rise in ethnic nationalism among both the Tamils and the Sinhalese. There is now a stronger focus on what unites the various ethnic groups than on what divides them.

Even though caste is now often regarded as an outdated concept – particularly among the young generation – and as a threat to social cohesion, all caste systems still practise various kinds of discrimination. Some underprivileged castes are denied access to religious sites and buildings while others experience discrimination based on descent and work. Certain unclean jobs such as cleaning of toilets and garbage collection are inherited through generations.

The continued existence of caste-based discrimination affects about 20% to 30% of the population. This is highlighted in a new survey by Sri Lankan researchers for the Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in association with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN). The study is one of the few recent examples of academic research into the topic and describes how caste discrimination has become “underground” and “a hidden entity, not openly addressed by society”.

The reluctance to deal with the issue means that the government has refused to institute quota systems or any other attempts to favour the underprivileged caste groups. The lack of focus has at the same time made it difficult for the victims of discrimination to organise themselves. This is contrary to the situation in India and Nepal which both have strong movements of Dalits or “lower castes”.

While policies from abroad can not necessarily be imported, the survey concludes that “caste-blind policies are not the best way to deal with the continuing and emerging aspects of caste-based discrimination”.

### A Regional Study

Sri Lanka's Dalits are part of a regional study on caste-based discrimination – Casteless or Caste Blind? – coordinated by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in association with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN).

The regional research covers four countries — Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The landmark reports are available at [www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org) and [www.dalitstudies.org.in](http://www.dalitstudies.org.in).

The Sri Lankan study's main findings are highlighted on the following pages in the “Challenges and Recommendations” section.

### A Word about Wording

In much of South Asia, the term Dalit – “broken people” – is increasingly used to describe members of “lower castes”.

But this word is rarely used in Sri Lanka. Some “lower caste” communities fear that the concept of Dalit may lead to further marginalisation.

This fact sheet uses the term “lower caste” in inverted commas as the International Dalit Solidarity Network rejects the concept of ranking people according to castes.

## Transitions Make Space for Progress

Over the last couple of decades, Sri Lanka has experienced a number of transitions that have contributed to the struggle against caste-based discrimination. In the war-affected Jaffna society, the Tamil Tigers have banned discrimination based on caste. War and the accompanying emigration and social upheavals have further loosened the grip that “upper caste” Vellçlars traditionally had on “lower caste” Panchamars. New organisations have



sprung up to fight various discriminatory practices, even though some argue that the Tigers’ reluctance to discuss caste issues might have silenced a more thorough struggle against the inherited inequalities and discrimination.

In the tea plantations, urbanisation and the youths’ search for new opportunities in the city have created the so-called Colombo Boys: they are young people, working and studying in the capital, who reject the old caste traditions and often bring this new thinking back to the plantations during holidays.

Influence from political movements has in some cases allowed “lower castes” among the

Sinhalese in even remote villages to demand further rights from the “upper castes”; national legislation has in some instances helped members of the “lower castes” to secure land rights. The ability to work overseas – most often as housemaids in the Middle East – has provided alternatives to social marginalisation, even though these jobs often come with their own problems and injustices.

## War Broke Down Barriers for “Lower Castes”

Caste-based discrimination in Sri Lanka has traditionally been strongest among the Tamils in the north, known as the Jaffna society after the provincial capital. Decades of war have brought further tensions and enormous suffering to this area; but for the “lower castes”, the rule of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Elam (LTTE) has also created opportunities.

The LTTE is the militant version of Tamil nationalism that grew out of a campaign for access to the temples in the 1960s. The traditionally untouchable castes – known collectively as the Panchamars – rebelled against oppression from the leading and landowning caste of Vellçlars. The Tamil nationalism thus had two aims: to fight the dominating Sinhalese; and to “heal caste wounds” within the Tamil community.

Later, in the 1980s, the LTTE banned caste discrimination altogether which further eliminated a number of the accompanying practices. At the same time, however, any discussion of caste was discouraged as the Tigers needed the support from Panchamars as

### Making Barbers Respected Professionals

Upheavals in the north have made space for caste-based organisations who regard the traditional house visits by barbers to the “upper caste” Vellçlars as demeaning and unacceptable. The organisations are trying to professionalise these occupations by recommending standard fees and making it necessary for clients from all castes to visit hair salons rather than wait for the barber to make a house call.





**Sri Lanka**  
 4-5 million or  
 20-30 percent of  
 the total population

well as the Vellçlars in the struggle against the State. The LTTE might in this way have silenced a broader “lower caste” struggle.

The war and displacements did however force the various castes to intermingle, which made it more difficult to sustain untouchability and caste-based social distance. When the more resourceful Vellçlars fled the war zone, it created new space for the lower castes or Panchamars.

In the LTTE war cemeteries, the movement has defied the caste system by erecting monuments for all martyrs side by side, irrespective of their caste. Reportedly, there are many inter-caste marriages within the movement.



## - But Also Increased Discrimination for Some

While the Tamil Tigers have fought caste-based discrimination as a concept, their warfare has in some cases led to further discrimination. This is not least the case among the many people who are internationally displaced by years of fighting. The worst affected are people living in camps, known as Welfare Centres, of which 81 were still operating in the autumn of 2007. These victims of war are in some places joined by survivors of the tsunami that hit large parts of Asia in 2004.

The IIDS study reveals that the vast majority in the centres belong to the three deprived groups among the Panchamars, namely the Nalavar (toddy tappers), Pallar (agricultural labours) and Parayar (drummers). Many of them report that they are not welcome in the local temples, often owned by members of the Vellçlars, and they can’t go back to their own temples in areas that are now under control of security forces.

Access to water is another problem. Each welfare centre has one or two small wells for a large number of families. This is not enough to fulfil their daily needs for water. The internally displaced people are thus forced to seek water from their neighbours. These are often Vellçlars whose wells the Panchamars – who are considered “unclean” – are not allowed to touch. They are therefore at the mercy of the Vellçlars and have to rely on them to provide water.

**Why “Lower Castes” end up in Camps**  
 “Lower castes” – such as the Panchamars – are more likely to end up in camps following war and natural disasters such as the 2004 tsunami. There are several reasons for this: traditionally, they don’t own land and become absolutely landless when they are displaced; they typically don’t have networks outside their own communities to accommodate them; most of them don’t have resources to buy their own land or shelter elsewhere – and even when they have, they might meet resistance to sell among “higher castes” or Vellçlars.

On a more positive note, the emigration of many Vellāls has made more of their land available. In some cases, Panchamars are able to buy it with the proceeds from remittances from relatives abroad. However, the Panchamars do complain that they often have to pay an extra amount to be allowed to buy the land from the “upper castes”.



## Sanitation Workers Forced to Live in Dirt

On the outskirts of the hill town of Kandy, Mahaiyawa is a community suffering from an enormous paradox: the inhabitants are descendants of labourers who were imported from India in the 19th century to clean the town’s streets and toilets; the community has had this responsibility ever since, and now as municipal workers. Yet the municipality has never bothered to secure proper sanitation in Mahaiyawa itself.

With faeces occasionally streaming down the roads during rains, the community struggles with poor hygiene, low social esteem and discrimination from the rest of the town. This makes Mahaiyawa a visible expression of the mix of caste-based, social and ethnic discrimination that has kept the majority of Sri Lanka’s Indian Tamils at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

The establishment of Mahaiyawa had all to do with caste. In the 1920s, Parayans (sweeper caste) and Chakkiliyan (toilet cleaning caste) were settled in the section known as MC, short for Municipal Council Quarters. Later, Mahaiyawa MT (for Model Tenement), with its slightly better accommodation, was built for their “higher caste” supervisors. MT is today a broad mix of Tamils, Sinhalese and Muslims while MC has remained an overcrowded ghetto for primarily “lower castes”.

Even though caste-based discrimination has diminished in recent years, the inhabitants of Mahaiyawa MC are still denied access to some temples and better schools. While the former is caste-based, the latter seems to have more to do with their address in Mahaiyawa. The inhabitants themselves regard caste as an outdated concept which many of them refused to discuss with the researchers of the IIDS study. The dynamics do seem somewhat more complex. Historically, caste-based notions of untouchability placed the community at the lowest level of society. Present-day social and ethnic exclusion cemented this inherited poverty and powerlessness.

The study concludes that the most recent analysis and attempts to improve the conditions in Mahaiyawa MC have turned a blind eye to caste discrimination. However, the issue can not be addressed in isolation and there is a need to include caste among other factors in any attempt to tackle the social exclusion and denial of rights for the sweepers and cleaners of the community.

## Excluded from the Benefits of the Majority

The village of Henawala in central Sri Lanka is renowned for its mat and carpet weaving and for its dusters that are widely used to beautify other communities in the area. The villagers’ craft is inherited over generations but the same can be said about the social exclusion of the Kinnara population of Henawala. As is the case with so many other “lower castes”, their services to society are appreciated while they themselves are not.

The mat-weaving Kinnaras were traditionally one of the “oppressed castes” among Sri Lanka’s majority of Sinhalese with a duty to deliver mats and ropes to the royal families. Not much changed in these dynamics with the advent of democracy, even though the intensity of the discrimination diminished and the entire notion of caste became progressively less prominent.

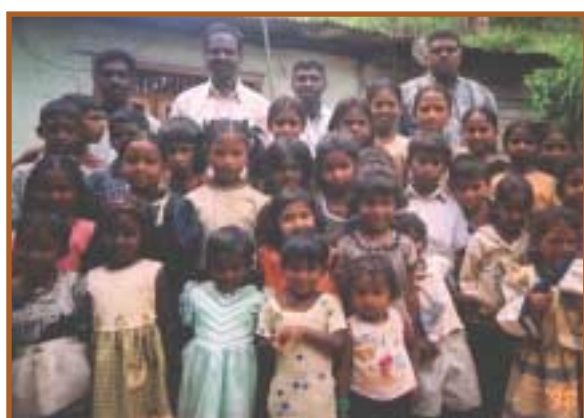
While the Sinhala caste system always has been seen as mild in comparison with the one practised by Hindus, it did however leave the “lower castes” with a high degree of poverty due to breakdown of traditional patron-client relations, limited rights and access to land and rapid population growth following the eradication of epidemic diseases.

As the villagers of Henawala told researchers for the IIDS study, a number of other characteristics of caste-based discrimination are also still in place: they are unable to move out of the community because the organisation of the production of mats and carpets makes them interdependent – some source the materials, some weave, and some are responsible for distribution. The schools in the area discriminate against their children – and they don't believe much in education in any case as they have no faith in anyone giving a job to a Kinnara. Inter-caste marriages are frowned upon by "higher castes", and the outside person usually has to join the Kinnara community.

The IIDS study reveals similar experiences among other "lower castes". Denial of access to temples and exclusion from political parties and organisations are still practised; some villages have their own internal hierarchy based on caste. While the issue of Sinhala castes is not often discussed openly, there have been examples of youth, from some "lower castes", who have mobilised politically on the basis of their social exclusion and their demand to be recognised for more than just their services to society.

## Colombo Boys Bring Progress to Tea Estates

Sri Lanka's world famous tea is picked by Tamils who are among the most marginalised workers in the country. They were imported by the British from India and so was their caste system as an integrated part of their Hindu religion. As members of "lower castes" and as Tamils in a Sinhala-dominated society, they have traditionally suffered double discrimination. But as their younger generations become exposed to a world outside, they are presented with alternatives to caste-based and social discrimination.



The tea estates modified the caste system for their own purpose: workers from "lower castes" were controlled by "upper caste" Kanganies (labour supervisors) who often also became trade union leaders. A repatriation programme in 1968 partly undermined this division. A large number of Kanganies returned to India which created more opportunities for workers from the "lower castes" to become leaders of trade unions and political parties.

Since the domination by "upper castes" always had more to do with the organisation of labour than with untouchability based in religion, discrimination has rarely included denial of access to water, education and

health services. During visits to tea estates, researchers for the IIDS study had to interview women in their sixties to get an overview of the number of workers belonging to each caste. The men felt that caste had nothing to do with their daily life. The youth refused to take up caste-related occupations such as washer men and barbers because of the stigma associated with these jobs. Among the few remaining taboos are inter-caste marriages and the prohibition for "high castes" to eat in the houses of "lower castes".

Some of these changes are inspired by the so-called "Colombo boys", young men from the estate who work and study in the capital. When they come home for visits, they bring back norms from the outside world; during festivals and funerals they deliberately disregard caste altogether. They will do tasks that were previously reserved for certain castes as a contribution to the community. In the city, many of the Colombo boys marry outside their own caste. Initially, this often causes friction with their parents, but when the first child is born, the tensions typically reduce. This all lends some hope that increased awareness can do away with the remnants of caste-based discrimination and possibly even encourage the plantation workers to question their inherited status at the lowest level of society.

# CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

## Background

Sri Lanka has three parallel caste systems: Sinhala, Sri Lankan Tamil and Indian Tamil. All have some kind of caste-based discrimination, but caste is a taboo in contemporary Sri Lanka and not often discussed or researched. 90% of the population does however recognise caste for some purposes. Caste sentiments have been used to organise social and political movements and are often used in election campaigns.

Welfare policies of the government from 1930 onwards assume universal coverage in providing services; no reservations of any kind have been introduced to address hereditary disadvantages of the deprived caste groups. The depressed communities themselves have only a few and relatively small organisations to address the issues. In most instances they deny and ignore the problems they face rather than dealing with them; instead they choose other strategies such as overseas migration, migration to cities or new settlements and change of name.

## Caste Discrimination in Sinhala Society

While the Sinhala caste system is regarded as less severe than the Hindu version and does not entail untouchability, there are certainly underprivileged caste groups with a higher degree of poverty, limited access to land, limited opportunities for advancement and limited contact with the State apparatuses. They may not be deprived of basic necessities like drinking water but are often excluded from services such as free education.

The socially excluded Sinhala caste groups are spatially dispersed and organisationally weak. Less than 1% comes from the "outcaste" category, but if traditionally disadvantaged service castes are included, as much as 30% of the Sinhala population may be experiencing some kind of caste-based discrimination.

## Caste Discrimination in War-Affected Jaffna Society

The most severe forms of untouchability and caste discrimination in Sri Lanka have been reported in the Jaffna society of Tamils. "Low caste" resistance from 1920, combined with population displacement, outward migration and the general social breakdown during the war, has, however, led to considerable erosion of caste discrimination. This has been compounded by an outright ban instituted by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. However, the preponderance of "low caste" members in camps for internally displaced people (IDP) and the treatment they experience from the neighbouring "high caste" communities indicate some degree of continued caste discrimination.

The social movement against caste discrimination, which in some ways paved the way for the current developments in Jaffna society, has been co-opted and more or less silenced by the LTTE. Caste is seen as, at best, an unnecessary diversion and, at worst, a threat to political and social unification of the desired Tamil nation.

### **Caste Discrimination among Indian Tamil Plantation Workers in Sri Lanka**

The patterns of bonded labour in the plantations traditionally utilised caste-based divisions of labour; Kanganies (supervisors) were mainly “higher caste” Kudiyanavars while the workers were from “lower castes”. However, they shared resources like water, Kovil (temple) and accommodation.

Homogeneity among worker families eroded the notion of untouchability. Trade unions to some extent replaced the role of castes. Ethnic marginalisation and outbursts of ethnic riots where the Indian Tamils became victims made them forge a new “Malaiyaha” (“hill country people”) identity to assert their cultural distinctiveness. Ethnic solidarity was strengthened as distinct from caste identity. The concept of “Malaiyaha” allows the “upper castes” to forge vertical ties with the “lower castes”, while the “lower castes” can redefine their identity in a more respectable manner in ethnic rather than caste terms.

### **Urban Untouchability: The Condition of Sweepers and Sanitary Workers in Kandy**

The Mahaiyawa community in Kandy is an urban ghetto with a complex mix of underclass, outcaste and ethnic enclave characteristics. The inhabitants are descendants of “lower caste” workers who were imported by the British from India to sweep streets and clean toilets.

Today the community is an example of the cumulative impact of social exclusion and discrimination over many decades that keep Sri Lanka’s urban Indian Tamils in poverty and powerlessness. While explicit caste discrimination has decreased over the years, urban untouchability has continued unabated due to caste origin, derogatory occupations inherited from the past, ethnic enclave atmosphere, population congestion, social vices and environmental and health hazards. As these problems are closely interconnected, they need to be addressed in a comprehensive manner.

### **Recommendations:**

Government, civil society organisations and international donors should explicitly recognise the existence of caste-based discrimination and plan for policies, legal measures and administrative measures to prohibit discrimination based on work and descent. Existing legislation must be reviewed and strengthened where necessary. The government must honour its international human rights obligations and report to the United Nations treaty bodies on a regular basis.

It is not advisable to follow caste-blind policies as pockets of caste-based discrimination make caste an important policy issue. Reservation policies favouring underprivileged castes may not be advisable or feasible as they may revive caste consciousness and related conflicts. Alternative means of addressing existing gaps through targeted interventions must be explored, for instance in relation to education. Local government agencies must be encouraged to improve the living and working conditions of sanitary workers through adoption of improved technologies, safety measures and development of career paths extending beyond caste-specific employment.

Caste must be explicitly addressed in social impact assessments and monitoring and evaluation of development programmes. The National Human Rights Commission must pay greater attention to violation of human rights on the basis of caste and related factors in matters such as education, access to land, drinking water and places of worship, and denial of political rights.

Caste is not a variable in any official data collection or database which makes it impossible to monitor progress or adverse outcomes relating to caste-based discrimination. Because of widespread denial, it may be difficult to introduce caste as a variable, but agencies working for “lower caste” communities can include caste in their project monitoring.

The absence of a common name such as Dalit may be an important obstacle to a common identity and interaction among “lower castes”. But the term may not be acceptable in Sri Lanka due to its external origin. The appropriateness of this or any other common identity should be explored. The civil society organisations working with “lower caste” communities should share their experiences across the ethnic divide. It may also be useful to share experiences with Dalit activists in the rest of South Asia. There is a need for further research on the topic to inform policies.