



THE CASTE SYSTEM AND
THE BRITISH ADMINISTRATION IN
THE KANDYAN PROVINCES OF SRI LANKA
1815 - 1832

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The caste system in the Kandyan Kingdom was a complex phenomenon of social stratification into categories of varying rank, on which the entire social structure was based. Being a fundamental integrating factor in Kandyan society, caste played an important role in regulating the relations in political, economic, social and cultural spheres and in the operation of the whole monarchical system. Caste was of Indian origin but in the Kandyan Kingdom it grew with its own characteristic features. The classical fourfold Hindu *varna* system, i.e. *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, *vaiśya* and *śūdra* divisions, was therefore non-existent in the Kandyan society. As Bryce Ryan says 'the conventional fourfold hierarchy would appear to be but a memory of the ancient past'.¹ Instead, there was a far more functional hierarchical caste division. The Kandyan castes could basically be divided into two groups, that is, high and low castes. The *goyigama* caste was considered the highest caste while all others were considered as low castes in the hierarchical structure. A striking feature in the system was that the primary occupation of all castes was agriculture while all other castes except *goyigama*, in addition specialized in some hereditary craft. Every caste was a closed occupational and 'economically privileged group in the sense that it alone had the privilege of supplying a particular kind of special labour.' Therefore the Kandyan caste system as a whole was 'a sophisticated system of labour specialisation'² which provided the different services required by the state, the *radala* nobility and religious establishments.

The system of *rūjakāriya* was the mechanism which combined the land tenure and caste systems and directed the revenues and services based on land and caste to the benefit of the state. All the caste services to both secular and religious authorities were associated with land, bringing about a close connection between the land tenure and caste systems. In other words, tenants drawn from the different castes performed services to the King, nobles and the temples according to their respective castes in return for the lands they held.³

1. Bryce Ryan, *Caste in Modern Ceylon: The Sinhalese System in Transition* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, 1953), p. 7.
2. S. B. W. Winkremasekera, 'The Social and Political Organisation of the Kandyan Kingdom (Ceylon)', M. A. thesis (University of London, 1961), pp. 159-60.
3. For a terse description of the relationship between land holdings and caste services in the Kandyan Kingdom, see Robert Knox, *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*, ed. James Ryan (Glasgow, 1911), pp. 68-9.