

**CASTE IN NORTHERN SRI LANKA AND BRITISH COLONIAL
ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICE IN THE MID 19TH CENTURY:
COMPROMISE AND EXPEDIENCY**

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The northern part of Sri Lanka (Ceylon) where most of the people are Tamils and Hindus form an ultra conservative section of the country. Despite their high level of education the overall system of a caste based, structurally and partly functional society, in North Sri Lanka was not affected very much nor underwent noteworthy change because of British colonial rule in the 19th century. Any change at all occurred only in the urban centres and was slight at village level. The social system in North Sri Lanka persisted with hardly any radical change over a long period and this social system had withstood unaffected any changes that a continuous imposition of European colonial rule since early 17th century could have brought about.

From the very beginning the first English Governor, Fredric North (1798-1805), had been not averse to accepting the caste system that was prevalent in North Ceylon as a mechanism of the political and economic organization. For example, the British continued to maintain, in the districts, the caste headman system in respect of *karaiyar* or fishermen and others. Moreover, Ordinance No. 10 of 1806 had legitimately decreed that obeisance be paid to those belonging to the higher castes, and in this way traditional customs and usages were upheld by the British¹. Later, in 1859, although the Colonial Secretary, Emerson Tennent, had complained of the horrors of caste, yet he concluded that the influence from the past experiments of the government suggested the propriety of abstaining from direct interference, and leaving the abatement of the evil to the operation of time and gradual growth of intelligence².

The only remarkable change, however, that administrative reform, wrought by the British in the 19th century, brought about in the caste system was that caste groups were no longer required to owe any direct obligations to the State. This development, nevertheless, had left relatively unaffected the secondary local level of the traditional structure. For instance, in North Ceylon, the village system of inter-caste relations continued to exist with its focus on the *Vellalas*, the high caste group.

Caste in North Ceylon was commonly associated with traditional occupations such as fishing or agriculture. Among the Tamils in the North, a person's caste status was finally and firmly determined by his birth. Caste stratified society formed an organic system with each particular caste and subcaste filling a distinctive functional role. It was a system of labour division from which competition among workers had been largely excluded; and fundamentally there was economic interdependence, stemming from the patterning of the division of labour.

Also, three caste *traits* were noticeably prevalent among the Tamils throughout the 19th century and even after - endogamy, hierarchy, and occupational specialisation - although some degree of flexibility later on gradually crept into these³ Leonard Woolf, who was an Assistant Government Agent in Jaffna in the early 20th century, noted that the existence of caste difference and caste consciousness was still strong even then. He realised "....one had to be careful about caste customs and demands to change them", and spoke of a caste dispute arising from the removal of the corpse of a higher caste person by a lower caste man⁴.

A survey of British rule, at least till the end of the third quarter of the 19th century, shows that no solution was ever found by the British for the dilemma of the English conscience in which a regard for local custom and tranquillity was counterpoised against a regard for a conflicting concept of social order and justice. Their resolution of this dilemma was not on an ideological basis, but in the pursuit of a policy calculated to preserve order, and hence principally to support the ancient hierarchy. Although, historically, the indirect effects of British occupation were great, the direct impact of colonial rule upon the caste system in North Ceylon was negligible and was not seriously disorganizing. In a sense the dominant caste was even strengthened and made use of by the British colonial power.

The stratification of Ceylonese society, according to a system of caste groups, and the prevalence of conventions governing the observance of such a system, however, still posed numerous problems to the British due to the existence of caste distinctions; but at the same time to break up traditional practices was no easy task.

P.A. Dyke, (1829-1867), the Government Agent of Northern Ceylon, and earlier Collector of Jaffna, found the problems, he confronted as an administrator, originating from the caste system so formidable and complex since he administered both the Jaffna and the Vanni Tamil as well as the Sinhalese Vanni and Nuwarakalaviya areas which lay within the Northern province during the mid nineteenth century. Apart from the variations within the caste patterns among the Tamil and Sinhalese inhabitants, there were also peculiarities associated with the caste system prevailing among the Vanni and Mannar Tamil peoples which made them distinct from the Sinhalese of this region⁵.

Generally, however, taboos on food and water were stronger among the Tamils since Hinduism had lent a certain amount of religious sanction to caste distinction and discrimination. Moreover, peculiarities, such as the existence of a subdivision in the *Vellala* higher caste, the *madeipaliyar*, was found in Jaffna alone. Those who claimed to belong to this subdivision traced their descent from the Indian *kshatriyas*. All this complicated caste among the Tamils further and made the British Government Agent's task even more difficult⁶.

In 1830, the higher caste folk in the Jaffna peninsula objected to the use of ornaments, such as ear rings by women, belonging to what they deemed the lower

Nalava caste⁷. Furthermore, the local village officials had even ordered the members of the *Nalava* caste to abandon the use of such ornaments, and had fined those who violated customary practice. It was alleged that the privilege of wearing ear rings did not appertain to those from the *Nalava* caste: the *Nalavas* were landless labourers who had formerly been chattel slaves. But a government, which believed in egalitarianism, could condone no such caste distinctions and could not look on indifferently. Therefore, the government pardoned those who had been penalised; but, also being wary in interfering with conventional customs, merely advised the Government Agent's subordinate officials not to rake up such problems in the future.

Again, in another instance, a *maniagar* or superior headman had extorted the free services of the *Timilars* a group of low caste fisher folk, for conveying palmyrah timber to be used in the construction of a wharf for shipping elephants for export⁸. Members of this depressed caste group had protested against the imposition; but the *maniagar* pleaded that it was customary to requisition the services of the members of this caste gratuitously for the performance of such duties although he had contravened the orders of the British administration. The Collector of the district, P.A. Dyke, ordered the *maniagar* to pay the wages due to the *Timilar* labourers out of his own emoluments and thus redressed a wrong⁹.

When the Colebrooke - Cameron Commission, appointed by the Colonial Office to report on reforms due in Ceylon, arrived the Collectors of the districts in the island were asked in September 1830 to furnish a statement of the persons who were liable, either because of custom or the conditions under which they enjoyed land tenurial rights, to perform gratuitous services of any description¹⁰. Consequent to a decision of this Commission to abolish the requisitioning of people for performing free services, as a primary step, the Collector of the Jaffna district decided to abandon the practice of getting circuit dwellings prepared for him or the members of his establishment gratuitously even if they had been doing so because they had belonged to a particular caste group which had been obliged to render such services in the past¹¹.

Yet, the caste system was such an integral and persistent part of Tamil society that in 1831 the higher caste headmen in the North of the island petitioned to the Collector of Jaffna that there was a lack of the outward respect that had been customarily paid to them from those belonging to the inferior castes. Various forms of customary behaviour in a caste stratified society served to symbolize the rank differences between lower and higher caste groups. But, P.A. Dyke who was the Collector then, however, could not entertain such a representation because the British could afford no recognition whatsoever to caste distinctions. Nevertheless, since the headmen were so very necessary as administrative auxiliaries, he had no alternative but to direct them to make their representations to the Governor himself¹². The machinery of British government then was and continued to be a large number of headmen; village headmen in a village and superior or chief headmen in larger areas¹³.

Headmen formed an indispensable agency of the administration and since they were utilised in the management of the province due deference had to be paid to them. In 1844, the Government Agent himself observed that the habits and tone of feeling of many of the superior headman had altered very much during the past years: they would no longer seat themselves on the floor of the verandah of the kachcheri as they had done earlier since they considered it demeaning to do so¹⁴. Therefore, he wanted to provide them with more suitable accommodation. A separate well was also constructed for their use as they would not drink water from other sources, to which there was indiscriminate access and which they felt was hence polluted. The Government Agent realized that some regard had to be extended to accommodate their demands which was fair in view of their position. Furthermore, Government Agent Dyke, supported their demand for distinctive and special treatment stating that it had been the constant desire of the government to raise the self-respect of these public servants¹⁵. Hence, he could not, too strictly and suddenly, eradicate some past practices even though they had stemmed from an adherence to the system of caste. As an administrative head the Agent had to be pragmatic and politic in tackling problems connected with the caste system; and this was indeed difficult.

Therefore, though theoretically the British administration paid no heed to distinctions in caste or religion their practical attitude towards social questions connected to these were not explicitly clear. When in 1835 the population of the Northern province had been declared to be 252,108, the Colonial Secretary had wanted the population returns for 1837 to be furnished classifying inhabitants according to caste and religion; and even headmen were to be classified according to their rank and religion. But by March 1845 there was a change of attitude, and the government directed that the mention of caste should be expunged in any public proceedings since it was declared to be inconsistent with their avowed policy. Being a scrupulous public official the Government Agent of the North thereafter wanted vaccinators not to refer to caste in their statement of returns¹⁶.

However, in July 1847 the Government Agent adverted again to this question¹⁷. As fiscal of the province he had to furnish returns in a prescribed form to the Supreme Court at its northern sessions and to make up this schedule he had to obtain from magistrates information about the caste of the parties, who had been noticed to appear before court. To Government Agent Dyke, this requirement was quite contrary to the instructions of March 1845, and untenable. It was the only instance where reference to, or a record of caste, was being made other than in any public office and he wanted the practice abandoned.

Often complaints of oppression by those from higher caste groups were lodged by members belonging to inferior castes. In March 1849, the Government received a petition from the blacksmiths of Puloly in Point Pedro and from some others belonging to lower castes enumerating grievances suffered by them arising from prevailing repressive caste practices. The Government Agent was directed to

inquire and settle the problem. Among other grievances was one which stated that the headman who hailed from the higher caste had generally ignored their representations about injustices.

Dyke replied to the Colonial Secretary, "... considering the tenor of the general instructions of Govt. to me to studiously avoid all public recognition of caste can it I think be intended that I should enter into an inquiry as to caste dispute in which this petition seems to have originated". He naturally wished to avoid inquiring into the petition considering caste a septic matter and preferred to be like an ostrich blind to realities around.

But the Government Agent too had received similar sorts of complaints from washermen and barbers that members belonging to the higher castes had obstructed them in the performance of their occupations. When Government Agent Dyke was, however, convinced that such an unjust action had indeed been committed he warned the local headmen that they had failed to discharge their duties properly by tolerating such injustice. Even in the petition from the blacksmiths the main complaint from the depressed people had been that the *Vellalas* (the higher caste folk) were acting unfairly towards them since they had no headmen of their own caste to whom they could complain and who would be more sympathetic towards them whenever they were harassed.

Within Jaffna district the maintenance of caste divisions and a strict adherence to them remained strong in spite of the introduction of western egalitarian ideas. Clashes between those belonging to the different caste groups occurred time and again, and generally such disputes were referred to the courts for settlement. In 1862, when violence between factions from different caste groups, erupted in Chavakachcheri, the law courts were allowed to settle the conflict while the administration kept aloof.

Caste disputes were considered to be justiciable under British law and the government which was the executive preferred to play the role of an impartial umpire when there arose a dispute over the burial of the dead between two factions of Roman Catholics in the island of Kayts off the Jaffna peninsula. The Government Agent washed his hands off the dispute stating that there was "no wish on the part of government to interfere with native customs ..." Parties involved in the conflict were to seek judicial redress.¹⁸

This sort of solution to caste conflicts, however, proved to be no permanent remedy to the problems and conflicts that arose out of caste disputes. Even in his report for 1862, Government Agent Dyke still complained of the frequent disturbances that arose from caste and class disputes,¹⁹ and three such cases cropped up in May 1863 alone.²⁰

A carpenter had made arrangements to celebrate his daughter's wedding and decorated a *pandal* (shed) for a ceremony with white cloth. Some of the inhabitants

of the village, belonging to a superior caste group, tried to restrain forcibly the carpenter from using this form of decoration and upset the celebrations, although the headman had tried unsuccessfully to prevent them. Finally, the assistant agent himself had to be personally present to ensure that the carpenter could proceed with the ceremonies without being disturbed by mischief makers from the superior caste group.

Although caste was never officially recognised by the British, and according to their laws all men were equal, in their actual administration, however, they were compelled to compromise and tolerate its existence if they desired to rule peacefully. For example after completing the erection of a *pandal* (shed), permission according to a prescribed form had to be obtained from the *Mudaliyar* (superior headman) and the other headmen of the district before a person belonging to the caste of washermen could decorate the structure with white cloth. The unqualified right to erect and decorate a *pandal* with white cloth was granted only to those of a particular rank and social status in Tamil society; the right to erect a *pandal* and decorate it with white cloth was considered to be the special privilege of the upper elite, the *Vellalas*²¹.

In Government Agent Dyke's opinion caste disputes had not engaged the serious concern of the magistrates, who had hence been generally very lenient. "I think some examples of severe punishment are required to repress this kind of lawlessness and to protect those who used to be considered of low caste and class in the enjoyment of the personal liberty now allowed by the laws to all alike", commented Dyke advocating the employment of deterrent punitive measures to eradicate caste based offences. In fact, in the earlier years as in the 1820's, the courts had even upheld that the higher caste *Vellala* people were entitled to the privileges that they had customarily and according to usage enjoyed²²: but now the Government Agent not only enjoined a reversal of that attitude but also a positive assertion of the government's indifference to caste.

Yet, nothing remarkable happened and the practice of observing caste differences continued among the Tamils. Caste was so deeply ingrained in the social system that it was hardly possible to make any noteworthy change in the attitudes of the people towards it. For instance, in 1864, all the influential people in the North including the headmen, objected to the selection of a notary as he did not hail from the upper caste group.²³ Commenting on this reaction, the Government Agent drew attention again to the notice taken by the government on his representations regarding the disorders arising out of caste disputes within the Jaffna district. Once he had even pointed out to a case of gross oppression of a low caste man by persons of a higher caste group in Nallur. It was because of such a context in the North that the Government Agent had selected the notary for Nallur ignoring the caste group to which he belonged.

However, he saw that there was no use in explaining his stance and felt that right action alone was essential and was warranted to deal with a matter of this sort.

Hence the Government Agent justified his selection stating that "From my knowledge of their character I am aware that the Jaffna people in judging of any measure look only to the plain and palpable results and that they pay little if any attention to elaborate explanation of reasons and motives"²⁴. Government Agent Dyke felt that the ends attained by the means he had employed alone justified the means.

When a petition was later presented against the selection of this notary, since it offended caste prejudices, the Government Agent elaborated on his explanation. Each candidate had been interviewed and notes of the interview were maintained. Afterwards, the headmen were consulted; and lastly the people who were assembled. This procedure had been followed and it was similar to that observed for selecting headmen - the Government Agent meets the applicants and the people on an appointed day before making a selection. He had not, therefore, anticipated that the selection would offend caste feelings, nor did he know that the candidate was a goldsmith until he was so informed by the applicant himself. No doubt his choice had aroused a strong feeling of aversion among many influential persons who had favoured the observance of distinctions based on caste; but, since the government minute of 1845 forbade any mention or official recognition of caste in public official proceedings, the selection of the Government Agent was correct.

Yet, despite this sort of legal and official position, caste prejudice remained entrenched among the people. Legislation nor fair administration could do little even to mitigate the treatment meted out to those belonging to the inferior caste groups by those in the higher caste groups. Persons, born into the subordinate caste groups, had to reconcile themselves to the lowly position in society ascribed to them among the Tamils in the North.

A major obstacle to the endeavours of the Christian missionaries, who paid no recognition to caste in spreading their faith and social values was the observance of caste classification and discrimination among the Tamils even as late as in the 1850's - so many years after the missionary had commenced his labours in North Ceylon. But the economic advantages of gaining education weighed heavier with the Tamils and hence some sought English education in missionary institutions ignoring the taboos of caste.²⁵

Yet even the missionaries did not find their task easy. Owing to opposition from the higher caste group once a student of the washerman's caste had to be removed from the Wesleyan Methodist school at Vannarpoonai in Jaffna town. Again, in 1847, when a Wesleyan School admitted a student of the *Nalava* caste, opposition to it was strong and the higher caste students withdrew themselves from school.²⁶

The Christian missionaries, however, expected that through the instrumentality of their schools and churches they could alleviate the evils of the pernicious caste system among the Tamils of North Ceylon.²⁷ Although schools brought in contact

with one another children of varying castes, which in itself was a remarkable social change; caste prejudices, nevertheless lingered as strongly as ever among the Tamils. The idea that association with members belonging to a lower caste "polluted" those from a higher caste remained.

Moreover, anyone educated in a Christian school or worse still converted to one of the newer religious sects often came to be suspected of belonging to an inferior caste group. Thus traditional social behaviour and customary thinking in regard to caste lingered as ever before and hardly changed. The action of the English administrator and the Christian missionary really made only a slight dent in a practice that was nurtured and never abandoned, and at times as a reaction to missionary activity even fostered by a society among whom observance of caste division was so deeply and ineradicably entrenched. It was too deep-rooted an institution that was not easily removable and persisted as a vital element in the organization of Tamil society well beyond and into the 20th century. Christianity could not exorcise caste among the Tamils in the North.

Yet, another cause accounted for the difficulty in exterminating the system of caste among the Tamils of North Ceylon. Headmen supported the maintenance of caste distinctions from motives of self interest as well as because of the prejudice they themselves harboured. All attempts on the part of the inferior castes to improve their lot in life were hence resisted and even countered.

But between the caste system in Ceylon and in India there were noteworthy differences. Among the Tamils of Ceylon the caste divisions were different and cast distinction even in North Ceylon was certainly less obtrusive than in India.²⁸ The Indian caste system was found to be significantly modified among the Tamils of the Jaffna peninsula. The social status allocated to Brahmins and other ritual twice born groups in India was not seen in Jaffna. It was really the *Vellalas*, who were overlords and managers of the Hindu temples, and Brahmins became their paid employees. This was clearly shown in 1851 when the manager of the principal Hindu temple at Nallur refuted the claims of certain Brahmins to be appointed as priests; and government concurred with him in allowing the manager the independence to choose the priests. The dominant caste among the Tamils, the *Vellalas*, were not ritually speaking twice born at all. Moreover, although the ideology of pollution remained intense, endogamy at the subcaste level was an idea rather than the fact and this left room for some degree of intercaste mobility; caste distinction was less rigid.²⁹

Within the Vanni region, south of Jaffna peninsula but within the domain of the government Agent of the Northern province, the majority of the population were also Tamils. Nearly half of the Tamil inhabitants were by caste *Vellalas* and next in order came the *Karaiyar* or fisher folk, *Nalavas*, *Pallas* and *Chanars* and others belonging to different caste groups.

In 1856, Oswald Brodie, the assistant agent made an interesting observation in regard to caste in the Vanni district; "There is one (caste) here not general over the Island, and which is superior to that which is elsewhere considered the highest, - I mean the Vanni caste" "They are very numerous here, and very troublesome, as they will not accept any inferior appointments, and for the most part think it quite beneath their dignity to educate themselves. As their claim to fill all the high offices has been rejected, they now frequently intermarry with *Vellalas*, and will in all probability soon be incorporated with that caste."³⁰ Obviously, Brodie was referring to a sub group confined to his area and certainly not to a distinctive caste. However, it is a remarkable variation, peculiar and perhaps unique to the social structure in the Vanni in North Ceylon. Similar confusion about caste prevailed among the early British alien and foreign administration: they believed that there was a distinctive group called the "Mudiyanases" who were the *creme de la creme* of the Sinhalese higher castes and perceived them to comprise a caste or sub caste division.

Actually the *Vanni* "caste" or *Vannihuru* whether it be in the Vanni district or in the Nuwarakalaviya district of the Northern province, comprised a grade within a single caste and was in the nature of a social class rather than a caste. And this grade itself had surfaced because the members belonging to the *Vellala* caste group had existed constantly in competition, one against the other.³¹

The mass of the people in Nuwarakalaviya district, south of the Jaffna peninsula and a part of the Northern province then, were Sinhalese; and in their manners, feelings and appearance they were Kandyan Sinhalese. All the caste groups commonly found within the former Kandyan kingdom were found in Nuwarakalaviya, with one or two other groups peculiar to the area. Furthermore, whether a man belonged by his caste to the occupational group of a blacksmith, potter or washerman, he was also a cultivator or owned land. None was solely dependent on the pursuit of one's crafts alone for one's livelihood. The Kandyan Sinhalese of this area were therefore primarily cultivators; occupations like shopkeeping and trade were discharged by migrant settlers - the low country Sinhalese, and the Tamils or the Moors, who were ubiquitous.³²

Caste was crucial in the social structure of Nuwarakalaviya and its influence was quite obvious: the district itself was largely a collection of villages, one differing from the other according to caste. Generally, district administrators were partial towards the *goigama* (equivalent to the Tamil *Vellala*), the high caste, and treated them as the traditional ruling elite. But there also prevailed the practice of appointing headmen over each caste from their ranks; the British administrators, concerned with administrative expediency, seemed to have favoured this practice even if avowed policy prevented them from pursuing it always.³³

In Nuwarakalaviya, the highest caste group, according to the esteem paid by local inhabitants, were called the *vannihuru*. Those who were from this peculiar group were even reckoned to be superior to those belonging to the highest caste - *Vellala* - elsewhere. Actually, however, the *vannihurus* did not constitute a caste

group; they were socially, and perhaps economically also, the highest elite among the *vellalas: primus inter pares*.

In the Kandyan hierarchy here, high officials had all hailed from the *vannihuru* class. When Brodie, the assistant agent, inquired from the *Nikawewa ratemahatmaya* (chief headman) in 1851 about this unique *vanni* class, he was informed that, "The people respect the *vanniyas* more than the *Vellalas*;"³⁴ This answer seemed to confirm that there was a small distinguished class at the top of the *Vellala* stratum.

If the code of behaviour relevant to the accepted caste divisions in Nuwarakalaviya was transgressed, it was deemed to be an offence punishable by a curious custom of boycott: then neighbours refused to associate with the offender and washermen refused to serve the culprit. Such an interdict could only be removed by the decision of a *ratasabbawa* (Council) presided over by the *ratemahatmaya*.

Offenders who contravened customary norms were penalised according to tradition, and thus distinctions within the society were strictly observed³⁵. In 1838 according to assistant agent Lieutenant Mylius in Nuwarakalaviya a young woman had been kept for ten days in the stocks, because she had wanted to live with a man from a different family though not from a different caste; so strict were customs.

The British provincial administrator in North Sri Lanka in the mid 19th century had to confront a complex and complicated problem in caste and caste practices both in Tamil Hindu and Sinhalese Buddhist society. Compelled by reality and circumstances, the colonial government agent or his assistant had to compromise on and off eschewing prescribed practice, and because it was politic and expedient to do so. British practice towards caste in northern Sri Lanka hence was ambivalent; neither precise nor constant or consistent.

The basic tenet of the British Raj apparently was to interfere least with the customs and traditions of the people, and the people for their part seem to have regarded the alien Government more as a source of security and a guarantor of freedom for each individual with his where withal, however, to pursue his individual vocation. And, moreover, all around there appears to have been prevalent a spiritual outlook which tempered the rigours of the caste system and leavened social life with humaneness. Caste consciousness could be a great evil; but in those days people had learned to accept status in life without much resentment. It was not merely fatalism; in some degree at least it was rooted in a spirituality one cannot pin down in precise words.

Caste consciousness was so embedded in the mores of the Tamil people and proved to be a formidable obstacle to social reform in 19th century northern Sri Lanka. A radical change in the opinions of society was hence needed before any change in the attitude of the people towards caste could be wrought. Such a change

in the climate of 19th century opinion, especially in North Sri Lanka, came very slowly and slightly, if it came at all.

Moreover, neither the British administrators nor did their auxiliaries in social change, the missionaries, exhibit a clear policy on caste apart from espousing a sense of vague egalitarianism³⁶. Since caste was an obstacle to social reform, administrators and missionaries were opposed to it but they remained helplessly handicapped without a proper knowledge of the caste system itself. However, both the administrators and the European missionaries together were generally convinced that caste was obnoxious and intolerable and were opposed to recognition of caste distinctions in principle. But in north Sri Lanka, among the Tamil community, there was no marked morally or socially repugnant practice such as untouchability in neighbouring India.

Consequently, the British administration felt no moral compulsion to adopt any precise positive action against the practice of caste in north Sri Lanka. Caste itself appeared to be so unclear, nebulous and amorphous to the alien administrator, and he hence could not enunciate a precise or deliberate policy towards it.

Also, as the Tamil people in the north were so steeped in caste prejudice, the British administrators and even missionaries were apprehensive that impetuous or precipitate action in regard to caste practices could provoke unrest among the Tamils. Consequently, the British officials postponed any action on caste issues and acted rather tardily in regard to them. They preferred to deal with the social evil indirectly rather than frontally. As a result, administrators as well as missionaries treated each caste problem specifically instead of prescribing general principles of universal action to deal with the social scourge of caste.

Since a person's caste was determined by birth and the practice of endogamy prevailed so strongly coupled with definite restrictions on commensality between those of different castes and a conception of pollution, caste practices among the Tamils of North Sri Lanka were clearly reprehensible. Taboos on food and water were sharper and severer among the Tamils where Hinduism was the dominant religion. Observance of caste distinction was particularly rigid among Tamils who forcefully followed the hierarchical arrangements of castes along with diverse forms of traditional and customary behaviour symbolising differences of rank. Among the Tamil Hindus of the North caste exclusiveness seemed to be particularly pronounced.

As a result, in dealing with the social evil of caste in North Sri Lanka administrators and even missionaries faced a dilemma. In fact, the impediment to missionary enterprise was strongest among the Tamils in the north of the island³⁷. Therefore, missionary enterprise though relatively strong and widespread in the Jaffna peninsula, and in neighbouring areas, could not alleviate so much the evils of caste practices either through conversion or education, which was so welcomed by the Tamils. Attacks on caste could alienate converts but acceptance of it meant

to the missionaries a betrayal of their fundamental principles and their basic tenet of egalitarianism. Placed in such a predicament the missionaries, like the government, chose to attack caste tentatively and cautiously.

So strong were caste prejudices among Tamils of the North that bringing together children of different castes within a school or persons of diverse caste within a church was in itself a social revolution, that could well have triggered off deleterious consequences to the progress of education or religion. Even teachers had to be selected from those of the higher castes, if children were to be attracted to the Christian mission schools.³⁸ In spite of the demand for education in North Sri Lanka opposition arose even from students in schools when caste distinctions were ignored or when the traditional taboos on food and water were disregarded. Therefore, even among the missions, there was no uniform policy outlawing caste habits or practices; the Wesleyans tolerated the use of caste marks on the foreheads of students which was disallowed by the American missions³⁹. In this type of atmosphere among the Tamil Hindus of the North who believed strongly that association with members of a lower caste could pollute those of a higher caste, the missionaries too were, like the administrators, compelled to compromise and be expedient in their attitude to caste which thereby became consequently an equivocal attitude.

However, in the 19th century, the administrators and the missionaries alike did take certain positive steps to lessen the harsh characteristics of the social evil of caste. The system of *rajakariya* or conscription of forced labour rigidly on caste based distinctions was abolished in 1833⁴⁰. But among Tamils this system was not in vogue in North Sri Lanka and hence the salutary abolition of *rajakariya* was in effect not meaningful to them in practice. But the abolition, in 1843, of the practice of compiling lists of jurors taking into reckoning caste distinctions officially pronounced islandwide the government's decision not to recognise such distinctions. Furthermore, the Charter of Justice, proclaimed in 1833, established a uniform judicial system in the island applicable to all races and recognized all as equal before the law⁴¹. This measure did manifest the government's intention to ignore caste and it did help at least legally to erode the caste system somewhat. But the effects this change wrought were not evident dramatically or immediately. Even if legally people were declared to be equal, irrespective of their castes by this measure, in practice the work of the missionary preaching equality before God helped more in softening, albeit again to a limited extent, the rigours of caste practices among the Tamils of North Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, neither education which could provide upward social mobility nor conversion which could erase caste distinction did not in practice, change so much the pervasive prevalence of caste prejudice among Tamil Hindus.

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12. SLNA - 20/11 - 54 - Collector's Diaries, entry of 27 June 1931.
13. For the importance of headmen in administration see Woolf, Leonard, *Growing* (London, 1961) p. 56.
14. SLNA - 8/133 - No. 355, Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 10 December 1844.
15. *Ibid.*

16. SLNA - Ceylon Govt. Circular of 5 March 1845 in *Heads of the Minutes, Circular Letters & General Rules etc* (Ceylon, 1849); and also SLNA - 6/2070B - No. 141 Govt. Agent to Colonial Secretary, 18 July 1850.
17. SLNA - 6/1917B - No. 213 Govt. Agent to Colonial Secretary, 20 July 1847.
18. SLNA - 6/2097 - No. 250 Govt. Agent to Colonial Secretary 1 October 1851; also SLNA - 20/999 - 267 - No. 190 Colonial Secretary to Government Agent, 20 November 1852; SLNA - 20/672 -283 - No. 40 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 16 February 1860.
19. SLNA - 20/1454 - 421 - No. 293 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary 6 September 1862.
20. SLNA - 20/1703 - 423 - No. 132 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 16 May 1863; also SLNA - 20/779 - 292 - No. 278 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary 2 December 1865.
21. For a discussion of special privileges and caste see Leach , E.R. (ed.) *op.cit.*, p. 7.
22. See Arumainayagam, K. "Caste in Jaffna in the 19th century" *op.cit.*, p. 19.
23. *Ibid.*
24. SLNA - 20/786 - 428 - No. 36 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary, 28 January 1864.
25. Ludowyk, E.F.C., *The Modern History of Ceylon* (London, 1966) p. 187, 188, 191.
26. See Thananjayarajasingham, S. *The Educational Activities of Arumuga Navalar* (Colombo, 1974) p. 9 - 10; also see for the missionary initiative, Arumainayagam, K. 'Caste in Jaffna in the 19th century' in (ed.) Amarasingham, S.P. *Tribune* Vol. 20, No. 51, May 29, 1976 (Colombo) p. 19 - 21.
27. For expansion of Christian activity in early years see ed. Kwiat, Joseph J., *History of American Missions to the heathens from their commencement to the present time* (Minnesota, 1970) pp. 187 - 297.
28. Gordon Cumming, C.F. *Two Happy Years in Ceylon*, Vol. 1 (London, MDCCCXCIT), p. 119.
29. Leach, E.R. (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 3; See SLNA - 6/1940B No. 352 Government Agent to Colonial Secretary 16 December 1848; SLNA - 6/2097 - No. 319 Government Agent to Col. Secy. 27 December 1851; and SLNA - 20/920 - 261 No. 29 Col. Secy to Govt. Agent, 16 February '1852.

30. Leach, E.R. (ed.) *op. cit.* p.3
31. Quoted from Brodie's account in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Ceylon Branch)* 1856 in Lewis, J.P. *Manual of the Vanni Districts (Vavuniya and Mullaitivu) of the Northern Province, Ceylon* (Colombo, 1895), p. 101 & fn.
32. See Ievers, R.W. *Manual of the North Central Province, Ceylon*, (Colombo, 1859) p. 89.
33. For a discussion see Wickremeratne, L. Ananda *The Genesis of an Orientalist : Thomas William Rhys Davids in Sri Lanka* (Delhi, 1984) pp. 92 - 93.
34. Quoted from Brodie's diary, July 1851 - *Ibid.* p. 92
35. *Ibid.*
36. For a good discussion see De Silva, K.M. *Social Policy and Missionary Organizations in Ceylon 1840 - 1855*, (Royal Commonwealth Society, London 1965) pp 186 - 205.
37. See *Ibid* p. 188: also for earlier accounts, Anon. *A brief sketch of the American Ceylon Mission* (Jaffna, 1849) and other references quoted by De Silva, K.M. Tennent, Sir James Emerson. *Christianity in Ceylon* (London, 1850)
38. *Ibid* p. 190
39. *Ibid*
40. *Ibid* p. 191
41. See for a discussion *ibid* also Mendis, G.C. *The Colebrooke - Cameron Papers*, 2 Vols (Oxford, 1957), Introduction : and Digby, W. *Forty years of official and unofficial life in an Oriental Crown Colony, The Life of Sir Richard F. Morgan*, 2 Vols (London and Madras, 1879).