

CASTE AND CLASS AND THE HEADMAN SYSTEM IN NINETEENTH CENTURY SRI LANKA*

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The Karava caste headmen were the worst affected by the Colebrooke-Cameron reforms of 1833.¹ Many Karava caste headmen appear to have been absorbed by the custom's establishment.² A Karava Mudaliyar post in Colombo continued to exist even as late as 1920, but some of the functions performed by him such as the supervision of the landing of coal and petroleum from ships were so different from the traditional functions that it was not considered necessary to appoint a person of the Karava caste to the post. In 1920 the post was held by a person of the Salagama caste.³ In some of the Kandyan districts it had been found necessary to continue with Durava caste headmen at village level. They performed functions similar to those of village headmen but bore different designations and dealt only with people belonging to the caste. Thus as late as 1920 there were headmen bearing the designations of Vidane Durava, Devava, Gan-Durava and Gammahe, one hundred and sixty of them distributed in the Central Province, twenty four in the North Western Province and fifty two in Sabaragamuwa.⁴ There was a difference in a Wasam, or division in charge of a village headman and one in charge of Durava. In some cases the latter was only a part of a village while in others it was a whole village in which only the people of the caste resided. In the Matale district a few Karava caste headmen known as the Maha Vidane Patahandi Arachchis to oversee the Fishermen and Deveperne Arachchis to oversee forest work appear to have been continued well into the 20th century, more as a matter of practice than of necessity.⁵ In other districts the caste headmen even at village level appear to have got absorbed in to the general headman system so that even if they belonged to different castes they bore a common designation. Thus an important change after 1833 was the general disappearance of caste headmanships at the higher levels and excepting for the instances noted above their extinction as separate caste headmen even at village level.

Accepting Colebrooke's recommendation that the chief headmen should in future be appointed without a reference to caste, Lord Goderich had hoped

* The Editors of this Journal record with a deep sense of loss the death of Dr. P. D. Kannangara which occurred while this issue was in the press. The author had not finalized the foot-notes at the time the manuscript was handed over to us. Despite this lapse this article is included here as a mark of respect to our colleague.