



## **VEDDHA IN TRANSITION: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS ON THE IDENTITY TRANSITION OF THE RATHUGALA ADHIVASI COMMUNITY**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The *Veddha* community of Sri Lanka has undergone several transformations while existing in the multiethnic and cultural fabric of the country. Commonly identified as a part of the cultural assortment of Sri Lanka, there is a tendency for the *Veddhas* to be perceived as an “artefact” to be exhibited within the cultural heritage of the country rather than a separate entity of individuals. This community is expected to preserve their “indigenous” logo through the preservation of their language, rituals, customs and manners in order to be showcased as a fossilized element of the cultural platter of Sri Lanka. Thus, the identity formation of this community maybe largely ignored and/or disregarded by the rest of the Sri Lankan population due to their set perception of the *Veddhas*.

With the advent of capitalism, neoliberalism and neo-colonialism, the identity of the *adhivasi* community has been undergoing drastic transformations across multiple layers. The aim of this study is to map out these transitions by specially focusing on selected aspects of their communal identity through an in-depth case study.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The data which were gathered in the form of convenient samples by conducting face to face interviews with the individuals of the *Rathugala adhviasi* community formed the primary set of data for this qualitative study. Accordingly, five individuals, including the leader or *nayaka atto* of the *Rathugala* community, a few non-indigenous individuals and clergy from two prominently followed religions in the area - Buddhism and Christianity - were interviewed during the study, while in-depth case studies were conducted with them. The interviewees responded in Sinhala while the indigenous interviewees incorporated a few terms from the *Veddha* language when speaking. The case studies were conducted on a semi-structure basis. The data gathered were then transcribed, tabulated and themes were derived. The derived themes were analysed using critical discourse analysis. An outline of the key questions and issues that were essential to be discussed during these interviews was prepared by the research team beforehand. The questions covered areas such as language, livelihood, education, monetary status, religion and the current state of ritualistic and cultural aspects of the community.

The gathered data were then analysed from a poststructuralist perspective, mainly deconstruction, in the form of a theme-driven analysis. Thus, a critical discourse analysis approach was taken throughout the study in order to examine the presence and /or absence of certain ideological patterns that have been insinuated within the *adhivasi* community. Gayatri Spivak’s subaltern theory was intensively used to study the subject position of the *Veddhas*.

### **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The key themes such as education, gender dynamics, livelihood, communal participation and religious and political involvement were chosen with the intention of tracing the “developments” and/or transitions of the identity of the *adhivasi* community that may have resulted with the intruding socio-economic forces such as neoliberalism, capitalism and neo-colonialism.



The *Rathugala adhivasi* community is marginalised in multiple levels within the Sri Lankan socio-cultural and political context due to many reasons. Firstly, they are “subalternised” within the *Veddha* community as they receive minimal or no attention at all from the state regarding their basic necessities and rights as Sri Lankan citizens. The existence of the *Rathugala adhivasis* appears to have been unacknowledged to a certain extent within the structure of the Sri Lankan indigenous community itself. The “traditional” ways of livelihood such as hunting and bee hive hunting have been obstructed due to the intervention of state authorities such as the Wild Life Conservation Authority in Sri Lanka:

Respondent “B”: “We have inherited hunting and harvesting honey from bee hives from our ancestors. We are nothing without these. But these officers have imposed restrictions on them. What should we do?” (Field Interviews 2021).

The restrictions imposed upon the *adhivasi* community for hunting such as obtaining a license and paying a fine for “violating” these restrictions appears to be a huge blow to their accustomed way of life in general. Running out of options, these individuals are now gradually leaving behind their traditional livelihood methods, while opting for professions such as farming and *chena* cultivation close by to their dwellings. In addition, a hotel run by a foreigner which is located close by the *Rathugala* village has become the other more appealing and easier option for the young generation the indigenous community to find jobs: Respondent “A” : “It is not like when we were young. These days, our children are on the lookout for job opportunities at the foreigner’s hotel, or in the town” (Field Interviews, 2021). The “privilege” of existing as the “exhibitionists” of the *adhivasi* culture that is endowed upon the *Dambana adhivasi* community by popular media and state sponsorship is lacking within this community and as a result, the indigenous identity of the *Rathugala adhivasis* is gradually being erased and replaced with that of a “rural village community” which lacks the basic facilities for survival.

Most of the younger individuals of the *Rathugala adhivasis* are gradually directed to receive education through schooling and also by the apostolic church run by priests. The church plays a major role in educating these youngsters:

Respondent “C” : The church has sent some of the young boys to learn English and do jobs in Colombo. It is good in a way. But some of our elders are angry with the church for interfering with our day today lifestyles” (Field Interviews, 2021).

The church which is located close by the *Rathugala* area comprises of a small building with adequate facilities to conduct small scale classrooms. Those *adhivasis* who have embraced Christianity over Buddhism and the traditional *adhivasi* religion based on dead ancestors are in favour of the education their youngsters receive through the church while the rest are in disapproval about this “development” within the area. A certain number of students also attend the government primary school in *Rathugala*. Thus, religious intrusion has played a crucial role in deciding the direction of education received by the younger *adhivasi* generation. The quality of education received by them is intertwined with the religious division that is present within the community. However, regardless of what the sponsoring institution is, the education received by the younger indigenous community is a space which is devoid of any acknowledgment regarding their existence in Sri Lanka. Except for a few instances in the history books of the state syllabus, the *adhivasi* community has been erased from the school curriculum of the country.

The majority of the interviewees were males as there was a reluctance from the females of the indigenous community to join these discussions. Likewise, the absence or the lack of participation of female *adhivasi* individuals in many of the “important” departments of the community’s life shows how indigenous women are the most marginalised individuals within the *adhivasi* community. In addition to being collectively marginalised as a part of the *Rathugala adhivasi* community along with men, these women have an absent presence in the indigenous community. Other than playing the “stereotypical” roles of a wife or a mother, the



*adhivasi* women are subjugated by the heavy male dominance that is present within the community. Most of the female children are not encouraged to receive education and is married off at a young age. Decisions on behalf of women are mostly taken by men, who are the heads of their respective families. Their voice is silenced by the patriarchal social structure of the *adhivasi* community which reinstates the “stereotypical” roles and responsibilities of a woman. Thus, it appears that the identity transition of the *adhivasi* community happens within the paradigm of patriarchy, where women are doubly marginalized and given minimal space to break the “stereotypical” roles attached to their identity. Within an already “subalternised” community, women are further ignored and disregarded due to their gender. This occurrence thus, reinforces the global patriarchal structure, which is even present within the “developed” capitalistic societies most of the time. Spivak’s theory was used to analyze the participation and or absence of females within the terrains of the present day *adhivasi* livelihood such as education, rituals, politics and economic transitions within the community.

The identity transition of the *Rathugala adhivasi* community due to intrusive forces such as neo-colonialism, neoliberalism and capitalism cannot be labelled as “progressive” or “empowering” to this community since they are gradually displaced within the Sri Lankan society in multiple ways. The *Rathugala adhivasi* village is on the verge of transitioning from an *adhivasi* village to a “rural” village with extreme poverty and zero access to the basic necessities for survival. The intrusion of neo-colonialism and capitalism appears to further worsen their living conditions as their location in the periphery of a capitalistic society as well as the *adhivasi* community hierarchy is cemented with these intrusive forces. Similar to many other social structures, this community too has zero immunity to the advances of a global capitalistic and neo colonial wave, which further pushes them to the periphery and hinterlands of the Sri Lankan social structure.

In addition to the *Veddha* community, non-indigenous individuals residing in the *Rathugala* area close by the *adhivasi* settlements were also interviewed. These interviews provided an idea of how the *adhivasi* community and its transitions are perceived by the non-indigenous closer vicinity outsiders. Since the non-indigenous communities mainly consist of Buddhists and Catholics, these discussions continued with an inclination towards the religious dynamics of the *Rathugala* area and its impact upon these indigenous and non-indigenous settlements.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The socio-cultural, political and economic changes that have occurred in Sri Lanka over the years have brought tremendous changes to the lives of the *adhivasi* communities residing in the peripheral regions of the country. In addition, the colluding forces of neoliberalism, neo-colonialism and capitalism have significantly influenced the identity formation and transformation of these indigenous communities as they attempt to redefine their identities in relation to the constant changes within the socio-cultural, political and economic paradigms of the country. On the one hand, this identity transition displaces them within the *adhivasi* hierarchy, as they are forced to gradually leave their indigenous ways of livelihood, rituals and cultural aspects due the increasing difficulty of survival. Thus, they are losing their right to belong within the umbrella term “Sri Lankan *adhivasi*” as they have to shed the layers of their indigenous identity for the sake of survival. On the other hand, these individuals are struggling to find a space within the capitalistic social structure, to which they are being pushed while losing their indigenous logo Despite living in the periphery, the *Rathugala adhivasi* community has not been immune to the advances of neoliberalism and capitalism and have accordingly begun to leave their “traditional” lifestyles which have affected their language, cultural practices, food habits and means of sustenance. This research study critically analyses the intrusive nature of capitalist and neo-colonial forces which have



reshaped the identity of this community while displacing and disempowering them within the hierarchy of the *adhivasi* communities in Sri Lanka.

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