

# **AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF THE CHANGES WITHIN THE RODI COMMUNITY AGAINST A BACKDROP OF SRI LANKAN SOCIETY**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The main aim of this study is to discuss the changes and the challenges, faced in the present day by the Rodi Community in Sri Lanka. A caste system is a common feature in the South Asian societies and this particular social feature of stratification has been found in the Sri Lankan society since ancient times. While Sri Lanka has many castes within the caste hierarchy, the Rodi community is placed right at the bottom and their numbers are the lowest. Their fall from grace within the Sri Lankan society in ancient times is attributed to supplying the King's palace with the human flesh, instead of venison(Knox,1981:70) Walking along the streets, begging and receiving the brunt of other caste members' derision, disgust and revulsion have been part and parcel of their lives, since ancient times. In the present day, the socio-economic conditions of this community have faced with many changes. This research study aims to identify the changes which have taken place within the Rodi community and to study them further. During the time of the British rule, the concepts such as equality, acceptance and the human rights were made popular, and which had a direct impact on the traditional lives and livelihoods of the Rodi people. These changes over the years had recreated a new image for this community which was shunned by the majority. This study hopes to explore the hypothesis, 'the cultural practices of the Rodi people have faced with many changes and challenges,' as well as delve into the changes which have taken place from ancient times to the present day.

Key words - Rodi Community , caste system, caste hierarchy, Social Stratification

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Social stratification is a unique feature in the south Asian societies, which can be identified as the caste system. Since ancient times, the caste system has been a prevalent and a powerful factor in the Indian society. Due to the Indian influence, the social stratification has spread to the Sri Lankan society as well.

However, it must be noted that the stratification in Sri Lanka is not as rigid as it is in India. The reason, being the influence of Buddhism which has rejected the caste system. While there are 16 castes which can be named, in the caste hierarchy, the Rodi caste is at the bottom of the list. The Rodi caste has been discriminated by the rest of the castes in the Sri Lankan society. This research study hopes to identify the changes which the Rodi people are facing in the modern times.

## **REASEACH BACKGROUND**

The Rodi community has played a prominent role in the Sri Lankan society from ancient times. Eventhough, they are small in numbers, special attention and awareness have been paid by other clans towards this community. As the Rodi people are at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, it is clear that the other clans have no reservations in showing their revulsion and disgust towards them.

In ancient times, the job description of the Rodi people was to supply the King's palace with the venison. One day, instead of venison, the Rodi hunter surreptitiously supplied the royal household with the human flesh which the King in his ignorance relished during his meal. Although, King Parakramabahu's daughter Ratnavalli discovered the gruesome secret, she encouraged the hunter to continue with the supply of human flesh.

As time went on, the King discovered the horrific secret, he in his rage disowned his daughter, stripped her off of her royal entitlements and jewellery, gave her in marriage to the venison hunter, replaced her royal garb with rags and sent her to live with the Rodi clan, stating that the death was too good as a punishment for her and banished her from the palace.

The royal decree stated that from generation to generation they cannot engage in any trade or livelihood, and that they should roam throughout the kingdom begging from the rest for their survival and he ordered that they should be discriminated and treated with revulsion and disgust. Accordingly this community is found throughout Sri Lanka in small numbers.

Social stratification is an inimitable feature in the south Asian societies, which can be identified as the caste system. In India the caste system is quite rigid in its rules and it has been a prevalent and a powerful factor in their society. The Caste system in India is a social institution strongly interlinked with Hinduism.

In India, caste is identified under two names, which are *Varna* and *Jati*. *Varna* is a system deeply intertwined with Hinduism. The entire Hindu society is divided into four segments namely Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. When the Hindu society is studied, although the *Varna* system is important, it is the *Jati* system that is in use practically in the Indian social institution. *Jati* system though linked to the *Varna* system is a more complex division of classes. In India there would be many different *Jati* divisions throughout the country (Dube, 1990:48).

Sociologist Srinivas, identified that in one geographical area where one language is spoken, there would be over 2000 *Jati* divisions. (Srinivas, 1952) *Jati* or castes are many in India.

According to *Varna* division system, Brahmins are at the top tier in society while the Kshatriya and Vaishya come in second and third tiers respectively. Shudra is considered to be the lowest at the bottom of the hierarchy, while they are considered to be unclean, of a low birth and low social standing and they have no choice but to live a life of servitude to the other castes.

In the Indian society they are known as the 'untouchables' the other castes did not even want to come across anyone belonging to this social category. This group of people are known as Dalits and they represent 16% of the Hindu population (Dube; 1990; p49). Their work involves, removing dead bodies, removing garbage,

removing urine and faeces as well as working in leather tanneries, which were deemed unclean by the other varna/castes which further established their status as untouchables. The untouchables or Shudras of India are very similar to the Rodi people of Sri Lanka. In ancient times seeing a Rodi person, marrying into that community, sharing a meal with them carried a heavy social stigma.

In India, the Shudras occupy the last tier in the Varna social stratification system, Chandalas who originate from the Shudras are also a low caste group of people in India. Chandalas too should not come into the physical contact with the higher castes. Chandalas should build their houses away from everyone else while performing the community work such as performing last rites for the unclaimed bodies of the dead. During the early Anuradhapura period, it has been recorded that Chandala community migrated and lived in Sri Lanka. It is understood that their lifestyle has not changed yet even though they lived here (Geiger; 1960 p.34).

The term Chandalayyas are used even in present day to identify the Rodi people, which is an indication that the Rodi caste and the Chandala caste may have had a connection and similarities. Even though in ancient times, these people received the brunt of society's scorn disgust and ridicule, it is clear that in the present day their lives have been transformed in all the aspects such as social, economic, political and cultural.

### **REASEARH PROBLEM**

It is understood that the Rodi caste has been around since the reign of King Parakramabahu, however, their presence in the annals of history starts much earlier. As early inhabitants, this community of people have evolved with time, their traditions, cultural practices, social structures, attire, matrimonial practices and language have been subject to change. Therefore the research problem is to identify the nature of change within this community in the present day.

### **REASEARH OBJECTIVES**

The main objective of this study is to find out if the Rodi community has got modernized along with the rest of the society how those visible changes could be.

The recognition which the Rodi people are given in terms of social, political, educational and cultural differences can be observed and quantified. In the past, anthropologists mainly studied their genesis, the nature of their cultural practices, their civilization and the ritualistic practices that surround their social structure.

However, in the present day, they are fast disappearing into the society and morphing in the majority population and with that their centuries old practices and identity disappearing, the reason for their disappearance is also another area which this study hopes to discover.

In ancient times the livelihood of Rodi people was to beg for a living. However, in the present day they are occupied with livelihoods of other castes. It is important to identify the industries and trades that they \ have interchanged to. Another aim of this study was to identify the role and the condition of the Rodi man within his family and community as well as the role of the Rodi woman within her family, the lives of her children within the socio-economic framework. It is also important to find out the changes which have brought about upward social mobility to the Rodi community within a social context which values affluent society more than the caste divisions.

## **LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH**

The Rodi people are spread throughout the island and they are mostly found in the Sabaragamuwa, Central, North Central, Uva and Southern provinces mainly. It is not possible to study the Rodi people residing throughout the provinces, due to this reason, we have selected to study the Rodi villages in the North central provinces only.

## **REASERCH METHODOLOGY**

The details collected in a study are known as data and this can be divided into two groups depending on its nature.

- 1. Primary Data**
- 2. Secondary Data**

The primary data are gathered within the study through interviews, observations and questionnaires while the secondary data are gathered through newspaper articles, journals, books as well as data gathered from the statistics department.

Depending on the nature of the data it can be divided into two groups and studied further, one is qualitative data and quantitative data (Sarantakos,1998; p26) Quantitative data will give a numerical value to the details about the Rodi community such as their population, education levels, economic status etc.

However, the details such as the ideas and aspirations of the Rodi people, their traditions and cultural practices, language cannot be quantified numerically. These details are processed as qualitative data. Qualitative data collecting techniques used in this study are survey method and case study method. The purpose of this paper is to discuss about the changes within the Rodi community, thus the analysis is mainly based on a interviews, questioner and observation.

A popular method to gather information and data in sociological research studies is the survey method. When there is a large population to study, surveys are the best way to gather information. According to Wiseman and Aron survey research is a method for collecting and analysing social data through a highly structured and often very detailed interview or questionnaires in order to obtain information from large numbers of respondents presumed to be representative of a specific population (Berger,2000; p188).

Case study method was used in this research to collect data on the Rodi community's socio-economic status. This method was used in several provinces of the country. Apart from research survey method, gathering data through case studies were also used. This is a popular method used to obtain more qualitative data.

Case studies will help to analyse a person or a situation in an in depth manner (Desai and Potter,2006;200).

In this study case studies were used to identify the lifestyle of the Rodi people, their marriage practices and family unit, the present day challenges and their dealings with the mass society.

## **Data analysis**

Although Sri Lanka is an Island nation, it has a colourful diversity within its population density, the main constituents of the population consists of Sinhalese Tamil and Muslim citizens. The majority population is the Sinhalese community, at a glance it is a complex society. The immediate differences of geography is one division which categorises the community as upcountry Sinhalese and low country Sinhalese.

The up country Sinhalese people have an inflated sense of self-worth and consider themselves to be a better community than the low country community. They are also very caste conscious and will consider it quite seriously.

The govi caste in the caste hierarchy of the Sinhalese community is the highest. However, this caste is further divided into up country govi and low country govi segments. The caste conscious social institution of the Sinhalese community had about 18 other castes apart from the govi caste, this was found in the ancient constitution of laws and rules (*bana neethi niganduwa*). According to that, the lowest caste was called Gardi and this was another name for the Rodi people. They were Sri Lanka's untouchables, the other castes were forbidden to come into physical contact with them.

There are many ideas as to how the word Rodi came into being. Upham speculates that they were mostly leprosy patients who were ostracized from society and ordered to live in the jungles. Since they were considered to be very ill – the Sinhalese term for which is 'Rogadhithayin' which became Rodi for ease of use. (Upham,1833: p351) Wilhem Geiger, Ferguson and Enriques believe that the word Rodi came about from the Sinhalese word Rodda which means remainder of kernel once the nutrients are drained(Geiger,1920, Enriques; 1999,Ferguson:1895).

According to census and statistics from 1901 and 1911 in Sri Lanka, there were a total of 1464 and 1572 individuals respectively. The following table will show the spread of the Rodi community in various provinces in the country.

Provinces	Year 1901	Year 1911
Sabaragamuwa Province	438	479
Central Province	241	411
North Central Province	379	391
Uva Province	367	269
Southern Province	42	22
Total	1464	1572

**Table 1 Source: Census of Ceylon 1901,1911**

It is a hard task to provide exact numbers of the Rodi community living in Sri Lanka in the present day. The figures would be an approximate estimate and not exact figures. In 1951, M. D. Raghavan who conducted an in depth study about the Rodi people published a book by the title, 'Some aspects of Rodiya and Kinnaraya in the New Lanka.' The census conducted by Raghavan is as follows:

Province	Numbers
Central Province	350
Wayamba Province	490
Sabaragamuwa Province	1150
Uva Province	1100
Western Province	110
Southern Province	22
<b>Total</b>	<b>3122</b>

**Table 2 Source: Handsome Beggars M.D. Raghavan 1952**

There are many reasons for the Rodi community to gradually disappear from focus as opposed to multiply as with other groups. The main reason for their dwindling numbers is during the time of the Kandyan kingdom they had to face many hardships harassment and torture. For this research study, Rodi village - Manawa situated in the North central province has been used. Presently there are 580 individuals living in that village. The following table gives a breakdown of the gender within that village.

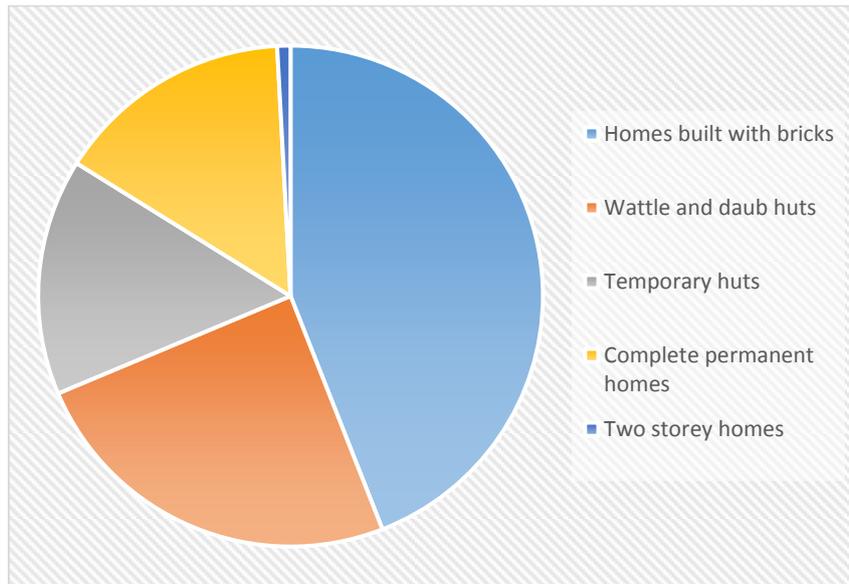
Gender	Numbers	Percentage
Male	277	48.49%
Female	293	51.50%

**Table 3 Sample population according to gender**

The home of the Rodi individual was known as a Kuppayama during the past. Such were built away from the villages of the high caste members of society often in inaccessible places which weren't hospitable at all. During the time of the Kandyan kingdom, Rodi households were only allowed to have one rafter in their roofs and leaves and branches should make up the roof. The front door should be coconut frond covered deer pelt. However in the present day, they have moved away from the identifying markers of a Kuppayama and have assimilated to society and built their homes according to their wishes and ability. The following table and pie chart gives an insight into the nature of their dwellings.

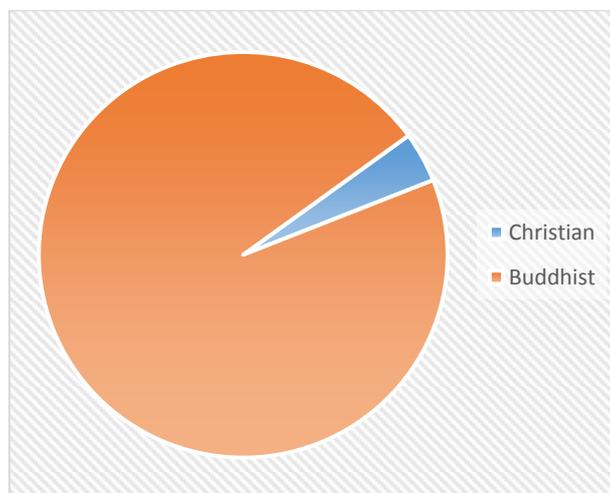
Nature of homes	Numbers
Houses made with bricks	52
Wattle and daub huts	29
Temporary huts	18
Complete permanent homes	18
Two storey homes	1
<b>Total number of homes</b>	<b>118</b>

**Table 4 Nature of Rodi homes and their numbers**



**Nature of Rodi homes and their numbers**

In the past, the Rodi community were forbidden from building anything but Kuppayam habitats, however centuries later these attitudes have changed completely and it is heartening to see that these people have gone on to build even two storey homes. If one is to compare the outward appearance of a Rodi individual with a Sri Lankan, there is hardly any difference in physical stature or appearance. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Rodi women had to bare their upper bodies as per royal decree of many centuries ago. This bared upper body was a clear indication of their Rodi community status. In the past, this baring of their upper body resulted in these women attracting sexual predators who in turn molested and abused them. By mid-20<sup>th</sup> century the rules changed and they could dress as they wished. As a result in the present day Rodi women and men have intermarried into the mass society and they have lost their unique identity as Rodi community members. Majority of the Manawa village population are Buddhist by birth.



**Population religion ratio**

From ancient times the Rodi people were Buddhist by birth, however in a recent sweeping trend, not just the inhabitants of Manawa village but many in other areas have converted to Christianity. Even though the segment representing Christians is as low as 4% it must be noted that these people were Buddhist by birth.

According to Raghavan, during Sri Lanka's feudal past, each caste had a specific job to perform as dictated by their caste and social standing, as Rodi people were restricted from engaging in normal livelihoods such as farming, cultivation or any other industry, their lives depended entirely on begging. In ancient times, there would be villages established close to Rodi villages so that they can seek out their meals from these host villages.

In the present day, changes in the country has resulted in those from the Rodi community breaking free from mental and physical shackles of their ancestors. Their choice in employment is an indicator of this.

Nature of employment	Number of people		Percentage
	Female	Male	
Trading goods	12	05	41.5%
Labourers	00	06	14.6%
Shop employees	04	01	12.2%
Cane goods manufacturer	00	04	9.8%
Carpet weavers	00	03	7.3%
Hospital employees	00	02	4.9%
Garment factory employees	03	01	9.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>41</b>		<b>100</b>

**Table 5 Nature of current employment of sample population**

Education was strictly out of bounds for Rodi people, because of society's poor assessment of this community, it was even forbidden for a child of this community to be entered into a government school. With the establishment of free education in Sri Lanka this situation has changed to a certain extent. When analysing the Manawa situation, it is apparent these children have received an opportunity to study.

Level of education	Number of people		Percentage
	Female	Male	
Grade 1-5	12	02	28%
Grade 5-8	03	09	24%
Grade 9-10	04	12	32%
Up to O/L's	02	04	12%
Never received an education	01	01	4%
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>		<b>100</b>

**Table 6 - Education level of sample population**

With data gathered from 50 respondents, it is apparent that there is a high percentage of Rodi children enrolling in school. Out of the study sample, one female and one male had not attended school this is an indicator of the rapid changes in the social environment such as acceptance and tolerance.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study was able to identify many changes within the Rodi community in the present day. Sri Lankan society has transformed from a caste stratified society into class stratified society. The reason for this is the fact that people no longer perform caste specific jobs for many decades and the concept of caste is on the verge of dying out. Also, this research study discovered that with the modernizing of society, the restrictions and limitations the Rodi community faced in the past has become obsolete and that this once segregated community has now fully integrated into the mass society of Sri Lanka.

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