WASAGAMA (SURNAME) AND INDIVIDUAL NAME CHANGES AMONG THE SINHALESE OF SRI LANKA: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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ABSTRACT

There appears a good number of newspaper notices to effect changes in surname (Wasagama) and individual names by the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. Surname and name indicate the social status of an individual in the broad linguistic-cultural context among the Sinhalese. Even though Sri Lanka is a practicing democracy, there are discriminations meted upon individuals on traditional caste based hierarchical norms of behavior. Successive governments have followed universal public policies that discourage ascribed values, while certain caste groups have been forming associations with the objective of inculcating pride among members of their folds and thereby helping the enhancement of perceived social status. Consideration of caste in social interactions is visible in many spheres of social activity in Sri Lanka despite avowed universal values. In this light, surname and name changes constitute one of the mechanisms adopted to manipulate this social reality. The present study was based on a classification of newspaper notices into certain categories in order to explore the general pattern of surname and name changes, with the objective of identifying the motivating factors behind such changes and the benefits accrued to the individual though such a process. The study concluded that name change does not only constitute a change of caste but also involves changing other types of identities.

Keywords: Surname, social status, identity, caste, Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to understand the reasons behind individuals' decision to change their surname and individual name, which is a frequently seen practice among the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka. Sinhalese surnames essentially indicate one's position in the caste hierarchy. Even though the Sri Lankan political system is framed by democratic and capitalist principles, upward social mobility of the individual is sometimes compromised in the interest of preserving the traditional caste hierarchy by those belonging to so-called higher castes. In this light, this study explores the practice of improving one's social status through surname (Wasagama) and individual name changes. The study comprises five sections. The first section presents the background of the study in which an attempt has been made to highlight the existing condition of knowledge in relation to status groups and coping strategies in the context of traditional group values vs. individualism espoused by capitalism (and the hope it signals for certain traditionally marginalized identity groups). In the second section, the objective of the study is explained and the methodology has been presented. The third section discusses the pattern of Surname (Wasagama) and individual name changes in light of the insights rendered by the case studies conducted. The final section examines the findings and presents some concluding observations.

CONDITION OF KNOWLEDGE

The surname denotes one's lineage. Lineage in South Asia generally signifies the social positions of individuals belonging to different status groups. This status in turn depends upon the ascribed values accorded to, and in most cases internalized by, different communities who meet face to face only in economic transactions and live in segregated settlements otherwise (Silva 2009). In extreme situations, even the face to face transactions are limited in societies that adhere to the values of status as part of its religious obligations (Deshpande 2010). The presence of European colonial powers in South Asia and the super-imposition of capitalism on those societies did not result in the total erasure of ascribed norms in social behavior. They tend to exist side by side with the modern values that have emerged as a result of capitalism. In other words, traditional values co-exist with norms based on achievement oriented values that are characteristic of a capitalist society. The doctrine of individualism where the individual is regarded as the best judge of what is good and/or bad for oneself which is the foundation stone of the capitalist society seems to be given due recognition in the governance process of Sri Lanka. However, this development seems to have had little impact on the island's caste hierarchy, which still constitutes a strong social force. In fact, it is so strong that one cannot always freely pursue his/her self-interest according to his/her choice. Such interests and choices are heavily conditioned by the respect and consequent opportunities afforded to each caste group. Though the popular belief is that the colonial powers (British in particular) did not tolerate social practices based on ascribed values, in some cases they had to depend on traditional status hierarchies to run the colonial administrative structure. Introducing far-reaching social changes were thought of as detrimental to the calculated colonial interests of profit making (Munasinghe 2002). Sometimes, they even actively endorsed the very same hierarchically organized status groups to obtain the know-how of the legal system of the natives and as a means of tapping the resources of the new found territories. Hence it would be a stretch to believe that colonial presence aimed to wipe out these pre-existing arrangements completely.

Having survived changing circumstances thus, caste still manifests itself in the

surnames and names of the Sinhalese, suggesting connotations of the occupations traditionally assigned to each status group. The vocabulary related to these names itself is an exercise of power (Dharmadasa 1996). According to oral history, the habit of having a fixed surname or family name came with the need to have surveillance over the natives.[1] Surnames and sometimes individual names of certain caste groups in Sri Lanka provide a clue as to the status of the individual's group in the traditional social hierarchy.

Jayawardene (2000a) comments on the changes in social organization and division of labour in the aftermath of colonial discovery of Sri Lanka by European powers, shedding light on the nature and content of the changes that took place in the social organization as an outcome of colonial public policy. She also brings to light the fact that low status groups in the traditional caste hierarchy were the first to tap the economic opportunities that came into being during the colonial days by providing the services needed for the plantations or commercial agriculture for which high caste groups had shown disinterest (ibid). It is further pointed out in her work that the status groups that enhanced their economic positions had also ventured into social projects that afforded improvements in their social status (Jayawardene 2000b). These projects included activities such as forming associations of caste groups which aimed at collectivizing the scattered members of the group, and welfare activities headed by well-to-do, professionally qualified, and politically active members.

The literature on caste politics in Sri Lanka brings out different strategies adopted by low status groups to upgrade their social position. These strategies typically included the following:

1. Writing caste histories which were designed to present the relevant caste group as superior to the dominant Govi/ Wellala groups.[2]

2. Embracing the cultural practices of the higher echelons of the Govi caste such as owning big lands and engaging in philanthropic activities like constructing schools, temples, etc. (Jayawardene 2000b).

3. Formation of caste associations to claim a greater share in the representative assembly of the colonial government and post-independence legislative bodies.[3]

These strategies were effective to an extent in electoral politics for they had worked as mobilizers of groups to secure seats in the national legislative assembly for well-to-do sections of the low status group. Sometimes, they had also – inadvertently perhaps – functioned as mechanisms of perpetuating caste sentiments among members of the group, despite being in a capitalist society with a different functional norm. They had served to form caste alliances among the educated elite layers of present Sinhalese society in the power game of politics (Jayantha 2006).

Today, the matrimonial pages of newspapers treat the caste status of persons looking for spouses as a norm, pointing to the significance of caste in social intercourses even in 21st century Sri Lanka. There are only very few proposals that consider caste as no bar in marital affairs. Members of higher status groups are always welcome for marriages. No doubt influenced by diminishing marriage prospects (among other things), some individuals of traditional low status groups, particularly from the Jaffna Peninsula, migrate to Southern urban centres to avoid caste discrimination (Johnpulle 2007).

Family name or surname (Wasagama in Sinhala) comes before the individual name and it is a socio-historical category among the Sinhalese (Devasiri 2008, p. 55). According to Obeysekera (2010), the literal meaning of Wasagama is 'residence in estate',

meaning s/he who enjoys rights in a common estate. However, etymologically, contrary to Obesekera, it can be interpreted as part of the village where a particular group of people reside. We believe such a definition is more meaningful for traditional societies in South Asia which are used to organizing themselves into hamlets, engaging in definite occupations prescribed by tradition or as religious duty. Thus, we hold the view that family name or surname (Wasagama) is a more meaningful manifestation of kinship associations between those who share the same Wasagama, as pointed out by Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri (Ibid, p. 56). Further, since the Wasagama on many occasions within the Sinhalese culture denotes a clue to the traditional occupation or social status attached to the groups, it was assumed that in the political, social and cultural milieus, changing surnames and individual names become a mechanism of hiding traditional low social status and hopefully achieving high social status. In the case of changing names, it is legally prescribed to make such changes publicly known through registered newspapers in the country. It is the observation of the authors that the ones who give notices to that effect select least circulated newspapers. There has been little scholarly attention on this social phenomenon. Hence, understanding the causal relationships between changing names, and imperatives for such changes marked the point of departure for the present study.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

The main objective of this study was to explore why certain individuals opt to change their surnames, thereby trying to understand the perceived benefits accrued to them through such change, especially in the context of a democratic institutional culture based on the principles of Liberal individualism. To this end, it follows the tradition of explorative research, gathering data from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data used for this study were of two kinds: Firstly, information was derived through classification of public notices in the relatively less circulated astrological weekly paper "Subaseta" that is published in Sinhala. These notices were then categorized into four types. In classifying the data, the experiences of the three researchers were used. Following are the categories that were identified during the classification process:

(i) Modification of name (upon the advice of soothsayers to make their names more auspicious, or as a means of correcting errors occurred during the process of registration)

(ii) Changing one's caste status within the same ethnic fold

(iii) Changing ethnicity

(iv) Religious cum ethnic reasons

Secondly, ten in depth case studies were conducted to gain deeper insights into why these decisions were made. The ten respondents were selected from among the persons identified through the public notice classification. Secondary data composed of library survey material. The information collected through the above methods was descriptively and qualitatively analyzed. It also needs to be noted that the present research did not make an effort to cover 'mainstream' newspapers published in English, Sinhalese, and Tamil languages. The ten in depth case studies did not represent geographical or any other dimensions of the study population. Hence, it is cautioned that future researchers must be mindful of these limitations of the present study.

PATTERNS OF NAME CHANGING

In the year in which the study was conducted (2013), there were 1322 public notices to change the name in the chosen astrological newspaper. The study revealed that around

73% of individuals who tended to change their names also had opted to change the surname or family name. Thus it can be concluded that the overall pattern of changing the name actually revolved around changing the surname (Wasagama). The general pattern of changing the name is presented in the following table.

Table 1: General patterns of name changing

Introduction	Numerical value	% value
Modification of name	352	27
Changing the caste status within the same ethnic fold	626	47
Changing ethnicity	97	7
Religious cum ethnic reasons	53	4
Changes to hide cultural/ethnic hybridity or mixed ethnic origins	90	7
Legal purposes	104	8
Total	1322	100

The number of persons whose names were changed for modification purposes falls behind that of those who changed their surnames to conceal their caste status. The relevant public notices revealed that these persons intended to correct erroneous records in their birth certificates to comply with the legal requirement that such errors be corrected by authorized officials. Incentives for such modifications were recorded as follows: expediency in claiming parental property inheritance,[4] making their names more attractive to the present taste of society,[5] or heeding their astrologer's advice.[6]

The highest number of notices had to do with cases pertaining to changing caste status while remaining within the same ethnic fold. Percentage wise the value of this category stood at 47% of the total recorded cases. A respondent to the queries of the research team explained that the group he belonged to was never discriminated against openly, but found that to be disregarded in informal gatherings was not tolerable. His intention in changing his surname was not to accrue any benefits to himself or his family, but to avoid discrimination based on social status for he knew he was destined to face the social difficulty his surname entailed, which was known to everyone in the organization where he worked.[7] In this kind of situation it becomes apparent as to how the co-existence of traditional values side by side with capitalist values of individualism has on the one hand afforded a degree of upward mobilization to previously marginalized caste groups, but also at the same time has seriously hindered prospects of career advancement and the social recognition it requires. The original family names of those people who opted to change the family names essentially denoted the traditional occupations or obligations of their forefathers to traditional institutions such as king, higher status groups in the caste hierarchy, or religious places of worship.[8] Another observation that can be made about the people who opted to change their individual names together with the family name is that it is not an individual decision, but a collective family decision. The researchers conducted an in-depth case study on this category. As the respondent narrated to the observing

researcher, the reasons behind or motivation to change his family name and other name together with family members had to do with the difficulties that he happened to undergo at his working place. His parents had been in the habit of rendering services to higher social status groups among the traditional Sinhalese social order. However, due to the universal free education policy, he was able to secure a prestigious job in the public sector. Yet he was not given the due respect even by his subordinates at his work place, and his orders were not followed on many occasions. He was looked down upon on many socially important occasions for he was known to them as a person that belonged to a low status group in the society. According to him, the only option available for him was to change his family name together with the individual name assigned to him, and migrate to a place where he could maintain less contact with persons from his original place of birth. He went on to say that even the individual name originally assigned to him was derogatory in the larger context of Sinhalese language and culture. He also pointed out that any decision to enhance his and his family's social status had to be tied with the decision to remain with the majority ethnic community, and to embrace cultural practices of the high social status groups, along with changing the family name and individual names assigned to him. Identifying with a minority group would have been foolish for it would jeopardize future prospects for his family members.[9]

The above narrative signifies that surname changes go hand-in-hand with a process of migration to places distant from the original place of birth of a person, for the social memory does not allow name changes to be a sufficient precondition of enhancing one's social status.

The research identified another significant group of people who have been inclined to change their family name. As leading social anthropologist Gananath Obeysekera (2010) has revealed, the pre-colonial society accommodated many migrant groups as different caste groups within the existing social organization of labour. In the interest of survival, those migrant groups later on gradually mixed with existing dominant cultural groups in the religious and linguistic spheres of social interaction, while retaining their distinct cultural symbols and crafts as a social group. They were treated as a distinct status group in the distant past, whose surname indicates some shared identity with an ethnic minority. It can be observed that presently they are being compelled to bid farewell to a shared ethnic identity in the context of ethnic rivalry in Sri Lanka. The researchers of this study observed that at present they have been partially assimilated to the Sinhalese fold.[10] One individual belonging to this category went on explaining the pressure the group has had to face in this broader social context. The surname of the group denotes some kind of shared cultural identity with an ethnic minority in the country. According to his experience that was not a big problem in the 1960s and the 1970s. However, with the gradual deterioration of ethnic relations in the country in the 1980s, many of the group thinks it is expedient to embrace surnames and names culturally more associated with the majority ethnic group. According to him, they have nothing to distinguish themselves from the Sinhalese at present except some family names. They are being compelled to take on new family names in this context.[11]

The other important dimension of changing names involves changing one's ethnic identity or attempting to conceal one's ethnicity. 'Subaseta' had at least one such case every week, indicating a shift in ethnic identities in favour of the majority ethnic group. The researchers were able to conduct two interviews with two individuals who had shifted their ethnic identity from Tamil to Sinhalese. The case studies revealed some other social

forces that had worked as a motivation to shift ethnic allegiance. According to the narration of life experience of the first person who responded to the questions, the forces that compelled him to change his ethnic identity emerged from within the community itself to which he was born. He had changed his name into a Sinhalese one with the belief that such a move would result in him getting relief from the caste discrimination he had to undergo in the Jaffna Tamil Society. According to him the only mechanism available to low status caste groups in the Jaffna Tamil Society who were not rich enough to migrate into a foreign country where there are less Jaffna High Caste migrants to avoid caste based discrimination, is to migrate to the Southern part of Sri Lanka and live with the other communities without much contact with upper caste Tamils of Jaffna. He had thus migrated to a Southern city and settled there, and had made his children follow their education in the Sinhala medium. He had thought it expedient to become a Sinhalese through changing his and his family members' names into Sinhalese names. Switching from one ethnic group to another, hence, does not always concern only ethnicity, but rather may constitute caste calculations as explained above. In other words, one can escape oppressive caste structures in one's ethnic group by simply changing one's ethnic identity, even if the second ethnicity itself accommodates caste structures. Since in this case he migrated to an urban area where caste identities are very much diluted, he did not have to think too much about the Sinhalese caste system. However, the decision to change his ethnicity had also to do with security concerns, as mentioned by this respondent.[12]

The other interesting case relates to a wealthy Tamil of Indian origin. His forefathers and parents were confined to a small space to live in, given by the estate management. They lived for a long time in conditions that seriously compromised their dignity, especially when compared with the neighbouring villagers. He was able to transcend, physically and socially, the boundaries of the estate, and become a leading businessman who now lives with the Sinhalese in a Southern city. He found it was wise to marry a Sinhalese woman and be part and parcel of their fold.[13]

The least number of recorded cases of name changing was for religious cum ethnic reasons. There were 150 cases recorded under this category, and further inquiries revealed that this is mostly a gendered phenomenon. Most of these notices were publicized by women of both Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The reason behind such changes was to embrace the spouse's religion. This practice was observed particularly among the Muslim community as a precondition of welcoming new members to the fold.[14]

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

This paper has revealed that the force of ascribed values based on the traditional caste hierarchy is still a powerful factor in determining individual social mobility in Sri Lanka. Universalist policies promoted by democratic governments have not been successful in completely eradicating social status based discriminatory practices among members of the society. The consequent aspiration to be equal members of society has, as shown in the paper, compelled a considerable number of people to change their surnames and individual names. This also constitutes a partial surrender of their identity. The other important finding is that the decision to change surnames together with individual names is always a collective decision of the family, made in order to escape difficult, and sometimes embarrassing, social situations and ensure they enjoy the maximum possible opportunities in life. Further, it was revealed that changing the surname and individual name is not a sufficient condition in enhancing the social status of an individual or group of individuals. It has to be supplemented with

migration. Additionally, ethnic rivalry has pressurized some groups of individuals to change their surnames and individual names in order to assimilate to the dominant ethnic group, for security concerns and better life options. Some individuals belonging to ethnic minorities who faced traditional status based discrimination also had opted to embrace the culture of the dominant ethnic group. Thus it is a process of shifting caste identity together with ethnic identity. Whatever the pattern of changing surnames and individual names that a person chooses, they tend to opt to take surnames or individual names that are associated with the Govi Sinhalese, considered to be the highest caste among the majority community. The least amount of name changes have been prompted by religious requirements when entering into marital affairs, particularly with the Muslims of Sri Lanka. Hence the conclusion of this study is that name change does not only constitute a change of caste but also involves changing other types of identities, most of which seriously question the particular form of liberal individualism Sri Lanka is supposed to be practicing.

NOTES

1. As one elder of the Salagama caste group narrated with the first author of the article, it was Alagiyawanna Mukavetti, a scholar of native languages who later converted into Christianity, that first presented the idea of giving a surname to the Sinhalese of the low country for the purpose of clear identification of persons who were against Portuguese rule in the country. However, it is clear that the tradition of having a fixed surname or Wasagama came with colonial land policy, particularly in the maritime provinces of Sri Lanka (Interview with Respondent 1, Colombo, March 12, 2014).

2. Writing caste histories became a significant exercise with the rise of low status caste groups during the colonial days. It also includes hermeneutic exercises by scholars to portray certain groups as superior to others. See Nirmal Ranjith Devasiri (2013, p. 15-33).

3. For instance, the Karawa Caste established the Kawrawa Maha Sabha and the Durawa caste did the Durawa's Lameni Kula Samajaya.

4. Interview with Respondent 2, Galle, January 10, 2014.

5. Interview with Respondent 3, Matara, May 11, 2014.

6. One lady explained that her name was erroneously registered and astrologers had advised her to get it corrected (Interview with Respondent 4, Matara, May 23, 2014). This is also an instance that demonstrates the regard for superstition in Sri Lankan society.

7. Interview with Respondent 5, Galle, January 14, 2015.

8. Interview with Respondent 6 (from Kandy), Colombo, July 20, 2015.

9. Interview with Respondent 7, Bentota, July 22, 2015.

10. The researchers do not wish to identify this caste group by name, as it might compromise the recognition they have earned in society. A previous suggestion to map the geographical locations of these groups was abandoned due to this consideration.

11. Interview with Respondent 8, Galle, July 23, 2015.

12. Interview with Respondent 9, Beliatta, May 14, 2015.

13. Interview with Respondent 10, Beralapanatara, December 18, 2014.

14. Interview with Respondent 11, Pelawatta, March 12, 2015.

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