

CULTURAL DILEMMAS OF INDIAN BUSINESS COMMUNITIES: SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCES IN THE COLONIAL ERA

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Introduction

Colonialism fundamentally changed the traditional pattern of Asian migration and opened new avenues for trade and investment for migrant merchant communities and occupational opportunities as indentured labour for agrarian classes. Various Indian business communities were attracted in large numbers by the favourable environment created by the plantation economy under British rule and diversified their economic operations and their trading networks in Sri Lanka. These Indian communities played vital and diverse roles in the colony's economic transformation during the British era.

Ethnic migrations and diaspora studies have become popular in the disciplines of humanities and social sciences. But very little research has focused on contingent factors that produced diasporic communities in the Asian region. Sri Lanka is a pluralistic society and apart from the major ethnic groups like the Sinhalese and Tamils there were more than twenty five small ethnic groups composing its population. Most of them migrated to the island during the colonial period.

The principal problem addressed in this research is the cultural dilemmas of Indian Business communities in Sri Lanka in their endeavour to locate themselves in a new colonial and socio-cultural context. This study investigates the complex dynamism with which these communities deployed different strategies – both to adjust and preserve their ethnic and cultural identity. The special focus of this study will be on the first half of the 20th century when the nationalist agendas of the Sri Lankan elite presented the Indian communities with the formidable problem of complying with the citizenship requirements of the new independent state in order to safeguard their economic interests as well as their cultural identity.

Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative approaches of data collection and analysis were used in this research. In regard to the qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with the descendants of each community still living in Colombo or suburbs to gather information of their family histories. The research also involved the search for private collections of documents of their families. This research was based on information and data obtained from primary archival materials in Sri Lanka and statistical records of colonial governments. Analysis of the information collected has been used to support the arguments relating to the transformation of this community.

Results and Discussion

These Indian communities such as Chetties, Bharathas, Borahs, etc., underwent socio-economic and later political transformation in the Sri Lankan colonial society. Political as well as socio-economic policies practiced under British colonial hegemony impacted on their complex transformation in this period. Under the changing socio-economic and political conditions they were able to achieve an upward mobility in the social ladder. At the same time the favourable socio-economic environment as well as the administrative structures created under colonialism were utilized to change their economic role beneficially, collaborating with colonialism. Thereby, they were able to transform their traditional identity both qualitatively as well as quantitatively in Sri Lanka. But at the same time they were bent on maintaining an identity as a separate Indian diasporic community.

Conclusion

During the British period this community adjusted itself to the new religious and socio-economic environment of colonialism using colonial institutional and socio-economic avenues to create a new identity and achieve a higher social status in Sri Lankan colonial society. When Sri Lanka transformed from a colony to an independent nation in 1948 the citizenship issue emerged as a controversial and crucial problem. With the transfer of power to Sri Lankan leaders their economic agendas and the requirements of citizenship of the new nation these migrant communities were confronted with the critical problem of accepting either expulsion or integration. While most migrant Indians departed at

this juncture some of them managed to successfully integrate themselves into the new nation, safeguarding their economic and occupational interests.

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