

F-19. Individual mobility as depicted in name changes among the Sinhalese

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Caste plays an important role in the social and political life of the Sinhalese. Caste is depicted as an ascribed status, which is for life and not amenable to change. However, in recent times, owing to many factors and forces of change, the nature of caste has also changed. Caste, as at present, is difficult to be identified using traditional attributes such as residence, name, and occupation of the individual. This paper examines how people perceive name changes and caste status in the context of social change and individual mobility, using newspaper notifications of name changes published in Sinhala newspapers during 1994 and 1995. The results show that the notifications were sent in mostly by residents from districts of Ratnapura, Badulla, Kandy, Anuradhapura and Colombo.

The names in notifications revealed that the majority of them belonged to non-Govigama, such as Bathgama, Wahumpura, Dura, and Neketi castes. The new names adopted by the individuals revealed that 90.0% of them have changed their names to indicate Govigama caste. The change of names to denote a higher caste status does not necessarily indicate that people have opted to change their caste. It is argued that the new names are associated with achieving higher social status than changing caste status.