

Social dynamics and Social change in Sri Lanka in the period from 13th century to 15th century

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Abstract

The collapse of the dry zone hydraulic civilization is one of the major turning points in Sri Lanka's history that witnessed a paradigm shift resulted in conspicuous socio-cultural and political changes. The available historical and archaeological records reveal that the basic form and shape of the social structure had reached substantial development during this period. The collapse of the social and political hegemony of the old order created a vacuum in Sri Lankan society giving rise to new social values. The former agrarian economy based on irrigation, paddy cultivation as well as swidden cultivation witnessed changes with the increasing importance attached to cash crops such as coconut and cinnamon. Internal as well as foreign trade became more important. At the same time, the newly emerged social and political elite consisted of trading groups, craftsmen, guilds and even forest chieftains known as Vanniyars secured substantial political and economic power. This created an upper stratum of society hitherto unseen.

Understanding these social dynamics in motion and the changes took place in the social conditions of women, marriage and social groups and ranking during the period from the 13th century to the 15th AC is our main research problem.

So our objectives were to examine social dynamics, to investigate factors and conditions that contributed towards social change, to trace the emergence of new elites and their political role during this period and to analyze the interplay of economic, social and political factors with special reference to impact on historical developments.

Importance of this research rests on the facts that it would help examine critically the existing studies of social history on the one hand and such a study would help us to understand what the changes had undergone in social order during this period in a broader spatial and economic setting and trace their social significance on the other. The research, as usual, was mainly done using primary sources and wherever necessary material was obtained from limited secondary sources published on the history of the island.

As the case of almost all the previous historical studies, we have devoted the first two chapters on (1) Introduction and Sources and (2) Political and Economic background of Dambadeniya, Yapahuwa, Kurunegala, Gampola and Kotte that led to social changes respectively as an essential preliminary work in our monograph. Then to achieve our objectives we moved to discuss our main theme, *i.e.*, social dynamics and social change during the period under the sub headings of Position of Women (Chapter Three), Marriage (Chapter Four) and Social Groups and Ranking (Chapter Five). In a study of this nature, we are fully aware that a discussion of local groupings such as *gāma*, *nigama*, *paṭṭanagāma*, *nagara* and *rājadhāni* is of paramount importance. In order to avoid repetition, however, we did not intend to delve into these in a separate chapter but referred to them where necessary in the chapters mentioned above.

Finally, it may be noted that a comparative study of the data available in the literary sources, *Sandēśas*, in particular, inscriptions and other source material throws a fresh light on the social conditions of the people of Sri Lanka during the period of our study.

Key words: Literary sources, Archaeological sources, Expected pattern, Existed pattern, Social mobility.