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AN ETHNOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ALTERATION OF BIRTH NAMES AMONG SRI LANKANS: EVIDENCE FROM NEWSPAPER ADVERTISEMENTS

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Introduction

Caste is a largely homogenous group of people who are almost or invariably endogamous, who claim descent from a common ancestor or a close association from the distant past, and also professes to follow a common hereditary calling. Caste system was originated in India and brought to Sri Lanka around 3rd century BC. It was established in Sri Lankan Society in terms of feudal services and occupations, differing it from the Indian four-fold caste system, "*chaturvarnaya*". Individuals belonging to particular caste groups were engaged in feudal services until it was diminished by Colebrook-Cameron reforms in 1833. It is possible to identify one's rank, ancestry, and family history by looking at his/her family or *ge* name (*Vasagama* or *Pelapathnama*), which was passed down through generations from the historical pre-colonial caste based feudal service system. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic, it is not taken into public discussion, which can lead different caste members to feel uncomfortable by exposing the caste they belong to. However, when it comes to social relationships like marriage and occupation, people still consider the caste based naming system. Similarly, individuals who belong to low caste groups seems to have inferiority complex in revealing their family or *ge* name.

Though the education and wealth are significant factors that make people to leave out the caste-based feudal service identity and acquire high status in social order; family or *ge* names are still there to identify their place in caste hierarchy. In Sri Lanka, registration of individual's given name (name given at birth) as well as the family or *ge* name was initiated under the British governance. As such, registered names can be changed due to mistakes made at the initial time of recording. Individuals under the age of 21 can be applied through their guardian from relevant Divisional Secretariat offices for new/corrected name. Individuals above the age of 21 have the right to apply for alteration of their names with consent of family members.

The process of changing the name: first an advertisement should be displayed in newspapers stating their old and new name. Then they have to supply necessary documents to prove that they have been using the new name (e.g. Bank statements, electricity bills etc.). Structured applications can be obtained from the nearest Secretarial Division. Then they can apply for new birth certificate and National Identity Card through *Grama Niladari* of relevant regions. This gives an opportunity for people, who are attaining high social status, to leave out the last evidence of their caste status from their original family or *ge* names. At present, in a week, about 500 people from all over the country advertise to alter their names in newspapers. Thus, the main objectives of this study were to discover the extent of applicants who are seeking to alter their original family or *ge* name, to identify the factors that cause them to alter the name, to find out what kind of new family or *ge* names that the applicants have adopted, and to discover the degree of caste consideration in marriage proposals.

Methodology

This study mainly focused on Sinhala newspaper advertisements appeared under the title “Alternations of Names” in Sri Lanka. Advertisements were collected from January to June 2015 from two daily newspapers; *Lankadeepa* and *Lakbima*. One thousand and two hundred (1200) advertisements were collected, then were sorted into following categories, for analysis.

- Category I: Complete name alteration from the Low caste to Upper caste
- Category I/a: Partial name alteration by leaving out only the low caste family or *ge* name
- Category II: Addition of the family or *ge* name at the end of the given name
- Category III: Alteration of the given name or addition of new parts to the given name without changing the family or *ge* names
- Category IV: Addition of a new upper caste family or *ge* name to the already existing upper caste family or *ge* name
- Category V: Complete alteration of the name when converting into a different ethnic/religion group

Further, to discover the degree of caste consideration in marriage proposals, 500 advertisements from Sinhala Weekend newspaper (*Lankadeepa*) between March to May 2015 were collected and analysed. In-depth interviews were done with ten individuals who have experience in name alternation, and five marriage-brokers (*Magul Kapuwa*) were interviewed to gather more information regarding the consideration of caste in marriage proposals and failure or disapproval of marriage proposals due to caste status. Entire research was conducted from January to September 2015.

Results and Discussion

From the collected cases (1200), 33% of newspaper advertisements were from *Kurunegala* District, 11% were from *Galle* District and 8% were from *Rathnapura* District. Majority of the cases were in category I. This is mainly due to the thought that they would be recognised more by the society with the new name and do not feel embarrassed whenever they were asked to tell or write their full names (e.g. *Kapuwa Henayalage Subani Nilakshika –Pathiraja Herath Mudiyanseleqe Subani Nilakshika*) as well as the low caste people have left out only the part of low caste family or *ge* name that indicate their family history instead of acquiring a new upper caste family or *ge* name as indicated below by category I/a (e.g. *Pransisku Radaqe Ranjaneqe-Pransisku Ranjaneqe*)(Figure 1.2).

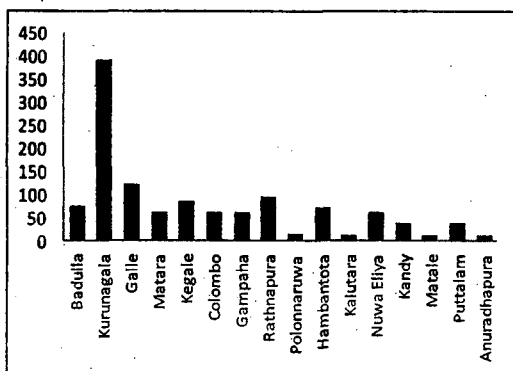


Figure 1.1. Name alteration advertisements according to applicant's district

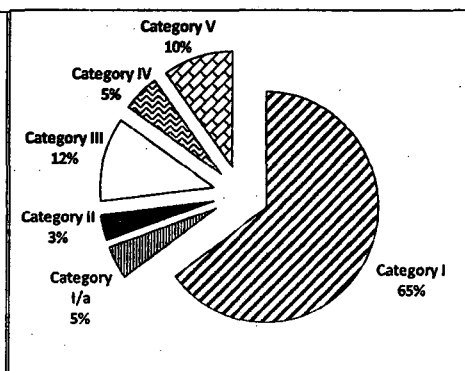


Figure 1.2. Name alterations according to categories. See Methodology for details.

People who do not have family name in the back of their given name tend to apply to add their family or *ge* name at the end of the given name such as in 'Katukoliha Gamage Hashan Malik' to 'Katukoliha Gamage Hashan Malik Gamage' (Category II). Individuals who do not have modern names have tendency in getting modern names due to the demand in the modern society-category III (e.g. Yatigala Gammacharige Rukmani - Yatigala Gammacharige Dinesha Upamali). Thus, names such as *Banda*, *Manika*, and *Gunawathe* are not fitting to the contemporary society and get left out from the names. Interestingly, people who already have upper class *ge* names have added more upper class family or *ge* names to their names. *Ge* names such as *Arachchilage*, *Dissanayakalage* and *Mudiyanselage* were acquired by 40% of this category IV. This tendency reveals the value judgment that was given by the society on these *ge* names. From the sample size of 1200, 10% (120 cases) of people have applied to alter the name as a result of changing their ethnicity (Category V).

Forty-one percent of Sinhalese have advertised to acquire Muslim names, 31% of Tamils for Sinhala names (Figure 2). In the collected 500 marriage proposals, 85% were seeking well matched caste status. Twelve percent of the proposals did not consider caste status, and they are either seeking a partner for their second marriage or are above the marriageable age. Caste based marriage proposals arranged by *Magul Kapuwa* also are in the same status. Almost all (100%) the marriage proposals are considering the caste status in marriages and only 5% of proposals have taken place with the bride belonging to lower caste status. The caste status of groom is highly considered on marriages as majority of Sinhalese experienced patrilineal descend. A person who belongs to high social status, with good educational background and wealth were stricter in their decisions of caste status in marriages more than others.

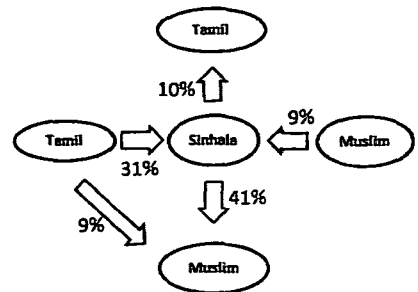


Figure 2. Ethnic name alternations

Conclusions and Recommendations

Though the caste system is a hidden entity and not openly addressed by the society, it seems to be well accepted in day-to-day social relations such as in education, occupations, and mostly in marriages. Educational opportunities, social change, as well as urbanization have caused individual to alter their family or *ge* names, which was used as an identity of the caste status by his or her own local community. Individual mobility from a lower status to higher social status is well apparent as a result of above stated factors and also with the easy access to equal educational opportunities. Thus, the traditional caste status and traditional social status are no longer exciting in the society at present, and will be diminished in the near future from the names of the individual, as they have altered their historical family or *ge* names. The utmost important factor is to give knowledge to youngsters about the caste origin and not to use it as a method of discrimination, but to respect as a cultural phenomenon which was traditionally used to identify people with their specific well practised occupations.

References

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