

## **Historical Aspects of Caste in the Kandyan Regions with Particular Reference to the non-Goyigama Castes of the Kägalla District**

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### **Abstract**

Archival material of the colonial period, especially at the grass root level, can provide a wealth of historical information on the hitherto little researched caste system of the Kandyan regions: it could shed light on the taxonomy, functional roles, historical evolution, and spatial distribution of castes. In this paper, emphasis is placed on the Kägalla district and on the dynamics of its so-called Duraya social groups. The political economy of the Kandyan kingdom was based on instrumentalization of the caste system: what remained of the caste category after its collapse is a basic issue underlying any study of caste under the British.

**Keywords:** *Duraya*, caste, Kegalle district, colonial period, Ceylon.

In present day Sri Lanka, in a large measure, caste identities seem to have been superseded by 'ethnic' identities, at least publicly. On the other hand, caste remains a sensitive issue, which is usually discussed in highly allusive terms. Caste belongs to a kind of cryptic culture, contrary to India where it has always been openly discussed and politically instrumentalized (Bayly 1999, Rogers 2004). In Sri Lanka, thus the subject has been generally left to the monographs written by social anthropologists while few historians and political scientists have ventured into a field which is supposed to be barren, for want of data - or because caste was considered a minor issue. But the rise of the Karava, Salagama and Durava in the maritime districts during the colonial period has been the subject of extensive research, notably by Michael Roberts (1982) though after Ryan (1953) no study has been undertaken on the history of Kandyan castes except in monographs such as those of Janice Jiggins (1979), Tamara Gunasekera (1994) and in the work in progress on the Vāddas by Gananath Obeyesekere (2002). However, research in the local records of the British period (especially those of the Kägalla district) for the study of the impact

of the plantations on rural economy and society, together with field work and interviews with old residents in the late 1970s, led me to gather scattered information on caste at the grassroots level, somewhat in the nature of the 'gazetteers' colonial civil servants used to write in their spare time. The material collected could shed some light on the spatial distribution of castes in the region and on the strength of the so-called *duraya* castes, which is generally underplayed. But the nature of the sources raises a series of questions on the 'caste' category as it was conceived by the British on the basis of the information given by their informers - Kandyan headmen and Low Country interpreters and lawyers. Rather than issues of hierarchy based on the degree of purity and alliance strategies, what mattered in their perception of caste was the question of authority and the function each caste occupied in society. Whether this representation, systematized by Hocart (1938), was a colonial construction, remains an open question. The representation and the instrumentalization of caste in the Kandyan kingdom under the Nayakkar may not have been very different.<sup>1</sup>The present paper presents my research on the subject.

### **Caste Taxonomy in the Kandyan Regions**

Caste has never had the same status in British taxonomy in Sri Lanka as in India, except in the 1820s, when very haphazard caste censuses were taken in the maritime and the Kandyan districts. It seems that as soon as the Dutch system of compulsory procurement of cinnamon was abandoned in the low-country, and the *rajakariya* theoretically abolished in the Kandyan regions, the colonial powers lost interest in caste, except in the matter of selection of headmen. John Rogers (2004) provides a detailed analysis of the different logics at work in Ceylon and India, which led to the divergence of colonial policy and rhetoric about caste after 1830: unlike in India, in Ceylon "the colonial state decided caste was not a legitimate form of social identification". In the Kandyan regions, official interest was however revived in the late 1860s with the attempt at feudal restoration effected through the registration of services, but then the emphasis was on function rather than on caste. The census categories since 1871 were based on ethnicity, not caste, even though the first census was taken at a time when the official policy was betting on tradition. Hence the paucity of information on caste

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<sup>1</sup> Revised version of a paper given at the International Centre for Ethnic Studies, Colombo, Seminar on caste, March 1992; I wish to thank John Rogers and the anonymous referees for their useful suggestions.



as compared with the colonial ethnography of 'castes and tribes' in India. The colonial historical monograph devoted to the Kāgalla district (Bell 1892) is the work of an antiquarian rather than an ethnographer. Even in the most detailed corpus of local information, i.e., Lawrie's Gazetteer of the Central Province (1896), caste is given poor treatment (caste is mentioned for only half the villages). The last attempts at producing a corpus on caste were related with the Donoughmore (1927) and Soulbury (1944) enquiries, when caste lobbies produced ad hoc memoranda. Later, the Reports of the Delimitation Commissions provide the finest examples of cryptic language. Caste was generally ignored in the official printed documents concerning the Sinhala areas, with two conspicuous exceptions (until the 1930s) being: 1) the Police reports and the police gazette (titled *Hue and Cry*), and 2) the Land Settlement Department reports.

Some data may have been gathered in unprinted colonial records, especially the diaries of the Revenue Officers and of the Settlement Officers, available at the Sri Lanka National Archives (hereafter SLNA), Colombo and Kandy, or retained in the departmental offices. The limit of such information lies in that practically all Revenue Officers depended on their high caste headmen; the Settlement Officers were in closer contact with the villagers but only a small minority of them had an interest in such matters<sup>2</sup>.

It appears that after the 1830's, Kandyan headmen openly emphasized only rough hierarchical distinctions but not caste subdivisions, and came to employ extensively the term *duraya*. The history of the term could provide an interesting insight into the Radala - Colonial Officers' relations: it was initially the name of the low caste headmen and the British were content to use it to designate the people under such headmen, without enquiring into

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<sup>2</sup> One can find scattered information in semi-official documents such as diaries: according to the diary of the Assistant Government Agent at Kāgalla for June 1893, 14,000 villagers had *duraya* or *dewaya* over them, i.e., 10% of the population lived in homogeneous low caste villages; but the actual numbers must have been much higher. See also D'Oyly 1975: 10-27, Bell 1892, Lawrie 1896. But caste is avoided in official papers except the early Land Settlement Department reports - a basic source, but to be carefully controlled, most Settlement Officers being hardly conversant with the subtleties of the system. The Settlement Officers of the 1930s who attempted to sort out the castes of the villages under survey and settlement were given contradictory or vague answers by their informers (for example, about the Pannikiya in Matale, diary of Assistant Settlement Officer Wijekoon, October 1937).

their subdivisions because it was enough for administrative purposes to know that these people were 'low caste'. This is the kind of loose categorisation, which is found in diaries and even quite often in Lawrie's Gazetteer. The inner subdivisions of the Goyigama caste (always called by its Tamil name) were generally ignored, and when caste was not mentioned the majority caste was likely Goyigama.

But such a rough division in the two categories was already present in more ancient documents (subdivision between *kulina* and *hina jati*) and I am therefore inclined to think that colonial (and later 'Protestant Buddhist') attitudes were re-enacting traditional features rather than inventing them. The only people keen on the subtleties of caste gradation were the low castes themselves (see for example the Padu/Rodiya/Kinnara strained relations), and the Radala when it came to the management of their local power and estates<sup>3</sup>: but even then, functional considerations were more important than caste.

***Rate Minissu: From Atapattu/Naideto Vellala and Goyigama***

The term *Rate minissu* (or *Rate ätto*) may be translated as 'peasants' or 'country folk', which points to its locality, without more subtle distinctions. It is the most adequate term applying to the people now called *Govi* or *Goyigama*. Knox (1681) used the honorific *Hamuduru*, Valentyn (1726) both *Govi* and *Vellala*, Cordiner (1807) *Hamuduru* and *Vellala*, Armour (1842) *Govi*, *Rate* and *Hamuduru*, Parker (1910) used the term 'cultivating caste', and Denham (1912) avoided any reference (while mentioning by name lower castes). They were defined by what they were not (neither artisans, nor labouring serfs, nor tribal) rather than by what they were (cultivators, cattle keepers, manual workers).

Their inner distinctions were already fading away in the 19th century, but the suffix *naide/nainde*, retained after the personal name (Dingiri Naide, Punchi Naide) is still extremely frequent in 19th century Kägalla records. The perusal of the *Hatarakorale Lekammitiya* (available in the Peradeniya Library Records and in the Royal Asiatic Society Library in London) shows that a large part of the *Rate* people of the Kägalla area subject to *rajakariya* during

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<sup>3</sup> The Service Tenures Registers, generally available in the *kacceri* records, provide a very useful source for the caste composition of the 'feudal' villages, but their main purpose was to enumerate the services required, which were not always a reliable indicator of caste.



the second half of the 18th century were categorized as *nainde*. These people were considered to be from the lower class of the peasant caste, as the term *naide/nainde* applied to people who could be employed in menial tasks; but at the same time it was an honorific which could be used only by the *Rate*, the *Navandanna* (smiths) and the *Badahela* (potters), and distinguished them from the lower castes. They were thus described in the records of the Colebrooke-Cameron enquiry in the 1830s (CO 416/25/4):

"Their duties consist in drawing timber...erecting ola tents, supplying gardens with bamboos, cleaning roads, building rest houses, carrying baggage, cleaning bed of rivers, serving in the kitchens and rest houses. They are subject to the performance of every other service except of carrying the palanquins which they consider a degradation".

This description fits in with that of the '*Nilawamsa*' Govi by Gilbert (1953: 311 sq). The different low country castes had similar functional gradations: the reports of the collectors "upon the subject of castes and the services they are bound to perform" (1818 in CO 416/23; see also Peebles 1995 and Dewasiri 2008: 97-99) enumerate them for each caste: 1. *Nanayakkara* (= *atapattu* in Kandy); 2. *Mayoraal* (= *gamvasam*, *aracci*); 3. *Lascoreen* (= *hewawasam*); 4. *Sellakaraya* (no fixed service); 5. *Nayides* (bearers). The boundary between *Naide* and lower castes was therefore quite clear: carrying baggage, goods or ammunition did not entail a loss of prestige, while carrying persons publicly humiliated the bearers. Only the lower castes could be palanquin bearers.

Above the *Naide* were the *Patti* (cattle keepers), but *Patti* were few in Kägalla (there were few pastures), unlike in Matale (Pallesiya pattu) and Uva (Pattipola korale) where they were often the majority. On the other hand, Kägalla being the battlefield of the wars between Kandy and the maritime powers, many people served in the *atapattu* as guards, soldiers and messengers, and as such they were regarded as the superior category of *Rate minissu* according to the 18th century *Hatara korale Lekammitiya*.

But the colonial records did not bother with such subtleties, which had become irrelevant with the abolition of *rajakariya*. The systematic use by the British of the (Tamil) caste name *Vellala* in the 19th century (instead of *Rate ätto/minissu*) raises an issue, which I have never seen, seriously considered (Ryan 1953: 78). It may be that the British were just following a loose Dutch

categorisation which underlined similarities between Tamil and Sinhala caste structure, or that the Kandyanans were already using the term at the time of the Nayakkar dynasty. The next step in the terminological shift was the development of the use of '*Goyigama*' and the disappearance of '*Vellala*' in the Sinhala and in the English usage. A systematic study of the occurrence of the term could shed light on the consolidation of the caste, and on the affirmation of Sinhala consciousness versus the Tamil.

I shall not enter the debate on the hierarchical order of castes raised by Dewasiri (2008: 192-197), which leads him to disaggregate the highest group, the *Radala*, from the *Goyigama*, like Gunasekera (1994: 33), but it is clear that *Rate* and *Radala* were quite distinct and did not intermarry before the 19th century. Another fascinating issue is that of the integration of the *Vāddas* of the region into the *Goyigama* category. Kandyan texts analysed by Gananath Obeyesekere (2002) establish beyond doubt that the process was a general phenomenon in the Central Province; it occurred as well in remote areas of the Kāgalla district such as Pata Bulatgama (diary of the Assistant Government Agent Codrington, 27.04.1913).

#### **'Duraya', 'Devaya' and so on: A Preliminary Note on 'Low Caste' Names**

'*Duraya*' was a term loosely employed by the British to denote lower Kandyan castes, including *Vahumpura*, *Padu*, *Panna*, *Velli*, *Berava*, possibly *Henaya*, and several others<sup>4</sup>. According to Ryan, *Duraya* used alone was another name for *Panna*, but I am by no means convinced. Initially and more specifically, the British and the *Radala* chiefs used the honorific *duraya* for petty chiefs of the upper section of lower castes, especially for those whose traditional duty was to furnish soldiers and manual workers under the *rajakariya* system, and this applied as well to the *Vahumpura* and even

<sup>4</sup> See for ex. Glossary of the Service Tenures Commissioner report, Service Tenure Registers for Kāgalla, Lawrie's Gazetteer, Bailey Report for the Matale district, 1853 (SLNA 10/177a), and the Kāgalla diaries: a typical case in Lawrie (1896: 179) is that of the Dolosbage area, almost entirely non-*Goyigama*, in which all the population is considered '*Durayo*' by the British without distinguishing between *Vahumpura* and others. See also CO 416/2 Replies for Badulla ("The *Doorey* caste includes the *Hangramoo* or jaggery makers, *Berrowaya* or tom-tom beaters and weavers, the *Paduas* or iron smelters"); also Gilbert 1953: 328 "Kandedurayas, Batgamdurayas, Hunudurayas, Vallidurayas, Pannadurayas". In the 1931 census, the *Vidane Duraya* divisions listed included the *Vahumpura* areas.



*Salagama* established on the borders between the Kandyan and low-country territories. Another term of address, *hulawaliya* (torch bearer), was often used for the chiefs of the lower sections of the low castes, the *Berava*, the *Padu*, the *Gahal Berava*, and the *Batgam Berava*. And still another term, *gasmanda*, applied to the chiefs of the lowest caste (*Rodiya*). Later, *hulawaliya* came to be used exclusively for *Gahal* or *Batgam Berava* and *Rodiya* chiefs, by a typical semantical shift, while the term *duraya* was extended to all other low caste chiefs. The same process led the *Vahumpura* headmen, who considered themselves to be of a higher status than the other low caste chiefs, to reject the term *duraya*, which had lost its honorific character, and insist on being called *dewaya*. During the 20th century, the term *duraya* was progressively abandoned by others, possibly because of its service connotation, and the term *Batgama*, linked with rice cultivation which was considered honourable, became more popular for sections of the former *duraya* castes, especially the *Panna* and *Padu*.

It is often difficult to distinguish the diverse *duraya* groups from the *Vahumpura* homogeneous caste; the wording *duraya/dewaya* is not conclusive, *dewaya* not being always used; hence, *ge* names such as *Durayalage*, *Durayinne* may be *Vahumpura*. *Hewayaya* (soldier) is used for the military section of any caste, and not always with specific complements such as *Hewapedige* or *Hewadewayale*. As a general rule, the *ge* names including the words *pura*, *dewa*, *kande*, *hakuru*, are *Vahumpura*. Several authors, following Ralph Pieris (1956: 184), wrongly attribute the suffix *-pedi* to the washer caste. In 18th and 19th century Kägalla at least, *-pediya*, *-pedige* or *-pedidurayalage*, with high sounding prefixes such as Sinhala, Hewa, Hapan, Menik, Rankot, Rajapaksa, Nuwarapaksa, Karuna, Devata, etc., always applies to the *Batgama*.

### ***Vahumpura***

A well-defined and self-conscious community, unlike the multi-faceted *Batgama* group, the *Vahumpura*, alias *Kande minissu* (people of the hills), alias *Hakuru* or Jaggery (palm sugar) caste, was often the second most numerous group on the periphery of the Kandyan kingdom (the borders of Ratnapura, Kägalla, the western part of Matale, the eastern part of Kurunegala and some areas in Uva). Their location was consistent with a history of ancient settlement, previous to the development of the Kandyan regions by colonists fleeing the Rajarata, in areas where they lived as gardeners, tappers of the kitul palm tree for toddy and jaggery,

slash and burn cultivators, like the so-called Indian hill tribes, rather than rice growers; one can speculate that initially *Kandeminissu* lived in hilly homogenous clusters (*kandegam*). Later, many villages came to be integrated in the peasant society dominated by the *Goyigama* caste. Dewasiri (2008: 208-209) has tentatively reconstructed the history of the caste along rather similar lines.

Descriptions of traditional *kandegam* are found in the diaries and reports of various Settlement Officers. An interesting example is that of the Madure korale of Kurunegala district (diary of the Assistant Settlement Officer Rasaretnam for January 1933). The large Maduragoda village was made up of hamlets scattered in the hills from an initial centre: the *diga* (virilocally) married women retained a right to claim property in the original centre and their brothers acknowledged the claim. In Wehigama (Uva), the same phenomenon occurred and the different brothers had different *gedara* names according to the place where they settled (diary of the Settlement Officer, 1933-1934). In these communities there were probably remnants of a matrilineal system. Lawrie (1896: 615, Munwatugoda) mentions '*genu pangu*', that is lands descending in the female line, in a *Vahumpura* family; in any case, patrilinearity was not firmly established among them. Polyandry was practiced but was not specific to the caste; it was rather common in Kandyan service-bound groups.

Another typical *kandegama* was the very extensive and out of the way village of Bambarabotuwa in the Ratnapura district, which is vividly pictured by Frederick Lewis in his autobiography (Lewis 1926: 198 sqq): here the villagers, some of them living in caves, still led an independent life on their own in the late 1880s, with little connection with the outside world, not very different from that of the Vāddas of the same district.

The *kandegam* of the Kāgalla district are described in the diary of the Assistant Settlement Officer Davies for July 1910, and in the settlement reports of the localities north of Rambukkana, especially Parape and Gabbala; similar villages are found near Aranayaka (Rahala and Salawa), in the Kālerata, forest canton under Adam's Peak, above Deraniyagala (Kosgahakanda), and in the areas on both sides of the former capital of Sitawaka (Mayinoluwa, Amitirigala and Kanugala). But *Vahumpura* villages were also quite common in the hilly cantons right in the centre of the district, notably in



Kiraweli and Kandupita south, where they lived close to *Goyigama* villagers.

In areas where the *kitul* palm tree was especially abundant, the *Vahumpura* depended mainly on their traditional occupation in homogeneous villages; in bi-caste and multi-caste villages, many were employed by high caste families as domestic servants and cooks while others under the *rajakariya* system were soldiers guarding the footpaths leading to the Kandyan highlands, just as their *Batgama* brethren. Social relations between *Vahumpura* and *Govi* were therefore quite close: it was as if the free life of the jungle entered the quiet existence of the peasants. *Kande minissu* were integrated in the economic and social life of the village, especially for festive occasions. They were often *mananna* (grain measurers). They had regular access to the houses of the *Govi*, especially women, as cooks and sweet makers, and their presence was ritually required for marriages. They were also the main providers of toddy for men. In a way they were 'insiders', people connected with the female world. Under the Kandyan kings, they had the privilege to carry the queen's and noble ladies' palanquins, and they were often settled in *bisogam* (villages belonging to the queens). According to one source, *Rate* and *Kande* people would have intermarried in the large hilly villages under Adam's Peak (diary of Assistant Settlement Officer Aluvihare, March 1931) - but it might have been a case of hypergamy rather than isogamy. More generally, it was often rumoured that high caste chiefs kept mistresses from the *Vahumpura* caste, but I have not come across any specific case.

On the contrary, agrarian relations were often strained, because *Vahumpura* villagers, with few exceptions, had no legal title to their highlands and were dependent on the goodwill of *Radala* lords (Administration Report for Puttalam district 1884 p. 100A) When the Settlement Department undertook to establish the titles to highlands, *Vahumpura* villages were disproportionately affected. Frequent difficulties arose for the settlement of highlands (19th century settlement papers of Uda Karandupone, Hinguralakanda and Patberiya in the Kägalla *kacceri* record room; 20th century settlements of Yatiwala and Magala by the Land Settlement Department in the diary of Assistant Settlement Officer Cocks for March 1935).

The relations of the *Vahumpura* with other castes were often difficult. The only caste with which they allied was the *Salagama*, in

a few localities such as Eṭṅawala in the west of the Kägalla district, and again it was rather a case of hypergamy (Denham 1912: 327; CO 416/25(4), Description of castes). The *Vahumpura* were especially keen to keep their distance from the *Batgama* and not to be merged with them under the name *Duraya*. Marriage with them was strictly forbidden and there had been cases of family murders of *Vahumpura* females who had eloped with *Batgam* men (Pieris 1956: 178) "Until the murder we were disgraced into the Paduwa caste". In areas such as Galapitamada, the two castes were in a state of permanent feud by the beginning of the 20th century.

The low-country *Karava*, who in many cases encroached on forests in their quest for timber wood, and monopolized toddy and arrack taverns, sometimes clashed with them. The fascinating story of the village of Palle Kanugala on the western border of Kägalla is worth mentioning (diary of the Assistant Government Agent of Kägalla, June 1892). Some *Karava* boatmen had a right to specific services of the villagers in return for plying the local ferry. But when the *Karava* claimed the village as their *nindagama* before the Service Tenures Commission of the 1870s, their claim was rejected and the *Vahumpura* villagers refused to render any service. The ferrymen then sold their rights to one of their low-country fellowmen, a court interpreter in Colombo, who sent rowdies to take possession of the highlands with a view to selling his purchase to a planter. The expedition failed after a pitched battle between the villagers and the rowdies, and the court interpreter died of the wounds he received. Thereupon, the villagers sold half their high lands to a *Vahumpura* Colombo businessman who had helped them. But when he came to take possession the villagers, armed with bludgeons, were waiting for him on the river bank, and he rushed back to Colombo. With their reputation as hotheads well established, the villagers were left to cut chenasas they pleased, until two British planters of the wild adventurer type, the Fairweathers, entered the field. They purchased land from all parties and opened their Glenesk estate in the village. However the villagers did retain a good amount of land.

Given the restrictive policy of the administration regarding the access to high lands, and the fact that the British generally relied on information provided by high caste chiefs, it is likely that *Kande minissu* were more adversely affected than others under the colonial regime: the adverse impact of the Waste Lands ordinance of 1840 on *kandegam* was anticipated by the Agent in Kurunägala



(SLNA 18/2490, 26.10.1840). It can be argued that *kandegam* were specifically affected by the repression of chena cultivation: a case in point is the Morawak korale described in the diaries of the Settlement Officers Lewis in December 1897, and Fraser in the 1900s; see also the petition before the Land Commission (Papers of the 3rd interim report, SLNA L62/28, no. 784/5953) of landless Mayirawati Korale villagers asking for land to cultivate. The subsequent development of plantations, especially rubber and tea, in their favourite areas, made landlessness especially severe, as in the case of Delwita estate in Madure Korale on the border between Matale and Kurunegala districts (SLNA 59/1384). And as toddy tappers, they were affected by the monopoly of the *Karava* toddy and arrack renters especially in the southern part of the Kägalla district. The general picture is therefore that of an impoverished peasantry who looked for casual jobs in the plumbago mines (especially at Dodangaslande) and gem pits, work on the roads, or indulged in activities such as cattle lifting and illegal sale of arrack and toddy, and migrated to the towns, especially the north-eastern suburbs of Colombo. A few enterprising families, such as the Pedris (whose ancestor came from Gabbala in the Kägalla district), succeeded in graphite mining, urban contracts, or shipchandling, but the majority especially in the interior were generally poor and backward while *Batgam* villages appeared often more prosperous.

To resist the British land policy, *Vahumpura* leaders during the 20th century developed arguments based on mythical stories. In the memoranda sent to the Donoughmore and Soulbury commissioners, they presented their caste chiefs as being entrusted by the kings to rule the highlands, quoting the Mahalankapuradewage and the Diwunuge Dissan Pedris families (the latter was the leading spirit of the campaign). They claimed that vast hilly jungle lands in Embilipitiya and Kolonna Korale, in the south of the island, had been forcibly taken from them. They pictured themselves as sons of the soil, untouched by outside influences, and the faithful guardians of primitive Buddhism.

Their fighting spirit provided them with substantial results. Earlier in the century, *Vahumpura* villagers refused to pay for lands settled on them, arguing that they were, as former furnishers of sugar to the king, the rightful owners of the highlands planted with *kitul*, just as the paddy growers were the rightful owners of their irrigated fields. The move must have been engineered by two lawyers, Moonemalle and Corea, who specialized in contesting land cases

against the Crown (see memorial Moonemalle 29.11.1907 SLNA 59/2537B). In Kägalla, the most active were the villagers north of Rambukkana, who petitioned the government, requesting to be exempted from the application of the Waste Lands Ordinance (memorial of Parape and Gabbala, end of 1911, C054/746). And at least in one case, that of Kobbegala Wasama (near Galagedara), a *sannasa* (grant on copper plate) given by King Rajasimha II, although unregistered, was pronounced genuine by colonial experts: it gave a group of villages to the Haturusinghaya Dewaya family (Diaries of the Assistant Settlement Officers Perera and Moonesinghe, May 1936). The claims to highlands were constantly reiterated in the same area (see also the case of Udukumbura, a typical *kandegama* described by Assistant Settlement Officer Navaretnam, in his diary for October 1934).

The reputation of the *Vahumpura* and more generally of the low castes for lawlessness has been seriously questioned by John Rogers (1987: 224-225). Already in the 1830s, in C0416/19/G4, the Judicial Commissioner declared: "I have not remarked that crimes are more frequently committed by one caste than another". But members of their community have been active in every violent uprising from 1848 to 1971 and the 1980s (Kannangara 2011, Jiggins 1979). From 1907 until the 1915 riots, the town of Rambukkana, north of Kägalla, was the scene of constant clashes between Muslim and Low country Sinhalese traders, and the *Vahumpura* and *Batgama* villagers of the area were very much involved in the violence, on the side of the Low country Sinhalese traders: in that case, the traditional rivalry between the two groups was forgotten, and two decades later, politicians belonging to both communities attempted to join forces to break the power monopoly of the high castes in the district, especially during the 1936 elections (according to the testimony of N.H. Keerthiratne who mentioned to me his relations with Parape Kira, a local *Vahumpura* leader).

### ***Batgama***

This is a multi-faceted group whose collective identity as '*Batgama*' is a recent construction, probably linked with their emancipation after the abolition of *raja-kariya* and the progressive lapse of feudal services. The present '*Batgama*' group, although more restricted than the previous '*Duraya*' group, tends to include the *Padu* (with sub castes), the *Panna*, the *Velli* (absent in Kägalla), and possibly



various groups of *Berava* origin, but as a rule *Beravas* are a distinct group with no connection to *Batgama*.

The first reference to *Padu*, so far as I know, appears in the early 15th century versions of the *Pujavaliya* (1402) (Liyanagamage 1968: 18-19) while the previous versions do not mention them under the name *Padu*: they are listed among "those who live by taking other's life". The undated but probably contemporaneous *Dambadeniya Asna* (Ariyapala 1956: 165) already mentions the '*Atabage mura piris*', the guard corps of Atabage, which is later described as made up of *Panna* soldiers. Between the 16th and the 18th centuries, experience of continuous warfare in Sitawaka and Kandy must have reinforced these groups, especially in the border contested areas such as Kägalla: they were posted along the passes leading up country (together with local *Vahumpura* soldiers), in villages such as Balane, Aṇandara, Hettimulla, Atugoda, and Menikkadawara. At the same time, every large rice-producing village (*bat-gama*), the property of kings or grandees, was actually or potentially cultivated by *Padu*. Robert Knox, who was captive in the Kurunägala and the Kägalla areas in the 1670s, mentions them as "Poddahs, husbandmen and soldiers" and in his manuscript additions to his book he adds "Heere are many townes whare in onely dwelleth poddahs and many of them very rich" (Knox/Paulusz 1989: II-208). Rice-villages were as a rule quite numerous in the richest tracts closest to the ancient capitals such as Gampola or Dambadeniya (diary of Assistant Settlement Officer Davies for December 1906, Medaketiya Korale). In Kägalla, Hewadiwela, Diwela, Dorawaka, and Balapane were the largest of such villages.

One may surmise that these people had been brought in the distant past from South India and had a common origin with the Pallar found in the Jaffna peninsula: the story of 12,000 prisoners of war taken to India by a Chola king, and brought back to Sri Lanka with the same number of Tamil prisoners by King Gajabahu, which became popular between the 14th and the 17th centuries, might have served as an historical myth explaining the presence of large numbers of South Indian migrant workers in the Kandyan country, especially in the Paranakuru division of the Kägalla district (Obeyesekere 1970, Meyer 2003). Raghavan (1971) hints that "Pallar are sometimes known as Kula hewayo in Sinhala areas where they are present", which would imply that at least in the eyes of Tamils, the *Padu/Panna* were originally *Pallar*. The *Matale*

*Kadaim Pota* (Gunasekara 1959:98) mentions that the *uliyam* service (especially earthwork) was effected in Matale by 'Tamil boys'. It appears that whenever the kings or grandees required manpower for new undertakings they looked for Indian immigrants: a late case is that of the *Padu* gardeners in Uva (CO 416/2, Replies from Badulla): "Barley, wheat, grapes, peas, cardamoms were cultivated by people from India (Goorooah families in two Udukinda villages), who had grants of land from the Kandyan king for the purpose, but have latterly been neglected, since 1/10th of paddy has been levied"; see also Tennent (1859: II, 760): "A small community known as *Padua-Guruwas* who profess Islam [sic] but conform to Kandyan customs".

During the first decades of the British rule there was an attempt to register them as cinnamon peelers. '*Panna Dooreyas* and *Batgam Dooreyas*' formed two distinct but connected groups both belonging to the cinnamon department (CO 416/2, replies from Madawalatenne, Tumpane and CO 416/21/G46: villages of Paddreara, Gabbadagama, Mahanapalara, Kotticabadde, Kitterapangu, Asbage, and Atbage). In Sabaragamuwa, according to the Turnour report (1824, in CO 416/20 G16), the registered cinnamon peelers were *Yamano Padu*.

Names and ecological features might help to distinguish three or four subgroups among the modern *Batgama* but the information given by the colonial sources is often confusing and ethnological research on these communities is generally poor<sup>5</sup>. For Hocart (1938: 26-27), *Velli*, *Panna* and *Batgama* (i.e., *Padu*), belonged to the same group but possibly did not intermarry in spite of identical *ge* names; on the contrary, Newton Gunasinghe (1990: 175) maintains that "*Yamano* intermarry with their brethren of the larger caste".

*Velli Durayi*, absent in Kägalla, were well represented in Matale and probably settled in the Rajarata for centuries. In his *Manual of the North Central Province*, levers (1899: 92) considers that they were originally *Pannayo* who came over from South India as slaves of the Vanniya chiefs, but that those who inhabited *viharegam* (temple villages) "have arrogated a higher title asserting that their ancestors came over with the bo-tree, which their descendants

<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the excellent study of Tamara Gunasekera (1994). There are also scattered informations in the works of Evers (1972), Gunasinghe (1990), Silva (1992), and Yalman (1960).



continued to protect from monkeys with their bows (Velli)". They were strictly endogamous in their main villages of Bulankulama and Medawachchiya, according to the diary of the Assistant Settlement Officer Wait for August 1906. Their function as guards and arch builders in the Bo Tree precincts in Anuradhapura gave them an aristocratic aura and they insisted on being called the 'Bodhi Vamsa'. In 20th century Kandy, 'Pannadurai' craftsmen called themselves *Vellivamsa* to assert their superiority over other low castes (Pieris 1971: 112-3).

The second category, the inhabitants of 'free' (neither royal nor large feudal) villages (for example Lewala, Warakagoda, and all the villages grouped around Bulatkohupitiya) were possibly *Panna*, but were always called '*Durayi*' in the colonial documents. *Panna*, quite common in the Central province according to Lawrie, who mentions the "32 *Panna* villages" of Dumbara (Lawrie 1896: 234, s.v. Gabbela) are not described as such in the Kägalla district, except for the three *Pannegam* villages of Kinigoda mentioned by D'Oyly (1975: 21). It remains unclear whether *Panna* constituted or not a distinct endogamous group. But their functions under the *rajakariya* system (grass cutters for feeding elephants, but also cattle keepers, and even tree tappers) were quite different from those of the *Padu* rice cultivators; their habitat up the hills and their functions were often similar to those of the *Vahumpura*, to the point that they were sometimes difficult to distinguish from them.

In historical perspective, Tikiri Abeysinghe (1966: 161) shows the close connection of the *Panna Durayi* with the *Demala Gattara* (generally translated as Tamil outcastes) of Pasdun Korale mentioned in the 1614 thombo ("*Pannaya* villages divided into 4 groups, *Malagattara*, *Pasdun Gattara*, *Pelpola Gattara*, *Rayigam Gattara*, with *Duraya* headmen"). Note that the meaning of *Gattara* is captive, war slave, rather than outcaste: this leads us again towards the Gajabahu myth. Ryan asserts that *Panna* were people of the highlands, of the jungles like the *Vahumpura*, and that they took on the functions of the *Vahumpura* when the latter were missing. They also acted as cattle keepers for the kings (Gilbert 1953: 322-23). According to B. Aluvihare (Peradeniya University Library, manuscript n° 22), constituencies were carved out for them by Delimitation commissions in Harispattu-Tumpane-Kohonsiya, Kägalla, Beligal-Kanduaha-Uduwe, Atulugam-Panawal-Kuruwiti-Nawadun: "Panni Durayi are present only there".

The *Panna* boasted of being king's servants under *rajakariya*, directly attached to the *Kuruwe* department (elephants) or looking after the king's cattle, and not serfs attached to a *gabadagama*: this is a functional superiority which distinguished them from palanquin bearers and earth workers. See what Lawrie says (1896: 234) of Gabbela people in Uda Dumbara: "Of the 32 *Pannadura* villages *Gabbela* held the first place. The tradition is that the inhabitants are descended from a *Duraya* who accompanied the ancestor of the Amunugama family from India. So high did *Gabbela* rank that when the Kandyan kings reached the village they got out of their palanquin [sic] and walked 7 steps on foot as a special mark of royal favour... The *Gabbela Durayo* had the privilege by striking a *pingo* on the ground of detaining anyone until satisfactory explanation was given" (this is the traditional *dharna* practice of Indian origin). Their service was supplying the palace with *suduhakuru* (white sugar), grass for white cows, and keeping watch of the king's cattle.

As soldiers, they were in demand for their skill in organizing guerrilla warfare, in the Kandyan kingdom, and even after 1815. There are numerous allusions in the early 19th century texts to their fighting spirit and their independence:

"In 1817 a lascoreen was sent to Dolosbage to call the people to Kandy, they having been reported by the Padikara Lekam, their superior chief, to be refractory; they started with the lascoreen but on entering a jungle Pallegama Duraya said there was no head chief over them in Kandy and they left the lascoreen [...] The people of Dolosbage held land to furnish buffaloes for the cultivation of the royal fields in Gampola" (Lawrie 1896: 179).

In 1834, the *Panna* chiefs of the Asbage (Dumbara: Wellemeg Vidane Duraya) and Atbage (Harispattu: Wettagode Vidane Duraya) were accused by a *Goyigama* headman, Pallegampaha Korala, to behave arrogantly (carry provisions in *chatties* for their marriages), and to have been allowed this 'extravagant right' by Molligoda Adigar to incite them to join a supposed rebellion, for they were considered indispensable for a successful upheaval: "The Asbage and Atbage were always the most enterprising among the Kandyans", according to Dunuwille Dissawe, joined by Mahawalatenne Disawe: "a very daring set of people" (C054/137: annexures to despatch of 15.09.1834, evidence). Again in 1848 they were considered as potential rebels although the leaders were of



Low Country *Karava* and *Vahumpura* origin: all the inhabitants of Pannegama had fled their villages to follow the pretender, and possibly for fear of army reprisals (CO54/261).

The third category, the *Padu* cultivators-soldiers of very extensive *gabadagam* (rice villages formerly belonging to the kings) located in the Kandyan districts, especially Kägalla - Dorawaka, Ballapane, Malwana, Mattamagoda, and Hewadiwela, for example; the soldiers, guards of smaller villages on the mountain passes and *kadawat* (thorny gates)-- Balane, Gantune, Debatgama, and Atugoda/Damunupola--likely belonged to the same group although it can also be argued that they were *Panna*. Most of them shared high sounding soldier names (Rajapaksapedige, Nuwarapaksapedige, Wikramapedige and so on) which were not *patabāndi* (honourific) names proper but underlined their prestige as fighters; but one finds also less exalted names such as *Ilandaripedige - ila* being the Sinhala term for palanquin. Among the *Padu*, many authors distinguished three sub-groups: *Kudadurayo* (small chiefs), *Hewayo* (soldiers), and *Uliyakkurayo* (palanquin bearers) according to De Saram (1888); *Kodituwakku Hewayo* (gunners), *Kulahewayo* (guards, bearers at war, executioners and menial labourers for the *dissawe*) and *Hitawidakurayo* were employed as menial labourers, builders and field tillers on *gabadagam* according to D'Oyly (1975: 16-18) and Bell (1892: 111); *Durava* [sic, for *Duraya*] *Padu*, *Batgam Padu* and *Batgam Durayi*, according to Evers (1972: 96), were not strictly endogamous but keen on maintaining a distinct identity with a tendency to be distinguished by their locality.

The fourth category, the *Yamano*, iron smelters, were found in the Kägalla district only along the Kandy road near Talangomuwa. They were much more numerous in the Ratnapura district where the art of metallurgy had attained a high degree of sophistication (see the archaeological research of Gillian Juleff, *Early Iron and Steel in Sri Lanka*), but they had lost their means of living during the colonial period, and their status, contrary to that of the smiths, was very low.

A fifth category is more difficult to conceptualize. *Batgam Berava* or *Batgamwala* (D'Oyly 1975 : 17) were a definitely distinct group, probably close to the *Gahala Berava*, the funeral drummers and executioners that were found in Katugastota near Kandy; they inhabited a few rice-producing localities up the hills such as Tellake

and Balatgomuwa near Aranayaka, and the title of *hulawaliya* was still in use to designate their chiefs. According to Gunasekera (1994: 42), they were regarded as *vahal* (slaves) by their *Batgama* neighbours. Their integration into the *Batgama* category is as problematic as their inclusion in the *Berava* group: they were considered much lower than the *Berava*, who were employed as temple musicians or, as weavers, were sometimes educated people through their connexion with Buddhist monks, and who portrayed themselves as astrologers (*Nekati*) which is the name under which they are known today.

Contrary to a view which would consider the whole *Batgama* group as socially and economically depressed, and politically powerless (Dewasiri 2008: 213-214), it appears that early in history some families were noted for their enterprise, their fighting spirit, and that they made use of every opportunity to improve their lot, by working on the tea and rubber estates or starting their own plantations, at least from the beginning of the 20th century, and more especially during WW2. The trend is obvious in the villages studied by Gunasekera (1994: 15, 65) and Gunasinghe (1990: 63), and it is the view held by the late N.H. Keerthiratne (1902-1992), who was the first and most assertive political leader of the group, in the interview which I had with him in 1978: "These people were not given any responsible position in the country. Their job was planting. For that there is no objection. So we started planting, coconuts, any other things, vegetables, we began planting and making money".

Under the Kandyan regime, as tenants of *gabadagam* (king's villages), "they were not allowed to acquire any permanent rights in land and were always at the disposal of the king" (Pridham quoted by Gilbert 1953: 327-28): they were *maruvena*, not *paraveni* tenants. After 1832, they benefitted from the abolition of the *rajakariya* obligations and the sale by the Crown of the *muttettu* (king's fields) of the *gabadagam*, which some families purchased (Sessional Paper 18 of 1869, Papers on Service Tenures, Memorandum by Sharpe, Badulla, 10.10.1869; in the words of P.E. Pieris (1913: II, 49, note) "by a strange turn of fortune's wheel, when the Kandyan *muttettu* lands were sold by the British Government, they were in many cases purchased by the *Paduwo* who cultivated them". However, the feudal reaction in the 1860s and 1870s, encouraged by the British administration, was resented



as a setback (but it affected only *ninda* and temple villages, where the *Batgam* were less numerous than the *Berava*).

During the British period, some of them found a free field for their enterprise. Among their skills was their ability for asweddumizing new lands or restoring abandoned tanks: one comes across numerous examples of their industry in reports and diaries. The early colonists who attempted to recultivate the fields under the Minneriya tank in 1850 were people who identified themselves as *Velli Durayi* (Irrigation report, Sessional Paper 1867/4); elsewhere in the dry zone, they undertook to restore by themselves tanks in Pandita Pattu, with the help of Indian specialists, (Administration Report Puttalam, 1868, p. 82) and in Demala Hatpattu (Idem, 1884 p. 108A: "Uppalawatta: this is a *Duraya* village and showed the usual signs of *Duraya* enterprise in the way of cultivation"). In other cases, they were established by local chiefs to repopulate abandoned villages (diary of Assistant Settlement Officer Fox, March 1906): "10 years ago Hulugalla Dissawe established some *Duraya* in the Gepallawa abandoned village, who then began to asweddumize low land for him". In the wet zone, the picture was the same: see the Kägalla diaries for 1861 and May 1893 for the villages of Atugoda and Bodawela, where the Assistant Government Agent marvelled at people digging irrigation channels and doing earthwork without being required to do so, with a skill to find the proper place to construct the *anicut*. An Agent concluded (Kägalla diary 24.4.1884): "It is worth remarking that in this district the most fertile and largest villages are possessed by low caste people - possibly given on account of their *rajakariya* services."

Their enterprise was not confined to paddy cultivation. For example, the *Duraya* of Attapitiya made a fortune by purchasing the remains of Fort King, the former headquarters of the British military in the district, selling the bricks and planting a coconut grove (Kägalla diary, January 1903). Planting coconut, tea and rubber became the path for economic success for many *Batgam* families, especially in the Kurunägala, Kägalla and Kandy districts (diary of the Assistant Settlement Officer Navaretnam for June 1934), the best example being that of the father of N.H. Keerthiratne and Asoka Karunaratna, who became rich by leasing undeveloped lands, undertaking planting contracts, and developing plant nurseries; war contracts during WW2 added a new source of income. In the villages of the Kägalla district, a substantial share of the lands passed from the hands of improvident high caste families

to low caste enterprising individuals, as in the case of the area south of Aranayaka studied by Tamara Gunasekera (1994: 141-152) and in the case of a village south of Kägalla studied by me (Meyer 2013b).

### ***Other Castes***

Craftsmen were not as numerous in Kägalla as in the neighbourhood of Kandy. Ironsmiths were present in every large village, especially in feudal villages; they were linked functionally but were very distinct sociologically from *Yamano* (iron smelters), who were considered as a low '*duraya*' caste. Gold/silversmiths formed a sort of aristocracy: the Kandyan kings made them lords over two villages (see Mangalagama *sannasa* in Bell 1892: 98-99 and Kägalla Diary 24.10.1893). Potters were a majority in a couple of villages and scattered elsewhere. Washers (of different gradations) were present everywhere but there was no major concentration.

The *Nekati* alias *Berava* (weavers, musicians and astrologers), and the *Oli* (dancers, the specialists of *bali* ceremonies) were commonly found in temple villages (such as Talduwa) where they acted as dancers and drummers, or in specific localities such as Watura. Through their ceremonial connection with temples and monks as drummers and dancers, some of them had attained an education level, which enabled them to act as astrologers and writers.

*Karava* and *Salagama* from the Low-country were present in a few villages in the west of the Kägalla district from the time of the Portuguese domination. There was a couple of *Karava* villages integrated into the Madige (transport) Department of the Kandyan kingdom, and they were quite active in the trade up to Kandy; others were boatmen on the Kelani river, ferrying and transporting goods and timber. And *Salagama* immigrants had been settled in the village of Etnawala, where they married *Vahumpura* women.

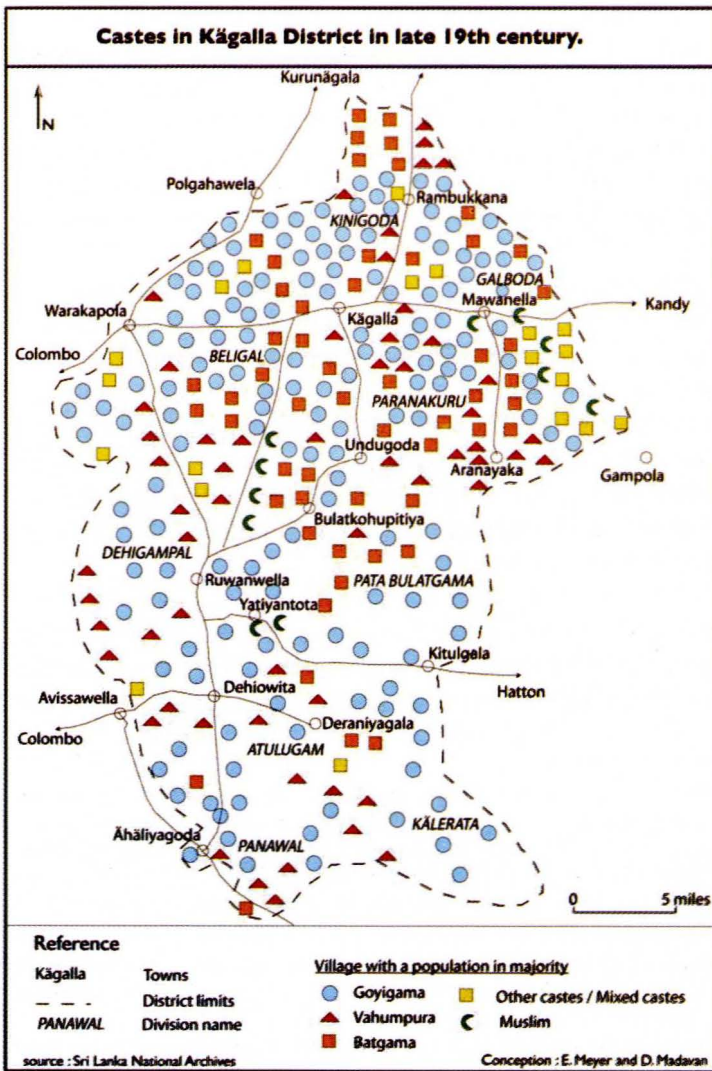
### ***Muslims***

Muslims living in the Kägalla district belonged to various categories, and it would be wrong to consider them as a single 'quasi-caste'. A group descended from Madige traders and bullock owners established in the Kandyan kingdom; they held most of the trade along the Kandy road, with a definite concentration around the town of Mawanella, and another near Ruwanwella, where they controlled the trade in arecanuts. Connected with them was an



influential family, the Betge Gopala, former physicians to the kings, who had become lords of the Moragammana village. Another group was made up of cultivators, who bore mixed Arabic and Sinhalese names; they were tenants in temple villages such as Alutnuwara, and in the former feudal/ex-royal villages of Mattamagoda and Atalawa where they had replaced a former *Vahumpura* and *Padu* population. The last group was that of the 'Coast Moors,' recent immigrant traders from the South west Indian coast, settled in towns such as Rambukkana.

**Spatial Distribution of Castes in the Kägalla District**



This map gives a very rough picture of the spatial distribution of villages with a majoritarian caste during the colonial period, but it does not pretend to be accurate in detail. My main sources are D'Oyly (1975), the forest and chena settlement reports, the paddy tax registers and the service tenure registers of the late 19th century, and the land settlement reports after 1900. Of course, due to further mobility and the weakening of caste identities, the map does not reflect the situation in present day Sri Lanka<sup>6</sup>.

In central Sri Lanka, the mono-caste villages were the majority if one includes under that category the villages where in addition to the majority caste there were a few families belonging to service castes. The typical monocaste village was a small irrigated valley or terraced village with a *Goyigama* population, or an extensive jungle habitat with a population either *Vahumpura*, or *Goyigama* with a possible *Vādda* ancestry, or *Panna*. In hilly Sri Lanka, frequent bi-caste small villages associated a *Goyigama* and a *Vahumupura* population, especially in the central part of the Kāgalla district, while villages with different non-*Goyigama* castes were uncommon.

Very large *Batgam* villages, such as Dorawaka, Ballapane, and Menikkadawara, were almost mono-caste, with the addition of an *Apullana* washing for the *Batgama*, and of a couple of *Goyigama* families employed as overseers (*vidana*), or as *kapurala* (priests) if there was a local *devale*, and these were settled in small hamlets on the periphery. Other large paddy producing villages, like *Dādigama* (a former princely capital) and *Algama* (a former temple village), were still worked by *Goyigama*, with a few craftsmen families, and were practically mono-caste.

On the contrary, the feudal villages were always multi-caste, especially the large *nindagam*: *Lewangama*, north of Ruwanwella, is the best example of a multi-caste village in the district, with at least

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<sup>6</sup> Compare with the approximate data reconstructed by Jiggins (1979). She may overestimate the numbers of *Vahumpura* and *Batgam* at the all-island level (3 million as compared with 4.5 million *Goyigama*), and her method of finding out the caste of the villages is not sufficiently explained to allow a definite appreciation of her results since she relies on present day oral testimonies without criticising the caste categories employed by her informants (p. 34). Besides, there are serious inaccuracies resulting from her lack of historical knowledge (e.g., '*Panna* weavers', '*Padu* sword bearers' [these two castes have no such specific occupations], '*Navandanna* goldsmiths [instead of any smiths]', '*Mahinda* [instead of *Sanghamitta*] bringing the bo-tree', '*nindagam* [instead of *gabadagam*] king's land'.



seven castes: the village was given for their services to the successive governors (*dissawe* or *ratemahatmaya*) of the three Korales, the southern section of the present Kägalla district. It contained 7 hamlets and 32 *pangu* (service tenure units): 12 *Govi pangu* including those of the overseers (*kankanam*); 8 specialized service *pangu*, 3 *Achari* (smiths), 2 *Nekati* (astrologers/musicians), 1 *Badahela* (potter), 2 *Rada* (washermen); and 12 *Durayapangu* (= 4 *Padu*, 5 *Vahumpura*, 3 unidentified). The *devalegam* (temple villages) belonging to the Kandy Maha Devale, located south of Mawanella, were also multicasite. But these villages were the exception rather than the rule in Sri Lanka while in India there were few mono-caste villages: the Indian pattern must have been imported by kings and nobles of South Indian origin.

*Goyigama* villages were everywhere but they tended to be smaller than those inhabited by lower castes. Some were concentrated in solid blocks from which the lower castes were quasi-absent: for example, the area north of Kägalla, and some of the upper valleys of Bulatgama, inhabited by people regarded as of Vädda origin. Others were, like small capitals, at the centre of a group of villages belonging to different castes, a 'micro-galactic' feature reproducing that of the capital Kandy: Beligala and Dädigama (to the west of the district), and Leuke to the east, are examples.

*Vahumpura* were located on the hills on the western, eastern and southern borders of the district, where reserved forest belts (*tahansi käle*) had been in existence until the British take-over, and also in the central hilly area called Kandupita, where they mixed with *Goyigama*. Forest and garden resources were the speciality of the Hakuru; they also acted as collectors of arecanut (the main export resource of the district) and cultivators of betel, possibly as cinnamon peelers (they intermarried with *Salagama* on the western borders). But none of these activities was a *Vahumpura* monopoly: one finds numerous *Govi*, *Panna* and Muslim villages engaged in the same trades.

*Batgama*, with their two main subdivisions, *Padu* and *Panna*, were found in two different locations: in the northern half of the district, the first, *Padu*, were very numerous in the large valleys cultivated with paddy, where they were settled by the kings to repopulate them after the lengthy wars which affected the district; in the eastern and south-central part of the district, the second, *Panna*,

inhabited the poorer and more hilly villages, in the areas from which the *Vahumpura* were absent.

The district had long been a border area affected by wars, at least since the Simhalasange (15th century) and the fights between Gampola and Kotte principalities, and probably much before: the area was populated very early, Wattarama Vihare dates from the 3rd century, Kirawelle from the 4th century (Bell 1892). Initially, Hatarakorale (the Four Korale, the northern part of the present district) included Siyane and Hapitigam Korales, which are now in the Colombo district. It was a most troubled area under the Portuguese, when Menikkadawara and Arandara outposts were taken and lost, Kandy invaded and lost. When Sitawaka was active as the main centre of resistance, the Three Korale, the southern part of the district, was its immediate hinterland. The 18th century was quieter, with perhaps population growth under the Kandyan kings (Hatarakorale was resituated by the Dutch to Rajasinha II except Siyane and Hapitigam annexed to Colombo *dissavony*), but the military organization of the district was still very apparent in the *Hatara Korale Lekammitiya* and the section of D'Oyly's *Constitution of the Kandyan kingdom* (1975: 10-30) dealing with the Four Korales. These villages taken and recaptured must have been depopulated more often than not, with the possibility for the kings to make them *gabadagam* and settle immigrant 'soldiers and husbandmen', or to dedicate them to temples, especially the Alutnuwara and later the Kandy Maha Vishnu Devale. Migration of Indian soldiers is attested from the 7th century in the border districts of the Four and Three Korales. Hatarakorale had been the place of several successive principalities (Beligala, Dedigama) and the Kandy Adigars were often drawn from the ranks of their aristocratic families (the so-called 'eighteen walauwas') such as Leuke, Molligoda, and Keppitipola, who based their wealth on the rich lands of Galboda and Paranakuru Korale, just under the passes leading up-country.

Even in peaceful times, it was the king's policy to lay hands on such villages considered rich enough to make *gabadagam*: the stories relating to villages such as Dorawaka, Kehelpannala, and Warakagoda are quite telling. Dorawaka was originally called Mawatagama and inhabited by Govi, later disgraced and depopulated, given to *Batgam* people and renamed Dorawaka (Pieris 1945: 145). Kehelpannala, in the hills above Gampola was founded by Brahmins acting as royal astrologers; later *Govi*



villagers resisted attempts by the kings and their courtiers to have it reduced to the status of *gabadagama*, by hiding its prosperity: when the king attracted by the report of his nobles came to visit it, villagers planted their paddy fields with *kehel* (banana) trees and built chena huts to make it undistinguishable from neighbouring villages. Centuries later these Govi were still very disobedient people and punitive police was quartered there for months by the British (Bell 1892: 33-34). Warakagoda, in the Three Korale, at the time of Sitawaka, was given by King Rajasimha I to the *Duraya* of a nearby village, Polatagama, to rear cattle there, at the expense of local settlers who were expelled (SLNA 6/10989 and 30/572, Ekneligoda report 25.11.1888). There are several such cases in Lawrie's *Gazetteer for the Central Province*, for example that of Teldeniya, the Govi inhabitants of which were expelled by King Rajasinha and replaced by *Padu* or *Hinna* from Siyane korale, who would later come to be considered as *Porokarayo* (woodcutters, a function and not a caste). More generally, in the Kandyan kingdom, the fear of any free Govi villager was to be reduced to a servile status (*wahal*) or degraded (*gattara*) for treason: in both cases, the villager would not lose his caste, nor his village, but his freedom, his prestige and probably his *paraveni* (hereditary) rights.

### **Caste, Function, Economic and Power Relations**

When the British took Kandy in 1815 they first upheld what they thought to be the traditional order: on the basis of documents furnished by Molligoda Adigar, the Resident D'Oyly compiled before his death (1824) a 'Constitution of the Kandyan kingdom' which was first published in 1833. Then, after 1833, they embarked on a new policy following the recommendations of Colebrooke, sold out *gabadagam*, brought in low country headmen and interpreters, disregarded caste considerations at the Temple Lands enquiries and the Waste Lands Ordinance enquiries. Caste was perceived by the British as an impediment to a free labour market, and a pretext to resist the demands of the colonial authorities: in the words of a high ranking civil servant, Anstruther: "It appears to me that the native of Ceylon generally avails himself of the prejudices of caste as an armour against the calls of government for labour. In cases where government is not concerned I do not observe that the majority of natives shun any mode of employment, which would otherwise be easy and profitable, on the score of caste only" (SLNA 19/9, Anstruther to Commissioners of Eastern Enquiry, 9.02.1830, quoted by De Silva 1982: 224). What mattered was the degree of freedom of the villager from the powers more than issues of

religious purity. Apart from the rare really polluting occupations, the hierarchy was seen as based on the degree of autonomy in relation to occupations involving compulsory manual labour, manifested in dress, seating and other codes of everyday life and cemented by endogamy rules.

After the Indian Mutiny a new policy was started, notably by Governors Robinson and Gordon (Lord Stanmore), leading to what Newton Gunasinghe aptly described as a 'feudal reaction'. As in India, the colonial ideologues painted an idyllic image of the immobile village order (Phear 1880). A Service Tenures Commission was set up to register services due by tenants of temple and seigneurial villages. In his report for 1870, the commissioner Dickson (Administration Report of the Service Tenures Commissioner 1870: 76) described the system as smoothly working, perfectly organized, in which service was gladly accepted in compensation for security. But the unpublished enquiries leading to the registration of temple and *nindagam* services show a definite bias towards high caste interests. This new policy was exploited to their profit by a few enterprising and influential Kandyan families while other families who could boast of being better blue-blooded were left out because they had no connection with the colonial masters. Obviously, there was some money to be made by exploiting Kandyan feudal structures. Among a dozen of examples in the Ratnapura and Kägalla districts, the Ellawalas and the Ratwattes families have a place of choice. The best example is that of Abeyratne BandaRatwatte, father of Barnes Ratwatte and grand father of Sirimavo Bandaranaike, documented in the Kägalla Diaries for 1894 and 1895 (also for September 1905 and November 1907). A.B. Ratwatte was *ninda* proprietor with his wife of Leuke estates; he was also Basnaïke Nilame of the Kandy Maha Devale, which controlled extensive lands in the same area, notably the Alutnuwara *devalegam*; he was also *shroff* (head cashier) of a commercial bank in Kandy. His field of activity was the area south of Mawanella, with a Duraya majority, but also with strong headed Muslim litigants (a common feature in temple village was the presence of Muslims). According to the Assistant Government Agent, he systematically sued his tenants for failure to pay or do service (with the abolition of the Grain Tax which the proprietor used to pay on behalf of the tenants, the latter ceased to pay their dues). He insisted on expelling the tenants "kick them clean out of the villages", and he would "keep the Village Tribunal going on his cases alone, and he has just as many in the courts in Kandy and doubtless elsewhere,



for he is I think in one capacity or another the largest landholder in the Kandyan province". The result was an intense discontent against him and his agents in the area, attempts to attack him on his way to Leuke *walauwa* (it may have been a false rumour spread by himself). As is well known, his descendants and their relatives formed the most influential Kandyan family group.

In a sense, caste relations *stricto sensu* were superseded by functional relations, re-enacted or recreated by registration policy, contrary to India where at the same time censuses and gazetteers, produced under the guidance of Brahmin informants, described and enumerated castes in India as if they were the quintessential social units (Rogers 2004). This was not a new phenomenon in Ceylon: already in the 1830s, according to the findings of the Colebrooke-Cameron commission (CO 416/19/G4), British tribunals never took decisions regarding caste *appartenance*, but on rendering of services only. In my opinion, it was just a continuation of the practice of the Kandyan kings and the Radala aristocracy: 18th century *lekammiti* were concerned with that sole purpose. Similarly, in the Low Country, Nirmal Dewasiri considers that for the Dutch administration, "the main reason to classify people was to facilitate the mobilisation of *rajakariya* labour" (Dewasiri 2008: 186) The examination of 19th century service tenure registers shows that the men in power made few distinctions between service castes: *Panna*, *Berava*, *Vahumpura*, even *Naide Govi* were often required to render similar services or services thought to belong to another caste: one comes across *Vahumpura* dancers, *Batgama* jaggery makers<sup>7</sup>, *Goyigama* coolies or *mananna* (measurers) and so on. The outside order, upheld by the colonial regime, which was aimed at service, took little cognisance of the inside order, which was that of endogamy and prestige gradation, as long as the service was rendered. But cases of passive or active resistance to oppression were rather frequent: it is well known that the use of *rajakariya* for building the Kandy road was so widely resisted by villagers of the Kägalla (then Fort King) district that the British had to rely on a pioneer corps made up of Indian workers under military discipline; less documented is the general lapse of services in small *nindagam* and *devalegam*, which the Service Tenures Commissioners were unable to counter. It was only the

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<sup>7</sup> Among numerous cases of disjunctive caste-function, see Suduhakurugama which was populated by *Padu*, and not by *Vahumpura* as the name of the village, 'white sugar village' and its service - furnishing sugar - would imply (Lawrie 1896: II-800)

most powerful and best connected families who could exact services.

In any case, the villagers themselves were keen on the distinction between the hierarchical caste order, which they recognized, and the government-sponsored neo-feudal order, which they opposed. In the dry zone, many decades later, a Settlement Officer who enquired into the land claims in a bi-caste village (Navandanna and Goyigama), recorded the clear expression of that sentiment (diary of Assistant Settlement Officer Abhayakoon, February 1936, village of Gurunnehelagama, Wann): "Goyigama people stated that Navandanna were their tenants and performed services. The latter denied (...) and stated that any services they rendered were out of personal regard to the Goyiwanse people and not because they were *ninda* lords". There was a fundamental difference between the free interplay of '*jajmani*' (exchange of services) relations as they prevailed in the Wann villages (like in the Indian countryside of the classical works on caste), and the organized 'feudal villages' of the Kandyan highlands, where caste was exploited for the service of the king and his grandees. It is the latter situation which prevailed in Kägalla.

Access to land in these feudal villages was generally proportionate with the caste status of the tenants, and that feature was more conspicuous in Sabaragamuwa than elsewhere: in Ratnapura and (to a lesser extent) in Kägalla districts there was a very large category of tenants at-will (*maruvena nilakarayo*) that formed a *de facto* landless rural proletariat. The Papers on Service Tenures (Sessional Paper 1869/18), especially the memoranda of Mitford and Sharpe, and the more recent Mahawalatenne report on the Census for 1901 (SLNA 59/417), are very explicit on the subject, but most public colonial reports eluded an issue which would affect their power base - the reliance on Kandyan headmen. In unprinted sources, such as diaries, a different story emerges, where it appears that some families or individuals were able to persuade the Service Tenure Commissioners to register as *maruvena*, tenures which were actually *paraveni* (the most conspicuous case being that of the village of Kanuggala appropriated by the Ellawala family, where the Goyigama villagers were as affected as the low caste people). Land grabbing by high caste headmen trying to pass as Kandyans but actually hailing from the Low Country was common during the 19th century, as in the case of the ('*Batgam Berava*') village of Balatgomuwa (above Aranayake) where an outsider usurping the



prestigious name of Molligoda, but actually named Edward Wijesinghe, tried to grab land by foul means (Diaries Kägalla for the 1860s; see also Meyer 1992)

Traditionally, intercaste tension manifested itself when rules of endogamy or codes of dress and seating were transgressed. 19th century colonial sources allude to local incidents when the wearing of upper clothes by low caste men and women, or disrespect of seating rules, led to violence by high caste men (for ex: CO 416/21/G.42 Board of Kandyan Commissioners 6.01.1829 in Ruwanwella; Kägalla Diary November 1870 in Bulatkohupitiya; October 1905 in Ampe). Murder or suicide under family pressure in cases of high caste girls eloping with low caste men are also mentioned in the district (Administration Report of the Inspector General of Police 1867: 203, in Malawita; Kägalla Diary November 1904 in Weligalla, March 1906 in Kitulgala, April 1915 in Atale).

But violence was much more frequent when it involved relations of power between high caste local headmen (*aracci*, *korala*, *ratemahatmaya*) and low caste headmen (*duraya* and *dewaya*), who were their subordinates under the British while under the Kandyan kings they were often under the direct authority of a specific chief located in the capital. The low caste headmen regularly complained of being harassed by high caste headmen, who extorted bribes from them, misappropriated grain taxes, and abducted their women while the latter reported them to the colonial authorities for drunkenness, cattle stealing, illicit tree felling, unauthorized *chena* cultivation, and refusal to obey orders, and often obtained their dismissal. Besides, the Goyigama headmen had the monopoly of three functions which gave them an economic, symbolic and social power: as *wibadde lekam*, in charge of the grain tax assessments, until the 1890s; as registrars of births, deaths and marriages, which gave them the power to refuse to register a low caste child under a high caste or even neutral personal name (Kägalla Diary July 1885); and as police officers, when and where a rural police was established. These privileges were resented by the non-Goyigama, and as soon as outsiders began to look after their interests, they agitated for their abolition. It happened when Christian missionaries selected low caste villages for proselytism, as in Walgam Pattuwa, north of Rambukkana, which became a field for the rival activities of the Church of England, the Catholics, and later the Salvation Army (Kägalla diaries, October 1887, April-June 1893, May 1894). Half a century later, in the 1930s, in the context of

electoral politics and with the development of print media, discrimination was more forcefully denounced (Wickremeratne 1975: 56-57), especially by the Udarata Jathika Sangamaya headed by N.H. Keerthiratne, with complaints regarding headmen requisitioning forced services and of registrars imposing 'low sounding' names. J.H. Meedeniya, the most influential Kägalla *ratemahatmaya*, honoured by the British with the Kandyan title of Adigar, was the target of virulent criticism for the evidence he had given before the Police Commission, where he insisted that low caste people should not be employed by the police. During the malaria epidemic of 1934-1935, especially severe in Kägalla and Kurunägala, accusations of caste discrimination by headmen in the distribution of relief were frequent (Meyer 2013a). In some areas, the growing assertiveness and economic success of local *Batgama* villagers during the second half of the 20th century inverted the traditional order, in a way reminiscent of the rise of the *Karava/Salagama/Durava* castes in the Low Country a hundred years earlier. The outcome was a new form of caste tension between these people and impoverished Goyigama villagers (Gunasekera 1994: 105).

However, caste consciousness never led to the formation of political parties nor even of strong lobbies as in India. It is often suggested that in the 1971 insurgency, the *Vahumpura* and *Batgama* youth were very much involved in the Kägalla district, and that the government of Sirimavo Bandaranaike née Ratwatte which they fought represented the interests of the '*walauwa* people'. The memories of past oppression and highland dispossession under the colonial regime must have played a role in their political activism, but caste was never openly put forward as a rallying cry: it belonged to the Sri Lankan cryptic political culture.

A popular interpretation would contend that owing to the influence of Buddhism, caste was never as discriminatory in Buddhist Sri Lanka as it was in brahminical India, and that caste mindedness developed under South Indian rulers - even inside the Sangha. A different view underlying the analyses of Ralph Pieris (1956) and John Rogers (2004) maintains that caste was central in the self-representation and organization of Sinhala society and polity until the 1830s, and went underground because it became irrelevant for the purpose of colonial administration; I would qualify that interpretation as regard the Kandyan regions, where the evolution was slower. Anyway, notably in the matter of alliance strategies,



caste remained an essential criterion, which outlived the collapse of the Kandyan and colonial systems of administration. Lorna Devaraja in her study of the Kandyan kingdom (1972: 234) put forward the hypothesis that "the link [of the *rajakariya* system] with caste [was] possibly fortuitous". Pushing too far the argument would miss the point that caste classification was also a system of incorporation of various migrant or marginal groups. But caste hierarchy and power hierarchies followed different logics, and severing the link between the two must have underlain long term peasant strategies.

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