# A Review of Origins and Evolution of the Caste System in Sri Lanka

**Dinesh Deckker[1], Subhashini Sumanasekara[2]**

**[1]Wrexham University, United Kingdom**

**[2]University of Gloucestershire, United Kingdom**

## ABSTRACT

This review examines the origins, evolution, and contemporary relevance of the caste system in Sri Lanka, with a focus on its development within the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. Drawing on historical chronicles such as the Mahavamsa, colonial records, and contemporary academic literature, the study examines how indigenous social structures, religious ideologies—particularly Buddhism and Hinduism—and colonial administrations contributed to the shaping of caste hierarchies. The paper further examines how the Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial powers utilised caste for governance and economic exploitation, reinforcing or restructuring social divisions through legal codification, labor exploitation, and missionary activity. Post-independence reforms, notably universal education and economic liberalisation facilitated social mobility and weakened caste rigidity, especially in urban contexts. However, the caste continues to influence politics, religious institutions, and rural communities. By applying theoretical frameworks such as Functionalism, Marxism, Weberian stratification, and Subaltern Studies, the review explains the resilience and adaptability of caste as a social institution. The study concludes with policy recommendations and calls for further longitudinal and intervention-based research to mitigate caste-based inequalities and promote inclusive development in Sri Lanka.

**Keywords :-** Caste System, Sri Lanka, Social Hierarchy, Colonial Influence, Buddhism, Hinduism, Social Mobility

## INTRODUCTION

**Background Information**

**Definition of the Caste System and Its Significance in Sri Lanka**

The caste system in Sri Lanka is a hierarchical social structure that has historically determined individuals' occupations, social status, and marriage prospects. Although largely influenced by the Indian caste system, Sri Lanka's caste divisions developed distinct characteristics, particularly under the influence of Buddhism and colonial rule (Ryan, 1953). The caste system is prevalent among both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities, with each group having its own unique hierarchy.

Among the Sinhalese, caste is traditionally linked to professions and land ownership. The dominant caste is Govigama, historically comprising landowners and agricultural elites who have wielded significant political and social power (Roberts, 1982).

**Sri Lankan Castes and Occupational Designations (Sorted Alphabetically)**

| Caste | Occupational Designation | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Badahala (Kumbal) | Potters and ceramic workers | 0.9 |
| Bathgama | Lower agricultural caste involved in paddy farming | 1.8 |
| Berava | Drummers (often in ritual or folk settings) | 1.6 |
| Bodhivansha | Buddhist clergy support and temple administration | Not listed |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Deva | Historically, temple workers and administrators | Not listed |
| Durava | Toddy tappers and coconut cultivators, later influential in trade and politics | 5.6 |
| Goyigama | Cultivators; dominant caste in agriculture and politics | 54.3 |
| Henu (Rajaka) | Traditionally washermen | 3.4 |
| Hinna* | Washers | * |
| Hunu* | Lime workers (lime-burners, plaster and masonry) | * |
| Karava | Seafarers and fishers; some became wealthy traders | 15.7 |
| Navandanna | Artisans and craftsmen | 3.5 |
| Nekathi | Timekeepers and astrologers | Not listed |
| Oli* | Dancers | * |
| Radala | Aristocratic class associated with Kandyan royal court | Not listed |
| Salagama | Cinnamon peelers who gained influence under colonial rule | 7.5 |
| Vahumpura | Jaggery makers | 3.0 |

(Jayawardena, 2000)

In the Sri Lankan Tamil community, caste distinctions have historically been closely tied to land ownership and occupations. The Vellalar caste, comprising landowners and agriculturalists, has been the dominant Tamil caste. In contrast, others, such as the Karaiyar (fishermen), Paraiyar (drummers and laborers), and Ambattar (barbers), have played significant roles in Tamil society (Pfaffenberger, 1990).

**Jaffna Tamil Castes, Traditional Occupations, and Population Percentages**

| Caste Name | Traditional Occupation | Percentage of Jaffna's Tamil Population (%) |
|---|---|---|
| Ambattar | Barber | 0.9 |
| Brahman | Temple priest | 0.7 |
| Karaiyar | Deep sea fisher | 10 |
| Koviyar | Domestic servant | 7 |
| Nalavar | Praedial labour | 9 |
| Paraiyar | Drummer | 2.7 |
| Pallar | Praedial labour | 9 |
| Taccar | Carpenter | 2 |
| Tattar | Goldsmith | 0.6 |
| Vannar | Washer | 1.5 |
| Vellalar | Farmer | 50 |

(Jayawardena, 2000)

While caste played a crucial role in Sri Lankan society for centuries, its significance has changed due to modernisation, urbanisation, and economic transformation. However, caste-based identities persist in rural areas

and certain professions. Social mobility has increased, but caste affiliations continue to influence marriage, politics, and economic opportunities in some communities (Jayawardena, 2000).

## Historical Origins and Early References in Sri Lankan History

The caste system in Sri Lanka has evolved through a complex interplay of indigenous developments and external influences. Early historical records, such as the *Mahavamsa*, a 6th-century CE chronicle, document the arrival of Prince Vijaya from India around the 5th century BCE. At that time, the island was inhabited by four primary tribes: the Deva, Naga, Yakkha, and Raksha. These tribal distinctions are believed to have laid the foundation for the island's subsequent social stratification (Mahavamsa, Chapter VII).

The Sinhalese caste system, while bearing resemblances to the Indian *jāti* system, developed unique characteristics over time. The Govigama caste, traditionally comprising landowning farmers, emerged as the predominant group, holding significant political and social influence. Other notable castes include the **Karava**, associated with seafaring and maritime activities; the Salagama, traditionally involved in cinnamon peeling; and the Durava, engaged in toddy tapping and coconut cultivation (Rogers, 2004).

Buddhism's introduction to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BCE further influenced the caste dynamics. While Buddhist teachings reject caste discrimination, historical records indicate that caste distinctions persisted, particularly in rituals and temple hierarchies (Holt, 2011).

Colonial interventions by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British from the 16th to 20th centuries also impacted the caste system. Colonial powers manipulated existing social structures to consolidate control, often elevating certain castes over others based on loyalty and administrative convenience (Roberts, 1982).

## Key Distinctions Between the Sinhalese and Tamil Caste Structures

The caste systems of Sri Lanka's two primary ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, exhibit both similarities and distinct differences shaped by historical, religious, and social factors.

## Sinhalese Caste Structure:

- **Govigama Dominance:** The Sinhalese caste hierarchy is predominantly led by the **Govigama** caste, traditionally landowning farmers who have historically held significant political and social power (Peebles, 2015).

- **Absence of Brahmins:** Unlike many South Asian societies, the Sinhalese caste system lacks a native Brahmin (priestly) caste; instead, the Govigama often assumes roles of social prominence (Peebles, 2015).

- **Service Castes:** Several service-oriented castes exist, such as the **Rada** (washermen), **Berava** (traditional drummers), and **Navandanna** (artisans), each associated with specific occupations (Peebles, 2015).

## Tamil Caste Structure:

- **Vellalar Prominence:** In the Tamil community, the **Vellalar** caste, traditionally landowners and agriculturists, holds a dominant position, similar to the Govigama among the Sinhalese (Mahroof, 2000).

- **Religious Underpinnings:** The Tamil caste system is more closely tied to religious bases than the Sinhalese system, with caste affiliations often linked to specific religious duties and temple affiliations (Mahroof, 2000).

- **Artisan and Service Castes:** Artisan groups, collectively known as **Kammalar,** include blacksmiths, goldsmiths, carpenters, and stonemasons. Service castes encompass roles such as barbers **(Ambattar)** and washermen **(Vannar)** (Mahroof, 2000).

**Comparative Distinctions:**

- **Religious Influence:** While both systems have religious associations, the Tamil caste structure is more deeply intertwined with Hindu religious practices, whereas the Sinhalese system, influenced by Buddhism, places less emphasis on religious hierarchy (Mahroof, 2000).

- **Occupational Flexibility:** According to Mahroof (2000), the Sinhalese caste system today allows for greater freedom of movement between occupations; however, some Tamil caste groups continue to practice their ancestral trades.

- **Social Stratification:** Among Sinhalese groups, wealth and influence at times belong to castes outside the Govigama classification, yet such privileges elevate scarce among Tamil Vellalar caste members (Mahroof, 2000).

The successful interpretation of Sri Lanka's social atmosphere and historical development among its diverse groups depends on understanding the social group differences within these contexts.

**Objectives of the Review Paper**

The purpose of this review is to examine the historical development and societal effects of the caste system in Sri Lanka through the analysis of three substantial objectives.

**To analyse the historical origins and evolution of the caste system in Sri Lanka.**

The objective tracks the development of the Sri Lankan caste system through the identification of its formation process and exploration of indigenous, religious, and external elements. Early records, including the Mahavamsa, together with other historical texts, will be analysed to reveal the sociocultural circumstances which led to caste divisions, according to Roberts (1982) and Holt (2011).

**To examine the impact of colonial rule on caste structures.**

During the time span from the 16th to 20th century, the countries Portugal, Netherlands and Britain exercised colonial power over Sri Lanka. Each colonial government led to variations in caste system institutions through the adoption of caste work regulations or the manipulation of historical caste dominance relationships. Research will examine how colonial policies modified caste structures and their role in both elevating social status and perpetuating caste differences throughout Sri Lanka (Rogers, 2004; Jayawardena, 2000).

**To understand how caste influences contemporary Sri Lankan society.**

Although the influence of the caste system has declined due to modernisation, urbanisation, and legal reforms, caste-based identities still persist in certain aspects of Sri Lankan society, particularly in rural areas and political affiliations. This objective will explore the relevance of caste in modern Sri Lanka, examining its impact on employment, education, marriage, and social mobility (Peebles, 2015; Silva, 1999).

By addressing these objectives, this paper seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of how caste has evolved in Sri Lanka and its continuing significance in social structures.

**Research Questions**

- What are the historical origins of the caste system in Sri Lanka?
- How did Buddhism and Hinduism influence the development of caste structures in Sri Lanka?
- What impact did Portuguese, Dutch, and British colonial rule have on the caste system in Sri Lanka?
- How has the caste system evolved in post-independence Sri Lanka?
- What role does caste play in contemporary Sri Lankan society, particularly in politics, employment, and social mobility?
- To what extent has modernisation and globalisation reduced or reinforced caste-based distinctions in Sri Lanka?

## Research Importance

The study of the caste system in Sri Lanka is essential for understanding the historical and contemporary social structures that shape the country's societal dynamics. This section highlights the significance of researching the Sri Lankan caste system, its socio-economic impact, and its broader academic and policy implications.

### Why Studying the Caste System in Sri Lanka is Crucial

Despite Sri Lanka's shift toward modernisation and legal frameworks that discourage caste-based discrimination, caste still plays a role in various social interactions, particularly in rural areas. Understanding the historical evolution of the caste system helps in identifying patterns of social hierarchy and how they continue to influence social identity and relationships (Rogers, 2004). Examining the caste system offers insights into the intersection of religion, politics, and economic structures in Sri Lanka, helping to challenge lingering social inequalities.

### The Impact of Caste on Social and Economic Structures

Sri Lankan society has utilised caste traditions to determine who could acquire land and what educational and occupational opportunities were available. Contemporary mobility practices have expanded in society, while caste influences social mobility and employment options in particular sectors (Peebles, 2015). The political orientation of people, alongside their electoral behavior patterns, demonstrates effects from caste identities, according to Roberts (1982), in their representation processes. Studying these social and political elements plays a crucial role in promoting fair development and addressing disparities in wealth distribution and access to opportunities.

### Contribution to Academic Discourse and Policy Implications

Understanding Sri Lanka's caste system enhances academic studies on post-colonialism, social stratification, and ethnic identity. The study establishes temporal connections between Sri Lankan caste-based practices and their background through the research of similar social systems in South Asia. According to Jayawardena (2000), the analysis reveals that Sri Lanka requires policy measures to promote inclusion and equal access to education, as well as action against caste-based discrimination. The research findings will help policymakers, social activists and academic scholars develop more inclusive policies for society.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This review adopts a narrative approach enriched by a structured framework based on the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines to ensure transparency and replicability. Although not a systematic review, elements of PRISMA—such as explicit search strategy documentation, inclusion/exclusion criteria, and structured synthesis—were applied to enhance the rigor of the review process. The goal was to trace the historical trajectory of the caste system in Sri Lanka and analyse its evolving relevance using peer-reviewed sources, historical texts, and government documents.

### Search Strategy

A structured search was conducted using academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, Taylor & Francis Online, and SpringerLink. Boolean operators were applied to combine keywords such as:

- "Caste system" AND "Sri Lanka"
- "Sinhalese caste" OR "Tamil caste hierarchy"
- "Colonial rule" AND "caste structure"
- "Buddhism" OR "Hinduism" AND "caste in Sri Lanka"
- "Post-independence" AND "caste inequality"

Only sources published in English between 1980 and 2024 were included to capture both historical and

contemporary perspectives.

## Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

### Inclusion Criteria:

- Peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, government records, and historical texts
- Studies focusing on caste dynamics among Sinhalese and Tamil communities
- Analyses of colonial and postcolonial policy impacts on caste

### Exclusion Criteria:

- Non-academic sources (blogs, opinion articles, or news media)
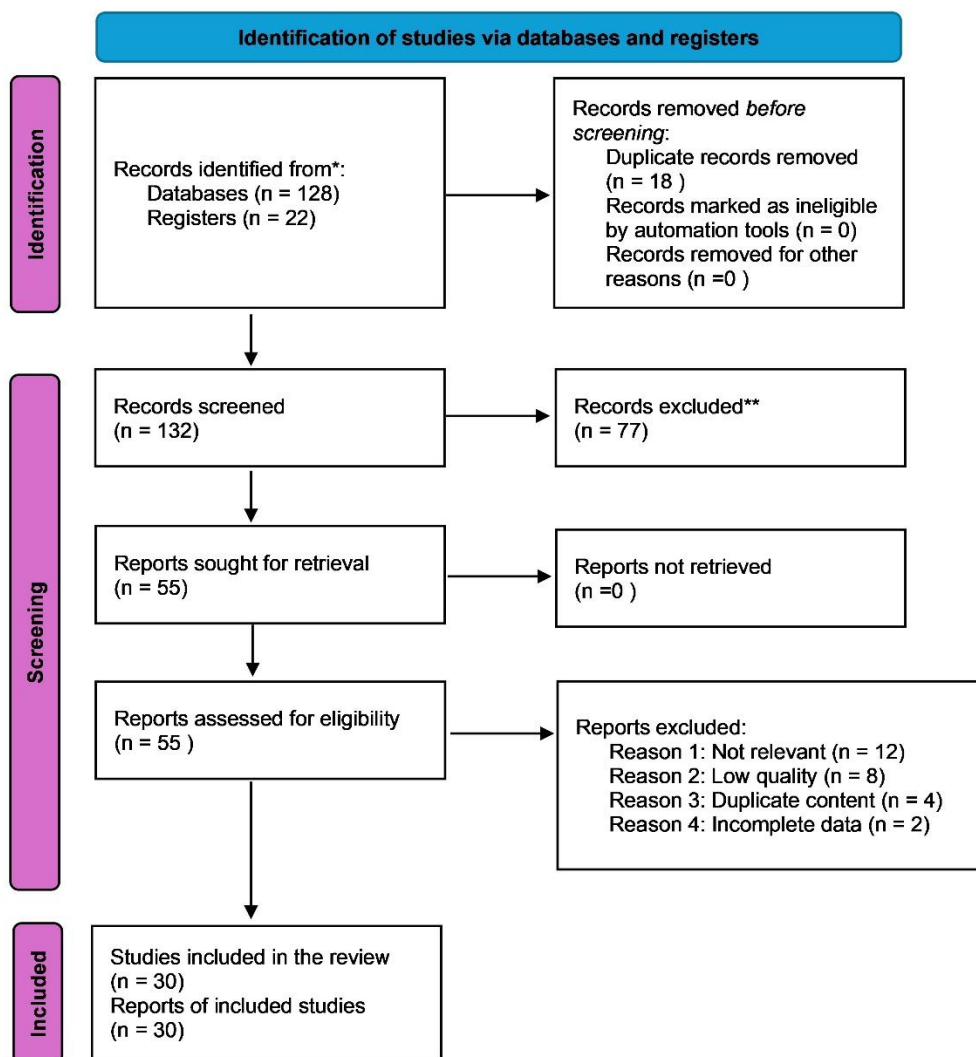- Studies not directly addressing Sri Lanka or that lack empirical/historical grounding



**Identification of studies via databases and registers**

**Identification**

Records identified from*:
Databases (n = 128)
Registers (n = 22)

Records removed *before screening*:
Duplicate records removed (n = 18 )
Records marked as ineligible by automation tools (n = 0)
Records removed for other reasons (n =0 )

**Screening**

Records screened (n = 132)

Records excluded** (n = 77)

Reports sought for retrieval (n = 55)

Reports not retrieved (n =0 )

Reports assessed for eligibility (n = 55 )

Reports excluded:
Reason 1: Not relevant (n = 12)
Reason 2: Low quality (n = 8)
Reason 3: Duplicate content (n = 4)
Reason 4: Incomplete data (n = 2)

**Included**

Studies included in the review (n = 30)
Reports of included studies (n = 30)

**Diagram 1:** PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021)

## Data Extraction and Synthesis

Relevant data were extracted using a thematic synthesis approach. The sources were read fully, and recurring themes were coded using open coding. These themes included historical caste structures, colonial interventions, religious influence, post-independence reforms, and contemporary caste relevance. Data were then categorised

and analysed using a theory-driven lens, integrating perspectives from Functionalism, Marxism, Weberian stratification, Constructivism, and Subaltern Studies. A timeline of key historical events was also developed to trace the evolution of caste dynamics across periods visually.

## Limitations

Despite efforts to ensure rigor, this review has several limitations. First, relying on English-language sources may have excluded valuable Sinhala or Tamil literature. Second, while thematic synthesis provides flexibility, it also introduces subjectivity in interpretation. Third, given the absence of primary data, this review depends on the accuracy and scope of secondary sources. Finally, global comparisons with caste systems in other regions (e.g., India, Nepal) were limited, which could have further contextualised Sri Lanka's unique trajectory.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Origins of the Caste System in Sri Lanka

### Early Historical References: The *Mahavamsa* and Inscriptions

The origins of the caste system in Sri Lanka are deeply rooted in historical texts and epigraphic evidence. One of the most significant literary sources is the *Mahavamsa*, a 6th-century Pali chronicle that documents the history of Sri Lanka from its legendary beginnings up to the 4th century CE. This text provides insights into the island's early social stratification and the roles assigned to different groups in the kingdom (Geiger, 1912; Gunawardana, 1979).

The study of ancient Sri Lankan inscriptions provides extra details about the social hierarchy system during historical times. Inscriptions from the Anuradhapura period reference specific caste-related roles, particularly in administrative and religious contexts. As recorded in the Abhayagiri inscription, a Karava navika term indicates the continued presence of occupational castes that historically practiced seafaring and fishing activities (Paranavithana, 1970). The political and economic role of Govigama caste members becomes evident through various inscriptions, which show their control over both agricultural land and administrative positions (Rogers, 2004).

The Pujavaliya and Saddharmaratnavaliya present 13th-century evidence that divides Sri Lankan society into four main castes, including Raja (rulers), Bamunu (Brahmins), Velanda (traders), and Govi (farmers) (Roberts, 1982). These organisational schemes both affirm the professional nature of Sri Lankan caste structure while demonstrating its significance in maintaining social stratification.

Buddhist monastic institutions added to the maintenance of caste hierarchy in society. Even though Buddhist teachings condemn discrimination based on caste status various temple hierarchy documentation shows that caste divisions arranged religious professions and temple leadership. According to Holt (2011) the Siam Nikaya allowed only Radala and Govigama caste monks to pursue the highest ordination level because they mirrored social divisions present in religious communities.

Caste systems demonstrate their importance in the development of Sri Lanka through their established roles across governance systems, religious groups, and social work segments throughout history. Caste existed as a political instrument that ruling elites employed to establish dominance over distinct social segments, as evidenced by ancient references that show caste extended beyond economics and society.

## Influence of Buddhism and Hinduism on Caste Divisions in Sri Lanka

Buddhism and Hinduism together have reformed the approaches toward caste status, which affect both the Sinhalese and Tamil communities of Sri Lanka.

### Buddhism's Influence on Sinhalese Caste Structure

Sri Lanka welcomed Buddhism during the 3rd century BCE; however, this religious system rejected the

theoretical acceptability of castes. The theoretical rejection of caste by Buddhism did not prevent its continuation in the practical daily life of the monastic order. Higher ordination within the Siam Nikaya required membership from the Govigama caste during the 18th century, as the community maintained religious hierarchies that mirrored social divisions. The Amarapura Nikaya emerged as a new monastic order because it broke from exclusivity rules to welcome members of all castes in a move that contradicted traditional beliefs (Obeyesekere, 2003). However, others argue this was less about doctrinal purity and more about preserving political influence among elite caste groups, particularly in the Kandyan region (Holt, 2011).

## Hinduism's Influence on Tamil Caste Structure

The Sri Lankan Tamil population relies heavily on Hinduism to sustain caste democratisation. Landowning agricultural work established the Vellalar people's position at the highest level of traditional Tamil social organisation. Specific Hindu temples adopted this social hierarchy system by selecting specific castes to fulfill religious functions, thereby reinforcing caste categories (Pfaffenberger, 1982).

## Colonial Impact and Religious Revivalism

Colonial administration introduced additional complexities into the caste systems, which had emerged in response to these religions. For administrative simplicity, the British implemented a systematic legitimacy for existing sustainable caste groupings. In response, religious revivalist movements emerged. For instance, figures such as Iyothee Thass in South India and Anagarika Dharmapala in Sri Lanka sought to reinterpret and reform their respective religious traditions to combat caste discrimination, advocating for a return to the original Buddhist principles that denounced caste-based discrimination (Aloysius, 1998). In contrast, Jayawardena (2000) emphasises that certain castes, such as the Karava and Salagama, experienced upward mobility during colonial rule by exploiting new mercantile and educational opportunities.

## Role of the Monarchy in Institutionalizing Caste in Sri Lanka

The monarchy in Sri Lanka played a significant role in shaping and institutionalising the caste system, intertwining social stratification with governance and religious practices. By integrating caste into administrative structures, economic functions, and religious institutions, the monarchy reinforced caste-based hierarchies that persisted even beyond the colonial era.

## Integration of Caste into Governance

The Sinhalese monarchy formalised caste divisions through the system of *rajakariya* (the king's work), a feudal service obligation that required each caste to perform specific duties for the state (Dewasiri, 2008). The **Govigama** caste, traditionally agriculturalists, played a dominant role in land management and governance, while other castes were assigned roles in craftsmanship, military service, and trade. This system not only structured the economy but also reinforced social stratification by linking caste identity to hereditary occupations (Roberts, 1982).

The Radala caste, a subgroup of the Govigama, emerged as the aristocratic class, closely associated with the Kandyan monarchy. They served as regional administrators and military leaders, consolidating their influence over both the kingdom's political and economic affairs (Dewasiri, 2008). According to the hierarchical system power rested with the elites of high-caste groups who maintained tight control over governance and decision-making processes.

## Monarchical Influence on Religious Hierarchies

The monarchies held power in establishing caste status by supporting Buddhist monastic orders. Sri Lankan Buddhist institutions throughout history have maintained caste hierarchies, which contradicts the theory that Buddhism rejects caste discrimination (Rogers, 2004). By endowing the Siam Nikaya in 1753, the monarchy imposed stricter ordination restrictions on Govigama caste members, thereby strengthening their religious power base (Holt, 2011). Exclusive admission practices led to the formation of different monastic groups, known as the Amarapura and Ramanna Nikayas, which expanded ordination opportunities to individuals who were not

Govigama (Obeyesekere, 2003).

By controlling access to religious authority, the monarchy strengthened caste divisions within Buddhist institutions, further legitimising the social hierarchy. Additionally, temple land ownership and monastic patronage systems favored high-caste groups, reinforcing their economic and spiritual influence (Roberts, 1982).

## Colonial Continuation of Monarchical Caste Policies

The British colonial administration continued many of the caste-based policies institutionalised by the monarchy, particularly in governance and land ownership. The British co-opted high-caste elites, such as the Radala, into the colonial bureaucracy, reinforcing existing social hierarchies (Dewasiri, 2008). Furthermore, colonial land tenure systems privileged high-caste landowners, deepening caste-based economic disparities (Rogers, 2004).

Despite Sri Lanka's transition to democracy in the 20th century, caste-based social and economic structures, originally institutionalised by the monarchy, have persisted. Political patronage networks and electoral strategies still reflect caste affiliations, particularly in rural areas where traditional social hierarchies remain influential (Holt, 2011).

The Sri Lankan monarchy played a crucial role in institutionalising caste through governance, economic policies, and religious structures. While colonial and post-independence governments have contributed to social changes, the caste system remains an enduring aspect of Sri Lankan society, deeply embedded in its historical and cultural foundations.

## Colonial Influence on the Caste System

The colonial history of Sri Lanka, spanning Portuguese, Dutch, and British rule, had profound impacts on the island's caste system. Each colonial power implemented policies that interacted with and reshaped existing social hierarchies, sometimes reinforcing traditional caste-based roles for administrative and economic benefits while at other times disrupting long-established structures (Dewasiri, 2008; Obeyesekere, 1967).

## Portuguese Period (1505–1658)

During Portuguese colonial rule, the indigenous caste system was preserved before the authorities fully incorporated it into their administrative system. The Portuguese administrative system honored established service durations, allowing responsibilities that had previously belonged to former ruling elites to be transferred to support the Portuguese state. The existing social structure became a tool for Portuguese economic gain when they focused on resource extraction, including the exploitation of cinnamon and elephants (Obeyesekere, 1967). Through their conversion efforts, the Portuguese provided benefits to people who accepted Catholicism while attempting to persuade local populations to adopt Catholicism. Most religious conversion programs did not remove social caste divisions because elite groups who accepted new beliefs kept their previous status positions while lower classes continued to hold inferior positions (Dewasiri, 2008).

## Dutch Period (1658–1796)

The Dutch East India Company (VOC) maintained the caste system to achieve administrative goals in its operations. They implemented standard land ownership rules and service responsibilities, which depended on locally appointed chief and headman representatives from different castes (Dewasiri, 2008). During this time, the Thesawalamai emerged to provide law for the Tamil population of Jaffna while legally reinforcing caste structures (Rogers, 1994).

Some low-country social castes, including the Karava, Salagama, and Durava, raised their status during the Dutch colonial period by utilising economic opportunities in the colonial trade and industrial sectors (Obeyesekere, 1967). Many Salagama caste members, for instance, gained prominence in the cinnamon trade, an industry previously monopolised by the Dutch, resulting in an elevation of their social and economic standing (Dewasiri, 2008).

## British Period (1796–1948)

Under British rule, the existing caste-based administrative system was initially preserved. However, over time, the British introduced **reforms that altered traditional caste structures.** The **implementation of a centralised bureaucratic system** diminished the power of local headmen, many of whom were from higher castes (Rogers, 1994). This shift disrupted the traditional patron-client relationships inherent in the caste system, allowing for a more meritocratic administrative system; however, caste influence persisted in many sectors.

The British also **introduced private land ownership and plantation agriculture**, which significantly affected caste dynamics. As land became a commodity rather than a communal or service-based obligation, traditional caste-based landholding patterns were disrupted (Dewasiri, 2008). The plantation economy, particularly in tea and rubber production, led to the importation of Indian Tamil laborers, who were assigned the lowest social status and worked under harsh conditions, further complicating the island's caste dynamics (Obeyesekere, 1967).

Each colonial power utilised and altered the caste system for its own economic and administrative purposes. While the Portuguese and Dutch largely reinforced caste structures, particularly in land tenure and trade, the British reforms disrupted traditional caste relations by introducing private land ownership and new economic structures. Despite these changes, caste remained a deeply entrenched social force in Sri Lanka, influencing political and economic structures well into the post-colonial period (Rogers, 1994).

## Impact of European Missionary Activities on Caste Structures in Sri Lanka

European missionary endeavors in Sri Lanka, spanning from the Portuguese arrival in the 16th century to subsequent Dutch and British periods, significantly influenced the island's caste structures. These missions not only aimed at religious conversion but also interacted intricately with existing social hierarchies, leading to both the reinforcement and transformation of caste dynamics.

## Portuguese Missionary Activities (16th–17th Centuries)

The Portuguese, arriving in Sri Lanka in the early 16th century, aggressively promoted Catholicism, particularly in the Jaffna Peninsula. They coerced conversions and demolished prominent Hindu temples, disrupting traditional religious practices (Gunasingam, 1999). Despite these efforts, caste distinctions persisted among converts. The Paravar community, for instance, converted en masse to Catholicism but retained their caste identity and internal hierarchies. The Portuguese often appointed local converts from influential castes to administrative positions, thereby reinforcing existing social structures (Arasaratnam, 1996).

## Dutch Missionary Activities (17th–18th Centuries)

The Dutch East India Company supplanted the Portuguese and introduced Protestantism, particularly the Dutch Reformed Church. They codified local customs, such as the *Thesavalamai* law, which governed the Tamil population of Jaffna, thereby formalizing caste-based legal distinctions (Arasaratnam, 1996). The Dutch favored certain castes, such as the Vellalar, for administrative roles, thereby enhancing their dominance. This preference led to shifts in social mobility, with some castes leveraging economic opportunities to ascend socially (Arasaratnam, 1996).

## British Missionary Activities (19th–20th Centuries)

Under British rule, various missionary societies, including the American Ceylon Mission, intensified conversion efforts, focusing on education and social reform (de Silva, 1981). Missionaries established schools that, while ostensibly open to all, often catered to higher castes, thereby perpetuating existing hierarchies. In response, Hindu revivalists like Arumuka Navalar emerged, emphasising traditional practices and reinforcing caste identities within the Hindu community (Jones, 1992).

European missionary activities in Sri Lanka had a complex impact on caste structures. While aiming to propagate Christianity, these missions often reinforced existing social hierarchies by aligning with dominant castes and codifying customary laws. Through their activities, the missionaries stimulated native religious revivals, which

in turn strengthened caste identities. Through their missionary activities, the caste system throughout Sri Lankan society found ways to continue and sometimes even grew stronger.

## Changes in Caste-Based Professions Under Colonial Rule in Sri Lanka

During the colonial era in Sri Lanka, the Portuguese, Dutch, and British governments substantially modified caste-based occupations. The transformation of traditional caste-based professions in Sri Lanka occurred due to economic and administrative reforms, as well as colonial social policies from the colonial powers.

## Portuguese Period (1505–1658)

The Portuguese preserved the Indian caste system for their business expansion, including the purpose of trading cinnamon. The Salagama caste, traditionally responsible for peeling cinnamon, provided their services to European customers due to the demand for the spice. The Portuguese era intensified the occupational connections between social groups by utilising the existing caste system for resource extraction purposes.

## Dutch Period (1658–1796)

During Dutch colonial rule, the caste system received formal organisation as an instrument to aid the economic activities of the colonisers. The Dutch East India Company established official land tenure systems and service obligations to compel different castes to perform their traditional tasks as the colonial economy required these activities. The traditional fisherfolk and sailors of the Karava caste maintained their important position in Dutch-sponsored coastal trade activities. The Dutch government officially approved customary laws through the enactment of Thesavalamai laws in the Jaffna Peninsula, setting in place both traditional land ownership patterns and caste-dependent labor practices.

## British Period (1796–1948)

The British maintained control by implementing multiple reforms that would separate professions from their traditional caste-specific backgrounds. The establishment of tea rubber and coconut plantations led to the importation of Indian Tamil workers, who altered the population dynamics and traditional job types. The plantation expansion resulted in the exclusion of local farming castes because British authorities and local elite owners took control of large agricultural sections of land.

Through their bureaucratic framework, the British weakened native caste leaders and their traditional leadership power. The colonial authorities strategically recruited members of the Mudaliyar class, who principally stemmed from the Govigama caste, to enter positions within their administration and altered societal social structure with job changes. A new class of clerical workers and administrators entered society during this time through the channels of education provided by English language programs available to higher caste students.

## Impact on Specific Castes

- **Salagama**: Cinnamon peeling activities became an integral part of the Salagama caste traditions because Portuguese colonial authorities intensified their demand for the spice across European markets.

- **Karava**: During the Dutch period, Karava caste members gained economic opportunities in maritime fishing and coastal trading, as their seafaring skills aided the VOC in its business ventures.

- **Govigama**: The British administration appointed Govigama caste members to the bureaucracy, which increased their presence in civil service positions while transforming traditional land-based occupations.

Colonial governance in Sri Lanka reinforced caste-based professions by preserving traditional economic roles to support colonial markets and introducing modern administrative systems, which altered the social order. The transformations made permanent changes to Sri Lanka's socio-economic structures, affecting caste relations and the distribution of professional work roles that persisted into post-colonial times.

## Post-Independence Transformations

### Evolution of the Caste System in Modern Sri Lanka

The caste system in Sri Lanka underwent significant evolutionary changes as it transitioned from its ancient roots to its current state. The traditional caste system survived through history but contemporary social-economic changes with educational reforms and political movements resulted in a changing social arrangement.

### Historical Context

The traditional Sri Lankan society divided itself into separate caste groups which assigned each caste specific work responsibilities and position in society. The Sinhalese caste system placed the Govigama caste in a position of prominence, as they controlled both land ownership and agriculture, while also exerting strong socio-political influence. Traditional Sri Lankan society divided its population into different castes, including the Karava (fishers), Salagama who peeled cinnamon and Durava who tapped toddy (Rogers, 2004).

### Colonial Influence and Social Mobility

The colonial administration's economic projects, together with its administrative systems, dismantled the established caste-based economic activities. Plantation economies, combined with the bureaucratic systems introduced by the British, led to more people from different caste groups participating in professional work. During this period, the middle class, comprising professionals and entrepreneurs, began to dissolve strict caste boundaries (Jayawardena, 2000).

### Post-Independence Reforms

Governments that took power after 1948 established programs to reduce social inequality through their enacted policies. Free education, combined with increased public sector employment opportunities in civil services, became pathways for social advancement, allowing members from underserved castes to pursue higher education and secure job positions in the civil services (Jayaweera, 2010). While universal free education is often credited with weakening caste divisions (Jayaweera, 2010), Silva, Sivapragasam, and Thanges (2009) note that these benefits were disproportionately accessed by urban upper-caste groups, reinforcing a new form of inequality under the guise of meritocracy.

### Contemporary Caste Dynamics

The identification with caste has faded strongly from contemporary Sri Lankan society, particularly among urban residents. Social standing in modern Sri Lanka is primarily defined by economic situation, educational background, and political loyalty. The rural areas continue to preserve traces of caste consciousness because traditional social structures maintain their influence there (Silva, Sivapragasam, & Thanges, 2009). However, others like Rogers (1994) argue that caste affiliations continue to shape rural political behavior, social networks, and marriage alliances—indicating that caste persists in more implicit but potent ways.

Although no longer dominating Sri Lankan society, the caste system exists in subtle ways among its people. Social inclusivity combined with programs that promote equity will help Sri Lanka overcome its past caste system divisions completely.

### Role of Education and Economic Changes in the Evolution of Sri Lanka's Caste System

The educational progress and economic structural changes have majorly affected the transformation of Sri Lanka's caste system. The combination of educational progress and economic changes has led to increased social mobility and a decline in traditional caste separation.

### Educational Reforms and Social Mobility

After becoming an independent nation, Sri Lanka introduced free education for all, making schooling equally

accessible to all social classes. Through education democratisation, marginalized caste individuals gained access to higher learning and professional occupations, thus defying social order structures (Silva et al., 2009). The importance placed on education as a social advancement tool led to a decrease in restrictions on traditional caste-based occupations, thus enabling the emergence of a new merit-based society.

## Economic Changes and Occupational Diversification

Industrial development, alongside service growth, created job opportunities that extended beyond the occupations controlled by the caste system. The economic liberalisation policies of the late twentieth century expanded entrepreneurial possibilities and private sector prospects, enabling people to overcome social barriers imposed by caste systems (Rogers, 2004). Economic diversification led to the dissolution of caste identities because work roles ceased to be linked to inherited status.

## Urbanization and Changing Social Dynamics

The castes underwent fundamental changes due to urbanisation. The cultural shift in urban areas enables people to focus on individual success rather than traditional social class structures (Silva et al., 2009), as caste factors rarely influence urban social interactions. The diverse populations and anonymous nature of cities enable individuals from various social groups to mix together, leading to a decline in caste-related hurdles.

## Political Reforms and Legal Frameworks

The decline of caste-based discrimination emerged from legislative efforts that supported social justice. Through educational and employment affirmative action policies, as well as equal opportunity mandates, the government has empowered underrepresented communities to create a more inclusive socio-political atmosphere (Rogers, 2004).

Sri Lanka's caste system has undergone transformation thanks to overlapping changes in education, economic activities, urban development and supportive legal structures. Social standing now relies more on individual merit, as rural caste consciousness coexists alongside a combination of factors that push Sri Lanka toward an increasingly egalitarian society.

## Declining Significance vs. Continued Relevance of the Caste System in Modern Sri Lanka

The Sri Lankan caste system continues to persist in some domains even though it became less important in other aspects. A double system in Sri Lanka arises from historical traditions and modern socio-economic changes.

## Declining Significance

Evolution in modern Sri Lanka has dissipated the traditional caste distinctions due to various developments.

- **Educational Reforms**: Universal free education policies established by the government have opened educational opportunities for marginalised caste groups, who can now pursue higher education programs and build their professional careers. Social mobility has become more attainable due to this change, which has weakened the traditional caste system (Silva, Sivapragasam, & Thanges, 2009).

- **Economic Diversification**: Human labor found new employment opportunities due to the shift from an agricultural to an industrial and service sector economy. The expanding economy now permits people to pursue careers outside their prospective caste-specific work roles, which weakens caste divisions (Rogers, 2004).

- **Urbanisation**: As people move to urban areas, they create social settings in which caste does not significantly influence relationships between individuals. The importance of economic status and educational attainment surpasses that of caste factors in determining social status in urban environments, resulting in diminished caste distinctions (Silva et al., 2009).

## Continued Relevance

Despite these advancements, the caste system retains relevance in certain aspects of Sri Lankan society:

- Rural Persistence: The rural communities continue to maintain traditional social structures which influence how locals interact with each other and the caste-based system affects community dynamics (Silva et al., 2009).

- Political Dynamics: Caste affiliations affect political alignments and voter behavior so certain political parties as well as candidates exploit caste identities to attract voter support (Rogers, 2004).

- Religious Institutions: Higher ordination in Sri Lankan Buddhist monastic orders traditionally admitted only members from specific castes because caste prejudices ran deep in religious circumstances (Obeyesekere, 2003).

Modernity has shaped Sri Lankan caste practices to develop two distinct facets – professional cities and educated zones show reduced caste importance, but village communities, political life and religious organisations continue to use it. Social equity necessitates ongoing efforts to address caste-based inequalities, as the contemporary scenario remains complex.

## Review of Relevant Theories

Analysing the development and survival of the caste system in Sri Lanka requires an investigation of various social stratification concepts that explain caste structures and identity formation.

## Social Stratification Theories

- **Functionalism**: According to this viewpoint, social stratification exists to maintain social stability through the assignment of competent individuals to critical positions. Functionalist researchers would state that caste system divisions supported social stability through their distribution of specific social functions (Dumont, 1980).

- **Marxism**: According to Marxist theory, economic exploitation creates social stratification because it enables ruling groups to suppress lower classes, thereby maintaining their resource superiority. From a Marxist perspective, the dominance of upper castes in economic power perpetuates strong social hierarchies, as they have traditionally controlled wealth and opportunities (Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

- **Weberian Perspectives**: Max Weber developed social stratification analysis by examining three separate dimensions: class, status and power. Weberian analysis examines the way these social elements interact when studying caste structures to identify opportunities for human resources and social advancement (Weber, 1978).

## Theories on Caste and Identity Formation

- **Constructivist Approaches**: These theories suggest that caste identities are socially constructed and evolve over time. Historical, political, and economic factors interact to shape caste consciousness and foster group identities (Dirks, 2001).

- **Subaltern Studies**: The framework verifies minority perspectives by analysing how oppressed populations, such as lower-caste groups, use resistance against dominant narratives to defend their identity (Guha, 1982).

- **Intersectionality**: The multiple social categories intersect, creating specific forms of oppression and privilege through their interactions with other factors, such as caste, class, gender, and ethnicity. According to the framework proposed by Crenshaw (1989), it becomes crucial to examine the multiple social identities within Sri Lankan society.

# THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Understanding caste evolution and its longevity in Sri Lanka becomes possible through the adoption of different social stratification theories.

## Functionalism

According to the Functionalist perspective, social structures serve as a means to maintain societal equilibrium by distributing specific duties and positions among social groups. The segregated labor system performs necessary operations that strengthen social unity. Sri Lankans were assigned to occupational divisions based on their caste status, which created social stability, according to Dumont (1980). The institutional roles started to lose their strictness after modernisation and economic diversification brought increased social role flexibility. The ability of social systems to change aligns with functionalist theory, as these systems maintain equilibrium by adapting to changing circumstances.

## Marxism

Economic dominance through resource control forms the foundation of Marxist theory in understanding the caste system, as higher castes maintain their economic power by subjecting lower castes to their rule. The caste system persists due to its role in maintaining economic disparities between social classes. The upper castes in Sri Lanka have historically controlled all land and economic opportunities, thereby maintaining their established socio-economic position (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). The economic changes through land reforms, together with emerging economic sectors, broke down traditional caste-based economic standings, thus enabling social rise among castes while restructuring their hierarchical system.

## Weberian Perspectives

Max Weber's multidimensional approach to social stratification, encompassing class, status, and power, offers insights into the complexity of the caste system. At the time in Sri Lanka, caste functioned as an essential factor that established economic position, along with social prestige and political power. The changing caste system is evident through modifications in its three dimensions, specifically occupational patterns and educational participation, which alter hierarchical positions between social groups (Weber, 1978).

## Constructivist Approaches

According to constructivist theories, caste identities emerge from social processes that change their form over time. The social positions of individuals and groups in Sri Lanka have evolved their caste identities through renegotiations due to colonial and post-colonial developments. The social constructiveness of caste becomes evident through this analysis, as historical and contemporary forces shape its development (Dirks, 2001).

## Subaltern Studies

The Subaltern Studies framework utilises marginal groups' ability to resist oppressive social arrangements by creating new definitions. Lower-caste communities in Sri Lanka have adopted two main strategies to challenge their subordinate status: engaging in economic growth opportunities and participating in political activism. Through their actions, subaltern voices change the caste system by asserting their identities and claiming their rights within the social fabric (Guha, 1982).

## Intersectionality

The theory of intersectionality reveals that the combination of effects between caste and class, as well as gender and ethnicity, creates specific patterns of social advantages and disadvantages. The overlap between caste and additional social characteristics in Sri Lanka determines which resources and opportunities people can access. Research requires attention to social intersections because such understanding enables us to understand the enduring nature of discrimination while recognizing differences in the pace of social change by various groups (Crenshaw, 1989).

# CONCLUSION

Several analytical approaches together provide a whole picture of how the caste system development persists in Sri Lanka. The frameworks demonstrate various elements of caste transformation as it encounters alterations due to socio-economic changes, political events, and cultural developments. The analysis adopts different perspectives, demonstrating the dual nature of caste while showing its historical establishment and ongoing social evolution.

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Due to its complexity, research into the Sri Lankan caste system necessitates multiple strategies, requiring careful interventions that adhere to ethical principles.

### Longitudinal Studies

A comprehensive understanding of the caste system's development requires studies which analyse different periods of caste organisation through historical examination. Academic research helps reveal both social advancement patterns, the effects of policy adjustments, and ongoing caste inequalities. A thorough examination of colonial-era policies, followed by post-colonial policies, enables us to understand how caste systems evolved systematically (Mandelbaum, 1970).

### Intervention Studies

Social equity requires strong social policies that help reduce caste-based discrimination and promote its development through assessment. Research through interventions enables researchers to evaluate whether affirmative programs, educational strategies, and community development plans effectively reduce caste-based inequalities. The recommendations of the Mandal Commission in India exemplified national policy efforts to create reservations for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in public services (Mandal Commission, 1980).

### Ethical Frameworks

The process of examining caste requires strong ethical guidelines when researchers develop associated policies. Research staff, together with policy makers, need to ensure that their work maintains ethical practices which avoid perpetuation of stereotypes in addition to preventing greater prejudice enhancement. Affected communities must be directly involved, while researchers gain consent and implement ethnically appropriate research methods. Caste discrimination advocacy work at Equality Labs exemplifies the importance of integrating ethical principles into both academic research and advocacy activities (Equality Labs, 2016).

# DISCUSSION

A constant evolution of the Sri Lankan caste system began in medieval times as indigenous beliefs were fused with religious doctrines, followed by advances stemming from colonial activities and societal economic shifts. Although the caste system lost some of its meaningful power in contemporary society, various remnants of this ancient tradition remain active. A thorough examination of research questions reveals the influence of historical, religious, political, and economic changes that molded the caste system and its development throughout different periods.

The Sri Lankan caste system originated from pre-Buddhist times, when the society was already divided into distinct classes. The Mahavamsa, an ancient document, states that society formed professional divisions based on both Sri Lankan tribal traditions and Indian cultural influences (Mahavamsa, Chapter VII).

The Sinhalese caste system, while bearing resemblances to the Indian *jāti* system, developed its own unique characteristics. Among the Sinhalese, the Govigama caste emerged as the dominant landowning group, holding political and economic power. Other castes, such as the Karava (seafarers), Salagama (cinnamon peelers), and Durava (toddy tappers), occupied distinct occupational niches (Rogers, 2004). In the Tamil community, the Vellalar caste dominated land ownership and agricultural professions, with lower castes assigned specific labor

roles, often tied to religious institutions (Pfaffenberger, 1982).

Religion played a crucial role in reinforcing caste structures. Despite its doctrinal rejection of caste, Buddhism did not eliminate caste-based distinctions. The Siam Nikaya, established in 1753, limited ordination to individuals from the Govigama caste, effectively institutionalizing caste within the Buddhist monastic order (Holt, 2011). Hinduism, particularly among Sri Lankan Tamils, further entrenched caste divisions, as Hindu temples assigned specific religious duties based on caste. The Vellalar caste maintained control over religious and economic structures, ensuring the continued subordination of lower castes (Pfaffenberger, 1982). Religious reform movements, such as those led by Anagarika Dharmapala and Arumuka Navalar, sought to challenge caste discrimination while simultaneously reinforcing caste identities within their respective religious traditions (Aloysius, 1998).

Colonial rule significantly shaped the caste system by reinforcing existing social hierarchies and introducing new economic and administrative structures. The Portuguese (1505–1658) integrated the caste system into their governance model, utilising the **Salagama** caste for cinnamon cultivation and favouring Catholic converts from dominant castes for administrative roles (Obeyesekere, 1967). The Dutch (1658–1796) formalised caste-based labor obligations through legal frameworks, such as the *Thesawalamai* law, which codified caste distinctions among Tamil communities (Dewasiri, 2008). The British (1796–1948) introduced economic reforms that disrupted traditional caste-based professions, replacing the feudal *rajakariya* (service tenure) system with wage labor and private land ownership. This allowed certain lower-caste individuals to ascend socially through education and employment in the colonial bureaucracy. However, upper castes, such as the Govigama and Radala, continued to dominate politics and administration (Rogers, 1994).

Post-independence reforms contributed to the gradual erosion of caste distinctions. The introduction of free education in 1943 allowed individuals from lower castes to access higher education and government employment, challenging traditional caste barriers (Jayaweera, 2010). Economic diversification, particularly the shift from an agrarian economy to industrial and service sectors, provided new opportunities for social mobility. However, caste remained an important factor in rural areas, where traditional occupations and social structures persisted (Jayawardena, 2000). Political parties, particularly in the mid-20th century, capitalized on caste identities to mobilise voter bases, reinforcing caste consciousness in electoral politics (Rogers, 2004).

Despite significant transformations, the caste continues to influence contemporary Sri Lankan society, particularly in politics, employment, and social mobility. In rural areas, caste continues to play a significant role in marriage alliances, social interactions, and access to resources. Although modern employment sectors prioritise merit over caste, informal networks often rely on caste affiliations to secure job opportunities and facilitate business transactions (Silva et al., 2009). Political parties working in rural constituencies use caste-based allegiances to attract electoral votes, which reinforces caste beliefs throughout political systems (Rogers, 2004). Through various Buddhist monastic orders, different beliefs about who can receive ordination persist because caste principles continue to reflect strongly within religious institutions (Holt, 2011).

Modernisation, along with globalisation, has operated through two parallel mechanisms to modify caste identities. The combination of urbanisation and economic liberalization has decreased caste significance in modern urban professional environments. The modern world has caused caste-based organizations to modify their operations while retaining their social group connections despite legal equality (Rogers, 2004). The experience of globalisation leads Sri Lankan diaspora members to maintain traditional caste-based interactions and marriage practices that they continued abroad, according to Jayawardena (2000). Diaspora communities preserve their caste system because socio-cultural elements maintain caste identities despite the impact of economic developments on caste structures.

The Sri Lankan caste system underwent fundamental transformations due to the influence of religious development, historical background, the colonial period, and modern economic dynamics. Modernisation, together with education and economic reforms, helps decrease the influence of caste power, although this social system still holds significant sway, mainly in rural regions and political contexts. Multiple factors, including economic background, political power, and religious affiliations, underscore the complex nature of the enduring caste system. Research must examine how caste relates to other social stratification systems, including ethnicity

and gender, to improve knowledge about its ongoing influence in current Sri Lankan society. The social structure requires ongoing steps toward inclusiveness and disparity remedies between castes to establish true equity.

# CONCLUSION

## Summary of Key Findings

The caste system in Sri Lanka has undergone significant changes throughout various historical periods, influenced by diverse religious, colonial, and socioeconomic factors, as well as cultural shifts. As early as a social system of occupation-based ranking, the caste system gained new layers from Buddhism, followed by monarchy governance and, subsequently, the advancing colonial powers. Although modernisation, education, and economic reforms have reduced the rigidity of caste-based distinctions, caste continues to influence social mobility, politics, and rural social structures in subtle ways.

Historically, the caste system in Sri Lanka developed as a hierarchical social structure with roots in indigenous tribal divisions and external influences, particularly from India. Ancient texts, such as the Mahavamsa, document the early formation of castes, which became more pronounced with the institutionalisation of occupations and social roles (Mahavamsa, Chapter VII). The Sinhalese caste hierarchy, led by the Govigama caste, and the Tamil caste system, dominated by the Vellalar, both structured society along occupational and religious lines (Rogers, 2004; Pfaffenberger, 1982). Buddhism, despite its teachings on equality, played a role in reinforcing caste through restrictions on monastic ordination, while Hinduism maintained rigid caste distinctions, particularly in Tamil society (Holt, 2011).

Colonial rule further shaped the caste system, both reinforcing and disrupting traditional hierarchies. The Portuguese maintained caste-based labor divisions, particularly in the cinnamon trade, while the Dutch formalised caste laws through legal frameworks such as the *Thesawalamai* (Dewasiri, 2008; Obeyesekere, 1967). The British, through land privatisation and the introduction of wage labor, weakened caste-based economic structures but simultaneously favored high-caste groups in colonial administration (Rogers, 1994). Post-independence reforms, such as the introduction of free education, facilitated social mobility and weakened caste-based privileges (Jayaweera, 2010).

Modern socio-economic changes have further altered the dynamics of the caste system. Urbanisation and economic diversification have reduced the significance of caste in professional settings, while globalisation has introduced new opportunities for social mobility (Jayawardena, 2000). However, caste-based identities persist in rural areas, religious institutions, and political structures, where social networks continue to be influenced by caste affiliations (Silva et al., 2009).

The modern Sri Lankan society demonstrates reduced caste boundaries, but caste traditions persist, influencing social behavior and available options throughout the country. The enduring presence of caste in specific regions underscores the need to advance inclusivity measures in combating previously established social inequalities. Future research should investigate how caste interacts with contemporary identity politics, as well as economic and global transformations, to establish its current influence on Sri Lankan society.

## Call to Action

The social and economic changes that occurred in Sri Lanka did not eliminate caste, so it continues to affect rural communities, as well as religious organisations and government structures. Modernisation creates better social movement opportunities, but caste-based disadvantages continue to affect education, employment opportunities and social network reach. The solution to these existing issues requires additional academic research, coupled with policy initiatives aimed at achieving social justice and inclusivity.

## Importance of Continued Academic Research on Caste in Sri Lanka

The study of Sri Lankan caste systems through academic research becomes essential to understand how past traditions impact current social organisation structures. Additional research about the effects of current

globalization and digitalisation, along with changing political systems on caste structures, remains vital since most studies have concentrated on caste in pre-colonial and colonial times. The comparison of Sri Lanka with neighboring South Asian nations serves to explain which social and political variables extend or reduce caste dynamics (Rogers, 2004).

The analysis of educational reforms and economic changes on caste mobility receives better support through longitudinal research strategies. Qualitative research on marginalised communities provides valuable information about real-life caste discrimination experiences and shows how prejudice against specific castes operates in everyday situations. A study combining anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science would provide a comprehensive overview of caste transformation in Sri Lanka (Jayawardena, 2000).

**Policy Recommendations for Caste-Based Inequalities**

Sri Lanka needs comprehensive nationwide policies that target education, work opportunities, legal systems, and community participation to reduce caste-based inequalities. Quality education accessibility must be the primary goal of educational reforms, accompanied by awareness campaigns to serve historically marginalised communities. Educational policies strengthened through dedicated efforts will make all forms of higher education available without conditions based on birth caste. The inclusion of caste education in school programs leads to a better understanding of social inequality and improves community acceptance practices. The implementation of endemic scholarships, combined with affirmative action programs for disadvantaged castes, helps students overcome systemic educational and professional hurdles (Jayaweera, 2010).

The workforce receives equal opportunities by employment and economic policies that aim to destroy caste-based divisions in occupations. Strengthened execution of anti-discrimination laws act as an important barrier which protects against favoritism-based career barriers that impact persons from underprivileged castes. Supportive initiatives for disadvantaged community entrepreneurship aim to boost economic independence, breaking down persistent patterns of poverty across multiple generations. Private companies need to take action against social barriers which dominate hiring procedures and career progression in industries where caste structures impact employment decisions (Silva et al., 2009).

Establishing boundaries against caste discrimination necessitates both legal and political frameworks, as well as systematic methods, to achieve equal representation in society. Enhancing the legal framework serves to protect individuals from the caste-based discrimination that occurs in social interactions and political environments. All segments of society need encouragement to participate in politics because this practice helps create policies that reflect diverse perspectives and reduce systemic inequalities. Observing caste biases in electoral affairs helps prevent the practice of caste-focused political methods that exacerbate social conflicts. A democratic process becomes more equitable when policies choose inclusiveness over the use of caste-based political strategies (Rogers, 1994).

Community groups and religious institutions hold the essential power to change social attitudes about caste practices. Religious institutions need to act actively toward abolishing all caste limitations that prevent religious participation for everybody. Communities that establish dialogue-based initiatives between castes create a pathway to destroy social boundaries that have existed for many years. Cultural initiatives that showcase Sri Lankan heritage beyond caste perspectives serve as crucial steps in building national unity as well as social cohesion (Holt, 2011). Sri Lanka can achieve its goal of creating social mobility through merit by implementing these interventions for multiple societal levels thus reducing caste-based inequalities to build an inclusive society.

# CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka must adopt comprehensive solutions to eliminate caste-based disparities, combining research efforts with educational activities, as well as protective legislation and economic system reforms. More social equity will emerge from Sri Lanka when the population adopts inclusive measures to combat preexisting biases that promote discrimination. Academics, along with civil society organisations and policymakers, need to collaborate to prevent blocking opportunities and development in the 21st century.

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