

CASTE AND NATION-BUILDING

Constructing Vellalah Identity in Jaffna

Bahirathy Jeeveshwara Räsänen

Akademisk avhandling för filosofie doktorsexamen i Freds- och utvecklingsforskning vid Institutionen för globala studier, Göteborgs universitet, som, med vederbörligt tillstånd av Samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsnämnden läggs fram för offentlig granskning torsdagen den 19 november klockan 13.15 i sal 326 i Annedalsseminariet, Campus Linné, Seminariegatan 1A, Göteborg.

SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES



UNIVERSITY OF
GOTHENBURG

Abstract

Bahirathy Jeeweshwara Räsänen (2015): Caste and nation-building: Constructing Vellalah Identity in Jaffna. PhD dissertation in Peace and Development Research, School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg (Box 700, 405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden).

Language: English, with summary in Swedish

ISBN 978-91-628-9607-2 (print), ISBN 978-91-628-9608-9 (pdf)

<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/40771>

This doctoral thesis explores the meanings and practices associated with Vellalah identity in the context of the Tamil nationalist project in Jaffna, Sri Lanka. Given that caste is a culturally sensitive identity and practice among Tamils, I investigate how the dominant caste identity was constructed, (re)negotiated and transformed. I do this via a case study on Vellalah identity by looking at the construction of Vellalah identity historically, as well as in contemporary Jaffna, with a main focus on the years 2004–2007. This study, in a sense, tries to unpack the Sri Lankan conflict with an inside account of the Vellalah Tamils who were one of the major protagonists of the ethno-national war which lasted more than three decades.

The Vellalah, being the hegemonic elite and intelligentsia of the region, monopolised the social, cultural, economic and political resources. An analysis of this study is imbedded in an interpretive constructive approach undertaken with narrative methodology. At a theoretical level, this study discusses the intersections of identity, caste and nationalism. It tries to account for how Vellalah identity is historically constituted, how major elements of caste relate to Vellalah identity, how the LTTE both influenced caste and Vellalah identity, and finally how war impacted caste and Vellalah identity. This study attempts to shed light on how the Vellalah articulations and (re)negotiations of caste identity shifted the Vellalah to always sustain themselves through power and the societal elite. It also discovers that the internalised caste identity is dynamic and durable. Moreover, it exposes that the axis extend from the Vellalah and the oppressed castes always entails a we-and-them perspective.

The central argument of this thesis is that while Vellalah identity evolved over time with certain stable markers of its identity and thus of caste identity, during the period of Tamil militancy such markers of caste identity were radically destabilised in the re-articulation of Tamil nationalism. It also explores the extent to which such destabilisation resulted in permanent shifts in caste-based practices and the identification arenas of the Vellalah, but found that despite some changes to caste practices during the LTTE period, caste-based identities did not dissolve but have rather returned in the post-war period. Importantly, this study contributes with the basis that these Vellalah negotiations of identity can provide insight into mechanisms through which dominance and oppression are (re)articulated and how collective identities are (re/de)constructed and renegotiated over time.

Key words: Vellalah identity, nation-building, Tamils, caste, negotiation, cultural schema, identification arena