



U.S. FORCES INDOPACIFIC **CULTURE GUIDE**

Sri Lanka



About this Guide

This guide is designed to prepare you to deploy to culturally complex environments and successfully achieve mission objectives. The fundamental information it contains will help you understand the unique cultural features of your assigned location and gain skills necessary for achieving mission success.

The guide consists of two parts:

Part 1 is the “Culture General” section, which provides the foundational knowledge you need to operate effectively in any global environment with a focus on South Asia.

Part 2 is the “Culture Specific” section, which describes unique cultural features of Sri Lankan society. It applies culture-general concepts to help increase your knowledge of your assigned deployment location. This section is designed to complement other pre-deployment training.



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PART 1 – CULTURE GENERAL

What is Culture?

Fundamental to all aspects of human existence, culture shapes the way humans view life and functions as a tool we use to adapt to our social and physical environments. A culture is the sum of all of the beliefs, values, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning for a society. All human beings have culture, and individuals within a culture share a general set of beliefs and values.

Members of a culture also usually assign the same meanings to the symbols in that culture. A symbol is when one thing – an image, word, object, idea, or story – represents another thing.

For example, the American flag is a physical and visual symbol of a core American value – freedom. At the same time, the story of George Washington admitting to having chopped down a cherry tree is also symbolic, representing the importance Americans place on personal honesty and leadership integrity.



Force Multiplier

The military services have learned through experience the importance of understanding other cultures. Unlike the 20th-century bipolar world order that dominated US strategy for nearly half a century, today the US military is operating in what we classify as asymmetric or irregular conflict zones, where the notion of cross-cultural interactions is on the leading edge of our engagement strategies.

We have come to view the people themselves, rather than the political system or physical environment, as the decisive feature in conflict areas. Our primary objective hinges on influencing constructive change through peaceful means where possible. We achieve this endeavor by encouraging local nationals to

focus on developing stable political, social, and economic institutions that reflect their cultural beliefs and traditions.

Therefore, understanding the basic concepts of culture serves as a force multiplier. Achieving an awareness and respect of a society's values and beliefs enables deploying forces to build relationships with people from other cultures, positively influence their actions, and ultimately achieve mission success.

Cultural Domains

Culture is not just represented by the beliefs we carry internally, but also by our behaviors and by the systems members of a culture create to organize their lives. These systems, such as political or educational institutions, help us to live in a manner that is appropriate to our culture and encourages us to perpetuate that culture into the future.

We can organize behaviors and belief systems into categories—what the Air Force refers to as “cultural domains”—in



order to better understand the primary values and characteristics of a society. A cross-culturally competent military member can use these domains—which include kinship, language and communication, social and political systems, and others (see chart on next page)—as tools for understanding and adapting to any culture. For example, by understanding the ways a culture defines family and kinship, a US military member operating overseas can more effectively interact with members of that culture.

Social Behaviors across Cultures

While humankind shares basic behaviors, various groups enact or even categorize those behaviors differently across cultural boundaries. For example, all societies obtain food for survival, although agrarian societies generally produce their own food for limited consumption using very basic techniques. Conversely, industrialized nations have more sophisticated market economies, producing foodstuffs for universal consumption.

Likewise, all cultures value history and tradition, although they represent these concepts through a variety of unique forms of symbolism. While the dominant world religions share the belief in one God, their worship practices vary with their traditional historical development. Similarly, in many kin-based cultures where familial bonds are foundational to social identity, it is customary for family or friends to serve as godparents, while for other societies this practice is nearly non-existent.



Worldview

One of our most basic human behaviors is the tendency to classify others as similar or different based on our cultural standards. As depicted in the chart below, we can apply the 12 cultural domains to help us compare similarities and differences across cultures. We evaluate others' behavior to determine if they are "people like me" or "people not like me." Usually, we assume that those in the "like me" category share our perspectives and values.

12 Domains of Culture



This collective perspective forms our worldview—how we see the world and understand our place in it. Your worldview functions as a lens through which you see and understand the world. It helps you to interpret your experiences and the values and behaviors of other people that you encounter. Consider your worldview as a way of framing behavior, providing an accountability standard for actions and a logical explanation of why we individually or collectively act in a certain manner.

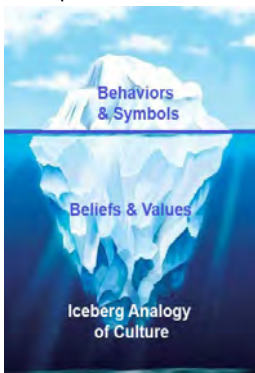
Cultural Belief System

An important component of a worldview is our belief system. A community's belief system sets its universal standards of what is good and bad, defines right and wrong behavior, and assigns a value of meaningful or meaningless. Our beliefs form the fundamental values we hold to be true—regardless of whether there is evidence to support these ideas. Beliefs are a central aspect of human culture. They are shared views about world order and how the universe was physically and socially constructed.

While all people have beliefs, their specific components tend to vary depending upon respective world views. What people classify as good or bad, right or wrong depends on our deeply-held beliefs we started developing early in life that have helped shape our characters. Likewise, these values are ingrained in our personalities and shape our behavior patterns and our self-identities. Because cultural beliefs are intensely held, they are difficult, though not impossible, to change.

Core Beliefs

Core beliefs shape and influence certain behaviors and also serve to rationalize those behaviors. Therefore, knowledge of individual or group beliefs can be useful in comprehending or making sense of their activities. We will use the iceberg model for classifying culture to illustrate two levels of meaning, as depicted.



Beliefs and values, portrayed by the deeper and greater level of the submerged iceberg, are seldom visible, but are indicated / hinted at / referenced by our behaviors and symbols (top level). It is important to recognize, though, that the parts of culture that are not visible (under the waterline) are informing and shaping what is being made visible (above the waterline).

In many cases, different worldviews may present behaviors that are contrary to our own beliefs, particularly in many regions where US forces deploy. Your ability to suspend judgment in order to understand another perspective is essential to establishing relationships with your host-nation counterparts. The ability to withhold your opinion and strive to understand a culture from a member of that culture's perspective is known as cultural relativism. It often involves taking an alternate perspective when interpreting others' behaviors and is critical to your ability to achieve mission success.

As you travel throughout South Asia, you will encounter cultural patterns of meaning that are common across the region. What follows is a general description of 12 cultural domains which are used to frame those commonalities.

CULTURAL DOMAINS

1. History and Myth

History and myth are related concepts. History is a record of the past that is based on verifiable facts and events. Myth can act as a type of historical record, although it is usually a story which members of a culture use to explain community origins or important events that are not verifiable or which occurred prior to written language.



South Asia comprises 5 countries on the mainland: India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bhutan, and Bangladesh, and 2 island countries, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, located south of India in the Indian

Ocean. Over thousands of years, many different ethnic and

cultural groups migrated through and settled in South Asia. The region's first civilization, the Indus Valley Civilization, emerged in modern-day Pakistan around 3000 BC. Inhabitants developed a complex writing system, built well-planned cities, and manufactured bronze tools.

Beginning with the Mauryan Empire (325-185 BC), the region experienced several cycles as empires consolidated and then splintered into smaller kingdoms and states before consolidating again. The Gupta Empire (320-550 AD) ushered in a period of peace and security known as the Classical Age. During this period, South Asians made major advances in literature, art, mathematics, medicine, and astronomy. The Hindu religion also rapidly developed and spread.



Following the fall of the Gupta Empire, warring kingdoms and Central Asian invaders known as the Mughals competed for dominance through the 15th century. During the 16th century, a series of Mughal rulers gradually conquered most of South Asia, founding the Mughal Empire and spreading Islam. At the height of their power in the 16th and 17th centuries, the Mughals greatly influenced art, literature, and architecture.

Meanwhile, the Portuguese had reached India in the late 15th century. By the early 17th century the French, British, and Portuguese were competing for control of the international spice trade as well as influence over Mughal leaders. The British emerged victorious, taking control of most of the subcontinent, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives by the late 18th century. Remote Bhutan and Nepal remained independent monarchies throughout the subsequent British colonial era.

Anti-British nationalist movements arose in the early 20th century. The Indian National Congress Party emerged as the largest anti-colonial movement but failed to attract Muslims, who

feared Hindu dominance. Instead, Muslims formed their own nationalist party, the All-India Muslim League, which advocated for a separate independent Muslim state. In response to these nationalist pressures, the British government divided most of its South Asian colonial empire into 2 independent nations – Muslim-majority Pakistan and Hindu-majority India – in 1947. Sri Lanka gained independence a year later. In 1965, the Maldives regained its independence from Britain, and in 1971, Bangladesh declared and won its independence from Pakistan.

Since gaining independence, India has remained a fairly stable democracy, while Pakistan has resorted to intermittent periods of military rule. Bhutan and Nepal have explored transition from monarchies to democracies. Sri Lanka emerged from a 26-year civil war in 2009, while the Maldives and Bangladesh have struggled to improve their democratic governance.

2. Political and Social Relations

Political relations are the ways in which members of a community organize leadership, power, and authority. Social relations are all of the ways in which individuals are linked to others in their community.

South Asia's strategic position between East Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia, along with its ethnic diversity, greatly influenced its political and social systems. From ancient times, traders, migrants, and conquerors from various places and cultures passed through or settled in the region. These peoples included the Persians, Scythians, Arabs, Mongols, Turks, and Afghans.



Historically, South Asia consisted of hundreds of kingdoms and principalities that no empire could control for long. Even under British colonial rule, over 200 rulers retained control of minor territories. Despite this fragmentation, the British colonial bureaucracy successfully administered these varied polities and interests for over 150 years, eventually becoming the framework for South Asia's

post-independence governments.

Today, India retains the region's most stable democratic political system. Pakistan began restoring democratic processes in 2008, while Bangladesh and the Maldives struggle with corruption and unstable leadership transitions. Sri Lanka maintains democratic institutions despite leadership's harsh tactics against political opposition. Nepal's government has dissolved several times since electing its first President in 2008, remaining deadlocked over drafting a new constitution. Bhutan largely closed itself off to the world, ceding control of its foreign relations to India between 1949-2007. Thereafter, the Bhutani king has been directing democratization efforts, overseeing the first parliamentary elections in 2007.

With India the dominant power in South Asia, the other South Asian countries are wary of its intentions. Pakistan especially rejects India's role as a regional leader. Ongoing territorial disputes between India and Pakistan have erupted in armed clashes several times since independence and compelled both countries to test nuclear weapons in 1998.



Meanwhile, relations between India and China are strained for several reasons, most notably China's close ties with Pakistan, rivalry over access to resources and regional influence, and ongoing territorial disputes. The US has strong ties to the region and seeks deeper economic, political, and security cooperation.

Modern South Asia encompasses hundreds of ethnicities, whose group identities influence regional politics. For example, ethnic nationalism prompted Bengalis to declare independence from Pakistan, establishing Bangladesh as the only ethnically homogenous state in South Asia. Seeking to create an independent Tamil state within Sri Lanka, Tamil insurgents fought and lost a 26-year civil war against the majority Sinhalese in 2009.

India is home to thousands of tribal groups, where both religion and ethnicity are powerful forces in politics. Although officially abolished in India and antithetical to the Islamic belief system,

the ancient Hindu-based caste system still plays a role in South Asian society. This system organizes society into a set of hierarchical and hereditary groups. At the bottom of the caste system are the **Dalits** (the “oppressed” or “downtrodden”), who are largely impoverished and uneducated, and who face strong discrimination.

3. Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a cultural belief system that provides meaning to members of a community. Religious and spiritual beliefs help preserve the social order by defining proper behavior. They also create social unity by defining shared identity, offer individuals peace of mind, and explain the causes of events in a society.

South Asia is the birthplace of 2 major world religions, Hinduism and Buddhism. Hinduism’s roots trace back to the Vedic Period (ca. 1750-500 BC). During the Gupta Empire from the 4th-6th centuries, these early beliefs and traditions evolved into the foundations of modern Hinduism. Today, large majorities of the populations of India and Nepal are Hindu.

Siddhartha Gautama, who achieved enlightenment and became “the Buddha,” founded Buddhism around 500 BC. In the ensuing centuries, Buddhism spread through South Asia into East and Southeast Asia. Starting in the 4th century AD, Buddhism began to decline in South Asia, virtually disappearing from the region by the 12th century. While the percentage of South East Asian Buddhists is small, Bhutan and Sri Lanka have Buddhist majorities and Nepal a significant Buddhist community.

Beginning in the 8th century, Muslims spread Islam throughout



much of the North and West of South Asia, culminating in the founding of the Muslim Mughal Empire in the 16th century. Although the early Mughal rulers tolerated other religions, later rulers sometimes persecuted followers of other religions.

Under British colonial rule, South Asians were generally free to practice the religion of their choice. Religious

tensions between Hindus and Muslims led to the breakup of the British Empire into Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan.

Today, South Asians continue to profess diverse religious beliefs. In addition to its majority Hindu population (80%), India is home to Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs, among other traditions. While Sri Lanka recognizes no state religion, its constitution gives “foremost place” to Buddhism, which is the state religion of Bhutan. Although both Pakistan (97% Muslim) and India enshrine religious freedom in their constitutions, increasing Islamic governance in Pakistan and growing Hindu nationalism in India create tensions with minority religious groups in both countries.

4. Family and Kinship

The domain of family and kinship refers to groups of people related through blood ties, marriage, or through strong emotional bonds that influence them to treat each other like family members (often called “fictive kin”).

Family life and relationships are important to South Asians. The traditional South Asian ideal family consists of several generations of the male line living in one household, along with their wives, minor children, and unmarried adult daughters. Women leave their parents' home when they marry and join their husband's family. Inheritance passes from father to son, and traditionally the family engages in business or a craft together.

In many South Asian families, parents have a great deal of influence over their children's marriages. Arranged marriages are common, and young women often marry older men. In some regions, families encourage their children to marry within their

caste. Hindus consider marriage to be an eternal bond, a belief that contributes to low divorce rates. Of note, polygyny, the practice of a man having multiple wives, is legal in most South Asian countries. Two exceptions are India, which outlawed polygyny for Hindus (non-Hindus may



engage in the practice), and Nepal, which outlawed polygyny completely.

A growing rural-urban divide in economic and educational opportunities across South Asia results in notable differences in rural and urban family life. The traditional family structure is still common in rural areas, where families engage in agricultural or village economies. In urban centers, where more educational and economic opportunities are available, the household is usually much smaller and family structures are much more diverse.

5. Sex and Gender

Sex refers to the biological/reproductive differences between males and females, while gender is a more flexible concept that



refers to a culture's categorizing of masculine and feminine behaviors, symbols, and social roles.

South Asia's dominant philosophies and religions (Hinduism and Islam) privilege the male's role as leader and

provider and stress female subordination. Despite progressive gender equality policies, South Asian women face continued challenges to their participation in the political system, the labor market, and education. While laws supporting equal rights exist in many South Asian countries, the legal systems often remain discriminatory and rarely uphold such laws.

In much of South Asia, women still assume the traditional roles of wives and mothers. Access to education is unequal in India, Pakistan, and Nepal, where fewer girls than boys enroll in school. South Asian girls typically marry at a young age, and over 26% of South Asian women have a child before age 20.

Women also face discrimination in the workforce. Across the region, some 60% of women are employed in the agriculture sector, and their participation in the labor force has declined since 1990. South Asian women do participate in politics, having served as heads of state in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal,

and Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, women remain underrepresented in politics, holding only 19% of the seats in national parliaments in 2023.

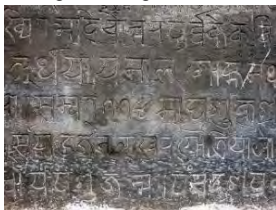
Bangladesh has topped the South Asian countries in gender equality surpassing Sri Lanka, ranking 59th among 146 Bangladesh lead the region in equality with over 72% of their gender gaps closed.

Homosexuality is illegal in South Asian countries except Bhutan, India, and Nepal. Homosexuals suffer discrimination and stigmatization across most of South Asia.

6. Language and Communication

Language is a system for sharing information symbolically, whereby words are used to represent ideas. Communication is defined as the cultural practice of sharing meaning in interaction, both verbally and non-verbally.

South Asia is linguistically diverse – about 453 languages are in daily use in India alone, although most are spoken only within very limited geographical regions. South Asia's languages belong to 4 groups:



Indo-European (languages such as Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu, are spoken widely in India and Pakistan), Dravidian (such as Tamil, spoken in India and Sri Lanka), Sino-Tibetan (such as Dzongkha, spoken in Bhutan) and Austro-Asiatic (such as Santhali, spoken in India).

Many South Asians are multilingual, although some regions exhibit more linguistic diversity than others. For example, while Hindi is India's national language, the government recognizes English as a subsidiary official language and grants official status to 21 other languages. By contrast, most people in Bangladesh speak Bangla as their first language, while Dzongkha is Bhutan's only official language. In Pakistan, large populations speak Punjabi, Sindhi, and Saraiki, yet the government is slowly transitioning the official language from English to Urdu, mother tongue of only 8% of the population.

South Asians generally consider English a sign of education or elite status. The British colonial powers that controlled most of South Asia during the 19th and early 20th centuries promoted the use of English. Since independence, English has remained a national or official language in India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives, where it is often used in official government business alongside local languages. Nepal also uses English unofficially in government and business. The only countries that do not use English to conduct official business are Bangladesh and Bhutan.

South Asians use a variety of scripts, some developed in the region and others adopted from abroad. For example, Hindi, Nepali, and Sanskrit, spoken in India and Nepal, use variations of the Devanagari script from northern India. By contrast, Urdu and Sindhi, spoken in India and Pakistan, use the Arabic script from the Middle East. Of note, to write Punjabi, Pakistanis use

the Arabic script, while Indians use the Devanagari script.



While some South Asians avoid confrontation during interactions, others

are more demonstrative. Generally, South Asians value respect in interpersonal relations. Of note, specific greetings, customs, and traditions used to demonstrate respect within interactions can differ significantly by region and culture.

7. Learning and Knowledge

All cultures require that the older generation transmit important information to the younger generation. This information can be strictly factual (for example, how to fulfill subsistence and health requirements) and culturally traditional (the beliefs, behaviors, and symbols that have meaning to the community). This knowledge transfer may occur through structured, formalized systems such as schools or through informal learning by watching adults or peers.

Traditionally valuing education, South Asian societies have established various types of formal institutions of learning. Prior

to the colonial period, most education took place in religious institutions such as the Hindu ***gurukula*** (a school headed by a ***guru***, or teacher), Buddhist monasteries, and Islamic ***madrasas*** (religious schools). Schools taught a variety of subjects, including religion, philosophy, warfare, medicine, astronomy, literature, mathematics, and logic.

During the colonial period, the British introduced secular education in the English language with the goal of spreading Western ideas and creating a class of South Asians that could support the British bureaucracy. The British suppressed instruction in South Asian literature, religion, and philosophy in order to “modernize” residents. Educated South Asians in turn opened their own schools that advocated South Asian history and culture. This rising consciousness among the South Asian elite contributed to nationalist movements of the early to mid-20th century, eventually leading to independence for most of South Asia.



Today, South Asian leaders view education as a tool for developing the region. The South Asian nations invested heavily in education in the first decade of the 21st century, resulting in an increase in primary school enrollment rates from 75% in 2001 to 89% in 2010. Despite this success, over 29 million South Asian children and youth remain unenrolled, disproportionately girls, while approximately 50% of students receive low quality education that leaves them without basic literacy and math skills.

8. Time and Space

In every society, people occupy space and time in ways that are not directly linked to physical survival. In most western cultures, people tend to be preoccupied with strict time management, devoting less effort to relationship-building. Conversely, in most South Asian cultures, establishing and maintaining relationships with others can take precedence over accomplishing a task in the most efficient manner. Networking is very important in South

Asia, as introductions through a reputable 3rd party can facilitate relationship-building by providing immediate credibility with a new contact.

Concepts of personal space differ throughout the region. While many Indians prefer to have at least an arm's length of space, Pakistani men tend to stand closely when speaking. In some regions, interactions between men and women may be restricted. In other regions, unrelated men and women may not interact at all. This segregation is particularly true in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and northwest India, where many wealthy and



middle-class Muslim and Hindu families follow a tradition called ***purdah***. This practice dictates that women are secluded in their family homes and wear veils on the rare occasions they go outside.

The rhythm of daily life changes during religious festivals and holidays. For example, during the Muslim month of Ramadan, many restaurants close and people enjoy a shorter work day. During the 5-day Hindu festival Diwali, participants open their doors and windows so the goddess of wealth may enter. Religious space is also subject to a variety of traditions restricting dress, actions, and types of participants, depending on the religion or local culture. For example, men must remove their shirts when entering some Hindu temples, while the Haji Ali dargah, a Muslim shrine in India, is off-limits to women.

Some practices concerning the use of space are common across the region. For example, visitors typically remove their shoes upon entering a home, temple, or mosque, and sometimes before entering an office or other private spaces.

9. Aesthetics and Recreation

Every culture has its own forms of creative expression that are guided by aesthetic principles of imagination, beauty, skill and style. Most of South Asia's forms of artistic expression reflect the diversity of the region's cultures and ethnicities as well as the influence of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Elaborate Hindu temples in India, Buddhist domed shrines in Nepal, and Islamic

art and architecture, such as the world-famous Taj Mahal, illustrate the artistic variety of South Asian culture.

Traditional dance, art, and literature have experienced revival following a period of suppression under the British colonial powers. Ancient epic poems, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, inspire modern mask and puppet theater, as well as television series. Contemporary novelists and poets explore a unique South Asian perspective while writing in both local languages and English. India features a thriving movie industry based in Mumbai. Known as Bollywood (a term constructed by combining Bombay and Hollywood), it is the world's largest film industry.



Cricket is the most popular sport in South Asia where India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka each having won the Cricket World Cup at least once. India and Pakistan have a strong cricket rivalry and have used cricket games as diplomatic ice breakers. India also is experiencing a Kabaddi revival – a 4,000 year old game combining elements of wrestling and rugby. Additionally, many South Asians enjoy soccer and field hockey.

10. Sustenance and Health

Societies have different methods of transforming natural resources into food. These methods can shape residence patterns, family structures and economics. Theories of disease and healing practices exist in all cultures and serve as adaptive responses to disease and illness.

South Asian cuisine is known for its variety and simplicity. Most meals are based on a staple, usually flat wheat bread in the North and Northwest and rice in the East and South. South Asians eat both bread and rice with lentils, beans, vegetables, and yogurt prepared with chilies and other spices. Because meat is expensive, most South Asians consume it only on special occasions. Of note, observant Muslims do not eat pork or drink alcohol; many Hindus do not eat beef or are vegetarians; and many Buddhists are vegetarians. Coffee is popular in the South, while tea is more common in the North.

Malnutrition, malaria, HIV/AIDS, and unsanitary drinking water are major health concerns throughout South Asia. Since 1990, malnutrition has declined by over half in South Asia, falling from 61% to 14% of the world's total undernourished population. However, the number of children who are stunted, underweight, or under height remains high and has even increased in some countries.

While most countries have implemented programs to fight the spread of malaria and HIV/AIDS, these programs are hindered by poor quality healthcare systems. Approximately 7% of South Asians still lack access to basic drinking water. Consequently, dysentery and other waterborne diseases are prevalent and a major cause of death among children.

South Asian countries face many challenges in providing healthcare to their growing populations. Unequal socioeconomic development has resulted in significant disparities in health and access to healthcare. As an exception to these trends, Sri Lankan life expectancy rates are significantly higher than the region's average due to the governmental provision of universal healthcare.

11. Economics and Resources

This domain refers to beliefs regarding appropriate ways for a society to produce, distribute, and consume goods and services. While most South Asians practiced subsistence agriculture prior to the arrival of Europeans, the region also produced spices and luxury items. Jewelry and fine woven goods are made both for



local consumption and trade with East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe.

Despite building communication, road, and rail infrastructure across South Asia, the British colonial administration did little to develop and modernize South Asian economies. At independence in 1947, the former British colonies in South Asia were some of the poorest countries in the world.

The South Asian nations followed different economic development trajectories following independence. India and Pakistan both implemented economic systems that mix market economics with significant government planning and control. Over the last 60 years, both countries have undergone periods of strong economic growth. In contrast, Bhutan closed its borders to external economic and cultural influences until the 1990s, retaining its traditional agrarian economy.

Aside from the pandemic year, 2020, South Asia has averaged 6% economic growth over the last 20 years. The economies of India and Pakistan have diversified into industrial, service, and technology sectors. By contrast, the economies of Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives remain largely undeveloped. Despite its strong overall economic growth, South Asia faces numerous economic challenges, including almost 216 million people living in extreme poverty. Even in India, with its relatively developed economy, much of the population has not reaped benefits from economic progress – 46% of the Indian population is employed in agriculture in 2023, with few farmers able to grow more than they need to subsist.



South Asian economies are still recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, which reduced investment flows, disrupted supply chains, and reduced human capital accumulation in the region.

12. Technology and Material

Societies use technology to transform their physical world, and culture heavily influences the development and use of technology. Since the end of the colonial period, as South Asian economies have developed at different rates, modern technology has spread unevenly through the region.

India has made extensive investments in its transportation infrastructure, creating the world's 2nd largest road network and a rail system that ranks among the busiest in the world. Despite

these modern alternatives, many Indians still use oxen, camels, or even elephants for labor and transport, even in urban areas. Pakistan's existing infrastructure is deteriorating due to government neglect. Nepal has very little modern transportation infrastructure, limiting its residents to non-mechanized means of transport outside the capital city of Kathmandu.

While most countries reported cell phone and Internet usage rates between 0% and 3% in 2004, Internet usage grew rapidly over the next decade, with a regional average of 43% in 2021. Cell phones are very popular, with most countries reporting usage of at least 84 subscriptions per 100 people in 2023. Sri Lanka leads the region, with an average of 143 cell subscriptions per 100 people.

South Asia faces challenges in meeting its growing energy demand. India is the world's 3rd largest energy consumer and the 2nd largest producer of coal, which supplies approximately half its energy needs.

Bhutan and Nepal are South Asia's only net energy exporters, Bhutan distributes about 70-75% of its generated electricity to India. Nuclear and hydropower are growing sources of energy.



Bhutan and Nepal have been slow to pursue international trade and investment. Other South Asian countries have had more open economic policies, but their

international trade and investment relationships often suffer from internal instability and lack of resources. With greater economic openness since the 1980s and recent improvements in domestic stability, South Asian nations are developing greater economic partnerships with countries such as China, the US, and Japan.

Now that we have introduced general concepts that characterize South Asian society at large, we will focus on specific features of Sri Lankan society.

PART 2 – CULTURE SPECIFIC

1. HISTORY AND MYTH

Overview

Sri Lanka is home to an ancient civilization with the world's 2nd-oldest continuous written history. The island's proximity to the mainland South Asian subcontinent greatly influenced its historical trajectory. From ancient times, Sinhalese and Tamil ethnic groups alternately vied for power, and at times, joined forces to repel foreign powers. Later, European colonizers joined the struggle to control rich agricultural regions, the trade of valuable commodities, and strategic ports. Since achieving independence in 1948, Sri Lanka endured ethnic tensions, culminating in a 26-year civil war that ended in 2009. Since then, Sri Lanka has slowly pursued reconciliation within its multi-ethnic population, while becoming a more economically developed and politically stable nation.



The Many Names of Sri Lanka

As described in the Hindu epic ***Ramayana*** from around 500 BC, ***Lanka*** (island) was the fortress of Ravana, a mythical

demon king. Since the earliest times, the island's strategic location attracted foreign explorers, each group giving it a unique name. According to the ***Mahavamsa*** (Great Chronicle) compiled by Buddhist monks in the 6th century AD (see "Myth" below), the island was known as ***Thambapanni***. Greek and Roman voyagers later adapted this name to ***Taprobane***, while Arab traders called the island ***Serendip***, the root of the English word "serendipity." Centuries later, the Portuguese adapted the ancient Buddhist Pali-language word ***Sihalam*** (Sinhala) to

Ceilao, modified by the Dutch and the British to **Ceylon**. As an independent nation, the island officially adopted the name **Sri Lanka** (resplendent island) in 1972. This guide uses the term *Lankan* to refer to native residents of the island, regardless of ethnicity.

Early History

Scientists believe early humans likely inhabited Sri Lanka between 500,000-125,000 years ago. A fossil skull known as “Balangoda Man” dates as early as 37,000 BC, while additional evidence – such as stone tools, burial sites, and human remains in nearby Fa Hien cave – confirm the presence of early humans around this time. As early as 16,000 BC, ancestors of the Veddah people (see *Political and Social Relations*) inhabited the island, hunting game, foraging for food, and utilizing stone and later iron tools. Around 8,000 BC, these people likely learned to cultivate crops and make pottery.

Historians tend to agree that Indo-Aryan migrants from present-day North India arrived in northwestern Sri Lanka sometime during the 5th century BC.



Historians disagree whether these early Sinhalese people arrived before the ancestors of the Dravidian Tamils from South India. Regardless of their exact arrivals, both groups of migrants likely mixed with each other and indigenous Veddahs, initially settling in the lowland coastal and riverine regions in the North. As the settlers began to expand across the island, other Veddahs fled to the southeastern highlands, where some of their descendants remain today (see *Political and Social Relations*).

The Anuradhapura Kingdom and the Arrival of Buddhism

Around 377 BC, Sinhalese King Pandukabhaya founded the Anuradhapura Kingdom, named for its capital in North-Central Sri Lanka. For centuries, Anuradhapura kings oversaw the construction of complex irrigation networks to support the

cultivation of rice and other crops, enabling them to expand across drier regions of the island.

Around 246 BC, Mahinda, the son of famed Emperor Ashoka of the Indian Maurya Dynasty, traveled to the island to spread Buddhism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). An early convert was Anuradhapura's King Devanampiya Tissa, who made Buddhism the state religion and founded monasteries and **stupas** (monuments to hold sacred Buddhist relics, also known as **dagobas** in Sinhalese) (see *Religion and Spirituality*) throughout the kingdom. By the 1st century AD, the island's *stupas* were the world's 2nd-largest man-made structures, smaller only than the pyramids of Egypt.



At Devanampiya Tissa's request, Mahinda's sister Sangamitta brought various sacred relics such as the Buddha's alms bowl and a piece of the Bodhi tree used to enlighten the Buddah (see *Religion and Spirituality*) to Anuradhapura. By the 1st century BC, most Sinhalese had adopted Buddhism, and Anuradhapura became a major center of Buddhist learning (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Early Chola Invasions: Meanwhile, the island's proximity to the South Asian subcontinent made the Anuradhapura Kingdom a target for Indian kingdoms seeking to expand. During this period, both Lankan Sinhalese and Tamil elites ruled the kingdom. Around 205 BC, the southeastern Indian Tamil Chola Kingdom invaded Anuradhapura and ruled for the next 44 years. In 161 BC, Sinhalese control of Anuradhapura was reestablished. Subsequent Sinhalese kings increasingly relied on Tamil mercenaries from the mainland to maintain control of the kingdom.

The Lambakanna Dynasty Brings Peace: In 67 AD, Vasabha seized the Anuradhapura throne, founding the Lambakanna dynasty and beginning several centuries of peace and prosperity. Vasabha improved the irrigation systems, while establishing trade in ivory and other goods with merchants from as far as the Roman Empire. In the 4th century, Buddhists brought a treasured relic – a tooth belonging to the deceased



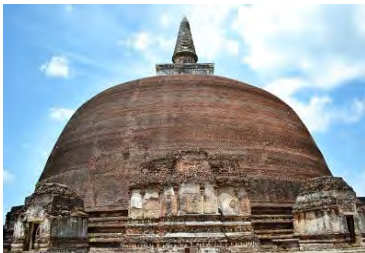
Buddha – to Anuradhapura from India. Currently housed in a temple in the central city of Kandy, this tooth remains one of Sri Lanka's most sacred Buddhist relics.

The Cholas Defeat Anuradhapura: By the early 7th century, disputes among Anuradhapura's Sinhalese rulers increased as the Tamil mercenaries began to exert significant influence. Meanwhile, invasions from the mainland became more frequent. In 993, the South Indian Cholas invaded and defeated Anuradhapura, destroying the city and establishing direct rule from a new capital in Polonnaruwa, southeast of Anuradhapura. After about 75 years of Chola rule, King Vijayabahu I reestablished Sinhalese control in 1070.

Parakramabahu Unites the Island

In 1153, Parakramabahu I took the throne in Polonnaruwa, ushering in what is considered a Golden Age. Besides unifying the entire island for the first time, Parakramabahu I (r. 1153-86) oversaw massive construction projects such as reservoirs, irrigation canals, and monasteries, as Polonnaruwa became one of the world's celebrated capitals. Trade flourished as merchants from around the world visited the island's ports, including Muslim Arab traders who enabled the spread of Islam (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Subsequently, small Muslim communities developed, primarily along the coast and in urban areas.

King Parakramabahu also led 2 military expeditions beyond the island. Around 1164, a city-state in present-day Myanmar ended trade with the island and imprisoned its merchants, causing Parakramabahu to dispatch a naval fleet to invade and capture the territory. Buoyed by this victory, Parakramabahu aided an unsuccessful rebellion against the Cholas in southern India in 1169. The costs of these 2 actions severely depleted the kingdom's funds, which had been depleted already due to massive construction expenses. After Parakramabahu's death, the kingdom enjoyed another decade of peace before leadership fractured due to infighting.



Tamil Influence in the North and Sinhalese Migration South

Poor leadership and frequent invasions caused violence and economic decline in subsequent centuries. With the island already weakened by Pandya Kingdom invasions in 1212, another South Indian invader, Kalinga Magha, seized control in 1215. His reign brought significant change, including the destruction of Buddhist sites and the forced assimilation of some Sinhalese into Tamil ethnic groups. Later in the 13th century, forces from a Buddhist kingdom in present-day Thailand invaded, primarily to retrieve Buddhist relics, although Sinhalese and Tamils banded together with various South Indian groups to repel these invaders.

As more immigrants arrived from India, South Indian Hindu culture flourished. Taking advantage of Sinhalese Buddhist weakness, Kalinga Magha and South Indian Tamil Hindus established an independent kingdom in the North around Jaffna. Consequently, many Sinhalese Buddhists migrated to the South. They eventually founded a fort in Kotte in the Southwest, used to repel Tamil invasions. Subsequent Sinhalese rulers primarily built settlements in mountainous or otherwise easily defendable areas to further sustain resistance to the continued invasions

from the North. Because the mountainous terrain proved difficult to cultivate, Sinhalese agricultural production declined.

Parakramabahu VI Briefly Reunites Sri Lanka: As the Tamils continued their attacks on the Sinhalese in the mid-15th century, they concurrently faced ongoing invasions from other South Indian groups. In 1450, after years of clashes, Sinhalese leader Parakramabahu VI finally defeated the northern Tamils, bringing the entire island within his kingdom until his death in 1466. Subsequent conflict resulted in the division of his holdings into 3 independent kingdoms: the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna in the North, the Sinhalese kingdom of Kotte in the Southwest, and a new Sinhalese kingdom of Kandy in the Central highlands. Soon, Kotte became the most powerful of the kingdoms, primarily due to its monopoly of the increasingly lucrative spice trade.

The Portuguese Begin an Era of European Colonization

In 1505, Portuguese traders arrived on the island seeking to



acquire a share of its trade in spices, particularly cinnamon. In 1518, the king of Kotte allowed the Portuguese to build a fort in Colombo, Sri Lanka's present-day commercial capital on the southwestern coast. Meanwhile,

Portuguese Catholic missionaries arrived, seeking to convert both Buddhists and Hindus (see *Religion and Spirituality*). While some residents converted to Catholicism and adopted other aspects of Portuguese culture, several Buddhists fled to the highlands to escape conversion.

By the late 16th century, growing Portuguese trade dominance and sometimes violent proselytization caused tensions to rise. Portugal annexed Kotte and Jaffna in 1593 and 1619 respectively, effectively conquering the 2 coastal kingdoms. Only the central highland Kandyan Kingdom remained independent. Although the Portuguese did not significantly

interrupt the local social order and even offered land grants to some Sinhalese, their heavy taxes proved widely unpopular.

The King of Kandy Aligns with the Dutch

With Portugal forcing the Kandyan Kingdom into undesirable terms of trade and supporting heavy-handed conversion to Catholicism, Kandy's king sought support elsewhere. In 1638, he successfully negotiated Dutch help for Kandy's struggle against the Portuguese. Within 20 years, the Dutch had ousted the Portuguese from the island, taking Colombo in 1656 and Jaffna in 1658. Although the Dutch granted Kandy 2 conquered ports in the East, they quickly monopolized all coastal trade and proceeded to landlock the Kandyan Kingdom, limiting its ability to align with other foreign powers.

To retain the support of the Kandyan king, the Dutch took on the role of "His Majesty's Servants," essentially



working as powerful middlemen between Kandy and the outside world. Despite these unfavorable terms, relations remained mostly peaceful. Unlike the Catholic Portuguese, the Dutch sought to convert residents to Calvinist Protestantism. Although their efforts were less violent than Portugal's, they were also less effective, a legacy evident in Sri Lanka's large present-day Catholic communities (see *Religion and Spirituality*). During the almost 150 years of Dutch control, violence erupted just once, when residents of some lowland areas rioted in 1762. After initially failing to quell the protests, the Dutch forced Kandy's king to grant them complete sovereignty over the lowlands in 1765. As a result, the Dutch secured control of much of the island, while allowing the Kandyan Kingdom to persist in a diminished form.

The British Acquire the Crown Colony of Ceylon

After France conquered the Netherlands in 1795, the Dutch turned to the British East India Company to protect the island, now known as Ceylon, from a French invasion in an effort to

retain their overseas holdings. Taking advantage of the situation, Britain assumed control of the island a year later and formally received Ceylon from the Netherlands under the Treaty of Amiens in 1802. While the British government was responsible for administering the island, renamed the Crown Colony of Ceylon, the British East India Company controlled all trade and finance.

In 1803, a British attempt to conquer the Kingdom of Kandy failed. Nevertheless, the Kandyan king's harsh rule caused local opposition groups to align with Britain. In 1815, there was little resistance when British troops toppled the Kandyan king. The island was reunited once more under a single power, the British.

British Colonization: British colonization of Ceylon was in some ways more favorable to the local population than other European colonization. For example, the British encouraged free trade, while prohibiting state monopolies. They also outlawed a



traditional class-based forced labor system and included some locals, primarily Tamils, in the civil service. The British built schools, mandating English as the language of government and education (see *Language and Communication*) and enabling the growth of an English-speaking Lankan elite. Of note, the British built more schools in northern Tamil Hindu communities, resulting in a higher proportion of educated English-speaking Tamils compared with Sinhalese (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

The colonial administration supported the development of a plantation economy to produce export crops such as cinnamon, pepper, sugarcane, and cotton. Coffee quickly became Ceylon's primary cash crop and a source of great wealth (see *Economics and Resources*). Of note, Lankans owned relatively large proportions of the land cultivated with coffee and rubber, as well as most coconut plantations.

In the mid-19th century, a leaf disease forced coffee growers to substitute tea, a crop requiring a permanent labor force. Since Lankans, particularly Sinhalese, refused to work as wage laborers on British tea plantations, the colonial government recruited indentured servants from South India. In subsequent decades, hundreds of thousands of Indian Tamils moved to Ceylon, forming the bulk of the plantation workforce. Over time, these laborers became known as “Indian” or “Plantation” Tamils, among other names, to distinguish them from the Lankan Tamils who had migrated centuries earlier (see *Political and Social Relations*).

Nationalist Movements

Eventually, the increasingly educated Lankan elite began demanding more rights and participation in the colonial government. In 1910, Britain permitted English-speaking Lankans to elect a local member to the colonial legislature. Meanwhile, Buddhist activist Anagarika Dharmapala and American Buddhist convert Henry Olcott campaigned relentlessly for Buddhist rights. Further, the rejection of British missionaries’ conversion attempts (see *Religion and Spirituality*) by both Buddhists and Hindus became an important component of the growing nationalist movements.

While Ceylon aligned with Britain and its Allies in World War I, only a few hundred Lankans actually served during the war. More significantly, the Allies’ promotion of freedom and self-determination increased Lankan nationalists’ drive for independence. In



1915, the British violently quelled a conflict between majority Sinhalese and minority Muslim groups. Following the arrest of many Sinhalese, including prominent nationalist D.S. Senanayake, various other nationalist groups began to coordinate their efforts against the British. For example, in 1919 Sinhalese and Tamil organizations united to form the Ceylon

National Congress, which subsequently petitioned the British to grant Lankans self-governance.

In an effort to appease the nationalists, Britain imposed a new constitution in 1924, granting the island a regional representative system. A revised constitution in 1931 promoted universal suffrage and outlined a new governing system of executive committees, although the British governor retained the power to reject any proposed legislation.

World War II (WWII): Progress towards self-governance was interrupted by WWII, when Japan, Germany, and other Axis powers went to war against Britain and the Allies, consisting primarily of Britain, the US, and Russia, among others. As the headquarters of the Allies' Southeast Asia Command during the war, Ceylon received significant British investment in infrastructure and was an important source of rubber for the

Allies. Some Lankans voluntarily joined the Ceylon Defense Force under British command. In 1942, Japan bombed the cities of Colombo and Trincomalee, although the island was largely spared otherwise. By war's



end in 1945, Ceylon had increased its spending on public education and health services significantly, improving the standard of living for many Lankans.

Ceylon Gains Independence

Meanwhile, Lankans continued to seek independence, forming various political parties primarily along ethnic lines. As Britain rapidly lost control of its other Asian colonies, Lankans held peaceful protests that prompted Britain to allow them a vote. After some 150 years of British rule, Lankans voted in their first national parliamentary election in 1947. The United National Party (UNP), a coalition of primarily conservative and elite Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim parties, received some 40% of the vote. In an alliance with another Tamil party, the UNP achieved

a majority in Parliament and UNP leader Senanayake became Prime Minister (PM). Just 4 months later, on February 4, 1948, Britain formally granted Ceylon independence as a “dominion” within the British Commonwealth of Nations.

The initial years following independence were peaceful, and Ceylon’s economy continued to grow. Nevertheless, some UNP policies soon fostered discontent, particularly among Tamils.

First, Indian Tamils were denied citizenship, a policy generally supported by both Sinhalese and Lankan Tamils, causing thousands of Indian Tamils to flee to India. Later, land grants to Sinhalese in the North triggered



tensions with some Lankan Tamils. Meanwhile, a drop in commodity prices around 1950 caused a decline in export proceeds that resulted in economic hardship and unemployment. The 1952 death of PM Senanayake, Ceylon’s beloved independence leader and symbol of national unity, brought instability. The 2 subsequent PMs, both relatives of Senanayake, were widely unpopular, partially due to their attempts to implement difficult economic reforms.

The Rise of Sinhalese Nationalism: Meanwhile, prominent politician and former Senanayake ally, S.W.R.D. Bandaranaike, compelled his Sinhalese nationalist party, the leftist Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP), to leave the UNP coalition. Bandaranaike appealed to his Sinhalese Buddhist base by accusing a UNP-Catholic conspiracy of targeting Buddhists, advocating for Sinhala to be the country’s official language, and claiming that both Tamil and English were foreign imports.

Upon becoming PM in 1956, Bandaranaike fulfilled his campaign promises by enacting the Sinhala Only Act. Besides making Sinhala Ceylon’s official language (see *Language and Communication*), the Act provided state support to Sinhalese

and Buddhist cultural initiatives, thereby angering increasingly isolated Tamil, Christian, and Muslim communities. Then in 1958, a rumor that a Tamil had killed a Sinhalese caused Sinhalese to riot and resulted in the deaths of hundreds of Tamils. Declaring a state of emergency, the government relocated some 25,000 Tamils from predominantly Sinhalese areas to predominantly Tamil areas in the North.

Meanwhile, the SLFP increased the role of government in the economy and enacted socialist policies. In 1959, Bandaranaike decided to open a dialogue with Tamil leaders to explore granting Tamil-dominated areas limited autonomy. In response, a militant Buddhist monk who opposed these overtures to the Tamils assassinated Bandaranaike.



Afterwards, his wife Sirimavo became active in politics. In 1960, she led her party to electoral victory and became the world's first female PM. Mrs. Bandaranaike, as she was known, continued her late husband's policies, deporting thousands of Indian Tamils to India, enforcing the Sinhala Only Act, curtailing Tamil political activity, and

nationalizing many businesses and schools (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

The UNP under Dudley Senanayake, son of Ceylon's 1st PM, won the 1965 elections on a platform to improve the economy and democratic institutions. Even so, Senanayake's government was largely ineffective. While private sector growth increased, the economy as a whole barely improved. To ease ethnic tensions, the government implemented the 1966 Tamil Regulations, giving the Tamil language a "parallel" status to Sinhala in Tamil-speaking regions. Nevertheless, subsequent Sinhalese hostility forced the government to declare a state of emergency.

In the 1970 election, Mrs. Bandaranaike joined with 2 leftist parties to oppose the UNP. This new United Front (UF) won the election with promises of increased rice subsidies and land

reform, among other changes. The UF criticized the UNP for its ties with Tamil parties and sought to make Ceylon a republic, while further enhancing the status of Buddhism.

Ethnic Tensions Reach a Breaking Point

Under the UF government, new laws targeted Ceylon's minorities. For example, the "standardization" policy reduced by 1/2 the university places reserved for Tamils (see *Learning and Knowledge*). While some Sinhalese argued that the policy sought to remedy historical educational disparities under the British, Tamils rejected this notion as a cover for racism and tyranny by the majority ethnic group. Meanwhile, the activities of radical Sinhalese groups like the communist People's Liberation Front (JVP) (see *Political and Social Relations*) kept tensions high. In April 1971, JVP operatives attempted to topple the government, causing over 1,000 deaths in the ensuing violence before the military restored order and imprisoned some 16,000 suspected insurgents.

Ceylon Becomes Sri Lanka

In 1972, the government enacted a new constitution changing the country's name from Ceylon to the Republic of Sri Lanka, the Sinhala name for the island. The new constitution angered Tamils because it removed minority protections, lacked provisions for an autonomous Tamil province, and provided state support for and protection of Buddhism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Diverse factions within the greater Tamil community united in opposition as the Tamil United Liberation Front (TULF). In 1977, infighting in the UF enabled J.R. Jayewardene, a distant relative of Dudley Senanayake, to lead the UNP to a landslide victory in the elections. Meanwhile, the TULF pressed for the independent Tamil state of **Eelam**, a Tamil name for Sri Lanka



The Tamil Tigers:

The death of the TULF's leader in 1977 led to a political vacuum among Tamil organizations. Several underground Tamil separatist groups

collectively known as the Tamil Tigers filled the void. The strongest of these groups was the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), founded in 1972 by former student leader Velupillai Prabhakaran who first gained notoriety for the assassination of the mayor of Jaffna. These groups soon attracted followers who advocated violence to achieve their independence goals. In 1977, additional ethnic violence erupted after a rumor spread that Tamil terrorists killed a Sinhalese policeman. An estimated 300 people died.

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Meanwhile, PM Jayewardene's government sought to mend relations between Tamils and Sinhalese and also improve the stagnant economy. In 1978, he introduced a new constitution, transferring executive power to a President, while automatically giving the office to the incumbent PM, himself. Jayewardene would serve as President of the subsequently renamed Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka for the next 11 years.

As President, Jayewardene repealed the controversial "standardization" education policy, offered high-level government positions to Tamils, and elevated the Tamil language to national status to be used in education and for some administrative purposes. Nevertheless, Sinhala remained the

only official language (see *Language and Communications*).

Despite these measures, ethnic violence worsened. With the UF in disarray, the TULF worked with the UNP to devise a



solution for Tamil grievances. Because many Tamil Tigers saw this cooperation as a betrayal, they escalated their terrorist attacks, primarily against symbols of the state such as police stations and post offices. In response, the government counterattacked. With a rising number of civilians caught in the crossfire, support for the Tamil Tigers began to grow as disillusioned youth joined the organization.

Violence escalated as Sri Lanka prepared for its 1st direct presidential elections in 1982. Pressured by extremists and unhappy with government efforts to end the conflict, the TULF called for a boycott of the vote. Many Tamils heeded this call: while voter turnout in Sinhalese-majority districts was around 85%, it was significantly lower in most Tamil-majority districts. Consequently, Jayewardene's UNP dominated the election.

The “Black July” Riots: In July 1983, Tamil Tigers ambushed an army patrol near Jaffna. In response, the army killed some 60 Tamil civilians in the city. Then, some Sinhalese looted Tamil homes and businesses, killing Tamils across the country. These events, later known as Black July, resulted in the deaths of 400-3,000 primarily Tamil people. In the aftermath, at least 150,000 Tamils fled Sri Lanka for India.

Civil War (1983-2009)

The Black July riots initiated what became a protracted civil war between the Sri Lankan government and the Tamil Tigers. While some Tamils sympathized with the Tigers, especially in light of government violence against civilians, others refused to support the radical group. The Tigers even resorted to forcibly recruiting some members, particularly schoolchildren, to grow its opposition forces.



Sporadic violence persisted during the mid-1980s. Although Jayewardene's economic policies had finally begun to fuel some growth, the start of war triggered a decline in tourism and investment (see *Economics and Resources*), further aggravating the already tense situation.

Indian Intervention: In 1985, the Tigers rejected a government offer for limited Tamil self-government. By 1987, government security forces had isolated some Tigers to Jaffna, although fighting continued throughout the Northeast. As thousands of Tamils continued to flee to India, President Jayewardene negotiated an arrangement with Indian PM Rajiv Gandhi to replace Sri Lankan government troops with an Indian Peace

Keeping Force (IPKF). Ultimately, the IPKF failed in its mission



to establish peace primarily because most Sri Lankans opposed what they considered to be an occupying force. Nevertheless, the IPKF grew to more than 70,000 troops in the late 1980s before ending its

mission in 1990. A Tamil Tiger member assassinated former Indian PM Gandhi in 1991 for his government's involvement in Sri Lankan affairs.

Meanwhile, the radical Sinhalese JVP took advantage of anti-IPKF sentiment to demand more government action in support of the Sinhalese nationalist agenda. JVP operatives assassinated officials across the South and Central regions, expanding the conflict. After defeating Mrs. Bandaranaike in the 1989 election, new President Ranasinghe Premadasa sought peace with the JVP. When the JVP refused this overture, President Premadasa dispatched paramilitary forces that imprisoned or killed all major JVP leaders.

Premadasa is Assassinated and War Continues: In the early 1990s, violence continued unabated. At a rally in May 1993, a Tamil Tiger bomber assassinated President Premadasa. In the subsequent 1994 elections, the leftist People's Alliance (PA) formed a coalition with the SLFP and won the election after over 15 years of UNP rule. Mrs. Bandaranaike's daughter Chandrika Kumaratunga assumed office as Sri Lanka's first female President. Unlike her parents, President Kumaratunga sought both economic liberalization and a dialogue for peace with the Tamils. When the Kumaratunga government began negotiations with the Tigers, peace reigned for a few months.

Although the economy enjoyed an upswing, the negotiations eventually failed and government relations with the Tamils once again became violent. Following a huge offensive, the government won control of Jaffna in 1995. In subsequent years,

the Tigers bombed key areas such as the Central Bank, important Buddhist sites, and the international airport. In 1996, the US designated the LTTE a foreign terrorist organization. In 1999, President Kumaratunga survived an assassination attempt, although she lost sight in an eye.

An Unsteady Ceasefire: Upon taking office as PM in 2001, prominent UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe initiated renewed peace talks with the Tigers. With support from Norwegian peace monitors, the Tigers decommissioned weapons and abandoned their demands for independence, instead favoring an autonomous province. Despite this progress, President Kumaratunga publicly conveyed that she thought PM Wickremesinghe was being too lenient on the Tigers, causing them to renounce the agreement in April 2003.



Meanwhile, the Tigers experienced significant in-fighting and broke into factions, which weakened their negotiating position. Moreover, in late December 2004, a massive earthquake off the coast of Indonesia triggered a tsunami that devastated most of Sri Lanka's coastline and killed over 35,000 people (see *Political and Social Relations*). A subsequent dispute over aid distribution among the government, Tigers, and various other entities further hindered the peace process.

Violence Resumes: In 2005, hardline anti-Tiger SLFP candidate Mahinda Rajapaksa was narrowly elected President amidst Tiger repression of voter turnout. President Rajapaksa rejected any form of Tamil autonomy and refused to allow the Tigers access to financial aid for tsunami victims. Nevertheless, in early 2006, international pressure forced peace talks to resume in Switzerland, although they broke down after just a month. In April, a Tiger bomb in a Colombo military compound killed 8 people, and the government retaliated by conducting air strikes against Tamil targets in the Northeast. Violence

continued throughout the year. Just as peace talks were set to resume, Tiger bombers killed over 90 Sri Lankan sailors in a suicide attack.



Norwegian peace monitors reported truce violations and misconduct on both sides.

After the Tigers launched an air raid against a military base near Colombo in March 2007,

President Rajapaksa amplified his offensive, forcing some Tamils out of Colombo. By July 2007, the government controlled the entire Eastern Province for the first time in nearly 20 years. The government continued to increase its offensive efforts, and in early 2008, pledged to win the war within a year. As the violence escalated in the North, the Norwegian peace monitors left Sri Lanka.

The Civil War Comes to a Violent End: By January 2009, the government controlled the Tigers' capital of Kilinochchi in the North. Skirmishes continued for several months. As the Sri Lankan army advanced towards the Tigers' final stronghold nearby, thousands of civilians fled to a no-fire zone on the far northeastern coast. Nevertheless, the Tigers moved into the zone to use it as a base of operations, and the ensuing firefight resulted in the deaths of thousands of civilians. Although accounts vary, some reports claim the army conducted a summary execution of surrendering Tigers. When the army killed Tiger leader Prabhakaran in May 2009, President Rajapaksa declared victory and the end of the civil war.

Aftermath of the War: After some 26 years of episodic violence, Sri Lanka's protracted civil war was formally over. The United Nations accused both sides of violating humanitarian law and pressed the government to account for its actions during the final battles. Although the government established a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission, President Rajapaksa proved reluctant to investigate war crimes. Moreover, thousands of

Tamils languished in refugee camps. While estimates vary widely, most experts believe between 60,000-100,000 people died and over a million more were displaced as a result of the war.

Contemporary Sri Lanka

In 2010, Rajapaksa was reelected President with 57% of the vote despite widespread allegations of fraud. Security forces subsequently arrested the losing candidate, a former general, sentencing him to 3 years in prison. In a televised speech after his victory, President Rajapaksa spoke in both Sinhala and Tamil, giving real hope to the possibility of improved relations between his government and the Tamils. Despite this encouraging sign, in subsequent years, the government did little to bridge the ethnic divide or account for atrocities committed during the war. Moreover, the Rajapaksa government became increasingly authoritarian, censoring the media and arresting journalists who criticized the regime.

In the years immediately after the war, Sri Lanka's economy grew faster than it had in decades, primarily due to increased foreign investment and tourism (see *Economics and Resources*). The



Rajapaksa government forged close relations with China, Iran, and other autocratic regimes, welcoming their investments. Sri Lanka was also the beneficiary of significant foreign aid, primarily to rebuild areas in the northeastern Tamil-dominated areas and coastal regions hit hardest by the 2004 tsunami.

By 2013, economic growth began to slow, with many Sri Lankans expressing their discontent with what they perceived as a corrupt and nepotistic regime. President Rajapaksa's tight control of the media helped give him the confidence to schedule elections for early 2015. With the support of former President Kumaratunga and former PM Wickremesinghe, Health Minister Maithripala Sirisena declared his candidacy, warning that Sri

Lanka was headed towards dictatorship under President Rajapaksa. Widespread shock swept Sri Lanka when Sirisena won the election with 51% of the vote.

While in office, President Sirisena sought to make significant reforms to the government, including reinstating presidential term limits, increasing the power of the courts, and initiating corruption investigations (see *Political and Social Relations*). As Wickremesinghe retook the office of PM, the government pursued additional political and constitutional reforms. Since then, international observers have noted an improvement in civil and political rights and freedom of religious expression (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Other achievements include the return of some lands confiscated from Tamils during the war and the creation of an office to investigate persons missing due to the war. Further, the government legalized the public singing of the national anthem in Tamil – a significant symbolic act.



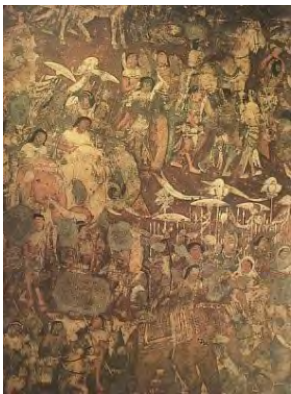
Despite these encouraging signs, some observers and Tamil groups demand reparations and faster progress towards reconciliation. While Sri Lanka's future looks brighter under this new government, significant challenges remain. Essential tasks will be to enact constitutional reforms, maintain economic growth, and improve relations between the Sinhalese majority and various ethnic and religious minority groups.

Myth Overview

In contrast to history, which is supposed to be an objective record of the past based on verifiable facts, myths embody a culture's values and often explain the origins of humans and the natural world. Myths are important because they provide a sense of unique heritage and identity. Sri Lanka has a rich and diverse tradition of myths and folklore that are still well-known today.

A popular legend recounts how the Veddahs and Sinhalese came to inhabit Sri Lanka. According to the *Mahavamsa*, a chronicle of early Sri Lankan history compiled by Buddhist monks in the 6th century, Prince Vijaya was the 1st of 16 sons born to a brother and sister who were the children of a **sinha** (lion) and an Indo-Aryan princess from North India. As he matured to adulthood, Vijaya caused too much trouble at home, so his father banished him. Consequently, Vijaya and 700 companions left the North Indian Sinhapur Kingdom by ship and landed on the western shore of Sri Lanka, supposedly on the same day as the Buddha's death. Vijaya named the island Thambapanni, or "copper-colored sand".

After landing in Sri Lanka, Vijaya and his men came upon a **yaksha** (spirit) in the form of Kuveni, a native woman. Although Kuveni trapped Vijaya's men with a spell, the prince was protected by a magic thread from the Hindu god Vishnu. When Vijaya threatened to kill Kuveni and her people, she released the men and transformed herself into a beautiful woman. Vijaya then married Kuveni, and the couple had 2 children. Subsequently deciding to seek a different wife, Vijaya forced Kuveni and the children into the forest. The children escaped, then married each other and had their own offspring, who are said to be the ancestors of Sri Lanka's ancient inhabitants, the Veddahs (see *Political and Social Relations*).



After establishing a kingdom sustained by rice cultivation, Vijaya married a Pandu princess from South India, but the couple were unable to have a child. Instead, Vijaya's nephew came from North India to continue the Vijaya dynasty upon his uncle's death. Vijaya's descendants subsequently became known as the Sinhalese, or the "people of the lion."

2. POLITICAL AND SOCIAL RELATIONS

Official Name

Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka

Srī Lankā Prajātāntrika Samājavādī Janarajaya

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Ilankai jaṇanāyaka cōcalica kuṭiyaracu

இலங்கை ஜனநாயக சோசலிச குடியரசு (Tamil)

Political Borders

Coastline: 833 mi

Capital

Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte

Demographics

Sri Lanka's population of about 21.9 million is growing slowly at a rate of 0.39% annually, slightly lower than that of the US. With an average of 904 people per sq mi, Sri Lanka is one of the world's most densely populated countries. Nearly 81% of the population lives in rural areas, concentrated in the Southwest, along the eastern coast, and on the northern Jaffna peninsula. Major metropolitan areas include the commercial capital of Colombo and neighboring Sri Jayewardenepura Kotte.



Flag

The Sri Lankan flag consists of 2 rectangular panels set against a yellow background. The left panel is comprised of 2 equal vertical bands of

green (left) and orange (right). The right panel displays a large yellow lion holding a sword, with 4 yellow Bodhi tree leaves adorning each corner on a maroon background.

The lion symbolizes the Sinhalese people (see “Ethnic Groups” below), strength, and bravery, while the sword stands for Sri Lankan sovereignty. The 4 Bodhi leaves denote Buddhist ideals of kindness, happiness, friendliness, and self-control and refer to the tree under which the Buddha received enlightenment (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The flag’s 4 colors represent the nation’s ethnic groups: green for Sri Lankan Moors, orange for Sri Lankan Tamils, maroon for the Sinhalese, and yellow represents all others.

Geography

Located in South Asia, Sri Lanka is an island nation situated off the southeastern tip of India. The Palk Strait, a shallow stretch of water just 30 mi wide, separates Sri Lanka from India in the North. Sri Lanka is surrounded by the Indian Ocean and Bay of Bengal to the East and South, the Laccadive Sea to the Southwest and the Gulf of Mannar to the Northwest. Sri Lanka’s total land area is about 25,000 sq mi, making it slightly larger than West Virginia and about half the size of Greece. Notably, Sri Lanka’s strategic location on several important trade routes and waterways has shaped its history (see *History and Myth*) and modern development as a nation (see “Foreign Relations” below).



Towering, rugged mountains dominate Sri Lanka’s South-Central interior. Here, Sri Lanka’s highest point, Pidurutalagala, rises to 8,281 ft. Sri Pada, the second largest reaching reaches 7,356 ft, is a popular religious pilgrimage site for Buddhists, Hindus, and Muslims (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Central highlands (also known as “Hill Country”) extend north, eventually descending into low, rolling plains in the North and East. Sandy beaches line much of the country’s 833 mi coastline. The highlands and mountainous regions are home to terraced rice paddies and numerous tea and rubber plantations. Forests cover about 34% of Sri Lanka.

Climate

Positioned just north of the equator, Sri Lanka experiences a tropical climate characterized by consistently warm temperatures throughout the year, although temperatures, humidity, and rainfall vary by elevation. Mountainous areas and central highlands, for example, are cooler, with temperatures averaging 64°F year-round. Meanwhile, lowland and coastal regions are humid and hot, with temperatures averaging 82°F. Southwest monsoons blanket central, southern, and western regions with heavy rains from June-October, while less severe monsoonal rains sweep in from the Northeast from December-March.

Natural Hazards

Sri Lanka is vulnerable to a variety of natural hazards, ranging from cyclones (tropical storms characterized by strong, spiraling winds and tornadoes to landslides and droughts. Tsunamis (large ocean waves caused by earthquakes and other geologic disturbances) occasionally threaten Sri Lanka's populated shores. In December 2004, a massive tsunami generated by an undersea earthquake off the coast of Indonesia ravaged Sri Lankan coastal communities, killing some 35,000 and displacing 800,000 people. The tsunami also destroyed much of Sri Lanka's coastal infrastructure. Further, it crippled tourism, manufacturing, and agriculture infrastructure, causing notable



economic loss (see *Economics and Resources*).

Monsoonal rains and cyclones often cause flash floods that disproportionately affect populations in low-lying regions. In 2017, severe

floods killed over 150 people and forced thousands living in the Southwest to flee their homes. The flooding also destroyed agricultural land, killed livestock, and left over 500,000 people in need of water, food, and medical assistance. Notably, as of 2017, Sri Lanka began experiencing a drought, the worst in over 4 decades, which has left many communities in the North and East suffering extreme water and food shortages.

Environmental Issues

The clearing of forest for commercial logging, agricultural activities, and urban development has resulted in prevalent deforestation, which in turn intensifies flooding, leads to soil erosion, and severely damages the nation's rich biodiversity. To preserve Sri Lanka's forests and wildlife, the government has established national parks, forest reserves, and wildlife sanctuaries, which today cover about 13% of the country's territory. Despite these steps, illegal loggers and poachers continue to operate and contribute to the loss of habitat and wildlife populations.

Moreover, water and soil pollution stemming from the dumping of industrial waste, agricultural runoff, and untreated sewage are increasingly affecting urban areas.



Government

Sri Lanka is a presidential republic with a parliamentary government. The country divides into 9 provinces administered by governors and elected local councils (*palāth sabhā*). Adopted in 1978, the constitution separates power among executive, legislative, and judicial branches and outlines the fundamental rights of Sri Lankan citizens.

Executive Branch

Executive power is vested in the President, who is both head-of-government and head-of-state and acts as commander-in-chief of Sri Lanka's Armed Forces (see "Defense" below). Directly elected by popular vote to serve up to 2 consecutive 5-year terms, the President forms and leads a 48-member Cabinet. With the Cabinet, the President runs the country's day-to-day affairs, including implementing domestic and foreign policies, managing the national budget, and maintaining domestic law and order. The President also appoints a Prime Minister (PM), usually the leader of the majority political party who, with his party, has the responsibility of introducing legislation. Current President Anura Kumara Disسانayake and PM Harini Amarasuriya both took office in September 2024.

Legislative Branch

Sri Lanka's legislature is a 1-chamber Parliament comprised of 225 members serving 5-year terms. Of those, 196 members are directly elected in multi-seat constituencies through a nationwide vote based on proportional representation. The remaining 29 seats are allocated to members of political groups proportional to their share of the national vote. The Parliament holds most legislative powers such as amending the constitution, ratifying international treaties, and approving declarations of war. Nevertheless, the President may suspend or terminate a legislative session or dissolve the Parliament with the Cabinet's agreement and call for new elections.

Judicial Branch

The judiciary includes a Supreme Court, the Court of Appeal, High and Magistrate courts, and municipal and primary courts



that oversee minor civil cases. As the highest court, the 10-member Supreme Court has the power to constitutionally review all legislation and official acts of the government. A 9-member Constitutional Council nominates all

justices, who are appointed by the President to serve until age 65. In some communities, indigenous legal traditions influence arbitration processes.

Political Climate

Sri Lanka's political landscape is characterized by a multi-party system in which political parties or coalitions of parties compete for power. Generally, those parties and coalitions which hold the majority of Parliamentary seats also hold the bulk of government leadership positions and consequently retain extensive control over Sri Lanka's political climate. Dominating the political arena since Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 (see *History and Myth*), the more conservative United National Party (UNP) and the liberal Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) have led successive governments either alone or by forging coalitions with smaller parties.

After having been postponed twice due to COVID-19 in 2020, Sri Lanka's parliamentary election took place in August 2020. Former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was sworn in as the prime minister on 9 August after his party, the SLFP, secured 145 seats and 59% of the popular vote. With allies, the SLFP secured 151 of 225 seats—the two-thirds majority required for effecting constitutional change.

Their primary rival, the ***Sajith Preamadasa-led Samagi Jana Balawegaya*** (SJB), which split from the UNP in early 2020, won 54 seats (24% of seats). The UNP, led by three-time prime minister and party boss, Ranil Wickremesinghe, won its single seat via the National List. The UNP suffered its worst defeat in its history, receiving only 2.15% of votes cast. For the first time in its history it failed to win a single seat in parliament, having only gained one national list seat. The SJB, although newly formed, is poised to overtake the UNP as the main opposition party of the country.



Although Sri Lanka has other active political groups, notable parties with seats in the Parliament include the Tamil National Alliance (TNA), representing the interests of Sri Lanka's Tamil minority, and the People's Liberation Front (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna, or JVP), a communist group rooted in Marxist-Leninist ideology.

After the surprise 2015 defeat of former President Rajapaksa (see *History and Myth*), President Sirisena and his administration had pushed for political and social reforms to tackle corruption, improve governance mechanisms, and restore the rule of law. The government has been slow to address war crimes and humanitarian abuses that occurred during the bitter 26-year civil war between the government and Tamil insurgents (see *History and Myth*). Those Tamils who disproportionately suffered from loss of life and property during the war, have



voiced concern that reconciliation efforts are stalling and the post-war justice process may not meet international standards of accountability.

Moreover, while national-level corruption waned substantially following Sirisena's election, the government largely failed to investigate and prosecute high-profile corruption cases that were prevalent during former President Rajapaksa's administration. Finally, economic progress remained slow, leading to some questioning of Sirisena's leadership and adding to friction between disadvantaged ethnic minorities and the comparatively prosperous Sinhalese majority. Amid these tensions, Gotabaya Rajapaksa won the 2019 presidential election with 52% of the popular vote.

Defense

Sri Lankan Armed Forces are a unified military force consisting of ground, maritime, and air branches with a joint strength of 262,500 active duty, 5,500 reserves, and 63,450 paramilitary troops. Since protracted civil war and a campaign against the Tamil Tigers ended in 2009 (see *History and Myth*), Sri Lanka's armed forces have reoriented toward a peacetime internal security posture. The forces focus primarily on counter-terrorism, counter-piracy, and humanitarian assistance/disaster relief efforts. The military has little capacity to operate beyond its territory but has recently begun to participate in international peacekeeping efforts. In 2015, for example, about



1,000 troops were sent to support various United Nations missions.

Army: As the largest branch, Sri Lanka's Army is a well-equipped, well-trained force of 177,000 active-duty troops. The



Army has 29 command regions and divisions, a special forces brigade, 67 maneuver regiments and brigades (including reconnaissance, armored, mechanized, light, and air maneuver),

and 22 combat support regiments.

Navy: Consisting of 44,500 active-duty personnel, Sri Lanka's Navy is the second largest military branch. It is equipped with 1 surface combatant, 178 patrol and coastal combatants, 8 amphibious ships and craft, and 4 logistics and support vessels.

Air Force: Sri Lanka's Air Force consists of 28,000 active-duty personnel divided into 12 squadrons, 1 training wing, and 1 regiment equipped with 29 combat-capable and 58 transport aircraft, and 35 helicopters.



Paramilitary: Sri Lanka's Paramilitary divides into 13,000 Home Guard members, 15,000

National Guard troops, 31,200 Police Force personnel, and 3,000 Ministry of Defense Special Task Force members tasked with anti-guerilla operations. The Paramilitary also consists of 1,350 Coast Guard personnel equipped with 24 patrol and coastal combatants.

Sri Lankan Force Rank Insignia



Marshal of the
Air Force



Air Chief
Marshal



Air Marshal



Air
Vice-Marshal



Air
Commodore



Group
Captain



Wing
Commander



Squadron
Leader



Flight
Lieutenant



Squadron
Leader



Pilot
Officer



Master Warrant
Officer



Warrant
Officer



Flight
Sergeant



Sergeant



Corporal



Leading
Aircraftman

Security Issues

Sri Lanka's 2 main security concerns are apprehension over a potential resurgence in Tamil militancy and the rise of radical Islamist movements.

Tamil Unrest: An influx of foreign aid since the conclusion of the civil war in 2009 has allowed Sri Lanka to transition rapidly to a peacetime economy and rebuild its infrastructure. However, many of the root causes that ignited the conflict (see *History and Myth*) have not been resolved. For example, some Tamils still feel marginalized by the national government and call for greater autonomy of Tamil-majority regions, with a few extremists lobbying for the creation of a separate Tamil state. Resulting

tensions between Sinhalese and Tamil groups raise fears among some observers of resurgent Tamil militancy.



Although the government has begun recently to

address accusations of war crimes and human rights abuses committed during the final stages of the war (see *History and Myth*), reconciliation efforts have been slow to materialize. This delay has left Tamils, particularly those with missing loved ones, increasingly frustrated. Significantly, Sri Lanka has the world's 2nd-highest number of disappearances behind Iraq, numbering around 100,000 since the start of the civil war in 1983. Tensions intermittently escalate to violent protests and clashes with security forces.

Finally, thousands of Sri Lankans displaced by the violence continue to languish in temporary camps. About 480,000 refugees who fled to India, Australia, and elsewhere to avoid the conflict have returned to Sri Lanka, further straining already scarce resources in Tamil-majority regions.

Islamist Extremism: Since the 1990s, sporadic violence has erupted between fundamentalist Islamist groups and moderate

Muslim communities within Sri Lanka. While the presence of large militant groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS, also known as Daesh, IS, and ISIL – an influential Islamist organization currently controlling swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria) is minimal in Sri Lanka, observers worry that members of Sri Lanka's marginalized Muslim communities, along with displaced and otherwise disadvantaged groups, are increasingly vulnerable to radicalization.

Foreign Relations

Sri Lanka's strategic location on important shipping lanes shapes its foreign relations. The US, India, and China, among others, each looks to forge closer bilateral ties and gain access to Sri Lanka's strategic ports, increasingly educated workforce, and abundant natural resources.

While Sri Lanka historically has pursued a "non-alignment" policy that avoided formal alliances with any major power, former President Rajapaksa's government relied heavily on economic and political assistance from China, creating some tension with Western powers. Since 2015, Sri Lanka's new administration has begun to mend relations with the West by attempting to accommodate international demands to establish a post-war justice process that addresses humanitarian crimes committed during the civil war (see *History and Myth*).

Nonetheless, Sri Lanka continues to actively participate in the Non-Aligned



Movement (NAM), an organization of 120 member countries that advocates peaceful multilateral cooperation between developing nations and the developed world and promotes sovereignty and independence of developing nations. Sri Lanka is also a member of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), an organization that promotes the development of the South Asian region. In addition, the country is a member of

global organizations such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and United Nations.

Relations with India: Sri Lanka shares a historically tense and volatile relationship with India. Relations soured most recently during Sri Lanka's civil war, when Sri Lankan rebels, the Tamil Tigers, used India's southern shores to recruit and train fighters.



Tensions rose significantly in the 1980s, following India's eventually unsuccessful intervention in the war (see *History and Myth*). Since the conclusion of the war, India and Sri Lanka have worked to strengthen bilateral relations. While some friction stems from the perceived ill-treatment of Sri Lankan Tamils, these tensions are ameliorated by growing economic and political ties.

In part to offset China's presence in the region, India provides economic, political, and social support to Sri Lanka to help rebuild war-damaged infrastructure, fund mine-clearing projects, and strengthen social and humanitarian programs, among other initiatives. Indicative of growing economic cooperation, Sri Lanka also takes part in a bilateral free-trade agreement with India, which provides for the free movement of goods, services, and capital between the 2 nations.

Relations with Pakistan: Sri Lanka and Pakistan share friendly relations, strengthened by close military-to-military cooperation during Sri Lanka's protracted civil war. Some observers attribute Pakistan's substantial involvement – including financial aid to modernize Sri Lanka's military, the training of personnel, and provision of weaponry – as key factors in Sri Lanka's eventual defeat of the Tamil Tigers. Today, Sri Lanka and Pakistan share a bilateral trade and investment agreement protecting

intellectual property and allowing goods, services, and capital to move freely between the 2 nations.

Relations with China: China and Sri Lanka have been linked long-term through strong economic and military ties. In addition to providing weaponry and munitions during the civil war, China has made substantial financial investments in helping rebuild Sri Lanka's war-torn road, railway, and coastal infrastructures. Notably, China's recent investments and influence in Sri Lanka worry regional and global powers like India and the US, who seek to curb China's growing regional dominance. Despite these and other powers scrambling to regain regional influence and as Sri Lanka's current administration continues to align politically more closely with the West, relations with China have remained relatively stable.

Relations with the US: The US has historically viewed Sri Lanka as a country of strategic importance and generally maintained close diplomatic relations since Sri Lanka's independence in 1948 (see *History and Myth*). Over the last 70 years, the US has delivered more than \$2 billion in development assistance to support Sri Lanka's social, economic, and political growth. Tensions increased somewhat following the conclusion of the civil war in 2009, when the US pressured Sri Lanka to reduce ongoing ethnic tensions and address war crimes allegedly committed by government forces.



Following the 2015 ascension of Sirisena's government, Sri Lanka and the US have enjoyed improved diplomatic ties. Significantly, in May 2015 the US announced plans to provide \$40 million in aid to support recent social and political reforms, in such areas as reconciliation, tourism management, livelihood development, and democratic governance. As Sri Lanka's foreign policy evolves, the US also seeks to deepen military-to-military cooperation, notably holding the annual Pacific

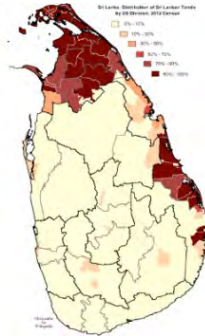
Partnership military exercises in Sri Lanka's southern Hambantota Port in 2017.

Ethnic Groups

Sri Lanka is a multi-ethnic country whose various groups have intermixed throughout history. The 2 largest ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and the Sri Lankan Tamils, both migrated to Sri Lanka from India over 2,000 years ago (see *History and Myth*). Despite centuries of relatively peaceful cohabitation, ethnic relations have been overshadowed by mistrust and violence between the Sinhalese majority and the large Tamil minority in recent decades (see *History and Myth*).

Sinhalese: Sri Lanka's largest ethnic group, the Sinhalese, account for nearly 75% of the population. First migrating to Sri Lanka from North India sometime during the 5th century BC, the Sinhalese today primarily live in the South, Central, and Western regions of the island. The Sinhalese established political dominance following independence in 1948 and enacted some discriminatory policies against minorities, resulting in ethnic tensions, and subsequently, war (see *History and Myth*). Some 93% of Sinhalese are Buddhist, and most speak Sinhala as their primary language (see *Language and Communication*).

Sri Lankan Tamils: Sri Lanka's largest minority group, the Sri Lankan Tamils, account for around 11% of the total population. Most Sri Lankan Tamils are descendants of South Indians who likely first migrated to Sri Lanka sometime between the 5th-3rd centuries BC. Today, about 70% live in areas in the North and East. Sri Lankan Tamils have been the primary opposition group to Sinhalese nationalist policies and comprised the core of the extremist Tamil Tigers organization (see *History and Myth*). Around 81% of Sri Lankan Tamils are Hindu and some 14% Roman Catholic. Most members of this ethnic group speak Tamil as their 1st language (see *Language and Communication*).



Indian Tamils: Several decades ago, Indian or “Plantation” Tamils comprised over 10% of the population, yet today account for just 4%. Most Indian Tamils arrived during the British colonial era to work on plantations in South and Central Sri Lanka (see *History and Myth*), where many still live today. The 1948 constitution denied Indian Tamils citizenship, even those who had lived in Sri Lanka for multiple generations. While Indian Tamils had the option to choose Sri Lankan or Indian citizenship in the 1970s, they largely were considered foreigners in both countries. Some 90% of Indian Tamils are Hindu and speak Tamil as a primary language.

Sri Lankan Moors: Comprising over 9% of the population, most Sri Lankan Moors are descendants of Arab traders who arrived as early as the 8th century (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Today, this group lives primarily in the East, North, or in urban areas, and about 93% are Muslim. Sri Lankan Moors have experienced marginalization by both Sinhalese and Tamils, particularly during the civil war. While most speak Tamil, at times mixing in some Arabic words, some are also fluent in English and Sinhala.

Burghers: Just under 1% of the population (about 40,000 people) are Burghers, who are primarily descendants of Portuguese and Dutch colonists. Burghers typically live in urban areas such as Colombo, Matara, and Galle, practice Roman Catholicism or other forms of Christianity, and typically speak English.

Veddahs: The Veddahs, also known as **Vanniya Aththo** (forest dwellers), are an indigenous group that traces its origins to the earliest inhabitants of Sri Lanka (see *History and Myth*). Fewer



than 2,000 Veddahs remain in Sri Lanka today. While some of them still live in traditional matrilineal (see *Family and Kinship*) societies as hunter-gatherers in remote eastern areas, others have become settled farmers. Some Veddahs formerly spoke an unwritten Austro-Asiatic language, yet most today primarily speak Sinhala.

Other Groups: Other notable ethnic groups include Malays, Indians, and Europeans, all accounting for less than 1% of the population. While located throughout Sri Lanka, these minorities tend to live in or around urban areas.

Social Relations

Kinship and family are the governing principles in Sri Lankan society. Regardless of ethnic identity, Sri Lankans tend to identify first with their immediate kin and then their extended family. Family connections are important in most political and economic activities, and Sri Lankans typically share their resources with their extended family (see *Family and Kinship*).



While the idea of social equality is increasingly prevalent, Sri Lankan society remains relatively hierarchical, with social standing often determined by ethnicity, religion, gender, class, and caste. Also common in India, the caste system was primarily based on occupation and prominent in traditional rural society. In Sinhalese society, for example, farmers held a status below only the ruling aristocracy. Today, the caste system is declining in significance, and lower caste membership rarely affects a person's economic or political mobility. Nevertheless, while they rarely discuss caste membership, last names often indicate caste, meaning Sri Lankans are typically aware of each other's place within the system. Notably, caste membership remains important in some marriage decisions (see *Family and Kinship*).

Though related, class tends to supersede caste in modern society. Sri Lankan elites tend to be wealthy urban-dwellers who are fluent in English, attend select schools, and have access to high-level jobs and international networks. While the growing middle class is more diverse, poor Sri Lankans typically live in rural areas or on urban peripheries and perform jobs traditionally associated with lower castes. Inequities between rural and urban residents are often intensified by ethnic divisions and unequal access to public services, such as education and healthcare.

3. RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Overview

According to 2020 estimates, some 69% of Sri Lanka's population is Buddhist, 14% Hindu, 10% Muslim, and 7% Christian. This religious diversity is reflected in the variety of temples, shrines, mosques, and churches located throughout the country. Notably, a connection between ethnicity and religion prevails among Sri Lanka's ethnic groups (see *Political and Social Relations*): most Sinhalese are Buddhist, Tamils are predominantly Hindu, Sri Lankan Moors are mostly Muslim, and Burghers are typically Christian.

Sri Lanka's constitution establishes freedom of religion,



including the right for an individual to choose religious beliefs and freely observe, practice, worship, and teach those beliefs both in public and private spheres. Although it does not name an official state

religion, the constitution assigns Buddhism a "foremost place" and requires the government to protect it. Consequently, Buddhist organizations, temples, and the Buddhist monkhood enjoy preferential state support.

Sri Lankans generally are tolerant of other faiths. Religious groups tend to mix freely, at times sharing historic pilgrimage sites sacred to Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian worshippers alike. Nevertheless, recently some emerging sectarianism has resulted in interfaith friction. Occasionally, tensions manifest in violence between nationalist, radical members of the Buddhist majority, and religious minorities. Moreover, although the state promotes harmony among followers of all religions, some local governments and authorities fail to enforce protective national laws and, in some cases, are

complicit in the harassment of religious minorities (see “Religion and the Law” below).

Early Spiritual Landscape

Early inhabitants of South Asia typically practiced animism, the belief that a spirit or consciousness resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate. Within animist traditions, all natural objects such as trees and animals, are sacred, and there exists a close connection between animists and their environment. Although many Veddahs (Sri Lanka's indigenous people who trace their history on the island for millennia) (see *History and Myth*) have absorbed Sinhalese and Tamil cultures, some continue to practice and preserve traditional beliefs.

Buddhism

Origins of Buddhism: In the 6th century BC, an Indian prince named Siddhartha Gautama became dissatisfied with Hinduism's explanations of the human condition (see “Hinduism” below). Gautama set out in search of truth and the meaning of life, eventually achieving enlightenment through meditation, reportedly while sitting under a Bodhi tree in northern India.

Buddhist Theology: Gautama, who became known as the “Buddha” (Enlightened One), determined that humans are fated to suffer, that suffering is caused by greed or desire and can be stopped by following a particular spiritual path of unselfish living and meditation.

Aside from these so-called Noble Truths, there are 2 basic laws in Buddhism – causation (similar to the Hindu concept of *karma* – see below) and impermanence, the



idea that change is constant (related to the Hindu idea of *samsara*). Given these conditions, the goal of Buddhists is to conquer suffering and achieve **nirvana** (*moksha* in Hinduism), a state of peace and unity with the universe.

Although Buddhism, like Hinduism, is based on a voluminous set of scriptures, there is no god or gods in Buddhism. Instead, devotees venerate the Buddha as a god-like figure. Further, Buddhism emphasizes ethical and moral instruction to help people follow a spiritual path. Buddhism also offers an explanation of life after death, specifically, that humans proceed through cycles of birth, death, and rebirth or reincarnation. Buddhist temples, shrines, and **dagobas** (Buddhist monuments) abound across Sri Lanka, and many households display small

figurines of the Buddha.

Several centuries after its founding, Buddhism split into 2 main streams: Mahayana and Theravada. Although the 2 traditions accept



and practice the same core teachings, they differ in several monastic rules and academic points. As the dominant form of Buddhism in China, Japan, and South Korea today, Mahayana Buddhism encompasses a variety of schools. Buddhism's 2nd stream, Theravada, focuses more strictly on scripture and is considered the more orthodox form of Buddhism. This particular stream is the predominant form of Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand today.

Spread of Buddhism to Sri Lanka: Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BC, when Mahinda, a Buddhist monk and son of the Indian king Ashoka, converted King Devanampiya Tissa of Anuradhapura (see *History and Myth*), who adopted Buddhism as the state religion and quickly converted much of the island's Sinhalese population. By the 1st century BC, the monkhood (**sangha**) was established, the temple became the center of community life, and Buddhism took deep root in Sri Lankan society.

Despite repeated Tamil invasions from India (see *History and Myth*) and the concurrent influx of Hindu ideas in the early centuries AD, Buddhism continued to prevail in Sri Lanka. By the 10th century, membership in the *sangha* surged with Sri Lanka

becoming an influential center of Theravada Buddhist learning. By the 13th century, Sri Lankan missionary monks were exporting the religion to Southeast Asia, making Sri Lanka the world's leader of the Theravada movement.

In the 14th century, amid continued encroachment by Tamil kingdoms and the fragmentation of Sinhalese society (see *History and Myth*), Buddhism's influence began to wane. As the population and power of monks declined, Hinduism became entrenched in the North, where successive Tamil kingdoms established rule. Meanwhile, Muslim traders from Arabia had formed enclaves on Sri Lanka's coasts since the 12th century (see *History and Myth*).

Buddhist numbers reached their lowest during the colonial era (see *History and Myth*), when Europeans propagating Christianity arrived and Hindu Tamils gained more territory and influence. In the late 19th century, repressive colonial rule and the desire to preserve Buddhist culture led to the rise of Buddhist revival movements. Rooted in Sinhalese nationalism (see *History and Myth*), these movements reestablished the prominence of Sri Lanka's monastic community and restored the influence of Buddhist organizations within Sri Lankan society.



Hinduism

Origins of Hinduism: The earliest traces of Hinduism date back to religious practices of the Aryans during the Vedic Period in India (ca. 1750-500 BC). The pantheon of Vedic gods included elemental deities such as Surya (the sun god) and Agni (the fire god), with Indra as the chief god. The Aryans orally conveyed descriptions of deities, rituals and hymns of worship, and teachings about social structure and behavior in the 4 *Vedas*, which were eventually transcribed over the period from 1000 BC-500 AD.

Later sacred writings include the *Brahmanas Upanishads*, the *Dharma Sutras*, and the *Puranas*, which espouse guidelines for **Brahmins** (priests), outline Hinduism's major tenets and concepts, prescribe social classes, and relate tales of Hindu mythology.

Concepts in Hinduism:

- **Dharma:** the duty to fulfill one's social and spiritual roles in life
- **Samsara:** what Westerners term "reincarnation;" the cycle of continual birth, death, and rebirth until one is able to break free (**moksha**)
- **Karma:** the concept that one's current circumstances derive from deeds committed in past lives
- **Varnas:** the system of social hierarchy commonly referred to as caste (see *Political and Social Relations*)

A Hindu seeks to achieve 3 aims during his life. The 1st is *dharma*, or duty, in both spiritual and social contexts. The 2nd aim is *karma*, and the third is **artha**, or material wealth.



The Hindu Pantheon: The Hindu pantheon includes hundreds of gods and goddesses. Some of these, the "greater" gods, are common to most Hindus, while "lesser" gods vary from village to village. **Brahma** is the creator, the supreme god, and his 2 other incarnations – **Vishnu**, the preserver, and **Shiva**, the destroyer, comprise a Hindu "trinity" of sorts. However, *Vishnu* and *Shiva* have come to

overshadow *Brahma* in popularity; today, only a few temples remain that are dedicated to the creator.

Some gods and goddesses have so-called avatars or other forms. For example, *Brahma* is also known as **Rama** or **Krishna**,

his most famous avatars, while *Shiva* appears as **Mahadev** and **Nataraja**, the “great god” and the god of dance, respectively.

Deities also have partners of the opposite sex, known as consorts, and animal “vehicles” that convey them from place to place. *Brahma*’s wife is **Swaswati**, the most beautiful in the pantheon and the goddess of creativity, learning, and music. *Vishnu*’s female partner is **Lakshmi**, the goddess of wealth, while *Shiva*’s consort is **Parvati**, one of whose avatars is **Mahadevi**, the great goddess.

Spread of Hinduism to Sri Lanka: Tamil kings and their followers from South India first introduced Hinduism to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century BC. While Hinduism was initially slow to take root, centuries of Tamil invasions and periods of Tamil rule over the island (see *History and Myth*) eventually led to the emergence of significant Hindu populations.

In the 14th century, Hinduism flourished in the North, where the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna (see *History and Myth*) supported and spread Hindu art, culture, and beliefs and welcomed waves of new migrants from South India. While it never displaced Buddhism as the dominant religion and declined substantially as Buddhism regained its influence in later centuries, Hinduism remains the predominant faith among ethnic Tamils, and Hindu values continue to influence Sri Lankan society significantly.

Religion Today

Buddhism

Sri Lanka’s Buddhists concentrate in the Central, North-Central, Northwestern, Sabaragamuwa, Southern, Uva, and Western Provinces. Although religion is a regular part of everyday life for Buddhists in general, most followers do not focus on achieving nirvana or enlightenment. Instead, they look to Theravada Buddhism as a guide for living their lives.



Specifically, the faithful try to follow Buddhism's instructions to take the so-called Middle Way between extreme self-denial and sensual indulgence, to avoid evil, and to acquire religious merit. To acquire merit, followers may perform a variety of acts, such as performing good deeds, giving alms or shelter to monks, providing offerings at a temple, performing worship regularly, or entering the monkhood (see "The Monkhood" below).

Worship: Sri Lankan Buddhist temples (**viharas**) typically comprise an image house, which displays statues and images of the Buddha and other figures, a *dagoba* that enshrines sacred relics, and a **bodhigara**, a shrine housing the sacred Bodhi tree. Temples do not hold formal, collective, regularly-scheduled worship services. Instead, followers worship by chanting, praying, or performing other acts of devotion before an image of the Buddha when it is convenient for them.



Some followers may assemble at the temple on special occasions such as days when the moon is in its full phase (**poya**) or for festivals. On such occasions, a monk may preach a

short sermon while followers engage in meditation, make offerings, and burn candles or incense at altars. Some communities celebrate the particularly important **Vesak Poya** – the day when Buddha was born, achieved enlightenment, and passed into *nirvana* – with large festivals and elaborate processions (see *Time and Space* and *Aesthetics and Recreation*).

Sacred Buddhist sites, notably places where the Buddha went during his 3 purported visits to the island in the 6th century BC, draw millions of religious pilgrims from other countries. Notably, the ancient **Sri Dalada Maligawa** or "Temple of the Tooth," which reportedly houses the Buddha's tooth – a precious Buddhist relic – is the largest and most popular temple in Sri Lanka (see *History and Myth*).

The Monkhood: Unlike in Myanmar and Thailand, where young men may commit themselves to the monkhood for a short period before returning to secular life, monks in Sri Lanka expect to serve for life. While traditionally young boys were chosen for the monkhood based on their religious inclination or on astrological predictions, today poor families tend to submit their children into the Buddhist clergy to ensure their education and a better standard of living. Boys are first initiated around age 10, when they sever most ties with their family and enter the monastery to live and study.

Monks commit themselves to numerous vows, such as those of piety and celibacy, and spend considerable time studying scriptures, meditating, and performing rituals

such as weddings and funerals (see *Family and Kinship*). At age 20, monks achieve higher ordination, becoming full members of the monkhood.

Some monks work as teachers and spiritual advisors, while others promote a socially engaged Buddhism, focusing on alleviating social injustice, protecting the environment, and participating in interfaith dialogues. While Buddhist monkhood is traditionally a male-only occupation, females may enter the *sangha* as nuns, although they have fewer roles and responsibilities and enjoy less respect and prestige than their male colleagues.

Some nationalist Buddhist groups promote hostile and discriminatory views toward religious minorities, while advocating the supremacy of Sri Lanka's Sinhalese Buddhists. In 2014, for example, hardline Buddhist monks attempted to desecrate Muslim places of worship and attacked members of both Muslim and Christian communities, subjecting them to hate speech, physical assault, acts of discrimination, and obstruction of worship services.



Beliefs and Rituals from Other Traditions: Sri Lanka's form of Theravada Buddhism contains elements from other religious traditions, including indigenous ones. For example, certain beliefs and rituals trace to Sri Lanka's animist traditions, beliefs that a spiritual presence resides in all objects, both animate and inanimate. Other elements trace to Hinduism. For example, some Sri Lankans regularly visit shrines dedicated to Hindu deities, such as the 4-faced Hindu creation god Brahma or the elephant-head deity, Ganesha. Notably, shrines or temples that contain both Buddhist and Hindu elements are known as **devales** and differ from Buddhist temples (*viharas*) and Hindu temples (*kovils*).

Hinduism

As Hinduism evolved over the centuries, rituals shifted from animal sacrifices in open-air venues to more symbolic worship in a temple. Usually dedicated to a particular deity, temples today house shrines where devotees offer flowers and food in return for blessings. In the temple, Brahmin priests act as intermediaries between the worshiper and the deity. At home, the faithful perform **puja** (devotion) to their preferred god or gods in much the same way. Hindus commonly make pilgrimages to holy sites such as temples, caves, rivers, and sacred cities.

The Hindu calendar abounds with numerous holy days and



festivals. Among the most significant and widely celebrated in Sri Lanka are **Thai Pongal**, a harvest festival celebrated in January (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*); and **Deepavali**, the festival of lights. Many Sri Lankan Hindus are ethnic Tamils, mostly concentrated in the Northern, Eastern, Sabaragamuwa, and Uva Provinces.

Islam

Islam was first brought to Sri Lanka by Arab traders, likely beginning in the 7th century. By the 12th century, communities of Muslims had developed on the island's coasts and urban areas (see *History and Myth*). Most Sri Lankan

Muslims today identify with the Shafi'i school of Sunni Islam, a generally tolerant school of thought. A small minority are Shi'a. A very small percentage of Sri Lankan Muslims subscribe to an extreme, ultra-orthodox, and fundamentalist version of Islam known as Wahhabism or Salafism and occasionally engage in violent activity (see *Political and Social Relations*). Most Muslims reside in urban areas in 8 of the 9 provinces, excluding the Northern Province. Some 30% of Muslims live in the Eastern Province.

Christianity

Christianity has ancient roots in Sri Lanka, with groups of Christians first settling along Sri Lanka's coasts in the early centuries AD. Despite this early presence, Christianity did not gain prominence



until the arrival of European colonists centuries later (see *History and Myth*). The Portuguese introduced Roman Catholicism in the 16th century, while Protestantism and other denominations were introduced by missionaries during the Dutch and British eras (see *History and Myth*). Since the end of colonial rule, the numbers of Sri Lankan Christians have reduced to about 7% of the population.

Christians concentrate in Eastern, Northern, Northwestern, and Western Provinces, with a smaller presence in Sabaragamuwa and Uva Provinces, where some Indian Tamils have converted to Christianity. About 82% of Sri Lanka's Christians are Roman Catholic, while the remainder divide into numerous Protestant denominations, primarily Anglicans and members of the Dutch Reformed Church. Other Christian congregations with smaller numbers include the Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh-day Adventists, Baptists, Pentecostals, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons).

Religion and the Law

In the past, local authorities cited outdated laws to restrict the construction of Muslim and Christian religious facilities and force

other sites to close. Moreover, some authorities have failed to respond to attacks on religious minorities and houses of worship, then were reluctant to pursue criminal charges against the perpetrators. Sri Lanka's new administration, which took office in 2015 (see *History and Myth*), has expressed a renewed commitment to maintaining rule of law and curtailing religious violence. Despite this stance, some members of religious minorities, particularly Muslims and Christians, continue to be vulnerable to intimidation and violence.

Visiting a Buddhist Temple

Non-Buddhists are welcome to visit temples. Visitors should dress modestly, particularly long pants for men and long skirts/pants for women. Women should also wear blouses that cover their shoulders. Visitors should remove their shoes before entering, remain quiet inside, and refrain from touching any statues or other artwork. Photography is usually allowed, but visitors should always ask first.

Although monks may choose to engage visitors in conversation, visitors should not interrupt monks who are praying or meditating. Visitors should also show respect to monks by ensuring the level of their heads remains below that of the monks. For example, visitors should not stand above a seated monk. This rule holds true even outside the temple: if a monk is seated on a bus, a fellow traveler should never stand so that he looms over him.

Because they regard all Buddhist statues and images as sacred, Sri Lankans treat them with great respect and expect non-Buddhists to do the same. Inappropriate treatment includes climbing on a statue, using a foot to point at it, or using a statue or image as a backdrop for a photo. Anyone who commits a disrespectful act against a Buddhist statue or image is subject to punishment such as imprisonment and fines.

4. FAMILY AND KINSHIP

Overview

While family customs vary among Sri Lanka's religious and ethnic groups, all share a tradition of respect for elders and a sense of responsibility for family members. Urbanization has shifted some family residency patterns, yet extended families (typically consists of aunts, uncles, cousins and their immediate family members all living nearby or in the same household) continue to serve as an important support network.

Residence

In rural areas, some nuclear families (2 parents and their children) live in separate quarters near their extended family. Sometimes, the extended family shares a dwelling. In such cases, each wife typically maintains her own cooking area to symbolize the independence of her family unit. In urban areas, nuclear families are more likely to live without extended family nearby.

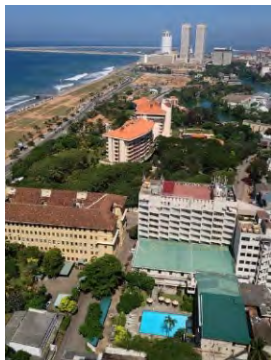
Rural: The majority of Sri Lankans live in rural areas, usually small villages and towns (see *Political and Social Relations*). While the caste system (see *Political and Social Relations*) was officially abolished in the 1950s, some towns still reflect segregation by caste, with some streets housing only members of a certain caste or the lowest castes living apart from the rest of the community.

Traditionally, rural homes were constructed of mud and sticks. Today, simple cement homes with roofs of coconut fronds, tin, or asbestos are common. Upper and middle-class rural homes are often constructed from whitewashed cement and have high ceilings and windows with built-in vents that circulate air. Middle-class homes typically feature a sitting room (**hall**), dining room, 2-3 bedrooms and a veranda, with a kitchen and washroom at



the rear of the house. Interiors are typically simply decorated with family photos, a calendar, or a small shrine (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Some rural residents plant trees or hedges to mark their properties. Nearly all rural homes have gardens, many featuring Buddhist, Hindu, or Christian shrines (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Urban: Less than 1/5 of Sri Lankans live in urban areas. Influenced by Dutch, Portuguese, and British styles (see *History and Myth*), urban architecture ranges from colonial-era buildings



to single-family homes and modern apartment complexes. Urban buildings often feature cement and brick construction with red-tiled roofs. Residents of single-family homes tend to surround their properties with walls.

Sri Lanka's poorest residents live in **watte**, small homes built from available materials, such as thatch, wood, and corrugated metal. Improvised and sometimes unauthorized shanty communities of **watte** typically

emerge near railways, roadways, beaches, and canals. About 1/2 of Colombo's residents live in such settlements and lack access to drinking water and sanitation services.

Family Structure

Among all ethnic groups, the oldest male is typically the head of the household, although the number of female-headed households increased as women were widowed in the civil war (see *History and Myth*). Elder family members are highly respected and serve as a source of advice for younger members. Children typically live with their parents at least until marriage. After marriage, the couple moves into their own quarters or joins the husband's family.

Inheritance patterns vary by region and ethnic group. While most groups are patrilineal, meaning descent and inheritance pass through the father's line, Sinhalese in the Kandyan region (see

History and Myth) trace descent and inheritance through both spouses. Husband and wife each possess property, which can be divided equally among their children. Some Tamil and Veddah communities (see *Political and Social Relations*) in eastern Sri Lanka are matrilineal, whereby inheritance and property pass from mother to daughter.

Polygyny: Legal only for Sri Lankan Muslims, polygyny is the practice of a man having multiple wives simultaneously. In accordance with **sharia** (Islamic law), Muslim men may have up to 4 wives. While exact statistics are unavailable, few Sri Lankans practice polygyny. Of note, the government is currently considering legal reforms that would outlaw both polygyny and child marriage (see “Dating and Marriage” below).

Children

Mothers typically carry their infants until they learn to walk. Parents teach **lajjava**, a combination of shyness, shame, modesty, and fear, to their children so they learn self-control. Families emphasize education, yet most children also perform household chores. Girls typically help with cooking and cleaning, and boys go to the market or tend the family garden.



Birth: In their final weeks of pregnancy, women often return to their parental home to receive care from their mothers. Traditionally, midwives attended births; now most deliveries occur in hospitals. After birth, female relatives assist the new mother with household tasks, and family and friends bring gifts to the new parents.

Childhood Celebrations: Sri Lankans celebrate several childhood events. Sinhalese families typically gather to celebrate a baby's first solid food, usually milk rice, at age 8-10 months. At an event held around age 2, a respected elder teaches the child the alphabet while presenting numerous items, such as pencils, books, money, or tools. Tradition holds that the item the child chooses first indicates his future career path.

Both Sinhalese and Tamil families mark girls' coming of age. At the time of her first menstruation, the family secludes the girl for about a week. During this period, an astrologer determines a favorable time for her to bathe with herbed water from a **dhoby** (clay pot). Following the period of seclusion, the family celebrates her transition to womanhood with gifts of jewelry.

Circumcision: Muslim Sri Lankan boys typically undergo circumcision in their early teens, signifying their passage into adulthood and membership in the Islamic community. Some Muslim girls are also circumcised (see *Sex and Gender*).



Dating and Marriage

Dating in the Western sense is relatively uncommon, although young adults in urban areas often socialize in groups. While Sri Lankans increasingly choose their spouses based on mutual attraction, arranged marriages are still common. Traditionally, a **magul kapuwa** (marriage broker) assisted families with finding suitable partners for their children. Today, few families engage marriage brokers, instead relying on relatives, friends, newspaper ads, or matchmaking websites. Most Sri Lankans marry within their caste (see *Political and Social Relations*), ethnicity, and religion (see *Religion and Spirituality*), though marriage between ethnic groups is increasingly common.

While the legal marriage age is 18, some younger Sri Lankans wed with parental consent or a court order. Of note, according to a community law, Muslim girls may marry at 12, although Islamic courts occasionally allow even younger girls to marry. Consequently, some girls are forced into marriage, usually to older men. About 10% of Sri Lankan girls marry before age 18, and 1% by 15, though the average marriage age is 24 for women and 27 for men.

Dowry and Brideprice: The practice of giving dowry, a payment made by the bride's family to the groom's family, occurs in some cases and may consist of cash, jewelry, or land. Sri Lankan

Muslim men traditionally pay a brideprice or **mahr** to the bride and her family. A legal requirement for Islamic marriages, the **mahr** may consist of cash, gold, or livestock.

Weddings: Sri Lankan weddings are often lavish affairs lasting up to 4 days. Families typically save for years and some incur debt to finance the celebration. Most weddings consist of a formal ceremony followed by a celebration with family and friends. Christians usually marry in a church. Among Muslims, an **imam** (religious leader) typically blesses the couple at the bride's home or a wedding hall.

The main event of a Sinhalese Buddhist wedding is the **poruwa** ceremony, named for the elaborately decorated, roofed wooden platform under which the couple stands. The couple's relatives perform several rituals, such as tying the little fingers of groom's left and bride's right hands together with a gold thread, then pouring water from a silver urn over the joined hands. Family



members exchange symbolic gifts, such as a **sari** (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*) and food. The ceremony ends as the couple lights an oil lamp together.

Tamil Hindus typically marry in a **kovil** (Hindu temple) or in a hotel banquet room. Like Buddhist weddings, they are usually lavish affairs involving numerous events and rituals. In one example, the couple ties 3 knots in gold chain or thread, symbolizing their ties of the mind, spirit, and body. Following the

ceremonies, wedding guests throw rice on the new couple to signify best wishes and future happiness.

Most formal ceremonies are followed by a reception for family and friends. When the couple returns from their honeymoon, some families have a "homecoming" celebration to welcome the bride into the groom's family.

Divorce: Rare due to the social and religious importance of marriage, Sri Lanka has one of the lowest crude divorce rates in the world at 0.2 divorces per 1,000 people. A variety of factors, such as women's increased economic independence and education levels, contribute to the increase. Nevertheless, social stigma still prevents some couples from pursuing legal separation.

Death

Funeral customs also differ by religious affiliation. While Muslims and Christians typically prefer burial in a cemetery, Buddhists and Hindus hold cremation ceremonies. Buddhist funeral rites usually last several days and generally occur in the home of the deceased. Upon



death, the body is washed and dressed and placed in coffin. For the next several days, relatives stand vigil, and monks visit to give **pansakula** (last rites) by chanting prayers. After about 7 days, the family accompanies the coffin to a crematorium, then collects the ashes for burial. Following the burial, mourners gather at the deceased's home for a meal of rice and curry known as **mala batha** (rice for the dead). Relatives typically give alms (**dané**) to a temple in honor of the deceased for 3 months following a death and annually thereafter.

Hindus consider cremation as the quickest way to release the spirit into the rebirth cycle (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The deceased is bathed, clothed, and covered with flowers. Mourners accompany the deceased to the cremation grounds, where the body is placed on a funeral pyre. Following the cremation, the ashes are collected for scattering.

In line with Islamic tradition, Muslim Sri Lankans typically bury loved ones as soon as possible after death, usually within 24 hours. Family members of the same gender wash, perfume, and shroud the body, then male family members transport it to the cemetery. Sri Lankan Christians typically bury their dead following a church service.

5. SEX AND GENDER

Overview

While customs in Sri Lanka differ by ethnic and religious affiliation, traditional values privilege men over women in most spheres. Women remain underrepresented in the labor force and were subjected to significant sexual violence during the civil war. Women continue to be subjected to domestic violence.

Gender Roles and Work

Domestic Labor: Traditionally, women perform most household tasks, such as caring for children, cooking, and cleaning, while men are responsible for providing for and protecting the family. On family farms, women also assist with the harvest. Even if they work outside the home, women typically retain responsibility for household duties.

Labor Force: In 2023, about 32% of Sri Lankan women worked outside the home. While this rate is higher than neighboring India (28%), it is significantly lower than the US (57%). Although women



predominate in teaching and nursing, some also pursue higher education to become doctors and lawyers. Notably, female workforce participation has decreased in the last several decades from 46% in 1990. Today, young women suffer the highest rates of unemployment of any group, and the country's gender gap in economic participation and opportunity ranks it 115th out of 146 countries surveyed in 2023.

Widespread gender discrimination in hiring and promotion is a key factor preventing women from entering and remaining in the workforce. Consequently, women generally are forced to take low-status, low-wage agriculture, services, and manufacturing jobs. Even if they find employment, women typically earn less than their male counterparts and attain managerial and leadership positions at lower rates than men. Finally, women

tend to leave the labor force upon marriage due to societal expectations that a wife's most important role is to care for her husband and children.

This lack of suitable employment opportunities has prompted some Sri Lankan women to seek work abroad. In early 2022, as many as 300,000 Sri Lankans worked outside the country, up to 40% of which were female. Most women performed domestic labor in the Middle East, where some were vulnerable to physical and other forms of abuse. Further, critics charged that children left behind by migrant parents suffered neglect. Consequently, the Sri Lankan government has implemented restrictions on international employment, such as banning females younger than 21 from traveling to the Middle East for work and mothers with children under age 2 from labor abroad altogether.

Gender and the Law

Although Sri Lankan civil law grants women equal rights to men,



lack of enforcement and entrenched customs result in unequal treatment regarding inheritance, marriage, and divorce. Children legally are granted equal rights to inheritance, yet sons typically get land and daughters only jewelry or cash. When the deeds of female property were destroyed during the 2004 tsunami (see *History and Myth*), some local governments issued new

documents in their husbands' names rather than theirs. The government historically has favored the husband in custody issues arising during marriage or after divorce, although a 2007 legal change now permits both parents to petition for custody rights following divorce.

Some local laws also foster inequality. For example, in the city of Kandy, inheritance is determined by residence and marital status. If a father's married daughter lives with her husband's family, she receives no inheritance upon her father's death – her portion passes either to her brothers or to an unmarried sister living in the family home.

Gender and Politics

Sri Lankan women have held prominent leadership positions in politics and government. In 1931, Sri Lanka became the 1st Asian nation to give women the right to vote. In 1960, Sirimavo Bandaranaike served as the world's 1st female Prime Minister, and her daughter Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga served as the country's 1st female President in 1994. Despite these early gains and recent efforts by political parties to implement female quotas, women's political participation remains low. Currently, just 5% of Parliament members are female, less than 1/2 the rate of India's Parliament and significantly less than the US rate of 29%. A revision in local government legislation introduced a reserved quota of 25% of council seats for women, but as of 2024, women only held 10% of seats in deliberative bodies of local government.



Gender Based Violence (GBV)

While rape is a criminal offense in Sri Lanka, marital rape is only punishable if the spouses are legally separated. Women generally do not report sexual violence for fear of facing significant social stigma and because indictment and conviction entail a lengthy legal process requiring them to share details of their assault publicly. In some cases, government officials suggest that unmarried victims wed their attackers instead of pursuing conviction.

Women in areas heavily impacted by the civil war (see *History and Myth*) remain particularly vulnerable to GBV. In these regions, human rights groups have reported isolated cases of Sri Lankan security and police forces committing torture and sexual violence against Tamil women.

Throughout the country, domestic violence remains a persistent problem. While exact statistics are unavailable, the 2019 Women's Wellbeing Survey indicated that 20% of ever-partnered women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner in their lifetime. Yet nearly half

(49%) of the women who experienced intimate partner violence did not seek formal help.

Female Circumcision

While official statistics on the practice are lacking, anecdotal evidence suggests that most Muslim Sri Lankan girls undergo some form of female circumcision, usually a symbolic prick or cut on the 40th day after birth. Proponents traditionally used the procedure to discourage women from premarital sex and infidelity, although today, it is viewed primarily as an Islamic duty.

Sex and Procreation

Sri Lankans consider sexual intimacy a private matter and tend to avoid public displays of affection. Though sex outside of marriage is not illegal, society generally condemns it. Due largely to successful family planning campaigns, fertility rates in Sri Lanka have fallen from 5.5 births per woman in 1960 to 1.97 in 2023, slightly lower than India's rate of 2.07 and higher than the US rate of 1.84. Of note, abortion is legal only if the pregnancy endangers the mother's life. Nevertheless, unlawful abortion is available from primarily untrained providers performing the procedure under unsanitary conditions. Experts estimate complications from these illegal procedures account for some 5-13% of maternal deaths annually.



Homosexuality in Sri Lanka: In 2017, Sri Lanka's government rejected a plan to decriminalize same-sex relations, although it did update its Human Rights Action Plan to include an addendum banning discrimination based on sexual orientation. As of late-2024, the government has expressed support for a bill which would decriminalize same-sex relationships. However, the bill is not expected to legalize same-sex marriages. Nevertheless, members of the LGBT community regularly face discrimination in housing, employment, and healthcare.

6. LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION

Language Overview

Historically, language has been a point of division between Sri Lanka's Sinhalese and Tamil residents. In 1956, the Sinhala Only Act made Sinhala the country's official language (see *History and Myth*), contributing to increased tensions between the 2 groups. The 1978 constitution elevated Tamil to the status of national language, while reserving "official" status for Sinhala. Since constitutional amendments in 1987-88, Sinhala and Tamil are both official and national languages, while English is used as a bridge or "link" language between the 2.

Sinhala

Around the 5th century BC, Indo-Aryan migrants from present-day North India arrived in Sri Lanka (see *History and Myth*). These people spoke Old Sinhala, a variety related to Prakrit and influenced by Sanskrit, both ancient languages of South Asia. While the earliest Sinhalese inscriptions date from around 300 BC, Buddhist monks taught and wrote in Sinhala (see *Learning and Knowledge*) beginning in the 1st century AD. Pali, the sacred language of Sri Lankan Buddhism (see *Religion and Spirituality*) and Tamil also strongly influenced the development of Sinhala.



A member of the Indo-Iranian branch of the Indo-European language family, Sinhala is closely associated with Sri Lanka's Buddhist Sinhalese population (see *Political and Social Relations*). About 75% of the total population or some 17.3 million people speak Sinhala as a 1st language, while some 2 million use it as a 2nd language. Sri Lankans speak several dialects of Sinhala that differ in both intonation and vocabulary, though they are mutually intelligible. A more significant

difference exists between spoken and written Sinhala, although the spoken language used in formal situations such as speeches and the media more closely resembles the written version. Members of the Rodiya caste (see *Political and Social Relations*), one of the lowest groups in the traditional social hierarchy, have their own dialect.

The Sinhalese alphabet descends from the ancient Brahmi script, the ancestral script of most Indian languages. Few Sinhalese letters exhibit straight lines. Instead, they are rounded and curling, with each letter typically symbolizing both a vowel and a consonant sound. The addition of diacritic marks above or below the letter can change the vowel. Like English, Sinhala is written from left to right in horizontal lines.

Tamil

Like Sinhala, Tamil has an ancient written tradition. Tamil speakers likely began arriving in Sri Lanka around the 3rd century BC (see *History and Myth*), and the earliest stone and palm leaf records date from that era. Also influenced by the

ancient Brahmi script, Tamil evolved from Old to Middle to Modern Tamil, which developed after 1600. Like Sinhala, Tamil is written horizontally from left to right and its alphabet features distinctive curved letters that are adapted with diacritic markings.



Of note, Tamil belongs to a different language family than Sinhala, namely the Dravidian family. It is related to other South Indian languages, such as Kannada and Malayalam, and is also an official language

of the Indian state of Tamil Nadu and of Singapore. About 15% of the total population or some 3.3 million Sri Lankans speak Tamil. Most Tamil-speakers are Hindus or Muslims, concentrated in the North and East. Tamil is the main administrative language in Northern and Eastern provinces.

English

During roughly 150 years of British presence (see *History and Myth*), English was the primary language of education and administration (see *Learning and Knowledge*). As noted earlier, English is the official “link” language intended to unite Sinhala and Tamil speakers. Commonly used in commerce and the hospitality industry, English is a compulsory subject in school and frequently used in higher education (see *Learning and Knowledge*).

Other Languages

A few Sri Lankans speak languages other than Sinhala, Tamil, or English. Around 60,000 people speak a Creole version of Malay mixed with Tamil. The indigenous Veddah people (see *Political and Social Relations*), historically spoke an Austro-Asiatic language that is largely extinct today.



Communication Overview

Effective communication in Sri Lanka requires not only knowledge of Sinhala or Tamil but also the ability to interact effectively using language. This broad notion of competence includes paralinguistics (rate of speech, volume, intonation), nonverbal communication (personal space, touch, gestures), and interaction management (conversation initiation, turn-taking, and termination). When used properly, these forms of communication help to ensure that statements are interpreted as the speaker intends.

Communication Style

Sri Lankan communication emphasizes the preservation of social harmony, while avoiding loss of face or shame and embarrassment to themselves or others. Consequently, Sri Lankans tend to communicate in an indirect, non-confrontational

manner. Direct statements, especially in support of controversial ideas, are rare. Instead, speakers prefer to communicate their intentions through subtle facial expressions or tone of voice. Further, some Sri Lankans prefer to avoid an outright refusal, which could signify a wish to end the relationship, instead answering affirmatively to show politeness. Sri Lankans consider

loud assertiveness and emotional outbursts rude and tend to speak softly.



Greetings

Traditionally, Sri Lankans greet each other by pressing their palms together in front of the chests,

while bowing slightly and inclining the head. They often accompany this motion with the phrase **Ayubowan** in Sinhala and **Vanakkam** in Tamil, meaning “may you be blessed with a long life.” Some Hindus also say **Namaste** (I bow to you), while Muslims typically say **Assalamu Alaikum** (may peace be upon you).

In informal settings, young Sri Lankans tend to greet with **Kohomeda** (how are you?). Handshakes are becoming more common. While young adults often shake hands with members of the same sex, they tend to avoid handshakes with members of the opposite sex. Some women in business situations may extend their hands for a light handshake, yet foreign nationals should generally wait for members of the opposite sex to initiate the greeting.

Names

Most Sinhalese have 2 or 3 names. The first is a family or clan name, indicating the family's origins and often ends in “ghe.” This name is passed down to both genders, and women typically retain their clan/house name after marriage. When writing their names, some Sri Lankans abbreviate their clan names with an initial, and some urban Sinhalese omit them altogether. The 2nd

name is the given or “first” name. Finally, some Sri Lankans use an additional family name, a practice which has become more common in urban areas. Of note, some Sri Lankans have Portuguese names dating from the Portuguese colonial presence (see *History and Myth*).

Tamils employ an alternate naming convention using 2 names. Instead of a family name, they typically adopt their father's name as their “last” name



before their given or “first” name. After marriage, some Tamil women adopt their husband's father's name in place of their own father's name. In writing, Tamils may abbreviate their father's name with an initial. Examples of some Sri Lankan surnames include Jayasinghe, Senanayake, Perera, and Silva (Sinhalese) and Pillai, Krishnan, and Ratnam (Tamil).

Forms of Address

In general, most Sri Lankans address others with their name and appropriate title. Common Sinhalese titles include **Mahathamaya** (Mr.), **Mahathmiya** (Mrs.), and **Menaviya** (Miss), while Tamil forms include **Shri** or **Thiru** (Mr.), **Shrimanthi** or **Thirumati** (Mrs.), and **Selvi** (Miss).

Sri Lankans often use distinct forms of address to demonstrate respect and the nature of the relationship. Sinhalese often use **Numbe** to address an equal and **Thamunnaasse** to address a superior, respected elder, or Buddhist monk. In less formal situations, Sri Lankans may address each other using relationship terms, such as calling a young man **malli** (younger brother) or **nangi** (younger sister).

Conversational Topics

Following greetings, Sri Lankans often engage in light conversation regarding the weather, food, or sports, especially cricket (see *Aesthetics and Recreation*). To further establish

rapport, foreign nationals should explore common interests. Sri Lankans take pride in their families and homeland and typically welcome questions regarding both. Nevertheless, foreign nationals should avoid discussing potentially sensitive topics such as politics, the protracted civil war (see *History and Myth*), and religion (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Gestures

Sri Lankans sometimes use gestures to emphasize or replace spoken words, though they tend to rely more on facial expressions and head movements than hand gestures. A common example is the “head bobble,” performed by tilting the head from side-to-side. Also common in India, the gesture’s meaning often depends on context, but commonly means “OK,” “yes,” “maybe,” and “I understand.” Sri Lankans tend to signal disagreement by pursing their lips and slightly shaking their head from side- to-side. To beckon someone, Sri Lankans hold the

hand, palm facing out at the shoulder level, while waving the fingers.

Because Sri Lankans consider the soles of feet unclean, they refrain



from showing or using them to point. In addition, Sri Lankans never allow their feet to touch sacred items, such as a statue of the Buddha (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Because they consider the head the most sacred part of the body, Sri Lankans avoid touching another’s head or passing anything over it.

Language Training Resources

Please view the Air Force Culture and Language Center website at www.airuniversity.af.edu/AFCLC/ and click on “Resources” for access to language training and other resources.

Useful Words and Phrases

English	Sinhalese (Romanized)	Tamil (Romanized)
Hello	Ayubowan	Vanakkam
Good morning	Subha udesenak	Kaalai Vanakkam
Good evening	Subha Sandevak	Maalai Vanakkam
Good night	Subha Rathriyak	Iniya Iravu
My name is ____	Mahgay nama...	Yen peyar....
What is your name?	Nama mokadhdha?	Ungal peyar yenna?
How are you?	Kohomada?	Eppadi irukkindriirgal
Good	Vahapata	Nalla
Please	Karunakara	Thayavu seithu
Thank you	Istuti	Nandri
Yes / No	Ow/Nay	Amam/Illai
Goodbye	Gihin ennam	poy vittu varugiren
Do you speak English?	Oba ingreesi kathaa karanavadha?	Ningal angilam paysu virhala?
I don't understand	Mata terinneeh neh	Enakku puriyavillai
Sorry	Matta kanagaatui	Mannikkavum
Excuse me	Mata sama venna	Mannikanum
Help!	Udav	Utavi!
I want ____	Mata one ____	Enakku vēṇṭum ____
What?	Mokadhdha?	Enna
Where?	Kohedha?	Engey
Who?	Kaudha?	Yar?
How?	Keseda?	Eppaṭi?

7. LEARNING AND KNOWLEDGE

Literacy

- Total population aged 15 and older who can read and write: 92%
- Male: 93%
- Female: 92% (2023)

Early History of Formal Education

Early education in Sri Lanka was closely linked to the spread of Buddhism (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Around the 1st century AD, Buddhist monks began teaching Sinhala (see *Language and Communication*) and Buddhist doctrine in schools associated with Buddhist temples. Higher education in Buddhist theology and Pali, Buddhism's sacred language, was available at **pirivenas** (religious universities).



Following the introduction of Hinduism around the 3rd century BC (see *Religion and Spirituality*), students received instruction from Brahmins, Hindu priests. Over time, technical schools opened to provide training for the architects, sculptors,

and engineers who designed and built the island's impressive settlements and irrigation networks (see *History and Myth*).

Formal Education in Colonial Sri Lanka

In the 16th century, Portuguese missionaries (see *History and Myth*) opened schools as part of their aim to spread Catholicism. Some 100 parish schools provided instruction in reading, writing, and the Catholic faith. The Portuguese also founded several Franciscan and Jesuit colleges (secondary schools) exclusively for Portuguese students.

By the mid-17th century, the Dutch effectively controlled much of the island (see *History and Myth*). Also viewing education as a means to promote their religion (Calvinist Protestantism) (see *History and Myth*), the Dutch significantly expanded the

education system. Specifically, they devised a primary school system that educated some 65,000 students in 130 schools by 1760.

By 1815, the British took control of the island as the colony of Ceylon (see *History and Myth*) and implemented



significant change to education. The British closed many Dutch schools, while expanding the public school system. Yet expansion was uneven. The British built more schools in Tamil communities, resulting in a higher proportion of educated Tamils than Sinhalese. Further, English-language instruction required for employment in the colonial civil service was offered primarily at private secondary schools. These schools attracted wealthier Christians and Hindu Tamils but were unaffordable for poorer Buddhist Sinhalese. Finally, the colonial government restricted the funding of rural Buddhist schools, further limiting the access of Sinhalese communities to educational opportunities.

These educational inequities resulted in significant differences in educational achievement across ethnic groups. Because they lacked English-language education, Sinhalese were largely excluded from government employment. Instead, these positions largely went to Tamils. By 1901, about 55% of Christian males were literate, compared to 35% of Buddhist men. Although Lankan Tamils (see *Political and Social Relations*) were well represented in the educational system, the so-called “Indian” Tamils brought to the island to work as indentured servants (see *History and Myth*) received little schooling. Consequently, the literacy rate for Hindu males overall was just 26%.

Education after Independence

Shortly before the country officially attained independence in 1948, Sri Lanka's first Minister of Education initiated a new education policy expanding public offerings, increasing funding for rural areas, and mandating Sinhala and Tamil as the primary languages of instruction over English. In subsequent years, the number of schools increased by over 50%, enrolled students by 300%, and teachers by 400%.



Despite these gains, inequalities remained. While schools offered graduation examinations in both Sinhala and Tamil beginning in the mid-1960s, educational attainment still lagged among Sinhalese. To rectify the historical imbalance, the government created a quota system known as the "standardization" policy (see *History and Myth*) in 1974 that aimed to increase the number of Sinhalese in higher education institutions by reducing the numbers reserved for Tamils. While education for Sinhalese increased following the implementation of this policy, the move helped enflame simmering ethnic tensions that within 10 years erupted into civil war (see *History and Myth*).

Modern Education System

Sri Lanka's Constitution guarantees all citizens the right to free and equal education. Schooling is compulsory and free for children aged 6-14 (primary and junior secondary school). Schooling beyond age 14 is optional but also free. Further, the government subsidizes textbooks, uniforms, school lunches, and transport to and from school. As of 2023, Sri Lanka spent 1.8% of its GDP on education, lower than that of neighboring India (4.2%) and that of the US (5.4%). The government also funds over 700 Buddhist *pirivenas*.

In recent decades, Sri Lanka has achieved significant education milestones. Its literacy rate surpassed 90% in the mid-1980s and

remains one of Asia's highest. Enrollment rates are also relatively high, with about 99% of children of the appropriate age enrolled in primary and 91% in secondary school in 2018.



Today, Sri Lanka's education system is based on the British model. Schooling divides into 5 years of primary school, 4 for junior secondary school, 2 senior

secondary school, and 2 pre-university studies. Examinations determine if students may continue to senior secondary school and pre-university studies. The school year divides into 3 terms: January-early April, the end of April-July, and the end of August-early December. Classes are generally held from 7:30am-1:30pm.

The government aims to promote social cohesion by providing at least some instruction in both Sinhalese and Tamil language and culture to all Sri Lankans, regardless of ethnicity. Yet, many schools remain segregated. In 2021, about 62% of schools used only Sinhala as the primary language of instruction and about 30% Tamil. Less than 8% of schools offered bilingual instruction.

Of note, about 5% of schools used both Sinhala and English as languages of instruction, 2% Tamil and English, and fewer than 0.05% Sinhala, Tamil, and English.



Pre-Primary: This level of education is optional for children aged 4-5 and is offered in public, private, and religious institutions. Moreover, the government has created national standards for this instruction.

Primary: Usually beginning at age 5 or 6, primary curriculum focuses on 5 main subject areas: native language (Sinhala or Tamil), math, environmental activities, English, and religion. By law, public schools must offer religious instruction, and students may choose among instruction in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Students cannot opt out of these lessons. At the end of 5th grade, students take an exam to determine possible placement in special schools that provide accelerated instruction.

Secondary: This level divides into junior, senior, and pre-university levels. At the junior level (grades 6-9), the curriculum includes math, religion, history, science and technology, health, physical education, social studies, and practical and technical skills. These schools also typically provide lessons in either Sinhala or Tamil (whichever is not the primary language of instruction) and English, though some schools also offer English as the language of instruction for certain subjects.



Grades 10 and 11 comprise the senior secondary level, when students prepare for the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Ordinary Level (OL) examinations. The curriculum during these years consists of 6 core subjects and 3-4 electives. Core subjects include the student's 1st language, English, science, math, religion, and history. Students may also pursue studies in elective subjects such as civics, geography, art, and technical specialties. About 75% of students pass the OL exams and qualify for pre-university study. Students who do not pass but wish to continue their education may enroll at a technical/vocational school.

Pre-university study occurs in grades 12 and 13 to prepare students for the GCE Advanced Level (AL) examinations and university entrance. Students choose to focus on 1 of 4 categories: arts, commerce, biological sciences, or physical

sciences. The AL examinations typically cover Sinhala or Tamil, math, English, and 3 elective subjects. Students' scores determine university admissions. Currently, about 74% of students pass their AL exams and score high enough to be considered for a university place.

Post-Secondary Education

The University Grants Commission and Ministry of Higher Education administer 20 general universities, most notably the former University of Ceylon, founded in 1942 and now 4 distinct universities: the University of Colombo, the University of Peradeniya, Vidyodaya University, and the University of Kelaniya. Other specialized institutions include the Defense University, Buddhist and Pali University, Buddhasravaka Bhiksu University (for training Buddhist monks), and the University of Vocational Technology.

While university education is free for Sri Lankan citizens, competition is intense for spaces, which are distributed solely through examination scores. Consequently, only 22% of all secondary school students attend a university. Those who are admitted to universities often receive outdated methods of instruction and curricula. Further, universities tend to lack sufficient resources and qualified instructors in the science, technology, engineering, and math fields. Consequently, graduates generally are not prepared adequately for the workforce and are unable to find employment. In 2021, Sri Lanka



joined the World Bank's Human Capital Project, committing to better investments higher education, as well as technical and vocational.

Technical Education

The Department of Technical Education and Training and the

Institute of Advanced Technical Education offer some 7 levels of technical training tied to 50 occupations, various types of engineering, and business.

8. TIME AND SPACE

Overview

Sri Lankans consider social harmony, consensus, and trust fundamental to building strong personal and professional relationships. Public displays of affection are common among members of the same sex but inappropriate for unrelated members of the opposite sex.

Time and Work

Sri Lanka's workweek runs from Monday-Friday or Monday-Saturday, and business hours vary by establishment type. Public sector employees typically work from 8:30am-4:30pm and private businesses from 9:00am-5:00pm. Some businesses are also open Saturdays from 8:00am-1:30pm. Shops typically open from 10:00am-7:00pm on weekdays and 10:00am-3:00pm on Saturdays. Muslim-owned businesses usually close for an extended lunch break on Friday, the Islamic holy day.

Banks generally open from 9:00am-3:00pm Monday-Friday. Post offices hours vary but typically open from 8:30am-5:00pm Monday-Friday and 8:30am-1:00pm on Saturday. Centers of worship and tourist attractions have varied hours. Some Hindu temples open at 5:00am and 10:00am for morning prayers then close until 4:00pm. Buddhist temples typically remain open from dawn until dusk. Museums often close on Fridays.



Working Conditions: Sri Lanka's legal workweek is 45 hours, averaging 8-hour days Monday-Friday and 5 hours on Saturday. Workers are allowed 12 overtime hours per week. Sri Lankans working in agriculture or informal sector jobs typically exceed the legal limit. Although labor laws provide regulations to protect workers, the enforcement capacity is lacking. Thus, forced labor, child labor, and other abuses regularly occur.

Time Zone: Sri Lanka adheres to India Standard Time (IST) which is 5.5 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) and 10.5 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. Sri Lanka does not observe Daylight Savings Time.

Lunar Calendar: While Sri Lanka's official calendar is the Western (Gregorian) calendar, Buddhists and Muslims use a lunar calendar to calculate religious festivals. Of note, Hindus use both solar and lunar calendars to determine certain holidays, such as the Hindu Harvest Festival. According to the Islamic lunar calendar, days begin at sunset, and each new week begins at sunset on Saturday. Consequently, the Muslim holy day of Friday begins on Thursday evening.

National Holidays

- January: **Thai Pongal** (Hindu Harvest Festival)
- February 4: Independence/National Day
- Mid-April: Sinhala and Tamil New Year's Eve
- Mid-April: Sinhala and Tamil New Year's Day
- May 1: May Day
- December 25: Christmas Day

These holidays occur on variable dates according to the lunar calendar:

- **Mawlid al-Nabi:** Birthday of the Prophet Muhammad
- **Vesak Poya:** The Buddha's birthday, observed during the full moon in May

Sri Lanka also recognizes Buddhist holidays at every full moon called *poya* (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Time and Business

While some practices vary by ethnic, linguistic, and religious affiliation, common values shape business negotiations. The Sri Lankan workplace is typically hierarchical. Junior staff usually

defer to leadership whose age, education, and experience are valued highly. Since leaders make most decisions, resolutions sometimes stall. To maintain harmony within the hierarchical relations, Sri Lankans typically use an indirect communication style that avoids confrontation, assertiveness, and direct criticism

(see *Language and Communication*).

Sri Lankans consider personal, long-lasting relationships as a key element of conducting business. Potential business partners often rely on a mutual contact to organize an

initial meeting, which typically begins with an extended period of conversation about family, sports, and recent activities in order to build and define relations.

While Sri Lankans tend to have a relaxed sense of time and often arrive late, foreign nationals should arrive on time as a sign of respect. Business partners typically exchange business cards with both hands, examining them for several seconds before carefully putting them away. Sri Lankans rarely exchange gifts during a first meeting, but rather, on a celebratory occasion such as the completion of a business deal.

Personal Space

As in most societies, the use of personal space depends on the nature of the relationship. Sri

Lankans tend to maintain about an arm's length distance when conversing with strangers or people of the opposite sex and stand closer to family and friends.



Touch: Close friends and relatives commonly touch one another during conversation. Friends of the same sex often greet with a handshake, hold hands, or put an arm around each other's shoulders in public. Sri Lankans consider displays of affection between the opposite sexes inappropriate, particularly unrelated individuals. Foreign nationals should generally avoid physical contact with members of the opposite sex.

Eye Contact

Eye contact is considered key to demonstrating trust in Sri Lanka. Consequently, most Sri Lankans maintain eye contact during conversation, especially with someone of the same status or age. Women typically prefer to avoid eye contact with men, and observant Muslims, in particular, avoid eye contact with members of the opposite sex. Finally, some employees may avoid direct eye contact with authority figures to show respect.

Photographs

Military or government offices, mosques, temples, and airports tend to prohibit photography. Although permitted on the grounds of some Buddhist temples, photography tends to be off-limits inside. Foreign nationals should avoid posing for photos in front or beside a Buddha statue (see *Religion and Spirituality*).

Foreign nationals should acquire permission before taking a Sri Lankan's photo.

Driving

Travel by motor vehicle tends to be hazardous in Sri Lanka. Narrow roads are frequently



crowded with traffic, pedestrians, and animals. Larger vehicles such as trucks often aggressively assert their presence over smaller modes of transportation such as motorcycles. As a result, Sri Lanka's rate of traffic-related deaths in 2021 was 12 per 100,000 people, slightly higher than neighboring India (15) and significantly higher than the US rate of (14). Unlike Americans, Sri Lankans drive on the left side of the road.

9. AESTHETICS AND RECREATION

Overview

Sri Lanka's traditional dress, recreation, music, and arts reflect the island's ethnic and religious diversity, centuries of foreign trade and occupation, agricultural activities, and modern global trends.

Dress and Appearance

Sri Lankans typically wear a combination of traditional and modern styles. Traditional attire is more common in rural areas and for religious or formal occasions. Specific traditional styles and fabrics often vary depending on local customs, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and socioeconomic status.

Traditional: Sri Lankan men traditionally wear a **sarong**, also known as a **verti** (a long cloth sewn at the ends to form a tube), that they step into, pull up, and wrap around their waists. Some men add a long, full-sleeved, collarless white shirt to match. Others drape a cloth over their shoulders or wear a jacket, simple undershirt, or even no shirt at all when working in the fields. Today, some men prefer colorful patterned short- or long-sleeved shirts. Others also don colorful velvet caps or turbans.



Women traditionally wear a **sari**, a piece of cloth several yards in length, usually wrapped around the body and draped over a shoulder. Methods of wrapping a **sari** vary by region and other factors. For example, Muslim women often wear the **sari** in a special "Gujarati drape" that enables them to cover their heads. The **osariya** is a similar garment with an elaborate frill, sometimes cited as the traditional dress of Kandy and often accompanied by a jacket with puffed sleeves. Some women,

typically Tamils, wear a **salwar kameez**, consisting of tapered, ankle-length trousers (*salwar*) beneath a long, tunic-like garment (*kameez*). Another traditional dress is the **redde**, a 3-yard-long cloth similar to a *sarong* that is worn wrapped around the waist or entire body and cinched in different styles. Women often wear the *redde* with a **hatte** (white linen, laced blouse).

Modern: Some Sri Lankans, particularly youth and urban residents, wear clothing that reflects the latest Western fashion trends or a mix of traditional and Western clothing. While attire is typically more conservative than in the West, particularly for women, most clothing is lightweight and relatively loose due to the country's hot tropical weather. Men commonly wear jeans, slacks, or knee-length shorts with casual t-shirts or long-sleeved shirts. Women typically wear bright dresses or blouses with pants or skirts that fall knee-length or longer. In business settings, Sri Lankans tend to wear Western-style suits or dresses and other more formal business attire. Sri Lankans often wear sandals or flip-flops, which are more comfortable in the heat than sneakers and dress shoes.

Recreation and Leisure

Sri Lankans prefer to spend much of their leisure time in the company of friends and relatives, often visiting each other's homes to enjoy conversation, tea, and snacks or meals. They also like to watch TV, particularly "teledramas" (soap operas), reading, taking walks, kite-flying, jogging, fishing, and swimming. Some wealthy Sri Lankans meet at restaurants, gyms, or health



clubs, where they play tennis or squash and participate in other leisure activities).

On weekends and holidays, Sri Lankan families typically visit local parks, beaches,

rivers, or mountains. Extended families often hire vans or buses to visit historical or religious sites (see *Religion and Spirituality*), national parks, and other similar destinations. While many Sri

Lankans cannot afford extended vacations, wealthier residents often visit religious sites and other tourist attractions in India, Thailand, and other international destinations.

Festivals: A religious and ethnically diverse society, Sri Lanka holds a wide variety of local and national festivals annually. The festivities surrounding the Sinhalese and Tamil lunar new year (**Aluth Avurudu** and **Puthandu**, respectively) are some of the largest, with businesses closing for up to a week. Sri Lankans typically celebrate by playing traditional games, buying new clothing, preparing lavish feasts, and visiting friends and family with sweets and gifts.

Buddhists mark the full moon monthly with a **poya**, Buddhist day of observance. The most significant **poya** day is **Vesak Poya** in May (see *Time and Space*) when Buddhists celebrate the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha and as his 3rd and final visit to Sri Lanka. In addition to displaying colorful lanterns and electronic images of Buddha's life, Buddhists hold a 2-day festival in local temples, where they meditate, fast, and pray. During **Poson Poya** in June, Buddhists flock to Anuradhapura to celebrate King Devanampiya Tissa's conversion to Buddhism in 247 BC (see *History and Myth*). **Esala Poya** in July commemorates the Buddha's 1st sermon after attaining enlightenment and the arrival in Sri Lanka of his sacred tooth (see *Religion and Spirituality*). Buddhists celebrate the occasion

with a 10-day **perehera** (parade) in Kandy featuring decorated elephants, dancers, drummers, and other performers.

Hindu festivals are equally spirited, often including **pereheras**, lights, and colorful decorations. During

the 4-day Tamil **Thai Pongal** festival, Hindus celebrate the sun and rice harvest by decorating their houses and enjoying large feasts. **Vel** is Colombo's largest Hindu festival, celebrating the god of war's victory over evil with a **perehera** featuring an ornate



silver chariot, dancers, musicians, and decorated elephants. Other important Hindu festivals include **Deepavali** (the festival of lights) and the Nallur Festival in Jaffna. Significant Muslim festivals include **Mawlid al-Nabi** (the Prophet Muhammad's birthday), **Idul Fitr** (the end of the Ramadan month of fasting), and **Idul Adha** (festival of sacrifice). The most notable Christian celebrations are Good Friday, Easter, and Christmas, a holiday

popular throughout the island.

Sports and Games

Traditional Sports: Sri Lankans enjoy a variety of traditional sports, often played on national holidays and at festivals. One notable sport is **elle**, similar to baseball but played on a larger field with a smaller ball and a



longer, thinner bamboo bat. Another sport is **kotta pora**, in which 2 competitors use pillows to make the other fall from atop a horizontal pole. **Lissana gaha nageema** features a tall greased pole topped with a flag. Team members make alternate attempts to reach the flag, and the 1st to capture it typically wins a cash prize.

Cricket: While volleyball is Sri Lanka's national sport, cricket is arguably its favorite athletic pastime. First introduced by British colonial officers, a Sri Lankan team played its first formal game, called a Test, against a British team in Kandy in 1889. Of note, the national team won the ICC Cricket World Cup final against Australia in 1996. Today, Sri Lankans enjoy watching both international matches and the 7 regional teams that comprise the domestic Sri Lanka Premier League. Spectators commonly gather in public venues to view Tests, and children and adults alike enjoy impromptu village games.

Other Sports: Sri Lankans also fancy football (soccer), swimming, tennis, track and field, netball, rugby, golf, cycling, and badminton. Sri Lankan athletes have collectively won 2

Olympic medals, both silver, at the 1948 and 2000 track and field events.

Games: Popular traditional games include **panche**, a board game similar to parcheesi, and **olinda keliya**, a 2-person game played on benches with holes. The object of **olinda keliya** is for players to capture or “eat,” an opponent’s game pieces, often red seeds. Flying and sometimes building or fighting kites are popular pastimes. Card and dice games, checkers, and chess are also common.

Music

Traditional: Sri Lanka has a rich variety of traditional music passed along through generations. Though dependent on the regional style, Sri Lankan folk music generally is rhythmic and fast, with shifting beats and cadence. Various unique percussion instruments, particularly drums, feature prominently in Sri Lanka’s pulsating traditional music. The **geta bera** is a large double-headed drum with heads traditionally made from monkey and cow hides, and the **yak bera** is an even larger double-headed drum made from cow stomach. The **udekkiya** is a small drum played with one hand while the other hand manipulates attached strings to control the sound. The **daula** drum is played with a hand on 1 side and a **kaduppu** (stick) on the other. The **dandu bera** is a bamboo drum played with 2 **kaduppus** (Photo: Sri Lankan man plays traditional drums in a *perhehera*).



Other traditional instruments accompany the drums. The **thalampata** are small cymbals joined together by a string, which make complex rhythms primarily for Kandyan dances. Sri Lankans typically use a **hakgediya** (conch shell) to open ceremonial events and dances. Similar to an oboe, the **horanawa** often accompanies percussion instruments in Buddhist ceremonies. The **ravanahatha** made from a coconut, goat hide, and bamboo, is similar to a violin and likely one of the world’s earliest bowed instruments. Sri Lankans also play foreign instruments such as sitars, harmoniums, and guitars.

Modern: One of Sri Lanka's most popular musical styles is **baila**, fast-paced dance music first introduced by Portuguese settlers and their African slaves. *Baila* is commonly heard at parties and other social or dance functions. South Indian music is widely popular, especially songs from Bollywood (nickname of India's Hindi-language film industry) movies. Classical and international pop music is also popular.

Dance

A key part of Sri Lankan culture, dances are often performed at festivals and accompanied by drums, bells, and cymbals. Among the many varieties of traditional Sri Lankan dances, **udarata natum** (Kandyan dance) and **pahatharata natum** (low-country dance) are the most common. **Sabaragamuwa** is a popular fusion of the 2 dances, with roots in ancient Vedda traditions (see *Political and Social Relations*). Other folk dances include **lee keli**, performed by adults holding sticks to complement a drumbeat, **kulu**, a harvest dance featuring only



women, and **kalagedi**, in which women act as if they are fetching water. In addition, Sri Lankan Tamils perform South Indian classical dance styles.

Sri Lanka's national dance is the **udarata**

natum, a classical and acrobatic dance traditionally passed down from father to son, although today women also participate. *Udarata natum* includes 5 general types. Originally performed only in temples, **ves** is popular at festivals and *pereheras*, featuring a rapid beat, leaps, and flips in the air. Women more frequently dance **vannam**, a combination of poetry, music, and dance that often portrays animal movements. **Pantheru** dancers twirl and pass around a *pantheru* (an instrument similar to a tambourine), originally to celebrate a war victory. **Udekki** is named after the *udekkiya* drum supposedly commissioned by Sakra, the Buddhist ruler of heaven. **Naiyandi** is a traditional Kandyan ceremonial dance in which dancers wear frilly white attire with decorative trim, ornate silver headdresses, beaded breastplates, silver bangles, and bells.

Pahatharata natum, sometimes called **Ruhunu**, is common in Sri Lanka's southern coastal regions. These low-country dances incorporate mime, dialogue, impersonation, and often elaborate masks that represent various deities and demons from some of Sri Lanka's pre-Buddhist belief systems (see *Religion and Spirituality*). The notable "devil dances" often last for hours, traditionally featuring an exorcism of a demon in order to cure disease. Dancers use specific masks, movements, and offerings depending on the illness to be cured. **Kolam** are related theatrical narrated dances, typically based on a Buddhist story about a mythical queen and king.

Theater

Early theater in Sri Lanka was primarily based on religious stories and satires, similar to dances like *kolam* that incorporated some theatrical elements. Performances have changed over the past few centuries. **Sokari** is a folk drama originating in the central highlands around the 17th century. Linked to fertility and harvest festivities, *sokari* typically focuses on a central village character and uses narration, mime, and satire to tell his story. **Nadagama** is a more recent form of folk drama, likely first performed in the 18th century. With origins in South India and the Tamil community, *nadagama* became popular throughout Sri Lanka as Catholic missionaries used it to dramatize religious lessons.

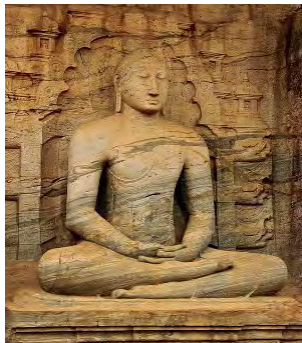


Literature

Sri Lanka has an ancient and rich literary history, with early writings on pottery likely dating to at least the 4th century BC. Sri Lankan Buddhist monks wrote the **Dipavamsa** (Island Chronicle) in the ancient Pali language (see *Language and Communication*) around the 3rd-4th century AD. Together with the subsequent **Mahavamsa** (Great Chronicle) and **Culavamsa** (Lesser Chronicle), the text covers over 2,000 years of Sri Lankan history and is considered one of the world's longest

continuous written histories. As the most important epic poem in Pali, the *Mahavamsa* tells stories of invasions, battles, cities, courts, Buddhism, and even has commentary on the lives of ordinary Sri Lankans, eloquently written in verses suitable for memorization.

Although most modern literature in Sri Lanka is in Sinhala, English and Tamil publications are increasingly available. Common themes include romance, politics, and poverty. A wide range of works explores the recently concluded civil war (see *History and Myth*). One of Sri Lanka's most prolific modern authors was Martin Wickramasinghe, who produced over 2,000 pieces and almost 90 books. Wickramasinghe was a pioneer of the realistic novel in Sri Lanka. He also wrote short stories, academic papers, and opinion pieces spanning a wide range of topics, from religion and language to philosophy and



anthropology. One of his most famous works is *Gamperaliya*, a novel that depicts the demise of traditional village life due to modernization. Praised for this and other works, many consider Wickramasinghe the father of modern Sri Lankan literature.

Arts and Handicrafts

Sri Lanka has a rich tradition of arts and handicrafts, first created as practical tools or for religious ceremonies.

Traditional handicrafts include stone sculptures, woodcarvings, masks, pottery, musical instruments, basketwork, metalwork, and jewelry. Giant stone sculptures in the ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa (see *History and Myth*) reflect religious devotion and royal patronage for the arts. Today, mats, baskets, hats and containers made from local materials such as reeds, rattan, bamboo, and coconut fiber are common and have practical uses. One of the most popular forms of folk art is mask-making. The *sanni* masks of the low-country dances are typically carved from wood and painted with bright colors to represent one of the 18 demons of ancient Sinhalese traditions.

10. SUSTENANCE AND HEALTH

Sustenance Overview

Sri Lankan cuisine prominently features vegetables, fish, and other fresh, seasonal ingredients, often heavily laden with aromatic and vibrant spices. Friends and families gather often for long meals in the home. Urban dwellers in particular enjoy dining in cafes, restaurants, bars, and at street kiosks.

Dining Customs

Most Sri Lankans eat 3 daily meals, with the largest in the afternoon or early evening. Arrival and departure times for guests are flexible, with friends often dropping by unannounced and staying for hours. Guests may bring small gifts such as chocolate, tea, or other food items for the host. Upon entering



the home, guests typically remove their shoes. Once seated, hosts may offer tea sweetened with sugar and milk along with light snacks.

During a meal, female hosts

usually serve guests and male family members first. In more traditional households, men dine with guests while women eat separately and later. After finishing their first serving, guests usually must decline several offers of additional servings if they do not want more food.

Although Sri Lankans traditionally dine while sitting on mats placed on the ground, urban families increasingly use chairs at Western-style tables. Sri Lankans typically share food from multiple large, centrally-placed dishes. To eat, diners scoop food with the thumb, forefinger, and middle finger of their right hand. While eating, diners refrain from touching their lips with their fingers and avoid soiling the palm of their hands. After a meal, diners customarily wash their hands in a bowl of water.

Diet

Sri Lankan cuisine varies by region and reflects Sri Lanka's ethnic diversity (see *Political and Social Relations*). Influenced by Indian traditions, northern fare is primarily vegetarian and spicier than elsewhere in Sri Lanka. By contrast, Sinhalese dishes often incorporate over a dozen spices, creating unique flavors. For example, curries are liberally spiced with tamarind, turmeric, cinnamon, cardamom, coriander, and lemon grass, among other spices. Red and green chili peppers are perhaps the most popular flavoring agents and may be chopped, ground, powdered, or roasted before incorporation into various **sambols** (fiery dipping sauces) and curries or used as seasoning for meats, fish, and vegetables.

Coconut is featured in a variety of Sri Lankan dishes. Grated coconut, for example, is a common ingredient in **roti** (flat bread), while coconut milk is used a thickening agent for curries. As Sri Lanka's main staple grain, rice appears at almost every meal, usually alongside lentils (**daal**), seafood, or vegetables stewed in various curries. Generally, Sri Lankans consume little meat, instead eating generous portions of fish, legumes, and nuts as their primary sources of protein. Sri Lankans also enjoy a variety of native vegetables and fruits year-round. One notable example is durian, a fruit encased in a large thorn-covered husk and famed for its pungent flavor and smell.



Some Sri Lankan ethnic groups adhere to certain dietary restrictions. Sri Lankan Tamils, who are primarily Hindu, (see *Religion and Spirituality*) typically avoid beef, preferring chicken, mutton, and seafood. Other Hindus are vegetarians who acquire their protein through beans, soy, and dairy products. Observant Muslims (see *Religion and Spirituality*) consume neither pork nor alcohol. In addition, they observe particular rules of animal slaughter and meat preparation to ensure that food is **halal**, allowed by Islamic law.

Meals and Popular Dishes

Breakfast in urban areas commonly includes a variety of breads served with eggs and fruit. A more traditional breakfast comprises *roti*, rice, and **katta sambol**, a mixture of ground red chilies, onions, chunks of dried tuna, and lime. Lunch often comprises steamed white rice served with various curried vegetables, meat, and fish. Dinner may consist of string hoppers (steamed nests of rice noodles) or plain hoppers (large fried pancakes) served with egg, *sambol*, and other fillings. For dessert, Sri Lankans enjoy a variety of baked goods such as



cakes, buns, and tarts, fresh fruit, and buffalo curd served with honey or blended into a drink called **lassi**.

Other popular dishes include **pittu** (flour and grated coconut steamed in a bamboo stalk); **pongol** (rice made with

cashews and raisins); **malu badung** (fried whole fish); and **kool** (a spicy, seafood soup popular in the North). Besides *katta sambol*, other popular varieties include **pol sambol** (scraped coconut mixed with chopped onions, chili powder, and salt) and **seeni sambol** (a less spicy, sweet and sour version). Notably, **kiri bath** (rice cooked in coconut milk) is a dish served on numerous holidays, childhood celebrations (see *Family and Kinship*), and other special occasions.

Beverages

Sri Lankans tend to drink tea with meals and throughout the day. Tea may be served plain or sweetened, with a slice of lemon, mixed with milk, or brewed with ginger. Other popular drinks include **tambili**, water of orange (ripe) coconuts and **kurumba**, water of green (unripe) coconuts. Sri Lankans also enjoy fresh juices from mangoes, papaya, pineapple, and other fruits. Popular alcoholic beverages include locally produced beer, wine, and cordials made from a variety of native fruits such as oranges, grapefruit, mangoes, and passion fruit. Coconut-based alcoholic beverages such as **arrack** (a liquor distilled from coconut sap) are also popular.

Restaurants

Sri Lankans enjoy eating out, with restaurant visits frequently lasting hours, particularly on special occasions. In large urban areas, restaurants range from upscale establishments offering global cuisines to casual eateries serving traditional Sri Lankan fare. Across the country, street stalls, tea kiosks, and **kades** (shops) sell a variety of snacks such as fresh fruit, rice and curries, **godamba roti** (paper thin bread served with or without egg), and **vadai** (a spicy deep-fried lentil doughnut). While most restaurants charge an automatic 10% gratuity, servers may expect an additional tip for good service.

Health Overview

Despite enduring years of conflict (see *History and Myth*), the Sri Lankan population's overall health has improved steadily over the last several decades. Today, nearly all Sri Lankans have access to clean water and modern sanitation facilities. In addition, malaria has been completely eradicated following aggressive government efforts to control, treat, and prevent the disease. Further, between 1990-2023, Sri Lankan life expectancy at birth increased from 70 to 78 years, slightly less than the US rate today. Infant mortality (the proportion of infants who die before age 1) decreased from 18 to 6 deaths per 1,000 live births, much lower than India's rate (26) and slightly higher than the rate in the US (5). Meanwhile, maternal mortality fell from 75 deaths per 100,000 live births to 29, significantly lower than the rate in India (103) but higher than in the US (21) (see *Sex and Gender*).

Despite these gains, Sri Lanka's healthcare system underserves rural dwellers and suffers from significant disparities in the quality of care offered by public and private facilities. Moreover, socioeconomic change has increased the prevalence of non-communicable diseases, with demographic trends likely to burden the healthcare system with rising demand and costs in coming years.



Traditional Medicine

Traditional medicine consists of knowledge, practices, and skills used to protect or restore health derived from the beliefs, experiences, and theories of the native population. Traditional medicine has a rich history in Sri Lanka and comprises several approaches that combine non-surgical methods such as nutrition, exercise, and herbal remedies to identify and treat the basic causes of illness.

First described in ancient Indian texts from around 300 BC, the **Ayurvedic** system (“science of life” in Sanskrit) is the most popular form of alternative medicine in Sri Lanka. *Ayurvedic* medicine attempts to stabilize and rejuvenate the 3 main bodily energies, or **doshas**, of air, bile, and phlegm. Treatments include ingesting foods or herbal remedies based on body type, therapeutic massages, physical exercise, yoga, and meditation. Similarly, the **Deshiya Chikitsa** system uses plant and herbal preparations to treat diseases. **Siddha** medicine, popular among



Sri Lankan Tamils, also aims to properly balance the body, mind, and spirit through herbal, mineral, and animal-based remedies, as well as yoga and meditation. Finally, a 4th system, **Unani**, derives from Islamic traditions and focuses on treatments based on herbal remedies. Homeopathy, a form of alternative medicine developed in Germany, is also prevalent.

Sri Lankans supplement modern treatments with traditional therapies, growing or gathering their own medicinal herbs or purchasing herbal treatments from pharmacies and other vendors. Notably, according to the World Health Organization, as many as 70% of rural Sri Lankans rely entirely on traditional medicine to meet their primary healthcare needs. In urban areas, hospitals and clinics frequently offer unique treatments combining modern techniques with *ayurvedic* medicine to treat a range of illnesses.

Modern Healthcare System

The Sri Lankan government offers free, universal healthcare to all Sri Lankans. Notably, despite low expenditure on healthcare – at roughly 4.07% of GDP in 2021 – the overall health of Sri Lanka's population has improved since the 1960s, largely due to the government's effective public health delivery system. A network of more than 1,500 public hospitals and clinics provides both preventative and curative care. In addition, doctors commonly make house calls to accommodate the special needs of pregnant women and young children.

Several shortcomings plague Sri Lanka's health sector. Outside of large urban hospitals, public facilities, especially in rural areas, are outdated and poorly equipped. Moreover, a shortage of skilled medical professionals and inadequate hospital capacity forces patients who require specialist care and complex medical procedures to wait for extended periods before receiving treatment.



While private hospitals and clinics offer higher quality care and address gaps in the public sector's health services, they are generally unaffordable for most Sri Lankans. Healthcare facilities remain largely dilapidated in the North and East from damage incurred during the civil war (see *History and Myth*). As a result, Sri Lankans living in these regions suffer from significant disparities in quality of care and are often forced to travel long distances and incur substantial costs to receive proper medical treatment.

Finally, Sri Lanka's current healthcare system focuses on providing maternal and child health services, while reducing rates of infectious diseases. Generally, it is ill-equipped to handle long-term care associated with non-communicable diseases. As Sri Lanka's population ages, the associated rise in such diseases combined with challenges related to elderly care will likely further burden the healthcare system.

Health Challenges

Today, the leading causes of death and illness are so-called “lifestyle” diseases such as diabetes, heart and respiratory diseases, and cancers. In 2019, these chronic and non-communicable diseases accounted for 83% of all deaths. In the

coming years, experts predict rates of such diseases will rise as the population ages and becomes more affluent, urban, and sedentary, and if a recent rise in smoking, obesity, and alcoholism



continues. Preventable “external causes,” such as accidents, suicides, and drug use result in about 8% of all deaths annually, about the same rate as in India (10%) and that of the US (7%).

Communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, dengue fever, hepatitis, and bacterial diarrhea contribute to 9% of all deaths, a slightly higher prevalence than in the US (5%). Notably, regular flooding leaves millions of Sri Lankans at risk of illness from polluted groundwater and exacerbates outbreaks of communicable diseases. Both in 2016 and 2017, severe floods displaced over 1/2 million people and resulted in shortages of clean water, food, and medicine. Flooding also created large pools of standing water, leaving some communities vulnerable to outbreaks of vector-borne diseases.

Since 2016, large areas of the country are also experiencing a severe drought. The worst in over 40 years, the drought has endangered the lives of over 1.2 million Sri Lankans, limited drinking water supplies, destroyed crops, and curbed the generation of hydropower, a major source of electricity in Sri Lanka (see *Technology and Material*). Significantly, even in the absence of food shortages, about 15% of children under age 5 are underweight, a rate considerably higher than in the US (<1%). In the wake of the recent floods and ongoing drought, observers worry that rates of malnutrition will increase.

11. ECONOMICS AND RESOURCES

Overview

For thousands of years, most Sri Lankans subsisted in a rural agrarian economy, utilizing canals and reservoirs to irrigate rice paddies while farming other crops. Located on the main trade route between East Asia and the Middle East, Sri Lankans also traded local goods such as spices, pearls, elephants, coconuts, betel nuts, and shells with merchants from around the world.



In the 16th century, Portuguese and later Dutch colonists controlled coastal regions where cinnamon, spices, and other goods were exported to Europe (see *History and Myth*). During the 19th-century, the colonial British developed commercial plantations that primarily grew coconuts and coffee for export (see *History and Myth*). When a leaf disease destroyed the lucrative coffee industry in the 1870s,



the British replaced it with tea bushes, and later, rubber trees.

British colonization drastically altered Sri Lanka's economy. While wet-rice cultivation remained

important, the land, labor, and resources spent on the new commercial plantations caused a decline in traditional rice production, prompting an increase in rice imports. The British also brought Indian Tamils to work primarily as indentured servants on the plantations (see *Political and Social Relations*).

In the early 20th century, British infrastructure investments and the export of tea, rubber, and coconuts fueled Sri Lanka's economy. Following independence in 1948 (see *History and Myth*), declining terms of trade reduced profits from commodity exports. In the 1960s, the government sought to reduce Sri Lanka's dependence on unstable trade by regulating imports and exports and expanding the public sector. In the 1970s, the socialist government increased its role in the economy by nationalizing large plantations and imposing internal trade controls.

By the late 1970s, rising unemployment and years of slow economic growth prompted economic reforms and liberalized deregulation and privatization of public firms. The government focused on infrastructure investments, such as large irrigation projects and hydroelectric dams, and the creation of free trade zones to entice foreign direct investment (FDI). These actions plus investments in industry and manufacturing helped Sri Lanka's economy achieve rapid growth rates in the early 1980s. Meanwhile, the share of exports comprised of cash crops fell from around 90% in 1970 to 42% in 1986, when textiles surpassed tea as Sri Lanka's most lucrative export. Nevertheless, escalating civil war violence (see *History and Myth*) and growing debt from infrastructure spending caused slower economic growth and a decline in both FDI and tourism.



While subsequent governments continued to support free-market policies, sporadic civil war violence caused fluctuating levels of FDI and tourism during the 1990s and early 2000s. From 1990-2000, real per capita GDP growth averaged a modest 4.4% before the economy fell into recession in 2001 following a global economic slowdown, terrorist attacks, and a currency crisis. In 2002, Sri Lanka avoided bankruptcy after reaching a ceasefire between the government and opposition groups (see *History and Myth*). The economy faced additional

challenges when a tsunami ravaged the coastline in 2004, ruining infrastructure, nearly destroying the fishing industry, and causing billions of dollars in damages (see *Political and Social Relations*).



Despite the catastrophic effects of the tsunami, from 2005 until the war ended in 2009, the economy grew by an average of nearly 5.3%, aided by billions of dollars of foreign aid. Immediately after the war, growth accelerated, peaking at 8.3% in 2012. Today, Sri

Lanka has an increasingly educated workforce, a growing private sector, relatively low unemployment, and a declining proportion of the population living below the national poverty line. Moreover, Sri Lanka has the continued support of aid donors and international organizations, providing assistance through loans, grants, and various development programs.

Nevertheless, Sri Lanka continues to face economic challenges. Government debt remains high for an emerging market, at nearly 128% of GDP, due

in part due to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Prior to the pandemic, Sri Lanka's GDP growth averaged 3% annually. In early 2022, the government sought a bailout from the International Monetary



Fund to maintain economic stability as debt repayments and erratic inflation eroded public funds and real economic growth as economic disparities remained. In 2023 the GDP declined by 2.3%. On average, Sri Lankan Tamils and other groups living in the war-torn Northeast are disproportionately poorer than many of their compatriots, particularly those living in Colombo. Millions of Sri Lankans are also dependent on remittances, money sent from relatives living abroad.

Despite these and other issues, Sri Lanka has the South Asian region's 2nd highest GDP per capita, except for the tiny Maldives island nation. Besides recent increases in tourism and FDI, other positive economic signs include government willingness to take on critical reforms essential for future sustainable economic growth.

Services

Accounting for about 60% of GDP and 47% of employment, the services sector is the largest and fastest-growing segment of Sri Lanka's economy. Significant sub-sectors include financial services; logistics, transport, and storage; public administration; banking; gem-cutting and finishing; hospitality; and tourism.

Logistics and Transport: Sri Lanka's strategic location on the shipping lane that transports 2/3 of the world's oil and 1/2 of its trade makes Sri Lanka an ideal hub for logistics and transport services such as transshipment between countries. Recently accounting for about 2.5% of GDP in 2023, the logistics and transport sector grew 40% from 2010-15. With recent investment in ports and other infrastructure (see *Technology and Material*), this sector will likely continue to grow in economic importance.

Tourism: This industry is one of Sri Lanka's fastest growing services subsectors. In 2023, tourism accounted for 8% of GDP and more than 870,000 jobs or 11% of the total labor force. In 2023, Sri Lanka hosted over 1.49 million tourists who visited attractions such as hundreds of miles of beaches, ancient ruins, and 8 official world heritage sites. Tourists primarily come from India, the United Kingdom (UK), Germany, Russia, and France.



Industry

As the 2nd largest component of the economy, the industrial sector accounts for about 26% of GDP and 26% of the labor force. The most significant sub-sectors include manufacturing, construction, and mining.

Manufacturing: Accounting for about 18% of GDP, Sri Lanka's manufacturing sector has been a key component in reducing economic dependence on agricultural commodities. Significant manufacturing sub-sectors include textiles, food processing, chemicals, rubber products, and electronics. Notably, textile and garment production accounts for about 40% of exports, or nearly \$5.3 billion, and employs some 15% of the labor force. In recent years, Sri Lanka's textile industry gained a larger market share, outperforming other South Asian countries primarily due to its higher-quality products, social compliance, and sustainability practices.

Construction: In recent years, construction has been a vital component of economic growth since much of Sri Lanka had to be rebuilt after the war and tsunami damages. Construction accounts for 4.3% of GDP, a larger proportion than most other Asian countries, and provides over 600,000 jobs.

Mining: Sri Lanka is one of the world's leading gem exporters, with deposits of some 50 gemstone varieties such as rubies, sapphires, and topaz. Accounting for about 1% of GDP and some 57,000 jobs, the mining industry is primarily artisanal, with minerals harvested from thousands of small pits and river

gravels. In addition to gemstones, Sri Lanka has significant reserves of graphite, phosphate, mineral sands, and salt.

Agriculture

The agricultural sector consists of farming, livestock, fishing, and

forestry. Agriculture is the smallest component the economy, accounting for about 8% of GDP and 26% of the labor force.

Farming and Livestock: About 44% of Sri Lanka's land area is dedicated to cultivation. While some Sri Lankans have small plots of land and practice subsistence agriculture, often utilizing slash-and-burn techniques, others are large commercial plantations. In addition to rice, largely consumed locally, tea is Sri Lanka's most important crop with Sri Lanka ranking 2nd in the world for tea exports, comprising about 11% of the market share



and earning over \$1 billion each year. Sri Lanka is also one of the world's top exporters of cinnamon, coconuts, and cloves. Other major crops include sugarcane, cashews, betel nuts, pepper and other spices, cut flowers, coffee, and tobacco.

Poultry, cows, goats, and buffalo are common livestock varieties.



Fishing: Sri Lanka's relatively large fishing industry consists of over 58,000 vessels that harvest around 500,000 tons of tuna, rockfish, mackerel, prawns, and other species each year. Selected varieties,

such as tilapia and prawns, are raised in inland aquaculture farms. Seafood exports typically earn over \$300 million per year and are primarily sent to European Union (EU) countries, Japan, and the US. In 2024, the fishing industry accounted for about 3% of GDP and generated nearly 4 million direct and indirect jobs.

Forestry: With about 34% of its territory covered by woodlands in 2020, Sri Lanka has a highly-developed forestry industry. State-protected forests account for around 55% of Sri Lanka's total forested area. Timber, firewood, woodchips, furniture, and other wood products comprised nearly 2% of GDP in 2023. In addition to coconut and rubber trees, commercial yields include teak, eucalyptus, pine, jack, mahogany, and acacia trees.



Currency

Sri Lanka's currency is the Sri Lankan rupee (රු, ශ්‍රී, or Rs), issued in 9 banknote values (10; 20; 50; 100; 200; 500; 1,000; 2,000; 5,000) and 4 coin values (1, 2, 5, 10). A Sri Lankan rupee subdivides into cents, though rarely used, issued in 6 coin values (1, 2, 5, 10, 25, 50). With fluctuations in

exchange rates, \$1 has been worth between Rs158-Rs322 in recent years. Although some larger businesses accept credit cards, smaller vendors typically accept only cash in small denominations.

Foreign Trade

Sri Lanka's exports totaled nearly \$14.94 billion in 2023 and primarily consisted of textiles and apparel, tea and spices, rubber products, precious stones, coconut products, and fish sold to

the US (23%), the UK (7%), India (7%), Germany (5%), and UAE (3%). In the same year, Sri Lanka imported \$19.6 billion of petroleum, textiles, machinery and transportation equipment, building materials, mineral products, and foodstuffs from India (19%), China (19%), the UAE (10%), Singapore (5%), and Malaysia (5%).



Foreign Aid

In 2020-2021, Sri Lanka's largest donors were Japan (\$237 million), the International Development Association (\$178 million), the Asian Development Bank (\$109 million), the US (\$57 million), and the EU (\$49 million). Since 1948, the US has delivered over \$2 billion of development aid to Sri Lanka. In 2022, the US government spent nearly \$77 million to support programs for reconciliation, environment, health, economic development, democratic governance, rule of law, and social services.

Remittances

Sri Lanka has experienced a large inflow of money in the form of remittances in recent years from some 2 million Sri Lankans living abroad. In 2023, remittance inflows accounted for 5.13% of GDP or over \$6 billion. While Sri Lankans live throughout the world, most work in the Arab Gulf countries or in East Asia, typically in construction, hospitality, or as housemaids (see *Sex and Gender*). In 2023, the primary markets for Sri Lankan migrant workers were Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait.

12. TECHNOLOGY AND MATERIAL

Overview

Sri Lanka's Southwest region has well-developed physical infrastructure, yet war and natural disasters have stifled the development of modern telecommunications and transport infrastructure in rural areas and in the North and East. Sri Lankans generally enjoy free speech, although the government restricts some news media and Internet content.



Transportation

Even as the number of Sri Lankan families using a privately-owned vehicle is growing, public travel by bus, motorbike, train, bicycle, taxi, and foot remains the most common mode. Auto or cycle rickshaws also known as **trishaws**, **tuk tuks**, or 3-wheelers provide cheap and popular taxi services. Wealthy Sri Lankans typically hire drivers to navigate the chaotic urban traffic. Public and private buses are the standard and most common transport forms, connecting both cities and remote areas across Sri Lanka. Major train routes extend from Colombo for both local commutes and inter-city travel, although lines are generally outdated, resulting in slow and frequently delayed journeys.

Roadways: Sri Lanka has over 72,000 mi of roads, with about 26% paved. While urban areas are increasingly connected by paved roads and expressways, rural areas typically just have unpaved 1-lane roads that are often impassible during monsoon rains. The new Southern Expressway (E01) connects Colombo and Matara, with additional expressways (E04, E06) under construction in the Southwest. After the tsunami in 2004 and the end of the civil war in 2009 (see *History and Myth*), Sri Lanka reopened highways connecting Jaffna and Batticaloa in the North and East to the Southwest, while continuing to repair damaged roads in the Northeast.

Railways: Sri Lanka has about 970 mi of railways, with work underway to expand the network and repair lines damaged by the tsunami and war. Railways connect all major urban areas, with commuter trains serving the greater Colombo metro area.



While some railway lines date from the British colonial era (see *History and Myth*), new, more efficient lines connect

Colombo to Jaffna and Mannar. Most service is slow, though new construction and restoration projects have improved efficiency in recent years. In 2020, state-owned Sri Lanka Railways and 2 private railway companies served 65.1 million passengers, down from 96 million in 2011.

Ports and Waterways: Sri Lanka has around 100 mi of inland waterways, primarily rivers in the Southwest. Major seaports include Colombo, Hambantota, Trincomalee, and Galle. Sri Lanka has invested heavily in its ports, opening the 1st section of the \$1 billion Hambantota port in 2010. In 2014, construction began on the \$1.5 billion Colombo Port City project, consisting of a marina, financial center, and commercial area financed by China. Ferry operations to India were suspended in 2011 but are expected to eventually resume between Colombo and Kochi, India.

Airways: Of Sri Lanka's 18 airports, 11 have paved runways. Colombo's Bandaranaike International Airport handles over 10 million passengers annually. SriLankan Airlines serves domestic and international destinations, while SriLankan, Cinnamon Air, Helitours, and FitsAir offer domestic services.

Energy

Sri Lanka has no significant reserves of oil, natural gas, or coal. About 100% of the country is connected to the national electric grid primarily powered by hydroelectric plants, wood, and imported coal and other fuels. In 2023, 54% of electricity was generated by renewable resources, and the government plans to increase this share to 100% by 2030. Growing electricity

demands and overreliance on hydroelectric plants vulnerable to droughts cause an unstable power supply and frequent blackouts.

Media

Sri Lanka's constitution protects freedom of speech and press, and direct government censorship is uncommon. Nevertheless, observers claim government officials have harassed, assaulted, and arrested journalists, resulting in self-censorship. While the current Sirisena government has allowed greater speech and press freedoms than the preceding Rajapaksa government (see *History and Myth*), in March 2016, the government ordered all news websites to join a registry, provoking fears of increased government control of the media.

Print Media: The Sri Lankan press includes dozens of local and national periodicals published primarily in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. *Divaina* and *Lankadeepa* are popular Sinhala national daily newspapers with circulations over 200,000, while *Virakesari*, *Thinakaran*, and *Uthayan* are popular Tamil dailies. *The Island*, *Daily News*, and *Daily Mirror* are national English-language daily publications.

Radio and TV: Sri Lanka has a wide range of public and private radio and TV broadcasters providing content in Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Households typically subscribe to satellite TV services providing international content.

Telecommunications

Sri Lanka has a rapidly developing telecommunications network, with 7 landline and 143 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in 2022.

Internet: While nearly 67% of Sri Lankans use the Internet, only 40% Internet access at home. However, it is widely available at cafes and communications centers. Although Sri Lankans can visit most websites since the government lifted former restrictions in 2015, the government blocks some pornographic sites.





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