

# *Family Characteristics and Occupational Choice of University Entrants as Clues to the Social Structure of Ceylon<sup>1</sup>*

## 1. Introduction

**I**T is unlikely that a classless society ever has, or (in a technologically complex civilization), can exist. However, vertical social mobility—the movement of individuals from one social strata to another—is a viable policy objective for a democratic state. Indeed even aside from ethical considerations, the facilitation of social mobility is desirable in order to maximize the human resources of the nation. For these reasons, and also for the purposes of better understanding the functioning of a society, it is important to have some idea of the extent to which such movement is taking place. This is especially true of a newly independent country such as Ceylon, which is undergoing vast changes in its educational system, and whose declared national policy includes the eventual replacement of foreigners holding posts in Ceylon, with Ceylonese nationals. In connection with the ‘Ceylonization’ policy, it is also of considerable importance to know the occupational plans and preferences of the university students who will be called upon to take over many of these posts.

There must be a large number of factors aside from those associated with differential social class membership, which influence the decision to attend, or not to attend an institution of higher learning. Some of these are related to the value system of certain sub-cultural groups, irrespective of economic level. For example, clerical workers as compared to skilled tradesmen, or religion ‘A’ as compared to religion ‘B’. In addition, the personality characteristics of the particular individual concerned must also be an important factor.

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1. The research reported in this paper was made possible by a research grant of the University of Ceylon. The interviews were conducted as the students reported for their medical examination through the co-operation of Dr. H. Cullumbine, Professor of Physiology, who contributed generously both with his own time, and with the facilities of the Department of Physiology; and of Dr. H. M. P. Perera, the University Medical Officer. I also wish to express my appreciation to Bryce Ryan, Professor of Sociology, for his co-operation and assistance in every phase of the research. The opinions and conclusions expressed in this paper are however my own, and do not necessarily represent the views of the University of Ceylon, or the individuals named above.

## UNIVERSITY OF CEYLON REVIEW

The present paper seeks to examine (within the limits of the available data) the social and economic background of students entering the University of Ceylon, and their occupational choices, for purposes of analyzing the selectivity of the student population as compared to the total population of Ceylon. In many countries one of the most important channels through which social mobility takes place is the educational system, and especially the universities. Special attention will therefore be paid to the problem of gaining some idea of the extent to which social mobility is taking place in Ceylon through the university.

The data on which this study is based, were obtained from a 50 per cent. interval sample of 1950 Ceylon University entrants which is being studied as a part of the research program of the Department of Sociology. The sample consists of 212 students (143 men, and 69 women). All per cent. tables reported in the paper, are based on this number of cases. Certain of the information is also obtainable for the total student population in the Vice-Chancellor's report<sup>2</sup>. However, the data from the sample of the entering students was used because the paper is concerned with selective factors in respect to those who enter the university. In any case, there are only minor discrepancies between the figures computed from the Vice-Chancellor's Report and the entering student population, none being larger than 7.5 per cent.

### 2. Results and Interpretation

*Father's Occupation:* Under present social and economic conditions in Ceylon, and indeed throughout the world (including the Soviet Union), it is to be expected that a major share of university students will come from the upper socio-economic strata<sup>3</sup>. One widely employed technic for determining the socio-economic position of a family, is through the occupation of the head of the household. The father's occupation of each of the entering student sample was therefore grouped according to a modification of the Edwards

2. University of Ceylon. *Eighth Annual Report of the Council* (1949), Colombo. Ceylon Government Press, 1949.

3. Hollinghead, A. B. *Elmtown's Youth*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1949.

Inkeles, A., 'Social stratification and mobility in the Soviet Union, 1940-1950'. *American Sociological Review*, 15: 465, 1950.

Sibley, E., 'Some demographic clues to stratification', *American Sociological Review*, 47: 322, 1942.

## FAMILY CHARACTERISTICS AND OCCUPATIONAL

Socio-Economic Classification, and the results are presented in the following table<sup>4</sup>:—

Table 1: Occupation of father's of Ceylon University students, by socio-economic category, 1950.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP	Per cent.	
	Males	Females
Professional .. ..	22.3	42.0
Proprietor .. ..	17.5	8.7
Manager .. ..	16.1	18.8
Teacher (non-university) .. ..	12.6	7.2
Plantation Crop Farmer .. ..	7.0	8.7
Paddy Farmer .. ..	6.3	1.4
Clerical Worker .. ..	13.3	11.6
Skilled Worker .. ..	4.2	1.4
Semi-skilled and Unskilled Worker .. ..	—	—

The above distribution of father's occupation is interesting in several respects. First, as expected, the vast majority of the student population come from families in the upper socio-economic categories. It would be interesting to compare the occupational distribution shown in Table 1, with that for the total working population of Ceylon, but this cannot be done as the census figures are tabulated by industry rather than type of work. However the census does report that 3.1 per cent. of the gainfully employed are engaged in the professions, and the comparison of this figure with the proportion of student's fathers so occupied, is illuminating<sup>5</sup>. There are no students at all from families in the semi-skilled or the unskilled worker categories, and only 6.3 per cent. of the men, and 1.4 per cent. of the women are from the rural peasantry which constitutes the bulk of Ceylon's total population<sup>6</sup>. On the other hand, it is significant that there are any sons and daughters of this class at all. In the same way, the presence of children of fathers in Skilled Worker category and many of those in the Clerical Worker category shows that higher education is at least beginning to be diffused through all levels of Ceylonese society. While progress has been slow and uncertain, the government of Ceylon is committed to a program of equal education opportunity

4. Edwards, A. M., *A Social and Economic Grouping of the Gainfully Employed Workers in the United States*, Washington, D.C., Bureau of the Census, 1938.

5. Ranasinha, A., *G. Census of Ceylon 1946, Volume I, Part I—General Report*, Colombo, Ceylon Government Press, 1950.

6. This analysis probably understates the socio-economic selectivity of university education in Ceylonese society, since many of the highest status group—comparable to Warner's 'upper-upper' class—send their children to England for university education.

for all, and as this program takes shape, it is likely that the trend just mentioned will grow. In any case, it is clear from the above analysis of father's occupation that only a relative small amount of upward social mobility is taking place through the medium of the university.

Attention should also be called to the fact that 42.0 per cent. of the female student's fathers are professional men, as compared to only 22.3 per cent. of the men student's fathers. The women students thus come from an even narrower segment of the total population than do the men. Moreover, in spite of the fact that the number of women students at the university has been increasing rapidly in the past few years, the ratio is still about four male students for every female student. These two facts are not surprising in view of the subordinate place which women traditionally occupy in Ceylonese society, and it can be inferred that such restrictions are breaking down most rapidly among professional people.

In addition to the occupation of their father, the students were also asked by whom their father is (or was) employed. It was found that almost half the population of freshmen students, are the children of government employees (49.1 per cent.). As for the approximately 50 per cent. of fathers not in the government service, they are about equally distributed between private employment, self-employment, and those living on income from land or investments.

*Father's Education:* Closely related to the previous discussion of father's occupation, is the amount of formal schooling completed by the father.

Table 2: Amount of education of fathers of Ceylon University entrants, 1950.

	Per cent.	
	Males	Females
Less than 3rd Standard .. ..	5.6	—
3rd to 7th Standard .. ..	22.4	11.6
Junior Cambridge .. ..	24.8	21.7
Senior Cambridge .. ..	16.0	37.8
Senior Cambridge and Non-University technical or professional training .. ..	16.8	37.7
Some University Study .. ..	3.5	4.4
University Degree .. ..	11.9	8.7

Although Table 2 indicates that Ceylon University students tend to come from families in which the standard of educational attainment is fairly high, the proportion of students whose father had reached only the seventh standard or less is larger than might be expected *a priori*. This is especially notable

in the case of the male students, 28 per cent. of whose fathers had not gone beyond the seventh standard in their formal education. This points up the selective character of women university students in Ceylon to which reference has already been made. Another way of demonstrating the same point, is to convert the intervals in Table 2 into years of schooling. The mean number of years completed by the fathers of the men students is 11.3 as compared to 12.1 for the fathers of the women students. The critical ratio for this difference is 1.64 which is significant at the .10 level<sup>7</sup>.

Interpreting the data of Table 2 from another angle, it can be seen that in spite of the selective character of the students already discussed, the proportion of students whose father completed any university education is not large. Only 15.4 per cent. of the fathers of the men students and 13.1 per cent. of the women student's fathers had done so. Thus even among the relatively well educated section of the Ceylon population which can provide its children with a university education, the standard of educational attainment is increasing sharply between these two generations.

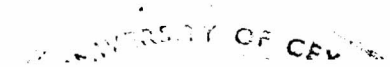
*Social Class Self Placement:* The students were asked to what social class they belonged. A fully structured question allowing four alternatives, and a space to write in a free choice was employed. The question was asked not so much to ascertain with any degree of accuracy the actual position of their families, but as one way of obtaining information about their outlook on life for use in connection with the studies in the field of culture and personality which are now in progress. Whether or not an impartial skilled observer would apply the same terms cannot be said. However, analysis of the data indicates that the social class in which the students placed themselves, is correlated with other more objective indices of social status.

Table 3: Social class self placement of Ceylon University entrants, by sex, 1950.

CLASS	Per cent.	
	Males	Females
Upper .. ..	8.4	10.2
Upper Middle .. ..	54.5	73.9
Lower Middle .. ..	35.0	14.5
Lower .. ..	0.7	—

In the first place, it can be seen that the women students assign to themselves a considerably higher social class position, as compared to the self evaluation of the men students. In the previous discussion of father's occupation

7. Critical ratio formula from McCormick, T. C., *Elementary Social Statistics*, New York, McGraw Hill, 1941.



and education, it was shown that the fathers of the women students in general occupied a higher position on the occupational ladder, and had more formal education. Since both occupation and amount of education are known to be positively correlated with social class position, this may be taken as indicating a certain degree of validity for the social class self evaluations of the students.

Second, each student was given a rating in respect to the socio-economic status of his home, as judged by the presence or absence of certain items of personal property such as a car, a radio, the reading of a daily newspaper, etc. These economic status score were found to be correlated with the social class self placement of the students, as evidenced by a coefficient of contingency of  $\bar{C} = .50$ . In addition, when the mean scores of the men and women students are compared in respect to this crude socio-economic scale, the higher status which the women students assign to themselves, is again confirmed. The respective scores are men: 3.85, and women: 4.55. The critical ratio of these scores is 2.38 which is significant at the .05 level.

It seems clear from the discussion of father's occupation, of father's formal education, and of the social class self evaluations that women students are on the average a group coming from families of higher socio-economic status, and superior educational attainment. In spite of this advantage, there is evidence that the academic ability of the women students is lower than that of the men. The scores of the women students on a standard test of intelligence were found to average significantly lower (C.R. 2.5) than those of the men<sup>8</sup>. In addition the 'grade point' average for the university entrance examination was computed for each sex, and the women students were again found to score below the men. The average score of the women was 1.14 and that of the men 1.24. The critical ratio of this difference is 1.8 which is significant at the .07 level. In view of the family background characteristics of the women students it is unlikely that the relatively poor performance can be attributed to selective factors. A more plausible explanation is based on the subordinate social position held by women in Ceylon to which reference has already been made. It is possible that the curtailment of participation in many areas of activity which this entails, has had a limiting effect on the possibilities for intellectual development of Ceylonese women. In addition, data to be presented later in this paper indicate that in contrast to American women students, the Ceylonese woman student does not generally anticipate a period of gainful employment. She especially does not anticipate sitting for the civil service examination which is a dominant motivation for a very large proportion of the male students. There would therefore seem to be

8. Straus, M. A. 'Mental ability and cultural needs: a psycho-cultural interpretation of the intelligence test performance of Ceylon University entrants'. Paper read at the 38th Indian Science Congress, Bangalore, 1951, and to be published in the June 1951 issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

grounds for attributing at least part of the poor test scores to a lack of motivation throughout much of the period of formal education, as well as to the more externally imposed restrictions previously mentioned.

*Family Size and Composition:* Just over one-quarter of the students (25.5 per cent.) come from incomplete families, e.g. families in which one or both parents dead, or as in the case of two students, the parents are divorced.

In comparison to European and American families of comparable social and economic position, the average number of children is quite large: male students report an average of 5.2 living children per family, and the female students 5.4. Since the students average just over twenty years of age, the families from which they come will have in most cases very nearly completed their reproductive cycle, and it would therefore be interesting to compare these data with the mean number of children per completed family for Ceylon as a whole, in order to see if the Western pattern of lower birth rates among the educated classes, is being repeated in Ceylon. Unfortunately, the census has not yet published information which would permit such a comparison. However, it may tentatively be concluded that this evidence argues against the existence of differential fertility between social classes in Ceylon. In the first place, the average number of children per student family approaches the biological limit for *average* number of children per completed family (about eight). Therefore, even if there were socio-economic differences in fertility, this factor alone limits their magnitude. Second, it has already been demonstrated that the women students come from families of higher socio-economic status, and superior education as compared to men. If there were differential fertility, then the women students should have a smaller average number of siblings, whereas just the reverse has been found to be the case.

It is important to note that even if some slight fertility differential were found, the existence of this relative difference would not detract from the significance of the high birth rate prevalent among the families of university students. Among other things, it is probably one reason for the smaller amount of vertical mobility in Ceylon as compared to the United States. In the United States the net reproduction rate of the higher occupational and educational strata is extremely low and this has given children coming from the more prolific lower socio-economic strata the opportunity to replace them in the next generation.

*Home Language:* The students were asked which language was most frequently spoken in their own home, among family members. Only about six per cent. of the student population are from an ethnic group whose traditional language is not Sinhalese or Tamil, yet almost one out of every four students indicated that English was the home language (as defined by the question). This is to be compared with the 6.3 per cent. of the total population of Ceylon which is recorded in the 1946 census as literate in English. This



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is obviously related to the socio-economic selectivity of the student population previously discussed. However, other factors also contribute to the relatively high proportion who speak English as a home language. For example, it may be that since the medium of instruction and of examination is English, that those who speak English at home have an advantage due to their greater skill in the use of that language. If this is correct, then it is to be expected that a larger proportion of such candidates will be successful in gaining admission to the university. In addition, it may not be a question of differential ability at all, but rather one of differential motivation. Home language is the traditional stronghold of any culture. It is not unreasonable to suppose that those families which have adopted English as the medium of daily intercourse, are also the most Anglicised in other respects, and this would naturally include the desire to have their children receive the essentially Western education which is offered by the University. It is most likely however that both of these explanations are factors in the total situation.

*Religion:* Since Buddhists are by far the largest religious group in the country, it is to be expected that they will also constitute the largest group of entering students. The distribution of students religious affiliation presented in the following table bears out this expectation.

Table 4: University entrants, and total population, by per cent. of each religion, Ceylon, 1946 and 1950.

RELIGION	Per cent. of		Per cent. under or over representation
	1950 University Entrants	1946 Population of Ceylon	
Buddhist .. ..	48.6	64.5	-24.7
Hindu .. ..	17.0	19.8	-14.1
Muslim .. ..	1.9	6.6	-71.3
Catholic .. ..	15.1	7.6	+98.7
Protestant and Other .. ..	17.5	1.5	+1,070.0

However, more intensive examination of the proportion of students belonging to each religion, indicates that the situation is far from a simple proportionate representation of each religious group in the total population. The last column in Table 4 shows that certain groups are under represented and others are decidedly over represented among the entering student population. Specifically, the three indigenous religions are under represented, and the Christian groups over represented. It is unlikely that this indicates any difference in the relative ability of the groups concerned. Much more plausible, is to explain these differences in terms of the values, and way of life of the groups under discussion. It may be that the extent of under or over representation is a reflection of the relative conservativeness, or perhaps of the degree to

which westernization has occurred among the groups concerned. On a less speculative level, it should be pointed out that the upper levels of Ceylonese society contain proportionately more Christians than do the lower socio-economic strata, and especially the rural peasant classes; and it has already been demonstrated that the student population comes predominantly from the upper socio-economic strata.

*Ethnic Group:* A similar pattern of over and under representation occurs in respect to ethnic group or 'community'. Particularly prominent are the under representation of the Kandyan Sinhalese and the over representation of the Ceylon Tamil, and especially of the Burghers.

Table 5: University students and total population, by per cent. in each ethnic group, Ceylon, 1946 and 1950.

ETHNIC GROUP	Per cent. of		Per cent. under or over representation
	1950 University Entrants	1946 Population of Ceylon	
Kandyan Sinhalese .. ..	6.6	25.8	-74.5
Low-Country Sinhalese .. ..	60.0	43.6	+37.6
Ceylon Tamil .. ..	24.5	10.0	+145.0
Burgher .. ..	5.7	0.6	+850.0
Ceylon Moor and Muslim .. ..	1.9	5.6	-60.6
Indian Tamil and other 'races' .. ..	1.4	14.4	-90.3

*Occupational Plans:* Just as the majority of the student's fathers are government employees, so the sons and daughters express a corresponding, but still more pronounced preference for employment in the government service. The overwhelming majority (62.7 per cent.) would prefer to work for the government. Next in order of preference but a poor second with 17.4 per cent. are those who don't care whether it is a private employer, the government, etc. As for self employment, 15.6 per cent. indicate such a preference, but in most cases, this referred to a professional practice. Only 3.8 per cent. said that they would prefer to be employed by a private firm. The reasons for this unparalleled preference for the government service are many and complex. Among those that seem most obvious are the prestige of occupying posts once filled by the ruling Europeans; the high value which Ceylonese seem to place on 'security'; and the preferred bargaining position of the civil servant in respect to dowries. In any case, whatever the reason, the status and prestige of the civil service is probably a phenomenon that is

unduplicated elsewhere in the world, and it is at least a half truth to say that the university is a government department designed to prepare the children of government employees for the government service.

The specific occupational choices of the students were grouped according to the Edwards classification in the same way as the actual occupations of their fathers discussed above.

Table 6: Occupational choice of Ceylon University entrants by socio-economic category, 1950.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC GROUP	Per cent.	
	Males	Females
Professional .. ..	51.0	21.7
Proprietor .. ..	2.1	—
Manager .. ..	4.2	—
Teacher (Non-University) .. ..	5.6	13.0
Plantation or Farm Operator .. ..	—	—
Clerical Worker .. ..	0.7	1.4
Undecided .. ..	36.4	63.8

The high proportion of women students who did not make an occupational choice is of course to be expected, and it can be inferred that this was because they did not anticipate gainful employment of any sort. However the 36.4 per cent. of men students who were undecided in respect to future occupational plans is something which may indicate the need for a program of vocational guidance. This figure is about twice that found in several studies of the occupational choice of American students<sup>9</sup>. Also pointing towards the need for a program of vocational guidance is the excessive emphasis on government service previously mentioned, and the fact that even through the cultivation of tea, rubber and coconuts is the major industry of Ceylon, not a single student indicated a preference for planting as an occupation. The lack of interest which the students display in commerce, and in planting probably represents in part, a realistic evaluation of the demand situation in respect to the employment of Ceylonese nationals. Evidently these students do not have much faith in the success of the Ceylonization policy.

### 3. Summary

The pattern of occupational choice, and certain characteristics in the social background of a 50 per cent. interval sample of 1950 Ceylon University entrants

9. Hollingshead, A. B. *Elmton's Youth*, New York, John Wiley & Sons, 1949.

Menger, C. *The Significance of Vocational Choices of School Children and College Students*, New York, Privately printed, 1932.

Nelson, E. 'Father's Occupations and Student Vocational Choices'. *School and Society*, 50: 572, 1939.

was examined with special attention to the problem of social selectivity of university students, and of obtaining some idea of the extent to which social mobility is taking place through the medium of the university. The findings may be summarized as follows:

1. While there is the expected concentration of students coming from families of relatively high socio-economic status, there are a considerable number of students whose fathers are clerical workers, and even some from the ranks of skilled workers.

2. Entering students have at least some conception of the social class position of their families. Most of the students placed themselves in the 'upper middle' class.

3. Fathers of men students averaged 11.3 years, and of women students 12.1 years of formal education. However more than one-quarter of the men student's fathers had not gone beyond the seventh standard.

4. While the women students in general come from families of higher socio-economic status, and superior education as compared to the men, their average ability as measured by a standard intelligence test, and the university entrance examinations, is lower.

5. Compared to American and English university students, the families of Ceylon students are quite large, averaging over five children per family.

6. About 25 per cent. speak English as a *home language*.

7. Of the religious groups, Buddhists constitute the largest single block of students. However in terms of the total population of Ceylon, they are under-represented, as are the Hindus, and the Muslims. Christians, and especially Protestant Christians are sharply over-represented in the student population.

8. Of the ethnic groups, the Indian Tamils, the Kandyan Sinhalese, and the Moors and Muslims are under-represented, while Low-Country Sinhalese, Ceylon Tamils, and especially the Burghers are over-represented.

9. An overwhelming preference for government employment is an outstanding characteristic of the student's occupational choices. The majority of the students wanted professional employment, and only 2 per cent. of the men wanted to enter business. None at all expressed a preference for Ceylon's major industry: planting.

MURRAY A. STRAUS