

A STUDY ON
UNIQUE CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS
OF THE 'KINNARA' COMMUNITY IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

In the Sri Lankan social organization, the 'Kinnara' people represents one of the bottom most strata in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy. 'Rodi' and 'Kinnara', two main castes in the inferior layers of the subordinate caste order, can be identified as tribes as well as being castes. Even though they bore specified caste duties in the Sri Lankan caste order, the tribal features are clearly visible among them. In the Sri Lankan research literature, this research carries the objective of identifying the cultural features which had been unique to Kinnara community and their transformation in the modern times. Kinnara people had been identified as a tribe by M.D. Raghavan through an anthropological research. The reason behind was the sociocultural features which they were carrying even in the 1950s as 'Kinnara' was an isolated community at that period of time. But today, a rapid dissociation from those unique cultural features and a swift assimilation into the main society can be well observed. Therefore the research problem in this research is "What are the modern changes

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that can be seen among the Kinnara people?” Case study method was used to identify the current situation of the community. A case study is an in-depth examination of a unit selected. Observations and interviews were used as methods of data collection. Presently, Kinnara people are spread out in the Central, Sabaragamuwa, North-Western and Western provinces. Even if it's dispersed in various parts of the country, a considerable population still lives in the hill country. After taking that into consideration, Central province was used as the field of research. Within the Sinhalese caste structure, weaving mats was the traditional caste occupation of the Kinnara people. Historically, their men were deprived of wearing headgears and for women covering the upper body was forbidden. That was because of the stratum they held at the bottom of the caste system. Other than to weaving mats, Kinnara people were also involved in agriculture. It is known that they cultivated paddy and millet. But the contemporary Kinnara people do not show any distinctive cultural characteristics. It's fact that a majority of them are engaged in casual labour for their living. They have disengaged from the traditional dress codes and presently clothe-in accordance to the transformation. Changing of the hereditary occupational surnames in to surnames used by the upper castes also signifies the numerous modern shifts ongoing within the Kinnara people.

Introduction

In the Sri Lankan social organization, the 'Kinnara' people represents one of the bottom most strata in the Sinhalese caste hierarchy. 'Rodi' and 'Kinnara', two main castes in the inferior layers of the subordinate caste order, can be identified as tribes as well as being castes. Even though they bore specified caste duties in the Sri Lankan caste order, the tribal features are clearly visible among them. In the Sri Lankan research literature, this research carries the objective of identifying the cultural features which had been unique to Kinnara community and their transformation in the modern times.

Despite of the fact that the genesis of the Sri Lankan caste system is hidden beneath the treasures of history, it's clear that it has its origins in India, similar to the Sri Lankan ethnic and cultural characteristics (Silva, 1996/97, p164). The caste in the Indian caste system carries a division between Varna and Jati, is widely spread and inherent to the Indian social structure. The entire hindu society is divided into the four 'Varna's named Brahmana, Kshathriya, Vaishya and Shudra and a wide array of sub castes can be identified within the Indian society (Dube, 1990, p47-49). But such dispersion can't be observed in the Sinhalese caste system. When considering the caste system of the Sinhalese society, books like Neethi Nighanduwa has mentioned about 18 castes except the Govigama caste (Ranasinghe, 2009, p9).

Sinhalese caste hierarchy accommodates castes such as Govi, Karawa, Salagama, Wahumpura, Vishwa, Bathgama, Rajaka, Kinnara and Rodi and the Kinnara people occupies a place at the bottom. Various sociological researchers who have studied the caste system in different eras had identified that Rodi and Kinnara represents the castes at the nadir. Despite that, Rodi people have always tried to express their superiority than the Kinnara people. Apart from the study conducted by Sepala Samarasekara about the Kinnara community in the mid 1990s, the paramount anthropological study about the Kinnara people has done by M.D. Raghavan. In his article 'The Kinnaraya - the tribe of mat weavers' published in the magazine *Spolia Zeylanica* in 1951, Raghavan identifies them as a primitive tribe. Citations about the Kinnara people can be seen in the colonial literature. European writers such as John Davy, Robert Knox and James Cordiner had named them as 'mat weavers'.

The bottom-most layer of the Sinhalese caste system is the Rodi and the Kinnara (Ryan, 1993, p217-221). Kinnara caste is not considered as untouchables like Rodi. As the Rodi people were duty-bound to supply leather cords to the King's castle, Kinnara caste were obligated to supply mats (Ranasinghe, 2009, p43). The definition of Kinnara people by Nandadewa Wijesekara in his work 'Lanka Janathava' (People of Lanka) is as follows. "A community named Kinnara, who weave dumbara mats are living in the villages closer to Ududumbara and Kurunegala. There are a few families of them who are sparsely located. Even though slight similarities to Veddahs can be observed, they are a unique kind. These people, who are short but strongly built and with long hair, being considered as a low caste thereby lives a poverty-stricken, miserable life. It's a mystery that how they preserved such an exquisite, disciplined craft while being put into such ignominy (Wijesekara, 1949, p41-42). But there's no mystery here to be solved. The social obligation in compliance with the prevailing caste system was to weave mats.

A compilation of the studies about the minor communities hidden beneath the major communal layers, Jana Vividhathvaya (Diversity of communities) describes Kinnara people in the following manner. Dumbara mat craft is a heritage of the Kinnara clan. But they are lowly privileged in the Sinhalese caste system. Since the Kandyan dynasty, various castes were attached to the state agencies and the duty of the Kinnara community was to supply cordage, mats, chamara (tufts of thread), whip-cords and other decorative items to the royal treasury (Weeraratne, 2007, p85). There is a number of folklore in the Sri Lankan society about the genesis of the Kinnara community which differs geographically. One of them is as follows. The King Bhatthiya or Bhatthiyathissa who was the ruler in the period 164-193 A.D. at the kingdom of Anuradhapura, had to leave for a battle against an enemy force. The king thought that it's too dangerous to leave his pregnant queen consort alone and took her to the battle front. The King lost the battle and managed to escape with the queen. The queen got neared childbirth, had labor pains on the way running and the royal couple spent the night in a smithy nearby. That night the queen gave birth to a child while being resting herself on to an anvil. The king and the queen concerned about the safety of the newborn prince and left him at the smithy and escaped. Next morning the returning blacksmith saw the newborn baby lying near the anvil and took him to his arms uttering "the son given by the anvil (kinihiraya) is my Kinnara son". The prince grew up and became an assistant to the blacksmith and it's said that his descendants continued to assisting

blacksmiths. One idea is that their jobs got altered and gradually became the Kinnara people. In a similar folktale, King Bhathiya goes to the war alone. After the news about his loss arrived to the palace, the queen escapes and spends the night in a smithy. She gives birth to a child and leaves him at the blacksmith's. Kinnara is his lineage (Samarasekara, 2001, p50-51). Both of these tales bear certain similarities and according to them the origin of Kinnara community runs as far as the 2nd century A.D. Locating at the basal level of the Sinhalese caste system, the traditional caste duty of the Kinnara community was mat weaving. A majority of these craftsmen who had an exquisite skill on weaving mats are now involved in different occupations rather than in their tradition. Simultaneously, their traditional family names, houses, behavior and rituals have also transformed.

Research problem

Kinnara community is incorporated into the Sri Lankan social structure as a caste which originated in the ruling period of the King Bhathiya of Anuradhapura between A.D.164-192. Having being an ancient tribe it can be seen that Kinnara people lived as a primitive community. Their traditional caste occupation was mat weaving. But at present, the components of their unique culture such as the economical production, rituals, social interactions, dressing and surnames have undergone drastic changes. Therefore, the problem of this research is “What are the modern transformations of the Kinnara people?”

The objective and the targets of the research

The main objective of this research is to identify about the transformation of the Kinnara people in the present Sri Lankan society. The traditional caste occupation of Kinnara people was weaving mats. What are the professions they are employed in the contemporary Sri Lankan society? And identifying the divergence in their culture are the supplementary targets in this research.

Research Methodology

The data acquired for a research can be classified into two main categories. They are Primary data and Secondary data (Kothari, 1999, p177). Direct interviews and observations were used to

obtain Primary data. News paper articles, reports, books and data obtained from the Department of Census and Statistics were used as Secondary data.

Data can be further categorized according to their nature as Quantitative data and Qualitative data (Sarantakos, 1998, p26). Quantitative data are data that can be expressed as a numerical value. Quantitative data was used in situations such as identifying the population of the Kinnara community and data regarding their economic status. But certain things like the cultural transformation of Kinnara people can't be expressed in numbers. Those were identified under Qualitative data.

Data Analysis

The Sri Lankan caste system is structured in a way that the economic factors and social benefits are concentrated on to the superior layers in the hierarchical order of castes. Hence the lower castes were deprived of the economic and social benefits. Despite how skillful and creative they were in their occupation, they were sunk in poverty. In the Kandyan era the Kinnara people supplied cordage, mats, whip-cords and other decorative items to the royal reserves as the primary caste obligation. Due to that caste occupation, they were condemned by the social system back then and their less privileged status prevails even now. At present, the traditionally mat weaving Kinnara people are barely engaged in their traditional profession.

Today, the Kinnara community of Sri Lanka is sparsely dispersed as a few groups located in a couple of areas. It's an insubstantial minority when compared to the population of Sri Lanka. But the cultural heritage sustained by that insubstantial population of the Sri Lankan social organization is a highly substantial one. Kinnara people who inherited a highly creative art under the burden of caste discrimination are presently engaged in their craft as a profit making business in accordance to the modern socio-economic environment.

In the present day, the geographical distribution of the Kinnara people is limited only to a handful of locations. Manikhinna-Henawala alias Kalasirigama in the Central province-Kandy district and Yatawaththa-Malhewa alias Alokagama in the Matale district, Hinnapalla and Dikwahara both in the North Western province-Kirunegala district, Bothale-Ihalagama Aendagala Kanda in the

Western province-Gampaha district and Embilipitiya-Mulaendiyawala in the Sabaragamuwa province-Rathnapura district are the settlements of Kinnara community (Samarasekara, 2001, p48-49). Even though Kinnara people live in various districts far away from each other, relations between them exist, overcoming the geographical boundaries. A considerable portion of the Kinnarapopulation lives at the up country.

There's unique folklore for any social group. Mentality of a certain community is engraved in them. The Kinnara song can be identified as a special folk song which emphasizes the unique occupation of the Kinnara people. It's composed about the entire process from separating fibers from Hana (hemp) leaves up to selling the woven mats. But today, either the song or the traditional methodologies for weaving mats which it relates to cannot be seen. Modern technology has replaced those ancient methods. Weaving mats was the prime traditional craft of the Kinnara people. But the mat has lost its use value as an essential item in the household because the habit of sleeping on mats has disappeared from the society. Plastic mats are used when needed instead of using the traditional hemp leave mats. Therefore, Kinnara people have moved into weaving broad mats and using parts of them to produce wall hangers, door mats and carpets addressing the current market requirement. Bags and small wallets produced using hemp are sold at an expensive price for the local and foreign tourists.

Rodi and Kinnara castes occupy the lowest positions in the Sinhalese caste system. Consequently, women of these two communities were disallowed to cover their breasts making them semi naked. As claimed by the history, Rodi and Kinnara women were subjected to the sexual attraction of the superior communities due to this vulnerability. Since the dawn of the 20th century the socio economic transformations of the Sri Lankan society paved the way for Kinnara women to overcome this situation. They started to wear a strip of cloth to hide their nudity. But today all these limitations have faded off completely.

There is an opportunity and an acceptance from the society to change the surnames which connote the lower caste inheritance within the Sinhalese caste system. Therefore changing of the surname has become a customary for the lower caste descendants. But it can be seen that the Kinnara people are still not eager to change their names and thereby keep on using their

traditional family names. Surnames like, Kinnarajathige, Pansalwaththegedara, Galabadawattegedara, Samudurayalagegedara, Gonawalapahalagedara and Wedikkaragedara are still on use and they clearly emphasize the caste inheritance. Even the first name of Kinnara people conveyed their less privileged status in the past. Instead of the names used by the elder generation such as Puhula, Wattakkaya, Kiriya, Punchiwasthuwa, Tikiri, Lucy and Baby, the second generation Kinnara people are using names like Karunawathi, Anulawathi, Irangani, Padmini and Sumanawathi. The younger generation of the Kinnara people, possess names such as MunamalgahawattegedaraKanishka, HenawalapahalagedaraIndunathUdaya Kumara and SriyaniPushpakumari.

Conclusion

When referring to the social transformation from the Kandyan kingdom to the modern society, the changes occurred in the social and economic spectra acquire a higher significance. The remodeling of the Kinnara society parallel to the changes at the mainstream is an inevitable phenomenon. Divergent to the primitive tribal characteristics accommodated at the past, today it's a modernized community living in the Sri Lankan society. Weaving mats which was the traditional caste occupation has turned into a macro scale business acquiring the commercialized objectives at present. And also it's a visible fact that the younger generations had lost the hereditary skills possessed by their ancestors in weaving artistic mats. Thereby the present Sri Lankan society accommodates a majority of Kinnara descendants who are employed in government and private jobs as well as working as hired labourers.

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