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### *Abstract*

*Buddhism is among major religious beliefs worldwide and is considered a philosophy rather than a religion. It is the doctrine preached by the Buddha. One of the most important teachings of Buddhism is equality; the Buddha rejected discrimination based on caste, colour, and so on and taught his followers to do the same. However, some current Buddhist practices clearly adhere to the caste discrimination prevailing in society. Hence the study was carried out to evaluate attitudes and perceptions of monks and laypersons about the prevailing caste related Buddhist practices against Buddha's doctrine. A qualitative study was conducted on 20 subjects selected through purposive sampling. The sample was a mixture of laymen/women and Buddhist monks. In-depth interviews were conducted for approximately one hour per individual. The results revealed that the divisions of nikaya or monastic order/fraternity in Buddhism is primarily formed and continues based on caste differences. Further the study revealed the awareness of the general public regarding the caste-based practices in the Temple of Tooth. But none of these respondents could justify any of the findings in relation to Buddhist doctrine, and a majority believed caste-based practices as a tradition transferred from generation to generation. It was also explained by a few that casteism has become a tradition which the public accept blindly without questioning it in relation to Buddhist teachings. The results of the study recommend that Sinhala Buddhists who appreciate equality should contribute to a social discourse attempting to change caste-based discrimination. The study also suggests that people should get rid of conservative ideas to reject unacceptable practices prevailing in popular Buddhism so as to promote and protect pure Buddhism.*

*Keywords: Buddhism, caste, discrimination, nikaya (monastic order/fraternity)*

### **Introduction**

#### **Buddha's position on social inequality**

Buddhism is well-known worldwide as a religious belief which has a rational and philosophical bent. It is even thought of as an academic discipline. As noted by Dhammanandha (1993), Gothama Buddha's personal name was Siddhartha, and the name 'Buddha' was given to him after he attained enlightenment and realized the truth. He was born into a prestigious, rich, and royal family and gave up his royal life in search of truth. His preaching covers every aspect of human life and guided people to live a life of peace and harmony. He was free from attachment and taught his followers the value of being so. According to Streng (1971), the highest wisdom that the Buddha preached is an attitude or

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mental-psychic condition which permits one to function without pain and with great joy. Buddhism teaches lay persons how to live a good life, a king how to be a good king, and monks how to find individual salvation from worldly bonds, etc. On the other hand, Buddhism may be construed as a science, as well as a philosophy, which explains and describes complicated functions of mind and extends up to universe. Many scholars worldwide have studied and discussed Buddhist philosophy. For instance, Kalupahana (1976) presents a detailed discussion on the philosophical richness of Buddhism. In explaining Buddhism in a simple way, Gombrich (1988) says, “The Buddha is the great physician, the Dhamma is the remedy he prescribes, the Sangha is the nurse who administers that remedy” (p.2).

The Buddha is famous for advocating non-violence. He promoted peace, harmony, and social justice. He rejected the caste system that existed in India at the time and discredited the notion of untouchability (Silva, 2017). He made the *Dhamma* (his preaching/doctrine) available to everyone and the monastic order was open to anyone regardless of caste differences. The story of Sunita, a scavenger and outcaste who became a follower of the Buddha and joined the monastic order with his approval, is a fine example of how the Buddha condemned social discrimination and inequalities.

### **Caste, Buddhism, and Popular Buddhist practices**

It is believed that the caste system first emerged in India. Brahmins, considered to be at the top of the Indian caste ladder, believed that caste cannot be changed as it determines a person’s social status at birth. The Buddha rejected Brahmin ideas and preached that a person’s status is not determined by birth but by one’s deeds. The Buddha clearly expressed his views on caste discrimination in the *Wasala Sutta*, the *Madura Sutta*, and the *Assalayana Sutta*. In the *Madura Sutta*, the Buddha stated that all monks should be equally considered and deserve respect despite the caste they belonged to as laypersons. Therefore, it is fair to say that Buddhism clearly rejects caste discrimination within monks’ communities. As Malalgoda (1976) points out, the Sangha’s (monks’) original motivation and purpose is individual salvation from the world of suffering and bondage. Gombrich (1988) stated that the Sangha are people who have left society to look for salvation; their duties include preaching and preserving the Buddha’s teachings.

But it has been observed by many scholars that Buddhist monks have deviated from Buddhist doctrine in following caste-based practices. According to Malalgoda (1976), granting higher ordination was refused to those of non-Govigama social origins, a refusal legitimized by a royal decree attributed to King Keerthi Sri Rajasinha. It is logical to suspect this point the beginning of caste relations in Buddhist practices. Caste has had a conflicted history within the Buddhist priesthood. Malalgoda (1976) pointed out that as a result of low caste protests, a separate fraternity (monastic order) was established. But this measure cannot be the ultimate solution to discrimination as caste conflicts still prevail in monks' communities.

### **Caste as an inseparable part of Sri Lankan culture**

Caste is a form of social stratification. As noted by Farooq (2012), the term 'caste' was derived from the Spanish word 'casta' meaning breed or race. The caste system was introduced to Sri Lanka from India many years ago.

According to Rao (2010), the caste system is basically a way of dividing people into different social classes, ranking them from the highest to the lowest. Even though the Sri Lankan caste system was influenced by the Indian Hindu caste system, the former has evolved with distinct changes. According to Ryan (1953), Sinhalese caste classification is based on occupation and place in the feudal order. Even though caste seems to be primarily determined by the occupation, the prevailing situation is different. Many people have achieved a social status which is higher to the status of their caste. But the commonly witnessed fact is that despite class mobility, caste identity remains the same and taken into consideration in special circumstances, like marriage. Hence, caste can be identified as an inseparable part of Sri Lankan culture.

### **What is missing in the literature?**

Most writings on current Buddhist practices have precisely explained the different traditions and customs in Buddhism and Buddhist religious institutions. Caste-based practices in popular Buddhism are taken into consideration by some scholars (Gombrich, 1971; Malalgoda, 1976; Silva et al., 2009; Gombrich & Obeysekare, 1988; Silva, 2017).

Though some scholars have addressed the topic of caste in Buddhism, it remains a knowledge gap in the literature, because a study on Buddhist monks' attitudes and perceptions on caste-based Buddhist practice has not been conducted so far. Moreover, it is really important to know the social discourse, as well as individual points of view, of the

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Sinhala Buddhist people about caste-based practices in popular Buddhism. This study is a qualitative study that bridges the knowledge gap in the area of study.

**Why is this study important?**

Buddhism is not only as a religion but a philosophy and an academic discipline that have earned attention and recognition. Hence, a considerable number of academic writings on Buddhism and related subjects can be found. But there are no published studies on perceptions of monks regarding caste discrimination in Buddhism. So, this research will be an influential contribution to the field. Additionally, the study has investigated public perceptions too. This will add more insight to the issue in understanding social discourse.

**Objectives**

Buddhism is a religious belief with a philosophical bent. Buddhism is famous for its priorities of equality, harmony, the middle path (the eightfold path), and the four truths. The Buddha rejected discrimination based on caste, colour, status, wealth and other distinctions and taught his followers to do the same. However, a majority of Sri Lankan Buddhists tend to promote discrimination based on caste, class, and gender, contrary to Buddhist teaching. This research aims to find out the most crucial and known caste-based Buddhist practices. Furthermore, the research aimed at investigating the views of Sinhala Buddhist laypeople, as well as monks/nuns, about caste-based practices in Buddhism.

**Methodology****Sample**

This qualitative study was conducted with a sample of 20 case studies selected through purposive sampling. The sample was a mixture of laymen/laywomen and Buddhist monks/nuns. All the subjects of the sample were Buddhists. Participation from other religious groups was discouraged as such respondents might have had inadequate understanding and knowledge about Buddhist practices.

**Methods and data collection tool**

The research followed a qualitative approach. In-depth interviews were used as data collection tools. Informed written consent was obtained from all the interviewees prior to the study. They were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any point without having to explain why. They were also told that they would be quoted anonymously and they could remain silent if they did not wish to answer. This study was conducted in

accordance with the Helsinki declaration (Experimentation, 1966). Interviews were conducted through a semi-structured questionnaire. Each participant was interviewed for a minimum of one hour and a maximum of two hours.

## Results

The study was conducted with a sample of 20 case studies. The sample may be categorized as follows.

Category	Percentages of cases(%)
Monks	20
Nuns	10
Laywomen	30
Laymen	40
Total	100

### Laypersons' perspectives on caste relations in popular Buddhism

Seventy percent of the study population consisted of lay persons of both genders. All the participants were aware of the fact that caste is taken into consideration when a layperson enters the priesthood into a monastic order. They were aware that the duties and responsibilities of the Temple of Tooth and some other major Buddhist religious institutions are handled by the monastic order consisting of high-caste monks, particularly monks with roots in the Govigama caste. Most importantly, all were aware that the pure Buddhist doctrine rejects caste, class, and other discrimination, and these popular practices are deviations from pure Buddhist teachings. On the other hand, people have no or little knowledge about caste in relation to women's ordination.

Apart from one participant, all the others rejected the place that caste is given in Buddhist practices. Two participants believed that prevailing practices are related the Buddha's high-caste birth. Four participants believed that the Buddha's high-caste birth has been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused in popular Buddhist practices. One participant believed that even the Buddha was not powerful enough to challenge the caste system prevailing in Indian society, and that was why he had a high-caste birth. But she insisted that in his later years, the Buddha tried tremendously, albeit unsuccessfully, to reject discrimination and to establish equality and reconciliation. Two participants quoted the

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term, '*kula daruwo*,' (meaning, high-caste young people), basically used to reference persons about to enter to the priesthood. They insisted that the term itself suggested that priesthood was given to those who come from recognized high-caste groups. Three participants stated that low-caste people lack personality and moral character. So that when they become monks, it is difficult for them to act accordingly, and it is uncomfortable for elite lay persons to respect them. So, the monastic order provides the elite an opportunity to worship and get advice only from high-caste monks. All the other participants did not believe that personality and moral character are linked with caste. Instead, they strongly believed that it is not caste that should be taken into consideration when admitting persons into the priesthood, but individual characteristics and qualities. The majority of participants believed that the introduction of caste considerations into Buddhist practices was a result of a high-caste social domination. So, these practices help to maintain capitalist aspirations.

One participant believed that the monastic order of monks is based not only on caste, but also property, prestige, and ownership of property. He said, "Both land owners and monks are addressed as '*hamuduruwane*.' This shows that the honorific, '*hamuduruwane*,' is associated with the ownership of property, not with the priesthood." Another respondent insisted that some monks did not approve of caste stratification. He pointed out that some monks are trying to establish different traditions: ways of wearing the robe, different practices, etc. He further added that current monks have a tendency to shift towards power and wealth rather than spirituality.

The majority of participants believed that powerful people had changed Buddhist practices in their favour. A participant exclaimed that this took place because Sri Lankan kings were reluctant to respect and worship low-caste monks. Another participant stated that, "Caste in Buddhism in Sri Lanka is a part of Sri Lankan culture. It is not about the core values in religion. It is obvious that in many cases the core ideas of Buddhism are being violated.... Religion is raped by its followers." He said that what we thought of nowadays as Buddhism is more likely the result of early Buddhist scholarly work. On the other hand, there was a participant who approved of the role of caste in popular Buddhist practices. According to him, low-caste people have inferiority complexes which make them less qualified to play a responsible role as a monk. But he also added that caste is a disgrace to Buddhist doctrine. All the lay persons pointed out the need to abolish these practices to establish and promote pure Buddhist doctrine.

**Buddhist monks' perspectives on caste relations in popular Buddhism**

Of the 20 subjects, there were 4 monks and 2 nuns. All accepted that the caste-based Buddhist practices are unacceptable according to the Buddha's doctrine. They expressed their shame concerning this issue. One monk said that the caste consideration for monks started in the period of King Keerthi Sri Rajasinha, through a decree concerning a low-caste monk's inadequate show of respect before the king. The respondent added, "Low-caste people have an attitude of inferiority. Even though they become monks, they cannot get rid of it." He explained that caste stratification persists in Buddhist practices because Sinhala Buddhists place a lot of value on caste. He added, "I have witnessed situations where people reject monks from low-caste backgrounds." The respondent explained that the temple is closely linked to society. The caste system in society is automatically absorbed by temples; an individual doesn't discard all the beliefs and attitudes they held as a lay person when they don robes.

Another participant stated, "People get to know monks through association with their family or relatives." He explained that the caste system is practiced by people and Buddhist monks. One monk said that the emergence of caste-based practices resulted from a king's order, as follows (another monk too said the same): "*Apita wadinna puluwan aya mahana karanda*" (Ordain those we may worship). He further said that the Buddha preached respect for royal authority. The respondent also said that caste-based Buddhist practices are most strictly observed in Kandy. Furthermore, another monk explained that caste would be less of a consideration as monks become educated. But the caste system would never be completely rejected, as monks are afraid of and find it offensive to go against established traditions. Moreover, he added that ordination differences are not based on Buddhist philosophy but on appearances. Therefore, all follow the same doctrine regardless of caste. But he accepted that he failed to answer the question: "If all monks follow the same doctrine, why is caste stratification a factor in ordination?"

On the other hand, Buddhist nuns explained that caste does not apply to their ordination. One nun said that monastic order is based not only on caste but on property ownership: many monks get their elderly relatives into the priesthood in order to gain control of property. In summary, both nuns and monks accepted that the caste-based practices should be abolished as they are a disgrace to Buddhist teachings.



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## Discussion and Conclusion

### Sinhala Buddhist attitudes on caste-based practices in popular Buddhism

The results showed that a majority of respondents agree caste holds no place in Buddhism. But a small number offered justification in its favour. All participants agreed that caste-based practices are contrary to Buddhist doctrine. There spondents have observed a power struggle among monks, which is again contrary to Buddhist doctrine. The royal decree quoted by two interviewees, “*Apita wadinna puluwan aya mahana karanda*” (Ordain those we may worship), is very significant, since it represents a common social attitude today.

One respondent explained that monks show a tendency towards creating traditions, raising the question whether further divisions might arise in the future. Another idea was that the temple is influenced by society and, therefore, embraces caste differentiation. This leads to the question whether Buddhist priests who are meant to be spiritual guides should be governed by social attitudes and beliefs. Also, caste is not a consideration among Buddhist nuns but remains a strong practice among monks.

Ideally, Buddhist practices should be based on doctrine. Caste considerations in ordination is now a traditional practice. There is no popular discussion about whether the tradition is right or wrong and whether it should hold a place in contemporary society. Both the clergy and lay respondents of this study emphasized that caste-based Buddhist practices should be abolished. Most believed that this should be initiated by the high-caste chief priests. Caste stratification means that the Sinhala Buddhist community is unable to identify true ambassadors of pure Buddhism. Therefore, my final note is that Sri Lankan Buddhists need to critically evaluate the prevailing discriminatory practices based on the caste system.

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