



A STUDY ON SOCIAL IDENTITY BASED ON THE BRAHMI INSCRIPTIONS OF THE EARLY HISTORIC PERIOD IN THE NORTH WESTERN PROVINCE, SRI LANKA

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ABSTRACT

This is a study on the social base of the Early Historic Period (EHP) in Sri Lanka with special reference to the country's North Western region. The chronological scope of the EHP extends from 3rd century BC to 3rd century AC, known as the Formative Period in the history of the island. The geo-physical region covered in this study is located between the river valley systems of Kala Oya and Maha Oya in North-Western Sri Lanka. Drawing upon textual sources, material culture, and cross-regional studies as corroborative evidence, it explores the formation and evolution of the identities of *parumaka*, *Naga*, *Dameda*, *Jain*, *Brahmana*, *Bata*, and *Aya*. The study concludes that the complex nature of society during the Early Historic Period owed largely to the development of state formation processes within and among macro eco zones around which civilizational clusters were centered.

Keywords: Early Historic Period, Brahmi Inscriptions, Social Identity, North-Western Sri Lanka

INTRODUCTION

This is a study on the social base of the Early Historic Period (EHP) in Sri Lanka with special reference to the country's North Western region.¹ This is a study of the Brahmi inscriptions representing the earliest extensive writings in Sri Lanka. The chronological scope of the EHP extends from 3rd century BC to 3rd century AC, known as the

Formative Period in the history of the island. The preceding era of the iron-using Early Iron Age (EIA), also known as the Proto Historic Period (PHP), provided the material and social base for the EHP (Seneviratne 1986). The geo-physical region covered in this study is located between the river valley systems of Kala Oya and Maha Oya in North-Western Sri Lanka. This study also draws upon textual

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sources, material culture, and cross-regional studies as corroborative evidence.

Technological and cultural transition from the hunting-gathering Mesolithic Period to the iron-using EIA in Sri Lanka represented multiple developments. Such developments were in the main the establishment of an agro-pastoral economy, movement of populations to regions rich in mineral resources, establishment of more assured permanent habitations in the plains, and the emergence of lineage-based societies over hunter-gatherers communities. Notable research on the socio-economic structure of the EHP include studies of Perera (1949); Hettiarachchi (1972); Seneviratne (1985), and Senanayake (1997).

The emergence of recognizable micro eco-zones was an important factor in the socio-economic and material formation during the PHP. Transition from clan to lineage-based chieftains evolved within individual eco-zones during that period. Such societies had semi-specialized economies based on mineral and other natural resources. There was an interactive-network among micro-eco zones, ultimately resulting in the formation of macro-eco zones in the subsequent EHP. The emergence of the early state in Sri Lanka coincided within such select macro-eco zones (Seneviratne 1988).

To understand identity formation in the EHP, it is useful to study certain social categories recorded in the early Brahmi inscriptions (3rd century BC to 1st century AC). These are donative inscriptions inscribed on drip-ledge cave shelters, offered mainly to forest-dwelling Buddhist monks, spread mainly over the dry zone. It is a valuable knowledge corpus providing useful information on religious conditions, social status, identities, economic activity, political information, and many other aspects of the Early Historic Society of Sri Lanka. Drawing from these sources, this study has a focus on several groups, their

socio-political identities, and the formation of early institutional set-ups recorded in these inscriptions.

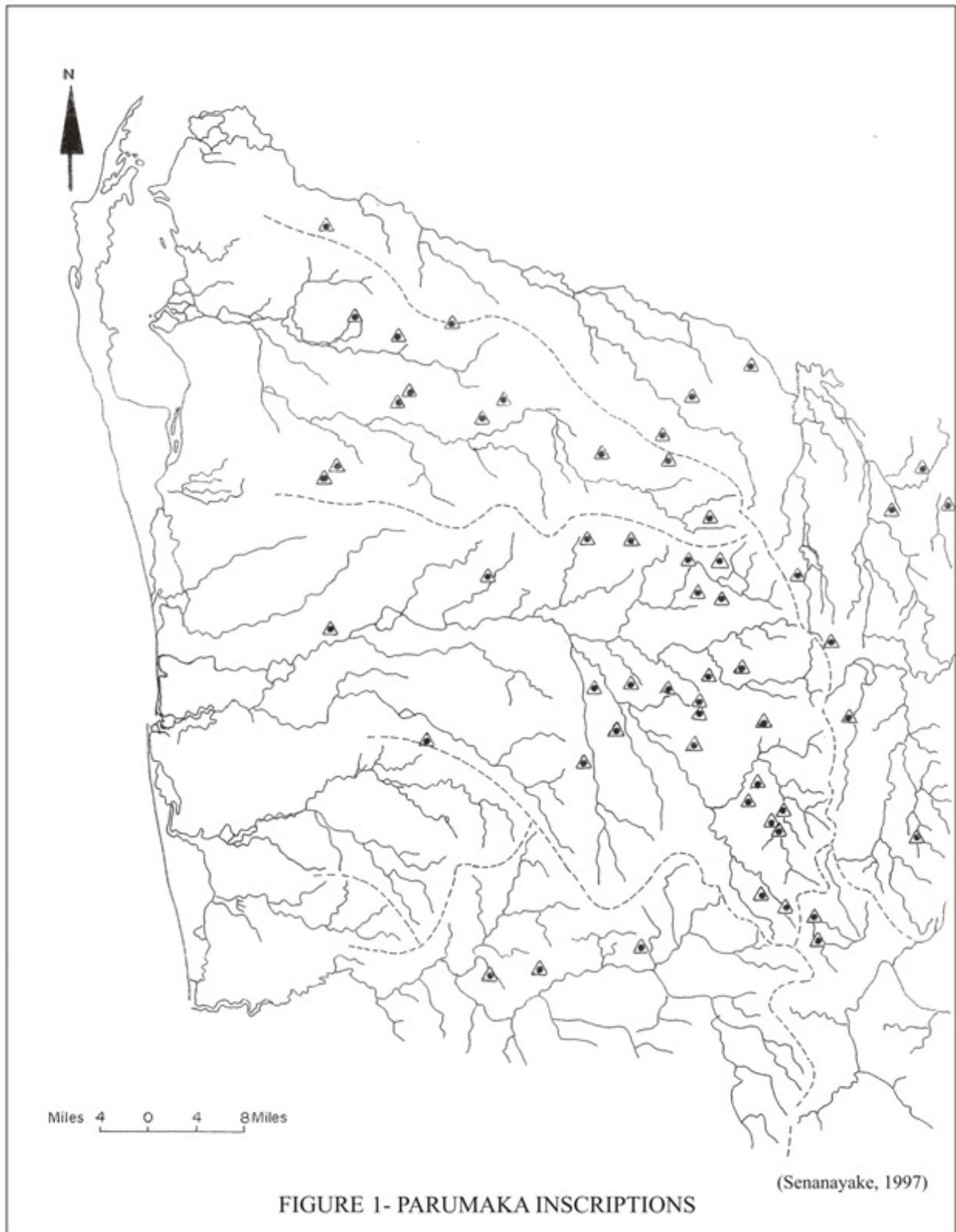
EARLY LINEAGE CHIEFTAINS: *Parumaka*

Among several social groups listed in the early Brahmi inscriptions, the category identified as *parumaka* played an important role in the pre-Christian society. The term *parumaka*, *pramakha* in Sanskrit and *pamukha* in Pali, can be identified, according to Paranavitana, as Indo-Aryan chieftains noted in early Buddhist texts (Paranavitana 1970, p. xxiv). It is also suggested that *parumaka* in Sri Lankan inscriptions is similar to the group known as *perumakan* in South India (Bell 1892), and is equated with the term *parumaka* i.e. chief, lord, and king in the Tamil language (Rasanayagam 1926, p. 65). Seneviratne has noted that some of the earliest *parumaka* may have been associated with the Black and Red Ware Megalithic Culture that originated in Peninsular India and Southern Deccan (Seneviratne 1992). However, the term denotes (lineage) chieftain in the earliest period. Seneviratne also suggests that some of the *parumaka* are the descendants of Velir lineage chieftains mentioned in the sangam texts of south India (Ibid). He further argues that some of the indigenous Mesolithic chieftains may have been absorbed into the EIA culture and they appropriated the term *parumaka* (Ibid).

There are over fifty archaeological sites located in the study area having inscriptions bearing the term *parumaka* (Figure 1). Some *parumaka* lineages seemed to have controlled relatively extensive territories in comparison to some the other *parumaka* lineages. It is important to note that in the Western Province there is only one early Brahmi inscription that refers to a *parumaka* (Paranavitana 1970).

Studies indicate that *parumakas* undertook cultivation, claimed ownership over agricultural produce, as well as controlled

Figure 1: *Parumaka* inscriptions



resource areas and movement of minerals between the lowland and montane regions of Sri Lanka (Seneviratne 1992). Within the study area, there is a higher concentration of *parumaka* inscriptions namely at Ridi Vihara, Kumburulena, Nuvarakande, Sangamu Vihara, Dambulla, Kaduruva, Sasseruva, Toravamayilaya, Paramakanda, and Vilandagoda. Among these sites, Ridi Vihara, Kumburulena, and Sangamu Vihara are associated with natural, mainly mineral, resources (Senaviratne 1984, p. 237-307; 1990, p.125-127; Senanayake 1997, p. 187-198).

These sites are also located in strategic centres along a network of routes extending from the hills to the fertile agricultural plains and eventually the maritime littoral tracts (Seneviratne and Senanayake, 1987). Archaeological sites such as Alulena in Kegalle, Danagirigala, Ambalankanda, Molagoda, Neluvakanda, Vagodapola, Kandalama, Pitiyegedara, Madagama Vihara, Hippava, Petiygala, Maligatenne, Nathagane Aranya, Tonigala, Kaikavala, and Bhagavalena are examples of such site locations.

Seneviratne (1988) has postulated that there is clear evidence of a method of succession in which the eldest son inherited the *parumaka* title. It is clear that certain *parumaka* families extended their hegemony over select landscapes in the North Western region during the EHP. The lineage group of *parumaka* pila in the Patahekanda inscription is a case in point.

Many *parumaka* families also had established their hegemony over several micro-eco zones in the geophysical area covered by the Kala Oya and Maha Oya valleys. The following list may be noted in this regard:

- Lineage of *parumaka Abhaya* at Tonigala (Nos. 1051 and 1052)
- Bamadata lineage at Mullegama (No.

1074) and Kadigava (No. 1050)

- Lineage of Vasiti *ameti* (Minister Vasiti) at Kaduruva (No. 1202)
- Lineage of Tiri at Sigiriya (No. 868)

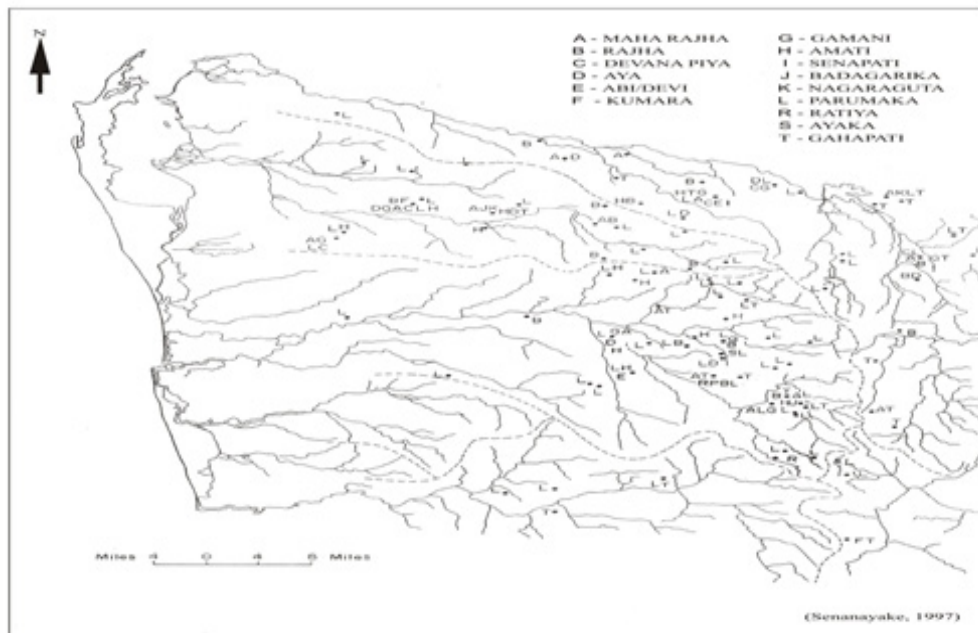
The term *parumaka*, a lineage term, latterly underwent transformation into a title (Seneviratne 1988). As such, descendants of *parumaka* continued to use the term as an honorific title. Latterly, even individuals who did not descend from *parumaka* lineage seem to have acquired this term as a title.

Based on the two inscriptions from Tonigala (Nos. 1051 and 1052), it appears even kings acknowledged the power of the *parumaka* based on their and lineage and socio-economic base. Names of *parumaka* preceded the name of the king in the Tonigala inscriptions, and King Gamani Abhaya endorsed donations made by the *parumaka*. Although the king had supremacy in a political sense, he had to acknowledge the local social leadership of the *parumaka* in question.

The political system (Figure 2) operative during the period of the Early Brahmi inscriptions was not a 'bonafide' monarchical system. The earliest powerful individuals were not kings, but 'leaders' accepted by the people. Therefore, the claim of early kings to Kshatriya lineage or Ksatriya *Vamsa* is questionable. Similarly, it seems unlikely that the establishment of villages and kingdoms could have taken place as fast or as miraculously as is stated in the Pali chronicles (Paranavitana 1936; Gunawardena 1978).

Some of the Brahmi inscriptions found within the study area represent the names of kings in association with non-Brahmi symbols. Those symbols found alongside the names of kings in inscriptions were found in Dambulla (inscription Nos. 835, 1019, 1020, 1021, 1022, 1023, 1024, 1025, 1026, 1027), Gallena Vihara (Nos. 1051 and 1052), and Tonigala. Such non-Brahmi symbols are in conjunction

Figure 1: Administrative ranks and political Groups



with the names of other kings of Sri Lanka in inscriptions located outside the study area.

Such symbols are also similar to ones inscribed on Proto Historic ceramics in archaeological sites in North-Western Sri Lanka such as the Pomparippu urn burial site and the Galsonkanatta urn/cist burial site (Seneviratne 1984). The inclusion of such symbols in the Early Brahmi inscriptions donated by kings may indicate that early polities may have evolved from a pre-existing socio-political nucleus.

From the first century AC, the title *parumaka* was replaced by the more imposing *maparumaka* title (Nicholas 1949). Its first known appearance was in the Tammannakanda inscription of King Kanittha Tissa (167-186 AC). Although fourteen inscriptions of this king are known, the title *maparumaka* appears only in this inscription (Paranavata 2001, p. 85-97). Similarly, King Mahasen is referred to as *Maparumaka* in the inscriptions of his successor, King Siri Meghavanna (301-328 AC.). Hettiarachchi suggests that the kings assumed this title to indicate their lordship over the *parumaka* nobles (1972, p. 56-59). However, there

may be other reasons for the assumption of the new imposing title. It is possible that the king not only established his power over the *parumaka* group, but also forged kinship ties with them, thereby claiming for himself descent from *parumaka* lineages. By doing so, he may have wished to consolidate his supremacy as the chief *parumaka* among the rest of the *parumaka*.

THE NAGA LINEAGE

A *Naga* family (*Naga kula*) collecting taxes on behalf of one *Uti Aya* (Price *Uti*) is mentioned in an inscription in the Hipavva inscription. The identity of *Uti Aya* is unknown. Paranavitana interprets *Naga kula* as “family of *Naga*” (Paranavitana 1970, No. 958). There is plenty of evidence for the existence of a group called *Naga* in various Sri Lankan sources (Rasanayagam 1926). It is therefore possible to suggest that the Hipavva inscription refers to a *Naga* family residing in that location which had socio-political control over the physical area. They apparently controlled technological and agricultural production while wielding power over merchant groups as well. This is probably indicative of the incorporation of a powerful pre-existing Proto

historic clan into the new political economy and conferring them with the title *parumaka* (Seneviratne 1988). It is clear that this Naga group maintained their ancient clan name despite taking up the new *parumaka* title.

Among the kinship terms recorded in 13 Brahmi inscriptions, the terms *Kula* and *Vasa* are important. Parnavitana interprets *Kula* as 'family' (1970, No. 958). Yet his rendering of *Vasa* is different (1970, Nos. 720 and 898). Although he interprets *vasa* as 'personal name' (1970, Nos. 720 and 898), it can be interpreted as *vamsa* (lineage) also. A householder named Naga who belonged to the *kula* of Anurada is mentioned in an Early Brahmi inscription (1970, No. 973) in Veṅgolla. The Mahavamsa mentions that an individual named *Anuradha* accompanied Vijaya to Sri Lanka and founded a village named *Anuradha* (MV. VII: 43). It is possible that members of the *Anuradha* family mentioned in the Velangolla inscription had connections with the Naga family.

DAMEDA IN SRI LANKA

An unpublished Brahmi cave-inscription in the Talagahagoda *Vihara* in Matale District refers to a Dravida (*dameda*) Buddhist monk (Sumanajothi 1984). Several Brahmi inscriptions carrying the term *dameda* and *damela* have been reported from various regions of Sri Lanka (Parnavitana 1970, Nos. 94, 356, 357, 480; Karunaratne 1984, p. 71). According to Parnavitana (1970), these inscriptions refer to Dravida people.

An inscription from the Abhayagiri *Vihara* site records *dameda* householders identified as sailors (Parnavitana 1970, No. 94). The Mahavamsa refers to two Dravida, called *Sena* and *Guttika*, sons of *assanavika* who seized power in Rajarata (MV. XXI: 10). The Dipavamsa and Mahavamsa refer to traders who arrived by ships bringing horses for sale (DV. XVIII: 47- 48; MV. XXI: 10-12). Another newly found early Brahmi inscription from

Kadigava (Senanayake 1997, p. 441) in the Deduru Oya basin records the cave of *asavita Guta* (*asavita gutaha lene*). It is possible to translate *Guta* into Pali as *Guttika*, and the term *asavita* is interpreted as "one who is knowledgeable about horses". There are other references in the inscriptions referring to *asa adeka* (superintendent of horse) (inscription No. 955), and *asaruya* (equestrian) (Nos. 606 and 931a).

A first century AD, an inscription from the Ganegoda *Vihara* (Dias 1991, p. 31, No. 10) located in the study area, refers to the "family of Chandra" (*Cada kulu*), who enjoyed some form of revenue (*bojaka*). *Cada kulu* is probably a person of the *Chandra Vamsa* or Lunar Dynasty, associated with the Pandya dynasty of South India (Parnavitana 1960, p. 613-635). Mahavamsa mentions that Vijaya as well as his followers married into families from the city of Madura (MV. VII: 49-58), so the presence of this lineage of Dravidian heritage may be explained by that development.

The Timbiripola inscription (No. 782) mentions a *kadaka* family, who bore the administrative designation *gamika*. Seneviratne interprets the word *kada* as 'to pass through', and 'end, limit, boundary, entrance, gate, shop, and market'. He suggests that raw material and products were taken across such entry-exit points/boundaries, called *kada* (1990, p. 124-128). If so, the *kadaka* family (*kadaka kula*, denoting Dravidian origins) referred to in the Timbiripola inscription was a family in-charge of collecting taxes on the goods passing between two economic zones or at territorial boundaries. Therefore, '*kadaka kula*' bears the meaning 'he who is in charge of the border/exit-entry points'.

THE PRESENCE OF JAIN

Brahmi inscriptions of Sri Lanka throw extensive light on monks, with special reference to the Buddhist clergy of the EHP (Parnavitana 1970; Fernando 1949;

Karunaratne 1984). Individual monks who were the recipients of caves are referred to as 'saga, samana and tera'. This term may not necessarily refer exclusively to Buddhist monks. Both Jain and Buddhist literature use the terms *samana*, *sanga*, and *gana* to donate Jain and Buddhist monks (Caillat 1975). Chronicles state that Jain monks lived in Sri Lanka from the time of king *Pandukabhaya*, as early as fourth century BC (MV.X: 97-99). Another literary source notes that two princes, *Abhaya* and *Uttara*, plotted against King *Khallatanaga* aided by Jain monks (VAP: 612). This may indicate that Jain monks wielded considerable power in early Sri Lankan society in the Pre-Christian era. It is recorded in the Mahavamsa that Jain monk Giri attempted to expose King *Walagamba* while he was fleeing from the capital city of Anuradhapura, resulting in a fourteen year period of hiding for the king (Adikaram 1949; Rahula 1965).

A high percentage of Tamil Brahmi inscriptions in South India (mainly Tamil Nadu) refer to the endowment of caves to Jain monks (Mahadevan 1966; Veluppillai 1980a). There are suggestions that Jains were instrumental in spreading the Brahmi script across *Karnatakadesa* to South India (Ramesh 1984). Jain monks probably moved to the island in the company of merchants prior to the arrival of Buddhist monks. They may have introduced the early Brahmi script as well as the technology of drip-ledge cave shelters. In that event, we need to recognize that the Jain clergy inhabited some of the cave shelters.

BRAHMANA PRESENCE

Several contemporary scholars differ from Paranavitana's view and utilize the same or similar inscriptional evidence for alternative interpretations. Explaining the pre-Buddhistic religious environment of Sri Lanka with special reference to personal names in the early Brahmi inscriptions, Sittrampalam suggests that a large number of names denote South

Indian groups professing Puranic Hinduism (1990, p. 283-308). An inscription from Rangirimada (No.1194) refers to a monk from a Brahmana family. Inscription No. 1045 from Diyabate Vihara and inscription No.838 from Dambulla mention individuals from Brahmana families who were Parumakas. Yet Sri Lankan chronicles (MV. IX: 2, X: 19-26, 102) as well as inscriptions such as the Piccandivava inscriptions (Nos. 1059, 1060) located in the study area in question, refer to the Brahmanas as those who acted as mentors and physicians to royalty. Karunatilaka points out that although these Brahmi inscriptions record the title of Brahmana (Bamana), the caste system on Indian lines did not function in Sri Lanka (1986, p.108-143).

The Bambaragala inscription (No.814) refers to a local ruler named the King of the East (*Pocanirajha*) who married the daughter of a Brahmana. There are some interesting variations in the use of the term 'Brahmana' in the inscriptions. For instance, the father of Bamana Dataka in the Molagoda inscription (No.812) is a *Parumaka* and not called Brahmana. Certain other inscriptions in the North-West do not assign the Brahmana identity to sons. Inscriptions from Sasseruwa (1003), Diyabate (1045), Piccandivava (1065), Rangirimada (1194), and Yangala (205) are some such instances. The exact identity of the group named Brahmana in EHP Sri Lanka during this period is therefore not clear. It is possible that a majority of those who identified themselves as Brahmana in the EHP was of mixed origin and some may have assumed Brahmana status. The concept of an exclusive Brahmana caste presence in contemporary India cannot be recognized in the Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions.

THE KABOJHA, MOURYA, BATA AND AYA IDENTITIES

An early Brahmi inscription records one *Gopala*, a member of a corporation termed *Gota Kabojhiya* in inscription No. 990 from

Kadtiruveva. Kabojha is the area of Kashmir in North India (Paranavitana 1970).

Paranavitana also read the phrase *Upasaka Meraya Tisa* in inscription No. 783 from Timbiripola as *Upasaka Maurya Tissa*, a member of the *Maurya* clan (Paranavitana 1970). Paranavitana, who held the view that the introduction of North Indian Aryan civilization to Sri Lanka, did not provide evidence for the existence of North Indian clans in Sri Lanka.

The term *bata* is interpreted by Paranavitana as Bhadanta, Lord, or an honorific (1970, CIV). It is a prefix to proper names inscribed in the early Brahmi inscriptions. There are other scholars who agree with this interpretation (Ellawala 1969, p. 41; Karunaratne 1984, p. 62-68; Hettiarachchi 1972, p.73-74). Seneviratne (1985, p. 49-56) suggests a different reading for *bata*, equating it with the term *paratavar* (>*barata*>*bata*). According to his interpretation, *paratavar* were of South Indian origin who originally thrived in the marine-littoral ecology. Later, a section of them engaged as seafaring merchants in the early historical period.

Sitrampalam has identified a kinship connection between the *Baratas* and the *Velir* (1990a, p. 89-90). The *Barata* term is recorded in several inscriptions in the study area (No. 1049 and 1049b in Gallava Vihara; No. 1011 in Sasseruva; No 1073 in Mullegama; No. 989 at Kaduruvava). Another *Barata* inscription is also located in the Kala Oya valley, at the Kantollavala hermitage site (Senanayake 1997, p.438).

The *bata* is noted as a specific group in inscription No. 898 in Habbilikanda, where it refers to three brothers identified as *bata*. An inscription from Sasseruva (No. 1011) mentions a donation made by a *barata* in association with his relatives. The Gallava Vihara inscription (No. 3049) refers to a *barata* identified as an envoy (*dutaka*), while

inscription No.797 at Atugoda refers to a *bata* who held a ministerial post.

The Vegiriva inscription (No. 807) refers to a joint donation of a cave made by a lapidarist, ivory artisan, potter, lay disciple, householder, and prince. Noting the name of *bata Sumana's* name at the head of this list over the prince indicates his priority status in this act.

With the progress of time in the EHP, the *bata/ barata* group may have achieved political goals. An inscription in Patahamulla (No. 935) records a *bata* who identifies himself as King. This individual may have been a leader who established political power over a small territory (Seneviratne 1985, p. 49-56). The location of this inscription suggests that this individual had established himself in a strategically important location at a *kada* (gap), funneling raw material from the lowland plain to the central Highlands and vice-versa.

There is a reference to the donation of part of the town of *Bata (batasa nagara)* to the *sangha* by one *aya Duhatara* (No. 786). *Aya Duhatara*, as a member of the Devanapiya clan (*kuala*) possibly of Anuradhapura, is mentioned in an inscription from Yatahalena (No. 792). Paranavitana traces *aya* as a derivative from the Prakrit term *aya*, in Sanskrit *arya*, or Pali *ayya*. He identifies *aya* mentioned in the Yatahalena inscription as a member of the royal house (1970, p. xxi-xvii). Tilak Hettiarachchi also accepts this interpretation (1972, p. 65-68). Velupillai (1980b) equated the term *aya* in the Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions with *aya* mentioned in Tamil Sangam literature. *Ayar* of South India, according to him, derived from *Ayar* (shepherds), who were descendants of the *Yadava* clan (p. 12-13). Sitrampalam equates the word *Aya* in the Sri Lankan Brahmi inscriptions to a clan of *Velir* chieftains (1990b, p. 89-94). *Bata Nagara* may have been a trading center of the *barata* merchants. Although this town may have been under the hegemony of the *Barata*, the inscription

indicates the influence of Anuradhapura over this town. *Aya* of the *barata* clan, who controlled an independent economic unit in the central hills, were probably absorbed into the sphere of control of the *Devanapiya* clan through matrimonial alliances. What probably emerged was the gradual transformation of Mesolithic communities through a process of integration into a more dynamic social, political, and economic structure that evolved through the Proto and Early Historic Periods.

Seneviratne suggests that the *bata* group of Sri Lanka were absorbed into the social-political structure of the EHP more successfully than the corresponding *paratavar* group in South India. The old aristocracy of the island, including *parumaka*, seem to have joined forces with the new aristocracy who controlled agricultural and commercial resources, to form a powerful socio-economic block (1985, p. 49-56).

It is evident that the *bata* took precedence in some instances, while *parumaka* had priority in others, in the process of interaction they had with each other. For instance, the Sasseruva inscription (No. 998) notes that the *parumaka* precedes *bata* in the donative record. In Mullegama (No. 1069), on the other hand, the name of *bata Sivabuti* precedes that of *parumaka Sumana Guta*.

In the process of this transformation of the old social structure, it is also possible to note within the study area instances where the *bata* even took up the title of *parumaka*. For instance, the four sons of a certain *bata* clan took up the title *parumaka* (Kumburulena No. 896d). The Nuvarakanda inscription (No. 931) refers to a *bata Utari* whose father held the title *parumaka*. One inscription in Sasseruva (No. 1001) records kinship ties between *bata Sivaguta* and *gamika vepuli* (village headman *vepulla*). The author also came across a *barata* who held the designation *gahapati* or householder at the *Nagolla Vihara* (Dias 1991, p. 3, No.7). In an inscription in Padiyagampola

kanda (No. 800), the father of a householder is identified as *bata. Gahapati* and *gamika* were rural leaders associated with the newly emergent Early Historic agricultural society. Judging by the above evidence, it appears that certain individuals of the *Bata* or *Barata* group acquired the status of *Gahapati* and *Gamika*, and they forged kinship links with various other social groups.

Within a limited geographical area, social integration of various intrusive populations in an island society was a natural process (Bandaranayake 1984, p. i-xvii). Gunawardena (1984) points out terms such as *Kabojha*, *Milaka*, and *Dameda* (*Damela*) that indicated various groups that existed within this island society. However, Gunawardena also emphasizes the need to evaluate whether such terms denote clan groups, language groups or some other type of social division, and rejects the possibility of racially pure ethnic populations in ancient Sri Lanka (p. 1-56).

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the evidence relating to various social groups recorded in the Early Brahmi inscriptions that some of the tribal and clan-leadership of the Mesolithic and later EIA entered the social mainstream of the Early Historic Period. There were diverse, irregular, and uneven processes in this dynamic. Various groups in early clan-based societies located in micro eco-zones of North-Western Sri Lanka gradually underwent transformation with the development of state formation within macro eco-zones. This in turn provided the social-basis for the evolution of complex societies in the EHP.

NOTES

1. The inscription numbers in the text follow the list noted in Senarat Paranavitana (1970), *Inscriptions of Ceylon*, Vol. I, Department of Archaeology, Ceylon.

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