

# **Search for Common Grounds: Tamil Caste System as “A Spoiler” in Post-conflict Peacebuilding in Northern Sri Lanka**

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## **Introduction**

Sri Lankan post-conflict positive peacebuilding efforts are harder than before due to diverse national as well as local challenges. In order to bring positive peace for every citizen, particularly thousands of conflict victims in the northern Sri Lanka, it is therefore necessary to explore and search another dimension in peacebuilding than the “generalized ethnic context”. Due to the complex conflict situation and complexity of the dispute factors in the protracted conflict in Sri Lanka, the majority of conflict analysts and scholars willingly or unwillingly simplify the Sri Lankan conflict in the ethnic framework. However, oversimplification of the Sri Lankan conflict as “an ethnic conflict” ignores much of the complexities and ground realities in both Tamil community Sinhala communities of Sri Lanka.

Aim here is to proceed beyond this generally recognized ethnic based socio-economic inequalities led frustration. The paper does not aim to refute or revisit the reasons that have already been advanced by diverse academic scholars as causes for the Sri Lankan conflict but seeks to analyze the conflict from the socio-economic perspective to explore how Tamil caste system based social structure secretly and naturally influenced the conflict.

The paper has arranged the discussion in the following manner: first part of the paper briefly summarizes the Sri Lankan conflict in ethnic line. The attention is focused on the Tamil caste system, its brief historical narratives as unseen caste

barriers in the Tamil community. Consequently it analyzes the caste based socio-economic inequalities among the northern Tamils during the conflict and in the post-conflict context. Finally the paper analyses and illustrates potential challenges in bringing positive peace into conflict affected communities, particularly at grass-root level. Apart from secondary sources, the paper utilizes quantitative methodology of interviews and observations carried out in the conflict affected Northern Sri Lanka.

### **1. Sri Lankan Protracted Conflict through “Ethnic Lens”**

Conflict erupts as a result of long term inequalities and deprivations of basic needs of the people in a society. Johan Galtung describes that the deprived basic needs of the people such as food, shelter, health, education, livelihood needs, social dignity and equal opportunities to participate in social and economic activities in the society lead to structural violence as well as direct violence (Galtung, 1969). Contemporary conflict resolution and peacebuilding literature reveals that those internal inequalities lead to deprive members of the society and more likely to initiate and strain conflict. Collier, Hoeffler and Soderbm (2001) discuss these inequalities in economic perspective referring to individuals.

Beyond individualization and limitation to economic perspective, Stewart (2000) introduces the concept of Horizontal Inequalities (HIs) among specific groups (ethnic groups, religious group, etc) based on socio-economic, cultural and political inequalities. The discussion of HIs is continuing and expanding in the literature of conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Stewart 2000; Stewart 2001; Østby 2004; Stewart, Brown & Mancini 2005; Stewart 2011).. Inequality between groups is pernicious because individual identity flows in part from group membership; group-based disparities solely due to intrinsic characteristics such as caste, race or gender would be held to be abominable (Østby 2004). Among other things, groups may have low or no mobility, i.e. it is not possible—or very difficult—to change groups; if you are discriminated against because you are a woman or belong to a particular caste

or ethnicity, it would be impossible in the first case, and very difficult in the latter cases to change identity in order to avoid discrimination.

Based on nature of the society, existing social group dimensions are very. Also the diverse dimensions are visible and invisible. In the context of Sri Lanka, there are multiple group dimensions but the ethnic based group dimension is prominent. Therefore, the other dimensions are invisible though they affect well-being, sense of injustice, actions of members of the society. Group identity is valued but varies in salience (goes beyond) is the sense of common identity strong enough to go beyond caste in the case of Sri Lanka, Gurr (1995) says the issue is whether the group identity is strong enough to (beings Tamils) to overcome the more narrow loyalties to clans, classes and castes. In the case of Sri Lanka, Gurr (1995) says that the independence Citizenship act 1948 Indian Tamils, half sent back from Sri Lanka, Tamils from the north did not take up that issue because those migrant workers of lower-caste, they continued to suffer and they organized themselves in one trade union and visibly demonstrate them as separate Tamil group from the northern and eastern Tamils.

The caste based group dimension particularly in Tamil community has invisibly affected wellbeing of Tamils in northern Sri Lanka. Caste based social setting creates diverse inequalities among Tamils in its own community. At the end the existing unfair and discriminative social structures and practices lead to direct and structural violence among diverse groups in the society. These caste based inequalities were sinking due to the identity of Tamil was under pressure, and then the caste differences were less important than the collective status of ethnicity against the battle of Sinhala majority (Gurr 1995).

Through diverse activities such as ceasefire agreements, negotiation and military intervention, the direct violence can be stopped in a society. The end of an armed conflict (absence of war) is what is called negative peace (Grewal, 2003). However, the negative peace is not positive peace and therefore can not stop the existing social structures which deprive basic needs of the people in the society which leads to structural violence. To eliminate structural violence in a society, it requires the establishment and restoration of relationships, the creation of social systems that serve

the needs of the whole population and the constructive resolution of conflict. “Peace is not merely absence of direct violence but also absence of structural violence” (Grewal 2003: 3). This is what Galtung (1969) called as positive peace in a society which is the ultimate goal to prevent occurrence of conflicts. Therefore, “the value of the positive paradigm is its vision of bringing about peace rather than just resolving conflicts through political mechanisms” (Grewal 2003, p.5).

This is why it is necessary to reflect on the terminated Sri Lankan protracted conflict from the national political perspective to local or grass-root socio-economic perspectives. Then it is possible to investigate the socio-economic issues including equal opportunities in education, employment, livelihood activities and social dignity among other members of the society which caused Tamil deprivation. The majority Tamils in grass-root level in Jaffna Peninsula has been experiencing hard reality of inequality locally as well as nationally because of their traditional caste system and ethnicity. Roberts (2011) states that the roots of the Sri Lankan conflict are go beyond political identity issue between Sinhala and Tamils (Roberts 2011). The problem of ethnicity arose as a by product of the British colonization and again soon after the independence of Sri Lanka in 1948 (Bose 2007, pp.6-54; Silva 1981; Wilson 2000; Wickramasinghe 2006). “From 1956 to 1983 Tamil political thinking developed under the impact of the anti Tamil riots of 1956, 1958, 1977, 1981 and 1983 together with mounting discrimination and a series of broken promises by successive Sinhala governments” (Hoole et al. 1992, p.16).

In the year 1947 and throughout 1960s, Sinhala colony projects and settlement of Sinhala people in Tamil-owned lands in northern and eastern Sri Lanka had negative impacts on the Tamil community (Wilson 2000; Wickramasinghe 2006). Moreover, the “Sinhala Only Act” and the Act of “Sinhala as the Official Language” in 1956 were two attempts of discrimination regarding language (Wickramasinghe 2006; Gunawardana 2006; Swamy 1996). Furthermore, 1972 constitutional reforms played a major role in not only defining the place of the Sinhalese and that of Buddhism in Sri Lankan society, but also by taking away the language rights of the Tamils by not mentioning Tamils in the constitution (Sivathanby 2004).

In and after the 1960s, the discrimination based on ethnicity in the state administrative system was increased (Sivathamby 2004). Education was a major area in which discrimination began to assert itself in a very pronounced way (Sivathamby 2004; Phandis 1976; Bastiampillai & Wanasinghe 1995). The state education policies (1956 and 1970s) such as ethnic based university admission procedure (district quota and standardization) and decrease in the recruitment of Tamil teachers resulted negatively by contributing to enhance socio-economic deprivation in the Tamil community.

The history has also shown us the importance of Tamil group identity to claim their right to well-being as citizens of Sri Lanka. As Stewart (2001) states that the case of Sri Lanka reveals a complex situation of HIs. During the British colonial administration according to the divide and rule policy they adopted, the minority Tamils had been privileged compared to majority Sinhalese. Most top level employment opportunities, access to education and other services were favorably enjoyed by Tamils (Wilson 2000). On the contrary, in the post-independence period, Sinhala majority who dominated the state apparatus had established new socio-economic policies in favor of the majority Sinhalese. As mentioned earlier, those state policies led to deterioration of the socio-economic situation of the Tamil community. In the 1960s to 1970s, unemployment increased among Tamils and their income decreased. Sinhalese were able to get more job opportunities, privileged education and other socio-economic resources compared to Tamils. Therefore, Sinhala led state policies “introduced new horizontal inequalities” (Stewart 2001: 21). The result was that Tamils segments of the society experienced their exclusion from the mainstream of Sri Lankan society and were deprived socio-economically.

Following the pre-independence era, Colombo elite Tamils (Arumuganathapillai Coomaraswamy, Ponnambalam Ramanathan and Ponnambalam Arunachlam) led Ceylon Tamils demanded political rights from the British administration (Wilson 2000).

It is a common acceptance that there are social differences among Tamils. Caste is a factor to divide Tamil society into diverse groups (Wilson 2000). Vellālar

caste becomes a powerful group in the society though there some regional and social differences between Mukkuwas in Batticaloa and the eastern Tamils due to their socio-economic and regional diversities. Apart from that up-country Tamils have lower socio-economic reputation among other Tamils because they belong to the lower caste in the caste based social setting in India. Though it is also applied to the community of Sinhala, the rigidity of the differences is higher in Tamil community. The differences in Tamil community are clearly based on the caste system. The caste system has influenced every relation in the society at different levels. It was highly visible in politics in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Wilson (2002) states that Tamils who lived in Jaffna peninsula exclusively were benefitted from the colonial administration and its socio-economic activities. As a result of American and British Christian missions, some prestigious English medium secondary schools were opened in Jaffna and the upper-caste Vellālar was privileged from those schools. It was little differ from Sinhala community's Govigama caste which social status similar to Vellālar. Those upper-caste Vellālar did acquire highest education skills with English language ability. It was totally differ from Tamils who lived in the eastern. The socio-economically privileged upper-caste Tamils became main actors of Tamil politics from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is interesting to note here that those elite upper-caste Tamils were not cooperated with other lower-caste Tamils in Jaffna peninsula as well as the eastern and up-country Tamils due to their inherent caste barriers. During the British administration, those elite Tamils were appointed as civil servants, lawyers, doctors, engineers, university lecturers and other high level professions. Most of those elites settled down in Colombo and carried out their own agendas being a special group in Tamil community. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these elite Tamils became frontline of Sri Lankan politics under the principle of democracy.

“The Colombo Tamils referred to above (though not the Wellawatte Tamils- Wellawatte is the area which is located in southern coastal belt of Colombo) tended to look down Jaffna Tamils” (Wilson 2000:16). It is important to examine why Wilson mentions that Colombo Tamils had the look down attitude towards other Tamils

including Jaffna Tamils. Moreover, Colombo Tamils further recognized differences between commercially and economically established Wellawatte Tamils and them too. This study significantly argues here that the reason to keep other Tamils away from their elite society was the caste based socio-economic status of the lower-caste Tamils. Though Wallawatte Tamils were economically succeeded, as Wilson indirectly points out, they were belonging to lower-castes or at least not upper-castes.

Then it had continued to demand equal socio-economic and political rights from Sinhalese led state during the post-independence period. It is important to note here that majority of elite Tamil politicians represented upper-caste. Most of them were from the Civil Service and other reputed professions during the British period. As a result, then elite Tamils and their later generations were able to establish relations outside Sri Lanka as well as in the southern part of the country and acquire enormous socio-economic opportunities and resources compared to the lower-caste Tamils (Hoole 2003).

Limited socio-economic benefits which were entitled under the state policies for minority Tamils were not reached to the majority lower-caste Tamils. Lower-caste Tamils were not able to reach limited benefits as they were obstructed by the upper-caste Tamils and consequences of caste practices. Majority of lower-caste Tamils were unskilled in professions such as doctors, engineers, administrators and lawyers. Due to low standard of education, or being uneducated, they were not able to acquire those professions rather than providing labour for farming in the lands of upper-caste and be a servant for upper-caste Tamils. On the other hand, the upper-caste maintained their socio-economic status over lower castes. Furthermore, those upper-caste Tamils were benefitted from those limited resources due to their education, skills and other social relations.

Moreover, from the 1920s to 1970s, those elite Tamil politicians put efforts to maintain their privileged socio-economic status in the Tamil community over lower-castes. The elite Tamils also demanded equal socio-economic and political rights on the basis of ethnicity. However, Hoole et al. (1992) states that “democratic politics” of the Tamil community are limited to one segment of the society which is the

educated, wealthiest upper-caste group. There were some elite Tamil politicians in the front line of the Tamil politics. Those elite Tamils worked for an independent state for Tamils through non-violent means (Vaddukoddai resolution in 1976), in 1970s those elites were recognised as “enemies of the Tamil nation” (Hoole et al. 1992:17) due to their ignorance of the caste based socio-economic discrimination in the Tamil community.

Democratic movements to demand equal rights from the state, led by elite Tamils before the post independent era, have not been successful. As a result of that ethnic violence started in 1983. This could be seen as emergence of diverse Tamil militant groups with diverse agendas to demonstrate and mobilize ethnically deprived Tamils against the majority Sinhalese led state policies in the name of “Tamil Nationalism” or “struggle for self-determination”. Development of militant groups in the Tamil community significantly increased in the 1970s under Marxist and socialist radicalism which helped to attract socio-economically backward members from diverse lower-castes (Roberts 2011, Tanges & Silva 2003). There were number of militant groups such as Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students (EROS), Eelam Revolutionary People’s Liberation Front (EPRLF), Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization (TELO), People’s Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam (PLOTE) and the LTTE (Wilson 2000, Swamy 2008). Tamil militancy was significantly increased in 1990s and upper-caste elite Tamils and their relatives fled to other countries and at least to southern parts of Sri Lanka while thousands of lower-caste Tamils who remained in the northern region due to their poor socio-economic incapability, ultimately became the human resource to fight against Sinhala state policies under the “LTTE fascist rule” (Hoole et al. 1992; Hoole 2003).

Therefore, a majority of lower-caste members were attracted to the radical and equal policies of the militant groups against the historical caste system (Shanmugathan 1997). “The EPRLF had a significant number of personnel from depressed-castes...” (Roberts 2011: 84) who were less educated or probably uneducated and unprivileged among other Tamils. However, this paper concentrates on the LTTE and its formation since the LTTE was able to eliminate other militant groups



(Bose 2007: 24).

LTTE leadership and other prominent leaders came from lower castes. “Prabhakaran, Mahattaya, Kittu, Seelan, Victor, Kumarappu, Baby Subramaniam and Soosai are believed to be Karaiyar” (Roberts 2011: 85) and Thamil Chelvan from Ampattar (babar) (Tanges and Silva 2009: 62). There is evidence some of the LTTE members were of upper-caste-Vellālar, some of them are Uma Maheswaran, Ponnamma, Kerdelz, Yogi, and Rahim. However, the LTTE leader was able to keep those members away from the top ranks of the organisation and isolated due to personal rifts with Prabhakaran (Roberts 2011).

Therefore, the paper argues that those political demands did not address the majority lower-caste Tamil people’s socio-economic needs rather than that of upper-caste political needs.

## **2. Tamil Caste System Under the Carpet of Ethnicity**

“A host of other factors characteristic of the heterogeneous groups within the Tamil people such as class, caste and regionalism...” (Orguela 2008: 7). The caste system in the Tamil community has been one of the causes of socio-economic deprivation since the pre-independence period of Sri Lanka.

Before examining the caste system among Tamils in northern Sri Lanka, it is necessary to define what is meant by caste. The original meaning of the word “caste” is breed, race or kind which was used by Portuguese. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines caste as “group of people having a specific social rank, defined generally by descent, marriage and occupation. Caste, most common in South Asia, is rooted in distant antiquity and dictates to every orthodox person the rules and restrictions of all social intercourse and occupation” (1995, p.348). Following Mill’s statement on the caste reveals that “The classification instituted by the author of the Hindu law is the first and simplest form of the division of labour and employments” (Quoted in Inden 2000, p.57). It is a significant social structure in the region of South Asia.

As a legacy of the Indian historical links and socio cultural influence, the caste system is instilled in both Sinhala and Tamil communities in Sri Lanka. “Caste, the distinctive social institution attributed to India, is assumed to be its utter manifestation” (Inden 2000, p.49; Sirinivas 2006, p.60; Driks 2001, p.8). It is further said that “the spirit of division and mutual opposition which seems to us to be one of the constituent elements of the caste system” (Paris 2006, p.37).

The caste based societies’ social power relationship is contrary to the class-based societies where “rights of ownership are the prerogative of minority groups which from privileged elites” (Leach 1960: 5). Privileged upper-caste elites represent the majority of the society where under-privileged low-caste minority members are exploited in the socio-economic and political relations in the society. Furthermore, “economic roles are allocated by right to closed minority groups of low social groups are bound, generally from a numerical majority and must compete among themselves for the services of individual members of lower-castes” (Leach 1960: 5). The exploitation of minority lower-castes by the majority upper-caste is abundantly severe in the society where ethnic deviations are socio-economically and politically existed. This is what the case of Sri Lanka reveals.

Pre and post-independence Sri Lankan politics have revealed how the caste system has influenced national politics among elite Sinhalese and Tamils (Roberts 2011; McGilvray 2008; Jiggins 1979; Yalman 1971). It would be fair to say that the caste system in the Tamil community is more rigid compared to the caste system in Sinhala community due to Hindu religious ideology and traditions.

### **3. Unseen Barriers: the Caste Based Socio-Economic Inequalities**

The caste oriented socio-economic practices in northern Sri Lanka has a long history. Jaffna is the main city of the northern Tamil stronghold. Pfaffenberger (1990) states that all socio-economic activities are centered around Jaffna. Banks (1960) mentions that the social structure of the Jaffna peninsula goes under the religious guidance of

Hinduism as well as Tamils own believes in the peninsula. Jaffna peninsula has “a number of named endogamous strata, a concept of pollution, and a formal system of interdependence which links these strata together in economic, political and religious fields and named strata are ranked and various forms of customary behavior serve to symbolize the rank differences” (Banks 1960: 61-63). It is said that the existing caste system in Jaffna is relatively differ from the western concept of the social caste. Except few areas of the urban Jaffna, “in villages class does not really exist, since economic and educational differentiation corresponds so very closely to differences in caste” (Banks 1960: 63). This caste based social nature in Jaffna peninsula has hierarchically created Vellālar as the majority of the society. It is completely opposite to the social composition according to the caste.

The socio-economic developments and their practices among in Tamil community significantly reveal the caste influences on the entire lifestyle of each Tamils. From birth to death, legacy of the caste goes with the person. The Sri Lankan historical narratives reveal that the Jaffna caste system’s uniqueness has deeply influenced socio-economic values and practices of the inhabitants in the peninsula. It is difference from the caste system of eastern Tamils as well as up-country Tamils.

Though there are many classifications, it is reported that there are nearly 21 caste groups in northern Sri Lanka. They are accordingly hierarchy Piraman (Brahman), Saiva Kurukkal (Siva priest), Vellālar (land holder), Pantāram (temple helper), Cipacari (temple sculptor), Koviya (domestic servant), Thattār (goldsmith), Karaiyar (fisher), Thachchar (carpenter), Kollar (blacksmith), Nattuvar (auspicious music), Kaikular (weaver), Cantar (sesame oil maker), Kuyavar (potter), Mukkuvar (lagoon fisher), Vannār (washer man), Ampattar (barber), Pallar (bonded labour), Nalavar (bonded labour) and Parayar (drummer) (Pfaffenberger 1980, p.39). All castes are again divided into “touchable and untouchable”. Lowest castes such as barber, bonded labour and drummer are considered as untouchable. “Equality in seating and in eating” (Tanges and Silva 2009, p.58) was the main reason for the struggle by the untouchable castes Pallar, Nalavar and Parayar. There are two main divisions which include high-castes and depressed-castes in northern Sri Lanka (Shanmugathan 1997). These

depressed-castes were not allowed to enter tea boutiques or to use the same cups as used by the upper castes. These lower- castes were not allowed inside the temple to worship the same god. Furthermore, the “Jaffna caste system is the notion of ritual purity is far more important in the day-to-day Hindu practice and the social and economic hierarchy with the land-owning Vellālar caste having a hegemonic control over many of the Hindu rituals and the labouring castes in Jaffna society being identified and treated as ritually unclean castes well” (Tanges and Silva 2009, p.50).

Anthropological Tamil literature reveals that social struggle against the caste system in Jaffna started in the 1920s. The upper-caste in the northern Sri Lanka had established customary prohibition on the lower-castes to continue its social power over the lower-castes more than 90 years ago. In particular, a series of 24 customary prohibition (Males and female of lower-caste should not wear an upper garments, untouchable must not wear any jewelry and cannot tie the wedding necklace, they must bury the death without cremation, they should not use the ponds of the upper-caste, they are barred from upper-caste temples, they are prohibited to ride bicycles or drive cars, they are not allowed to sit while travelling in buses and even after permission was granted to study in schools, they were not allowed to sit on chairs) (Tanges and Silva, 2009). The enforcements by the upper-caste on lower-castes escalated the caste struggle among the northern Tamils. Caste based Tamil struggles in the northern Sri Lanka reflects how the caste system deprived Tamils socio-economic needs in this own community well before the emergence ethnic disputes.

Anti-caste movements against the caste discrimination are “rarely mentioned in the continuum of Tamil nationalism, although they became very active in 1940s and reached a zenith in the 1960s, because they offered a counter narrative that attacked Tamil elites rather than the oppressive Sinhala dominated state” (Wickramasinghe 2006, p.275). In 1960s, harsh social discrimination by the upper-caste led to increase nonviolent protests among lower-caste Tamils. There was a significant protest in front of a holly Skanda temple in Maviddapuram, Jaffna in 1968. The protest was organised by Arumuka Navalar. “Hindus of high-caste rank (Vellālar and other their domestic servants, the Koviars), hit the minority Tamils with iron rods and sand-filled bottles

(Pfaffenberger 1990, p. 80).

In 1960s, virtually everyone the Maviddapuram conflict symbolized the seemingly inevitable confrontation of "ancient tradition" and "pre-modern caste relations" with modernity and social reform-and it looked as though tradition and caste were winning. However, the importance of caste influence on lower-caste Tamils rarely discusses in conflict literature and the caste issues concerns as "private" matters of the Tamil community. "The Maviddapuram crisis marked the culmination of a period of intercaste tension that threatened to tear Jaffna society apart" (Pfaffnbeger 1990: 81). The lower-castes protest became violent and spread over the entire peninsula. However, the lower-castes Tamils socio-economic demands on equal ground were not addressed and put under the ethnic carpet.

Vellalar control of the several artisanal castes (roughly 5 percent of the peninsula's population) collapsed in the eighteenth century, almost immediately after British re-forms dislodged the Dutch-built edifice of Vellalar control. In the twentieth century the brunt of Vellalar domination fell on the two untouchable agrestic laboring castes, the Pallar and Nalavar, who together make up about 18 percent of the peninsula's population. Well into the century Vellalars involved Pallars and Nalavars in relations that replaced the compulsions of slavery with economic compulsions. In the 1950s, for instance, many Minority Tamils still lived on Vellaar-owned palmyrah groves or wasteland; if they did not submit to Vellalar labor and service demands, they could be threatened with expulsion. The economic compulsions were paired with informal political controls: Minority Tamils who attempted to raise their position would find their communities victimized by Vellalar-organized gangs of thugs, who burned down huts and poisoned wells.

The colonial experience before 1900 created an exceptionally tense and unstable relationship between Vellalars and Minority Tamils, which could be maintained only by naked force, state support, and ritual stigmatization. Twentieth-century social change has altered Vellalar-untouchable relations in ways that have, if anything, ex-acerbated their underlying volatility.

The LTTE's aim of "a unified ethnic consequences among all Tamils...mass

displacement of Tamils in Jaffna...eliminated more or less traditional Vellālar political leadership...thereby leaving a political and social vacuum in Jaffna society” (Tanges and Silva 2009, p.60) influenced to ignore the socio-economic discrimination based on the caste. When interviewed on 10 April 2011, some of civilians and ex-LTTE combatants explained that the lower-castes including bonded labour groups were economically vulnerable and their livelihood become unstable due to spirals of political violence conducted by the state while socio-economic discrimination on land ownership and employment. Finally, the socio-economic frustrated lower- caste Tamils turned into violent militancy for searching solutions for their years of long social frustration. Tanges and Silva (2009) further states that the caste system has had multiple influences to the conflict.

At the beginning, Tamil militant groups including the LTTE had ignored the caste system of the Tamil community in order to mobilize lower caste Tamils to realize their military agendas. Swamy states that so called LTTE’s constitution aimed to establish a “casteless Tamil society by armed struggle” (Swamy 1996, p.59). The interviews conducted by the author during 20 March 2011 to 20 April 2011 in Jaffna peninsula, interviewing 40 ex-combatants and newly resettled IDPs revealed that 99% of LTTE members came from lower-castes. Many of them are less educated and experienced poor socio-economic conditions in their childhood. Some of civilians and ex-combatants revealed that they were able to go to school, but all most all their teachers who were from upper-caste discouraged them on education goals. Some teachers who came from urban area of Jaffna did not come to school due to what they regarded as insignificance of teaching lower-caste students. This education background and social conditions further influenced lower-caste children to be dropped out from schools. At the end they found the LTTE as the best alternative to their endless socio-economic issues.

However, the Tamil national liberation movement against Sinhala majority suppressed the voice of the lower-castes and froze the issue of caste based socio-economic deprivation in the Tamil community. The generalized ethnic based socio-economic deprivation that followed from the majority Sinhala oriented state

policies in education and employment that largely affected all Tamils. Furthermore, there was a dual affect to the lower-castes comparison to the privileged upper-caste segment. At the same time the ethnic conflict drew lower-castes into a circle of violence.

Hoole (2003) illustrates that the caste system naturally accepts the right of the upper-caste to be privileged in the society and obligation of the lower-caste is to sacrifice their lives for the well being of the upper-caste, which is naturally consented to by the Hindu religious ideology. The elite upper-caste Tamils take it as their inherent right to enjoy life while lower-caste has to die for the upper-caste. This caste attitude profoundly leads to socio-economic frustration and inequalities between the upper-caste and lower-castes in the Tamil community.

#### **4. Caste as “a Spoiler” in Post-conflict Positive Peacebuilding**

This paper argues that without bringing a comprehensive answer to the caste system based socio-economic issue as one of root-causes of the conflict in the northern Tamil community the goal of positive peace for Sri Lanka is unattainable. In the span of three decade period of the conflict, there could not be seen any significant attention on the caste based socio-economic frustration issue of the Tamil community. In fact it was rather the misuse of this fact to achieve politically motivated opportunistic interests and military agendas of diverse Tamil politicians and militant groups. To obtain equal socio-economic and political rights, fights for self-determination and Tamil homeland or life sacrifice for Tamil liberation (suicide) were popularized slogans that ignored caste discrimination between lower-castes and upper-caste. Limited successes of ethnic based demand did not reach to the lower-castes (Hoole 2003). As a result, still the majority lower-caste Tamils are uneducated and socio-economically vulnerable due to caste barriers. When compares to the upper-caste, the lower-castes are experiencing a bulk of socio-economic issues such as land ownership, unemployment and reestablishing of family lives. At the above mentioned interviews, majority of ex-LTTE

carders and newly resettled civilians explained their desire to have a block of land, construction of a new shelter, find a livelihood activity, be a family and gaining the social dignity as other members of the society. Some of young men and women explained that they wanted to re-start their education to overcome their traditional socio-economic barriers. Those conflict victims and stakeholders reveal that they did not know why and what they fought for and who got benefited from conflict. However, they explained that their life conditions were not positively changed. Therefore, the paper argues that according to the post-conflict scenario the rigidity of the Tamil caste system and its influences are not exposed in the Tamil community at national and international levels in order to gain political power to each ethnic group in post-conflict peacebuilding. This is one of many issues that can not be solved by means of national or local political perspectives. Therefore, the paper raises the validity and importance of dealing with the caste based socio-economic issues as one of hidden causes of the terminated Sri Lankan conflict to achieve the goal of positive peace.

Ongoing peacebuilding activities of the GoSL reflect the caste affected socio-economic issues in the Tamil community as an unsolved puzzle. In particular, resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is severely affected by the caste system based land issues (Narendran July 2011; Rasalingam June 2011). The Upper-caste Tamils have not been among direct victims of the conflict because most of them are living overseas, Colombo or at least urban Jaffna where the government control prevailed during the conflict. Majority of Tamil IDPs are from lower-castes and as well as economically backward (Tanges and Silva 2003, p.70). According to the social hierarchy of the caste system, the lower-caste people particularly untouchable do not have a right to possess a block of land. Most of lands in the northern Sri Lanka belonged to upper-caste people who left the area at the beginning of the conflict. At the end of the conflict, particularly upper-caste Tamils wanted to return to their own homes and claim their lands which were under control by the LTTE and the security forces of the GoSL. The lands which the LTTE controlled were given to the members of the LTTE as a reward for their contribution to the organization under the LTTE de facto



legal system. With the termination of the LTTE, the ex-LTTE members and their families became victims of the conflict and lost their privileged lifestyle they enjoyed. Land issue is very crucial due to upper-caste claims on inherent land ownership while the IDPs demands new land to resettle. The state owned lands with land mines and other explosives have been abandoned for long time. On the other hand some of upper-caste people react and organize campaigns against the government resettlement efforts against ignorance of their traditional socio-economic demarcations. Following these developments, there is no concrete solution for the GoSL and other stakeholders to deal with the issue to resettle thousands of the IDPs who have been remaining in interim camps without any land or other social assets.

## **5. Conclusion**

Even though it is not prominently visible at present, the caste based socio-economic divisions have strongly but naturally persuaded Tamils to be deprived in their own community. Therefore, the paper argues that the caste based socio-economic inequality issues in the lower-caste Tamils were not addressed neither by the LTTE led militant groups nor so-called Tamil politicians who were hailed from upper-castes. However, after the terminated conflict, as Tamil militants, the GoSL's post-conflict efforts are also mainly focused on popularized political issues rather than to respond to the Tamils caste-based frustrations in terms of resettlement and reconciliation. As the conclusion, the paper reveals the GoSL's military conclusion of the conflict and post-conflict peacebuilding efforts have neglected the importance of the caste based socio-economic issues of the re-victimized northern Tamils due to its politically popularized general understanding of the conflict. Furthermore, it is a well evident fact that the caste is one of highly required qualifications even to enter the mainstream Tamil politics. Moreover, "lopsided development" does not concern about Tamil community's caste based land ownership and its effects on the lower-caste civilians who have been discriminated for years. The paper finally concludes the importance that should be given to address the

caste-based structural issues and its existing challenges to achieve positive peace for Tamil victims in post-conflict peacebuilding in Sri Lanka.

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