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WEALTH, POWER AND PRESTIGE:  
Emerging patterns of social  
inequality in a Sinhalese village  
in north-central Sri Lanka.

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A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy from the Department of  
Anthropology and Sociology, Monash University.

March,  
1980.

Victoria,  
Australia.

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LB/DCN/30/83

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## SUMMARY

This study examines the changing and emerging forms of social inequality in a Sinhalese village in north-central Sri Lanka in line with the process of its transition from a relatively isolated peasant hamlet during the early British period to a diversified agrarian community in the recent times. Though the study is primarily concerned with the present and with the particular village involved, a constant attempt has been made to link the contemporary situation with a wider field in both time and space.

In Chapter Two, I outline the historical background of the region, the village and some of the social institutions among the Sinhalese in general. As for the Sinhalese caste system, following Dumont, I argue that it is fundamentally different from its Hindu counterpart. Having outlined the Sinhalese caste system as it operated in the Kandyan kingdom, I attempt to identify the major implications of the British rule for the peasants in the remote jungle villages such as Niltanne.

Chapter Three is a general introduction to present day Niltanne and its immediate environs. An attempt is made there to document aspects of the changing socio-economic and cultural environment in the locality.

Chapter Four is concerned with the village economy and the social class structure there. Having documented changes in the physical process of production and exchange and the land tenure practices in Parts One and Two, I attempt to analyse the emergent class relations in Niltanne in Part Three.

The fact that power relations are no longer internal village matters is demonstrated in Chapter Five. It is asserted that, despite the introduction of so-called democratic institutions into the village arena,



the close association between economic power and political influence remains unchallenged in the local context.

Social status is a multifaceted phenomenon. It is not simply caste, as many previous writers seem to have asserted with regard to Sinhalese peasant villages. In the face of the decaying Sinhalese caste structure, has emerged a separate system of social ranking which is closer to structural realities. These assertions are elaborated in Chapter Six.

Chapter Seven attempts to answer two important questions. Firstly, how do economic, political and social changes, both planned and unplanned, interact with each other? Secondly, do economic and political power on the one hand and social prestige and honour on the other constitute autonomous systems of social inequality? As elaborated in the text, at both levels, there is a strong tendency for overlapping and inter-dependency.

The Case Studies in Chapter Eight supplement the discussions in the other Chapters. The individuals portrayed there demonstrate the different ways they lived through the short period of time with which the present study is mainly concerned.

Finally, in the Conclusions, I attempt to bring together the major assertions of the present work. It is emphasized that the present study approaches an old problem with a fresh approach in that social inequality among the rural Sinhalese is viewed as multifaceted and, hence, is examined with the use of a wider range of concepts.

This thesis contains no material previously accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief the thesis contains no material previously published or written by any other person, except that to which due reference is made in the text of the present thesis.

S. T. Hettige.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am indebted to the people of Niltanne who helped me in various ways during my stay in the village. I am particularly thankful to my major informants whose assistance proved invaluable for my work. Throughout my presence in the field area I was supported by many friends. I am particularly grateful to Anira Amarasinghe and Dias Perera who helped me in more ways than one.

Dr. D.B. Miller from the Monash Department of Anthropology and Sociology who acted as my supervisor patiently guided me throughout this work; his comments, criticisms and suggestions played an important part in developing the major themes of the present thesis. I am particularly grateful for his constant encouragement and remarkable patience.

Dr. Rashmi Desai from the same department read the final draft carefully and offered many insightful comments and suggestions. Our close friendship over the past few years enabled me not only to sort out some of my hitherto confused ideas but also to extend my limited knowledge on a whole range of topics, both academic and political. I sincerely thank him for all this.

Dr. Michael Stevenson, also from the Monash Department of Anthropology and Sociology read parts of the first draft and offered valuable comments. More than anything else I will remember him for his warm companionship.

Professor Michael Swift, Chairman of the Monash Department of Anthropology and Sociology, assisted me in many ways. I benefitted a great deal from his kindness and sincerity. His sympathetic support made my stay at Monash easier and more comfortable.

I thank Jan Branson and A. Pemachandra for assisting me to sort out some of my complicated statistical data.

I am indebted to Mrs. Joan Green from the Anthropology and Sociology Department who typed most of the final draft of this thesis. If not for her kindness and enthusiasm, this work would have been much delayed. I also wish to extend my gratitude to Sue Stevenson, Val Suffolk and Mary Lou, all from the above department, who typed part of the present work.

I am grateful to the technical staff of the Geography Department, Monash University, who prepared the maps, plates and figures which appear in this thesis.

Throughout my stay at Monash I was supported by a Monash Graduate Scholarship. My field work was financed by the Monash Department of Anthropology and Sociology.

Last, but not least, I am grateful to my wife, Anula, who not only encouraged me but also remained patient throughout the present work.

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