

## **Changes in the Economic Role of Women of the Sinhalese Society in Sri Lanka from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

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### **Abstract**

*The aim of this article is to look into the economic role of Sinhalese women both in the Kandyan and Maritime Provinces during the period from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which one region was under the indigenous rule and the other was under colonial rule. The article discusses the economic conditions of the Sinhalese women during the pre-colonial era referring especially to primary sources and also how changes took place in her economic role due to colonial impact. It can be concluded that in the Kandyan era, women played a secondary role in the economy and were dependent upon the male members of the family. However, in order to safeguard her economic well-being there was a specific mechanism which functioned through traditions ensured by the law. And with regard to the women of the Maritime Provinces it can be assumed that under the colonial rule the economic role of Sinhalese women of the Maritime areas changed and they were not given a more progressive role. In fact they were ignored altogether and left to fend for themselves in whatever manner the new system allowed them to.*

**Keywords: Economy, Sinhalese women, Colonial rule**

The aim of this paper is to look into the economic role of the Sinhalese women both in the Kandyan and Maritime Provinces during the period from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century in which one region was under the indigenous rule and the other was under colonial rule.

At the dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, there were two distinct administrative regions in Sri Lanka; the base for such a division is the colonial experience. The first region was the Maritime Provinces which were under the Portuguese rule by the turn of the century (Abeyasinghe, 1966; de Silva, 1972). By early 17<sup>th</sup> century the Dutch displayed interested in establishing trading contacts with Sri Lanka. They have established their power in the Maritime areas after the Portuguese in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Goonewardena, 1958; Arasaratnam, 1958). During the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, this region was seized by the British (Mendis, 1971; Colvin R. de Silva, 1953). The second region was the Kandyan Kingdom. This was an independent, indigenous state until its fall to the British in 1815. The Kingdom of Kotte began to fall into the manipulative hands of the Portuguese during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Parallel to this political turmoil, the Kandyan Kingdom gradually became the major indigenous state. This process gathered momentum especially after the fall of the Sitavaka Kingdom in late 16<sup>th</sup> century (Dewaraja, 1972). Thus by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka were under Western colonial powers and the Kandyan Kingdom, a somewhat 'land locked' territory to the world outside, remained the indigenous state of the country.

An understanding of this territorial division, which incidentally was a political one, is vital for the study of the economic history of post-colonial Sri Lanka. The economy of the Kandyan Kingdom can be called an 'indigenous economic system' which was basically a closed and a primarily subsistence economy. In the Maritime Provinces the situation was somewhat different. By the dawn of the 17<sup>th</sup> century it had already experienced the colonial impact for nearly a century. The economy was 'open' in the sense that it was utilized by colonial powers for their international trading activities. The indigenous communities were sometimes given opportunities to participate in such activities although it exploited them more than providing them

with opportunities. However, the region became more economically accessible to the outer world by the 17<sup>th</sup> century. But one could not overlook the fact that even before the coming of the Portuguese the Maritime areas were open to the rest of the world through various economic activities via ports such as Colombo, Galle and Trincomalee. However, the region was 'partially closed' for the reason that, the socio-economic structure of the indigenous community was not adequately transformed or equipped enough to grasp the change of the new economic scenario. They were not allowed to or prepared to discard the existing indigenous system altogether while at the same time they had to face the challenges of a new system. In the situation of the cinnamon peelers for instance, peeling cinnamon was the *rajakariya* or the compulsory service to the government which had been assigned to a group of people in a particular caste for generations. Thus, it was a part of a tradition for which the Western powers had no greater regard. But since the international demand for Sri Lankan cinnamon was on the rise the colonial rulers retained the existing *rajakariya* for cinnamon peeling by not letting them find their livelihood elsewhere under the new rulers. This dichotomy, it can be said, is a result of a pre-modern economic system coming into contact with a modern economic system. This situation creates a dualism where the indigenous system becomes complex with the simultaneous functioning of two systems, i.e. the indigenous system and the system created by the colonial rule ('The concept of dualism implies a concept of a "whole" within which there are two discernible parts...The emergence of a dualism in history of specific communities and in specific parts of the globe has been broadly explained by various writers as being the result of a sudden cultural-contact between what are called "traditional societies" and the emerging post "industrial revolution" capitalist societies of the Western world.', Kurukulasuriya, 1983: 165).

The aim of this essay is to study the change of the economic role of women of the Sinhalese society of the Kandyan and Maritime areas of Sri Lanka during the period under review.

In gender studies, one of the key theories regarding history of mankind is that, civilization intensified the definition of socio-economic roles based on gender. Peter N. Stearns, a modern historian who has done extensive research on gender and history points out: 'While civilization developed, amid contacts but also the limitations of exchange, gender systems – relations between men and women – had been taking shape as well. Indeed, the biggest change affecting gender – the rise of agriculture – predated civilization itself' (Stearns, 200: 13). It could be said that by the 17<sup>th</sup> century the economic role of men and women in Sri Lankan Sinhalese society were well defined. This was more pronounced in the Kandyan setting.

The first part of this paper would investigate the nature of the economic role of the Kandyan women during the period under review. The following view of Boserup, a modern scholar, on various stages of a primarily agricultural societies in general and the role played by males and females is of immense importance in this context: '...where population is sparse and swidden (shifting cultivation) is the basis of the economy, women perform most of the work; with greater density of population and plough agriculture, men do more work than women, and where land is irrigated and intensely farmed, both put in a great deal of hard work' (Whyte and Whyte, 1982:18-19). If one is to define the role of the Sinhalese women of the Kandyan society in its agricultural setting at the time, it could be said that she was in the second stage of the process which Boserup has described.

At the time the Kandyan Kingdom was a politically matured unit and with a well defined socio-economic structure. It had a moderate

population density and the inhabitants used plough agricultural method for cultivation (Knox, 1681(1981): 105-110). Thus, as Boserup pointed out in general, in Kandyan economy too, men's role was more prominent in agricultural activities. In gaining information about the Kandyan economic system the description given by Robert Knox (Robert Knox lived in the Kandyan Kingdom during the reign of Rajasimha II as a captive of the King and wrote a vivid account of the country and its inhabitants.) is of immense value. Although there are certain lapses and inaccuracies in his accounts regarding specific persons or events (Goonewardena, January 1958: 39-52).

Knox clearly indicates that there were separate and well defined roles for men and women in agriculture in Kandyan society. According to Knox a man's role in agriculture was to attend to major tasks such as ploughing the land, sowing seeds and reaping the harvest (Knox: 108-110). According to him, women did the weeding, transplanting and bringing the harvest to the threshing floor and they were responsible for reaping crops such as *kurakkan* or *tana* (Knox:108-110 and 112). These were not regarded as her chorus at domestic sphere since she earned a payment (although not in money but in kind) by working in other villagers' fields too. Knox describes this earning as *warapol* (Knox, 110). Kapila Vimaladharmasiri, a modern researcher who looked into the economic conditions of Kandyan women is of the opinion that this was not a payment in kind but just a custom or tradition prevalent in Kandyan agriculture (Vimaladharmasiri, 2003: 145). However, since the agricultural system and economy of the Kingdom were ruled by the traditional customs, *warapol* can be regarded as an earning of sorts for the women's labour in an agricultural system where collective labour was valued immensely.

Thus it is clear that the women had a specific role in agricultural activities. However, it can be defined as a secondary role since the

main activities seem to have centered on men. What is important here is that although it appears to be a secondary role, the women's role in agriculture was considered equally important. This was evident from the fact that, be it in the domestic sphere or in the public sphere (such as in collective agricultural work), men did not interfere with women's work or duties. Knox notes this by saying: '...it is accounted a disgrace for the man to meddle or make with those affairs, that properly do belong unto the Women' (Knox: 244). What was the 'work' he refers to? It was threshing paddy to get rice, to supply water and fuel, to prepare vegetable for cooking and to keep a fire at the foot of the beddings of the members of the family throughout the night, at home; and in the public sphere she was responsible for above mentioned agricultural work along with animal husbandry which again was a collective work. What is the basis of this definition of the separation of roles? Professor Tilaka Mettananda is of the opinion that the base for such separation of roles was not the laborious nature of the work or the women's level of strength. She elaborates on this point by pointing out that although women were given lighter tasks such as weeding in the field she was used to do much heavier work at home (Mettananda, 1994: 130). This is evident from Knox's words that she was responsible for supplying water and fuel and threshing paddy. Thus it can be assumed that the base for such defining of roles was not labour but authority. Since the man was regarded as the breadwinner of the household, it was quite important for the woman to have a secondary role in economic activities. This helped the family to maintain the stratification of the levels of authority of the members of the household. According to Max Weber, in a patriarchal society (Although there is no unanimity in this regard, Kandyian society is generally considered as a patriarchal society with exceptional characteristics such as the *Binna* marriage system where the generally accepted role of women of most of the pre-modern patriarchal societies in Asia is different to some extent.), the authority of the head

of the household would be retained through the physical and mental dependency of the wife on him (Weber's concept is summarized in, Bendix, 1977: 330). This was extremely vital that it was maintained as an accepted custom for men and women to have their separate roles in the socio-economic sphere. It can be assumed that similar rule is applied when defining the roles of men and women of the Kandyian agricultural economy.

What should be emphasized here is that it was a separation of roles but not a degradation of women. In present criterion it can be assumed that this was discrimination based on gender. However, in a situation where even the man who was supposed to be the breadwinner of the family was not in a fully independent economic status in a system based on land tenure for service duties, one has to accept the fact that this was not sexual discrimination but a defining of roles with a purpose. The purpose, as mentioned before was to retain the levels of authority. Moreover, in a pre-modern society where labour was supplied from the family itself every person in the family mattered. Therefore, whatever their traditional role was, it was inappropriate for a person whether male or female to meddle with the other's work: simply it was against the custom.

Trade was not a money-based, income-generating economic activity in the Kandyian society (Trade was carried out with the outside world by the state. Kandyans, as individuals were seldom involved in trade. When they did partake in trade it was in small scale and in the manner of exchanging goods or the barter system. Most of the trading activities were carried out by the Muslims or the Moors.). Thus, apart from agriculture, the other prominent economic activity was skilled services based on the caste system which determined the land tenure, social and economic activities and the social status of the Kandyans (see, Pieris, 1956). In general there were two kinds of services in

which women were involved i.e. the traditional customary services which had specific importance and those which can be regarded as means of livelihood. However, in some instances, the two services intermingled each other. One example is the work of washerwomen. Their livelihood which was defined by the caste system was washing cloth. But at the same time these women were a part of the annual *Dalada Perahera* (Procession of the Tooth Relic) where they would walk with the *Karanduwa* (Casket of the Tooth Relic) as members of the castes which served the *Karanduwa* (Knox: 224). Besides, there were female dancers who were called *Digge* Dancers and *Aalatti Ammavaru* who served the Tooth Relic. These women seem to have served in a ceremonial capacity (Vimaladharm: 127-133). Their work cannot be defined as a means of livelihood: it was merely a continuation of the tradition. However, even for these services sometimes they were granted with land and other properties. However, it is clear that most of these land grants were not actual payments for services but grants made in appreciation of the services with a view of the well being of the family and ensuring the continuance of particular services for generations to come.

There were women who served the Monarchs as well. One such group was the female cooks who worked at the Royal Palace (Knox: 154). The records of various land grants refer to these women as *Mulutengei Mahatmayo*, a phrase which indicates honorary status (Vimaladharm: 124). Another instance was the three *Ilangam* or categories for Palace entertainment, i.e. *Neitton*, *Pichchamal* and *Vahala*. It was reported that Sinhalese women along with Malabar and Moor women danced in these troops (Vimaladharm: 124). Another important service was the *Kiri Mahage* position which required women from aristocratic families to look after the children of the royal family (Vimaladharm: 124-125). There were women who assisted the queens and ladies of the royal family who were also from aristocratic families (Knox: 54).

What is difficult here is to identify the fine line between the livelihood and the continuation of tradition, especially regarding the women of the higher levels of the social stratum.

But in lower levels of the caste hierarchy, the services although ceremonial and traditional when it comes to instances such as *Dalada Perahera*, were also the livelihood of the families concerned. The important fact here is that in this instance there is a difference between the roles of the Kandyan women based on their social status. Women from higher castes usually carried out specific ceremonial task or service to the royal family. Although they were rewarded for their services, that was not their livelihood. But women from lower levels of the hierarchy although acted sometimes in ceremonial capacity, contributed their services to the industry which was the livelihood of their families. These contributions are evident in folksongs of the Kandyan society. These songs clearly indicate that women contributed directly to some industries such as weaving. This is apparent from *Pannan Kavi* or *Kapu Yantare Kavi* or the singing which involved the caste duties such as weaving baskets or weaving clothes. However, there are other instances where this direct involvement is not evident. One example is the *Sakaporuve Kavi* or singing involved with the potters' industry, where women's contribution is not mentioned (Vimaladharm: 134-136). It can be concluded that in those instances women may have contributed as mere assistants since they were required to help out in all the activities of the family. Skills such as Pottery may have come from generation to generation through the male line. This can be assumed by a description of the artisans by Knox: 'No Artificers even change their Trade from Generation to Generation; but the Son is the same as was his Father, and the Daughter marries only to those of the same Craft: and her Portion is such Tools as are of use, and do belong unto the Trade...' (Knox: 206). Thus, it is clear that even in these industries women played a

secondary role. Again this was the division based not on labour but on authority. These roles were continuously maintained through generations where a father shall grant his son the skill he gained from his own father while for the daughter he will grant a portion of tools required by her husband to carry forward the industry of the caste.

With reference to the women's status in ancient China, Dr. Kumari Jayewardena points out that when doing research on women's status one cannot ignore the fact that even in a same society there would be diversification of women's status according to the class stratification of that society (Jayewardena, 1986: 171). This idea cannot be ignored when studying the Kandyan society since there was a strict stratification of the society not based on class but on caste.

It seems that women from the highest strata of the society have played specific roles which were not directly involved with their livelihood. Even in the domestic sphere, it could be assumed they had less work. However, Knox points out that even the women who belonged to aristocratic families were involved in household chorus although there were servants (Knox: 202). Although this confirms the assumption that they worked in the domestic sphere it also implies that they did it only to continue the tradition of being a good house-wife. But it seems that they had the option either to work or to supervise the work of the servants. This may be the case with the public sphere too i.e. they performed caste duties and services to the royals not as a livelihood but as a tradition. In reality the economic burdens were borne by the women of lesser privileged castes.

Another point which should be emphasized here is that there were women who earned their living through means which seemed to have been regarded as low or shameful. Referring to prostitutes, Knox mentions that prostitution was not allowed by the King (Knox: 70).

This indicates that it was an unlawful and unethical livelihood which must have been taken up by a few Sinhalese women. Slavery was not regarded as a livelihood. In fact it was an institution in the social system, where the slaves were allowed to lead a normal life and were given land and cattle. The only difference Knox saw in them was that they themselves were not allowed to keep slaves (Knox: 208). What is important here is that the slave woman must have contributed to her family's livelihood as any other woman of the society.

However, in general, as mentioned before, it is clear that the Kandyan woman played an economic role which was secondary to that of a man. But, the role was as vital as the main role played by the man in maintaining the pre-modern economic structure of the Kandyan society. In the Kandyan context the society had traditionally accepted the women's economic role as a dependent one. But what was unique in this system was how the society took responsibility for this dependent status of women. This is evident from the customary law of the Kingdom. The law, being very progressive in some aspects when compared to similar conditions elsewhere in the world, had given Kandyan women the economic security they needed in a secondary economic role. In the first place, they had the right to inherit, acquire and dispense property with a considerable amount of freedom. Incidentally, in marriage their property was not amalgamated to that of the husband or the property which can be defined as acquired jointly. This, according to Hayley, a compiler of the aspects of traditional Kandyan Law, is a very progressive aspect of the law when compared to the laws in Europe at that time (Hayley, 1923: 285). Secondly, the law assured that the women of the society would not be left in a destitute state due to the negligence of male members of the family who had the economic power (Koggalage, 2006). It is important to note here that a lapse on the part of the male members was remedied through courts and there are plenty of instances where

such cases were recorded (Reports of the Judicial Commissioner, lot no. 23 of the National Archives, refer to such cases which came before the law courts as late as in the 1930s.). For example, a husband cannot leave his wife without ensuring her maintenance and his obligation ends only after when she entered into marriage again (Knox: 248).

Thus, it can be concluded that in the Kandyan era, women played a secondary role in the economy which led them to an economically dependent state upon the male members of the family. However, in order to safeguard her economic well being there was a specific mechanism which functioned through tradition and ensured by the law.

The second part of this paper would focus on the general scenario of the women's economic role prior to the colonial experience in the Sinhalese society of the Maritime Provinces.

In the Kotte Kingdom the economic condition in general was primarily a subsistence agricultural one. Apart from agriculture, trade was an important aspect of the economy – both internal and external (de Silva, 1995: 37-60). The social hierarchy was again based on a caste system which was not altogether identical with the Kandyan caste system. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century there were some twenty-six castes which were given specific livelihood by the tradition. However, Professor C.R. de Silva points out that by the sixteenth century there are reports indicating that although the castes were there, the specific livelihood given to them in the *Janavamsa* had changed (de Silva, 1995: 47-48). However, it can be assumed, although the role of some castes may have undergone change still a specific service or services were assigned to each caste. The land tenure system in the Maritime Provinces was also much more complicated than that in the Kandyan

system although some characteristics are common to both regions. Basically aristocratic families had *nindagam* – villages given to them by the King and in those villages their direct share was *muttetu*. The other lands of the village were given to villagers based on their services and they were called *pangu*. Again there were other various tenure systems such as *otu* and *ande* (de Silva, 1995: 37-60).

In this economic system too, it seems that the women played a less prominent role. In agriculture, they were given secondary roles such as taking care of the crops. The *Parevi Sandesaya* mentions women who were chasing away the birds from the paddy fields (*Parevi Sandesaya*, 1958: verse 111). Both *Selalihini Sandesaya* (*Selalihini Sandesaya*, 1990: verse 38) and *Gira Sandesaya* (*Gira Sandesaya*, - :verse 76) refer to *El Geviliyo* whom G. S. B. Senanayake identifies as women who stayed at paddy fields to protect the crop (*Selalihini Sandesaya*: verse 121). Apart from this, the women were also responsible for animal husbandry. There is reference to *Gopalu Liyo* or women who looked after cattle in *Tisara Sandesaya* (*Tisara Sandesaya*, 1985: verse 87) and *Gira Sandesaya* (*Gira Sandesaya*: verse 75). Another important aspect was trade. *Tisara Sandesaya* (*Tisara Sandesaya*: verse 76) and *Gira Sandesaya* (*Gira Sandesaya*: verse 60) both refer to women who were involved in trade. Commenting on the description of *Gira Sandesaya*, Professor Indrani Munasinghe says that it is evident that the women at the time were involved in trading at market places or open spaces under shady trees (Munasenghe, 2005: 80). According to Professor Munasinghe, there is evidence to indicate that women were involved in making cotton thread even before 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. She also points out that there were women who worked in the pottery industry. She further states that these women may have helped the family trade (Munasinghe: 83-84). Another occupation was working as maids. There were two categories i.e. maids who worked in the temples and those who

worked in houses. They were paid in money (*kahavanu*) or rice (Munasinghe: 90). *Hamsa Sandesaya* refers to such maids called *desi* who carried things on their heads at Kotte (*Hamsa Sandesaya*, 1985: verse 125).

According to all instances mentioned above, it can be assumed that the women of the Maritime area had a secondary role in agricultural activities. There were women who contributed to the family industry and some also worked as maids. The marked difference from the Kandyan scene is the involvement of women in trade. This indicates that the Maritime area which was more open to trade had given access to women at least in domestic trading activities. What we can see here is a more open economic role for women although again it is limited to several specific areas and it was also a secondary role. This leads us to conclude that in this region too the male community was regarded as main bread-winners and key economic players. However, it could also be assumed that the women's economic role in the littoral was little more dynamic when it is compared with that of the Kandyan society. The reason for this may be that the Maritime region was more open to the world. This flexibility and openness are evident when we compare the women's attire depicted in temple murals of the Maritime and Kandyan regions during the same period. At Totagamuva Raja Maha Vihara, a temple in Galle district, the women in the murals are portrayed with clothes printed in colours regardless of their social status (Totagamuva murals in, Chutiwongs *et al*, 1990). These clothes which may have been imported were common in Galle area where export-import trade was a part of the economic activities. Whilst in murals of Sooriyagoda or Madavela Viharas of the Kandyan Kingdom which belongs to the same period had depicted women in pure white clothes most of the time (Sooriyagoda and Madavela murals in, Chutiwongs *et al*, 1990). There are occasions where women such as Amittatapa, who was regarded as an evil woman in Buddhist literature

wearing colourful clothes (murals at Degaldoruva Raja Maha Viharaya, Kandy.). This may also indicate the attitude of the Kandyan community towards the opening up of the Maritime society to the external world (Koggalage, 2007). Thus, it can be said that the slight difference in women's economic role may be due to the more dynamic nature of the general economy of the Maritime area.

There were other occupations too. One was dancing. But, it is not clear whether this was regarded as a tradition or a livelihood of this group of women. In the *Tisara Sandesaya* (*Tisara Sandesaya*: verses 165-179) there is a separate part which describes the dancers. The important fact here is that these dancers were related to entertainment and not to religious activities. In the *Selalihini Sandesaya* there is reference to women who danced in the shrine (*Selalihini Sandesaya*: verses 72-76). This is more in line with tradition than a sheer livelihood. Another noted feature in *Sandesaya Kavya* (messenger poems) is the description of prostitutes known as *Vaishya* or *Bisaru Liya* (*Tisara Sandesaya*: verses 11 and 27; *Hamsa Sandesaya*: verse 17; *Selalihini Sandesaya*: verse 23). Since the beauty of these women were appreciated by the authors of these poems, incidentally some of whom were monks, it could be assumed that it was not an illegal trade at the time. Nevertheless, it may have had a reputation as a corrupt trade. Again these factors indicate that the strictly traditional demarcation of women's economic role in the Kandyan Kingdom could not be seen in the Maritime areas.

However, even in these areas women's role was basically confined to the household chorus. According to Professor Munasinghe, a woman's talent for cooking was much appreciated and regarded as a special quality in her (Munasinghe: 85-87). In *Sandesaya Kavya* the woman's obligation to her family, her duty towards the husband and her ability to attend to the household chorus and also her thriftiness



were very much appreciated (for a description of an 'ideal Buddhist woman' see, *Kavyashekaraya*, 1966: 184, 186 and 189).

Thus, it could be assumed that she was assigned an economic role of secondary nature. How the society valued this contribution was not very clear as in the Kandyan context. It can be said that women of the Maritime areas may not have experienced the well kept economic security in its strict sense from the traditional law at the time. At the same time they may have got the opportunity to earn their living in more unconventional ways since the society which they were a part of was also open to constant change when compared to the Kandyan society.

The third part of this paper would focus on the question whether colonial experience had changed these roles of the Sinhalese women.

At the outset it can be said that, during the two centuries under review the conditions of the Kandyan economic structure has not undergone any drastic change. The economic activities were disturbed during the Portuguese attacks in early 17<sup>th</sup> century but such onslaughts did not fundamentally change the existing system. Nor the social conditions which facilitated the functioning of the economic system changed notably (Dewaraja, 1995). The changes started to trickle in after the British conquest of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815. Even then, drastic social changes were not brought about by the British during the initial years of their rule (Kulasekera, 1984). Thus, it can be said that it took some time even after early 19<sup>th</sup> century to change the economic conditions and role of the Kandyan women.

However, in the Maritime Provinces the conditions changed earlier. According to Professor S. Arasaratnam, during the Portuguese rule the indigenous administrative system did not change drastically. He

points out that the Portuguese undertook to retain the existing system by the Malvana Convention of 1597. He further says that although there were sufferings to the people due to the mishandling of the system by the Portuguese there were no notable changes in the existing administrative framework (Arasaratnam: 120). However, he further states that, since the system was governed by a set of unwritten customs and usages it was 'impossible for an outsider to study the system in theory and master its working without years of actual experience in its administration' (Arasaratnam: 120-121). Professor K.W. Goonewardena offers a similar explanation regarding the Portuguese administration. He also stresses the fact that although the Portuguese promised to retain the existing system in 1597, it was manipulated by the Portuguese officials for their own needs (Goonewardena, 1958: 153). What these two scholars point out is that although the Portuguese retained the existing administrative system it began to undergo changes due to the alien nature of a foreign rule (Abayasinghe, 1995: 123-137).

It seems that the case was the same with the Dutch. Dr. U.C. Wickramaratne describes the Dutch as 'continutors not innovators' (Wickramaratne, 1996: 27). Again they wanted to retain the existing system. Especially in the economy, the main system of the Dutch was to get maximum profit through minimum expenditure. To achieve this goal they manipulated the traditional institutions to the utmost (Arasaratnam: 121). However, changes were inevitable. For example, although the Dutch retained the service tenure system in principle, it was changed in spirit when they used it in large scale works (Arasaratnam: 136). Furthermore, they have used the existing system of law in the Maritime areas if they were only 'clear and reasonable' (Nadaraja, 1973: 10).

Where do all these observations lead us to? They imply that indeed the existing system has started to undergo changes in the hands of the foreign powers. This includes the economy. What has happened to the women in such a changing situation?

In order to solve the problem, it is important to look into the colonial attitude towards indigenous societies. Simply they did not like the general picture – whether it was the Portuguese, the Dutch or the British – they did not understand the prevailing social conditions and labeled the latter as unacceptable. This is evident from the observations made by Ribeiro (Ribeiro, 1999: 50), a Portuguese writer who criticized the Sinhalese marriage system: 'Their marriages are a ridiculous matter. A Girl Makes a contract to Marry a man of her own caste...and if the relatives are agreeable they give a banquet and unite the betrothed couple. The next day a brother of her husband takes his place, and if there are seven brothers she is the wife of all of them...She can refuse herself to none of them.' Another example is the comments made by W.C. McReady, a British officer, on the divorce system of the Kandyans: '...a man should be obliged to keep and support a wife whom he has grown tired, or who is not a hewer of wood and a drawer of water to the extent that he considered necessary' (Sessional Paper III/1869).

Moral issues such as this were instrumental in appeasing the mind of the colonizer since the colonial policy was contradictory to the liberal ideas of the West at the time ('Colonial policy in general was not compatible with egalitarian ideas accepted by rationalists at the time...Therefore the colonialists sought moral grounds to defend colonial rules...', Kulasekera, 1998: 104). Thus, the colonizers bend on a policy of 'civilizing' the indigenous communities. Fr. de Queyroz, a Portuguese writer, had extensively stressed the fact that it was the duty of the Portuguese to civilize the Sri Lankans (de

Queyroz, 1930). Similarly, the British were of the opinion that they were duty bound to 'civilize' the Kandyans ('...it is our Will and Pleasure, that you should wholly abolish these forms of Trial and Punishment which Humanity condemn and experience has shown to be less efficacious in the prevention of Crimes.', G.C. Mendis, 1956: 73).

What is important here is that one objective of these civilizing missions, it seems, was to improve the conditions of women. This is evident from ideas of British officers expressed as late as in the 1860s. One officer commenting on the Marriage Law introduced by the colonial government paid his compliments to the British rule: 'The excellent Marriage Law, though not so fully appreciated as might have been wished, has yet done much good, and will, I have no doubt, shortly raise the mothers of the people to the station which they ought to occupy' (Sessional Paper III/1869).

As mentioned earlier, the Maritime areas were somewhat open to the outside world even before the period under review. Even after the coming of the Portuguese and Dutch the existing system has not undergone structural changes. Both the Portuguese and the Dutch retained the existing system. But changes were inevitable. Most changes were introduced in the guise of fairness, rightfulness or upliftment of conditions, whereas they were actually more beneficial to the colonial powers in their pursuit of more profit through less expenditure.

In such an atmosphere women became vulnerable, because the new system was full of contradictory situations. For example one can again take the woman's attire. As mentioned above, the quality of the attire of every woman regardless of their social status was the same in the murals of the Maritime region. But in reality, the women still had to

abide by the caste law. According to Ribeiro, one cannot hide her caste since her attire reveals her social status. A low caste person should wear a cloth that reaches only up to the knee (Ribeiro: 90). According to Fr. de Queyroz women of ordinary status were not allowed to wear a jacket but they sometimes covered their breasts and head with a part of the garment which they wore around their hips (de Queyroz: 83). These customs slightly changed or became less rigorous, but nevertheless they still existed, especially in the minds of the indigenous communities. For example, as late as the 19<sup>th</sup> Century a foreigner when walking about in the Western Province saw some men of a higher caste scolding a woman of *padu* caste, which was regarded as a low caste in the hierarchy, for covering her breasts and thereby forgetting her real social status (J.W. Bennet cited in L.A. Wickremeratne, 1973: 171). This is an ample example of the change and the attitude towards change in the minds of ordinary people in the Maritime society. Even the Dutch did not interfere with the existing system. They allowed women of the seven highest castes to wear jackets but women who were from the castes which served the *goyigama* caste were asked to limit their liberty in wearing such garments.

Thus, it is important to note here that although the women seem to have changed, that change was not totally approved. The changes were especially evident in women of the higher strata of the society. They started wearing Portuguese jackets, the shawl and the petticoat ((de Queyroz: 83; de Silva, 1995: 163-181). But as Dr. Jayewardene points out this kind of changes apparent among women of higher classes of the society cannot be applied to the whole society in general. Even in the higher classes the change was not wholly welcomed. In 1741, two spinsters from an aristocratic family refrained from giving the right of inheritance of their property to a male relation of theirs due to his imitation of European attire and life-style. These

situations indicate that the changes in the Maritime society under the colonial powers were more of a chaos than a change. In fact, it raised a contradiction between the tradition and what was imposed by the foreign rule.

This situation was very much evident in the social scene. Since the Sinhalese social system had very much to do with the economic system, this situation changed the economy as well. The property rights were defined and registered; land transactions were organized and given new legal status. These were positive aspects. However, the service tenure system was exploited and thereby the lower strata of the caste hierarchy suffered and '...by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century [the condition of] the service tenure holders had become worse because their ability to free themselves was considerably reduced' (de Silva, 1995: 417-451). Thus, it can be assumed that the economic role of even the male community was changed inconsistently to suit the interests of the colonial powers.

In this situation, women who were already played a secondary and/or dependant role in economy faced grave consequences. The main reason for this is that although the colonial powers were bent on 'correcting what was unfair' in indigenous systems they were in reality exploiting these systems to maximize their profits. In this process, women who were already playing a secondary role in the economy would be displaced and disoriented. This was the case with the Sinhalese women of the Maritime Provinces during the period under review.

In a changing economic condition, they lost a specific role which was to be performed in the system and provisions were not given in the law, especially regarding the land rights in a society where the population was growing fast (Risseeuw, 1991: 75-79), to protect them

from being destitute. This was totally different from the well kept traditional system in the Kandyan Kingdom. Thus, the Maritime women had lost the protection offered by the traditional system which at least gave them a specific role and at the same time they were not given a new role in the colonial economic system. This led them into a more serious economic crisis.

They began to search for new means of earning a living under the colonial rule. Johann Von Der Behr, a German officer in Dutch force at Negambo describes ladies who were talented dancers and able acrobats. He also comments on their ability to cook delicious dishes especially the chicken curry (Raven-Hart: 76-77). Christopher Schweitzer another German sailor describes how he was boarded at a house of an old Sinhalese woman and that her livelihood was to cook for the Dutch sailors. This woman who lived in Colombo was able to speak a little Dutch and at times there were as much as twenty to thirty sailors around her dining table (Raven-Hart: 42). Schweitzer describes women who came to entertain them with dancing and acrobatics and who were very willing to make acquaintance with the foreign sailors (Raven-Hart: 65). These are testimonies to the desperate state of some of the women at that time in an economic system where women were not given due consideration.

Even under the new system, women of higher strata of the society enjoyed much better conditions. In fact, in some instances, they were given the 'rightful status' as depicted by the West. For example, in the newly started Dutch school system, girls were given the opportunity for education. But these girls were only from families of petty government officers or the teachers of the schools (Jayewardena: 116-117).

However, the general picture was that women found it difficult to survive economically under the new system. Sometimes it seems that she took drastic steps. In 1751, a woman who stole slaves was put into death by cutting off her head in public at Colombo.

Another answer to the problem of survival seems to be the marriage to a Dutch. But at times the marrying of indigenous women by Dutch sailors had posed problems for the Dutch administration. Therefore, they took measures to limit these marriages. If a girl wants to marry a Dutch, a missionary priest must certify that she was a good Christian. If the women did not attend mass after marriage their husbands were deprived of their wages. These are clear indications that women had to change their whole lifestyle for their survival. It also appears that these marriages were tactics of survival. Schweitzer's description confirms this assumption. He reveals how women tend to show more affection to Dutch Christians since they needed the security of the people who had power. But they had extra marital affairs with indigenous men and had even given birth to children from them (Raven-Hart: 76-77).

It is worth mentioning here that it seems that in this new mode of survival the women seemed to have trapped in another new set of rules. By an Ordinance of 1760, if a Christian woman had intercourse with a non-Christian man, she would be given lashes (*kasa pahara*) unto bleeding and put into slavery and her property be confiscated (Raven-Hart: 58-59). Since according to the Dutch, the women who married Dutch men led a corrupt life after coming to Colombo, the former gave the Church the power to supervise the good character and the lifestyle of these women (Arasaratnam: 210). Thus, even these tactics of survival were not easy. Women who climbed in the new social ladder through marriage may have had economic benefits but they had to pay a price for their survival under the new system.

There was evidence of women being more independent under the new system. But these were rare and exceptional occasions. Schweitzer describes a place where he had his meals after returning from Sitavaka. The landlady was one Branco de Costa. Her father was a Portuguese and the mother was a widowed Sinhalese woman. Branco had married a rich merchant who owned a ship. At the time the husband was missing owing to an accident at the sea. But Branco lived comfortably with twenty slaves from Bengal, wearing jackets made out of a see-through material with golden buttons and garbed in colourful silk. She spoke Portuguese, Sinhala, Malabar and Maldivian languages (Raven-Hart, 74). Branco was not a classic example but she was an exceptional case. She was very lonely and was most willing to marry Schweitzer although he refused the prospect. She was a cruel lady who victimized her slaves, used to smoke cigar and had a temperament which can be described as promiscuous. Cases such as this lead us to think that how vulnerable the state of women under the new system was.

Thus, it can be assumed that under the colonial rule the economic role of Sinhalese women of the Maritime areas changed in such a way that they were left with neither here nor there situation. They lost the accepted economic role and they were not given a more progressive new role. In fact they were ignored altogether and left out to fend for themselves in whatever manner the new system allowed them to. The economic policies of the colonial rule focused more on male labour and women were not given equal access to job opportunities (For example: the census report of 1871 shows that, the male-female workers' ratio in industry was 91.77% to 8.23% and in agriculture 93.49% to 6.51%). This clearly indicates that although the colonial rule had shattered the smooth functioning of the existing economic system it was unable to absorb the women into a more progressive, organized and specific economic role. Such a measure would have

given them the credit for transforming the women's economic conditions from that of a secondary role to a more active and powerful role. However, apparently what really has happened was that women of the Maritime Provinces lost even the existing security of their economic role under the indigenous system. This is apparent when one compares it with the more sheltered and well secured but somewhat limited economic role of the Kandyan women at the time.

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