



Sri Lanka

cultural note

Although its influence is declining, a caste system still exists in Sri Lanka. This system dictates a person's social standing, occupation, and even marriage possibilities. While there are only four traditional castes, these are broken down into thousands of subcastes.

Country Background

History / Date of Origin

The first Sinhalese immigrants to Sri Lanka arrived in the sixth century from northern India. Three hundred years later, Buddhism was brought with the Indian Prince Mahinda, son of the great Buddhist King Asoka. The religion flourished and became central to the culture.

The Portuguese were the first Europeans to arrive in Sri Lanka in the sixteenth century; they brought Catholicism with them. The Dutch followed in the next century, and finally the British arrived and declared it the British colony of Ceylon in 1815. During this colonial period, tea, rubber, and coconut plantations were established in the northern part of the island, and labor was brought over from the Tamil Nadu province in India. Sri Lanka's independence was peacefully obtained on February 4, 1948.

Since that time, free elections have been the vehicle for transfer of power, with the exception of the assassination of Prime Minister Bandaranaike in 1959. In 1971, an uprising of a Maoist group caused the government, under Bandaranaike's widow, to declare a state of emergency and suppress the insurrection. Although the revolt was put down in a few weeks, the state of emergency lasted six years. Partially in response to the turbulence, a new constitution was written that changed the country to a republic and its name to Sri Lanka. In addition, it created a presidency (appointed by the prime minister) and initiated economic policies that were highly socialistic.

In 1977, a change in political parties brought a new constitution and an open economy under J. R. Jayewardene. At that point, the Tamils' demand for more equalization at the federal level changed to a demand for an independent state of Tamil Eelam. The extremist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam resorted to force to achieve their goals. In 1983, the deaths of thirteen Sinhalese soldiers caused violent confrontations. Bloodshed, terrorism, and accusations of human rights violations occurred on both sides.

In 1987, the situation was deadlocked. India became involved by sending peacekeeping troops to help resolve the crisis. An accord was signed that made concessions to some of

the militants' demands, including giving official status to the Tamil language. But the militant troops backed out on their agreement to surrender to the Indian peacekeeping force. The fighting continued, and Indian troops remained in northern Sri Lanka for two years.

After the negotiated Indian withdrawal occurred in 1990, elections were held in the newly restructured provinces. With the resulting victory in Tamil strongholds and the seats won in the National Assembly, the militants halted activities. However, fighting broke out again in June 1990. Several hundred people were killed before a cease-fire was declared.

Type of Government

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is a unitary multiparty republic. Under the constitution of 1978, there is a strong executive president, elected for a six-year term, and a prime minister. The unicameral National Assembly has 225 seats. The president is head of both the state and the government.

Internationally, Sri Lanka maintains a nonaligned foreign policy. Relations with India, which have been tense in the past, remain a focus of attention.

Language

Sri Lanka has two official languages, spoken by the two dominant ethnic groups. The Sinhalese speak Sinhala, and the Tamils speak Tamil. English, a legacy from the colonial period, is the language of commerce and is spoken by about 10 percent of the population. It is spoken in tourist areas, and most business people and senior civil servants speak it fluently.

Religion

When Buddhism went into decline in India, Sri Lanka emerged as a Buddhist stronghold in southern Asia. The majority of the population (69 percent) claim Buddhism as their religion. Of the remaining 31 percent, 15 percent are Hindu, 8 percent are Christian, and 8 percent are Muslim.

Demographics

Of Sri Lanka's seventeen million inhabitants, 74 percent are Sinhalese, 18 percent are Tamil, 8 percent are Moor, and 1 percent are Burgher (descendants of Dutch colonists), Malay, and Vedda. The Veddas are a small remnant of the island's original inhabitants who have assimilated into Sri Lankan society and lost all traces of their original culture and history. Ethnic divisions between the Sinhalese and the Tamils run deep, and violent strife has been a problem since 1983. Tamils are generally concentrated in the "tea country," the northern part of the island.

Cultural Orientation

Cognitive Styles: How Sri Lanka's Citizens Organize and Process Information

In Sri Lanka both the Sinhalese and the Tamils are open to new methods and innovations, except when those methods or innovations come from the opposite ethnic group. Most education is skill training, and there is little abstraction.

Generally, Sri Lankans tend to behave in ways that are dictated by tradition and the situation of the moment. Interpersonal relationships are more important than abstract rules in the conduct of business.

Negotiation Strategies: What the Citizens of Sri Lanka Accept as Evidence

Both the Sinhalese (Buddhists) and the Tamils (Hindus) will use faith in the ideologies of their religion as a foundation for truth, modified by their personal feelings about an issue. They seldom resort to objective facts to find the truth.

Value Systems: The Basis for Behavior

In Sri Lanka there are two strong ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils, whose values and goals are clashing constantly. The following three sections identify the Value Systems in these predominant cultures - their methods of dividing right from wrong, good from evil, and so forth.

Locus of Decision Making

The concern of the Sinhalese is with one's responsibility to self and to interpersonal relationships, while the Tamils' concern is with one's responsibility to the collective-family, group, religion. Identity for both is found in the social system. Thus, individual decisions are made with social position in mind. There is a need for prestige within the group, so ranking is important.

Sources of Anxiety Reduction

The family is the central social unit in both groups and gives the individual the most security. Religious and ethnic affiliations (nearly synonymous terms) give the individual and his or her family the structure for their life. A strong patrilineal kinship system assures continuity and family stability. A high level of religious tolerance helps to offset the anxiety of ethnic differences.

Issues of Equality / Inequality

There is a strong feeling of inequality between the majority Sinhalese and the minority Tamils, leading to active insurrection and terrorism. The caste system exists but is not rigidly adhered to. Although ethnic groups desire segregation, government policy is to treat all people as equals. Men dominate all aspects of business and public life and are the heads of their family units. There are clear and classic role differences between the sexes.

Business Practices

Appointments



punctuality

- Punctuality is considered important and expected from Westerners. Do not be surprised, however, if your counterpart is late or keeps you waiting.
- Urban areas in Sri Lanka have heavy traffic during rush hours. Allow plenty of time between appointments for travel.

- Sri Lankans have a much more relaxed attitude about time than do North Americans. Most Sri Lankans would not object to a two- or three-hour wait before seeing an important person. Do not display anger if you are made to wait.
- Business hours are 8:30 A.M. to 4:30 or 5:00 P.m., Monday through Friday. Many companies close for lunch between noon and 2:00 P.m. Government offices observe regular business hours.
- As a foreigner, you must make appointments at least one week in advance.
- Also, reconfirm your appointments a day or two before. (Native Sri Lankans, however, often drop in on one another without appointments.)
- Sri Lankans take a "tea break" both in the morning and in the afternoon. Don't expect help from any employees during their tea break, even if they are sitting at their desks. No business is conducted during the tea break.
- Many introductory business appointments are held over meals. To meet for lunch in a restaurant is a common first appointment, but lunch or dinner in a Sri Lankan home is not unusual.
- Most Sri Lankan holidays are connected with the country's four main religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity.



Negotiating

- It is important to establish a rapport with your counterpart before jumping into business discussions. Therefore, take time to talk socially before starting negotiations. Be patient with delays, and do not expect business to move as quickly as in Western countries. Several trips to Sri Lanka may be necessary to finalize a business deal.
- If you are served tea at the beginning of a meeting, always accept this as a goodwill gesture and make a compliment on its quality.
- A first meeting will typically be held at a restaurant for lunch.
- Be prepared for your Sinhalese counterparts to consult with an astrologer before making any important commitments.
- Women in high business positions are still rarities, although not as unusual as in neighboring India or Pakistan.
- Business cards are often exchanged at first meetings. Have your cards printed in English. Having the local language printed on the reverse side is a good idea only if you can distinguish between a Tamil and a Sinhalese. Since this is often difficult for foreigners, it is better to leave it off.
- The caste system is still the way of life in many areas. It is important to respect this aspect of the culture and realize that there are places and activities where some people are not accepted. Do not pressure a person to violate this set of beliefs.
- The left hand is considered taboo for most purposes, since it is used for hygienic purposes. Therefore, do not use this hand when eating, passing food or objects, or touching another person.

cultural note

Treat religious objects with the utmost respect. Do not sit or stand on large statues of Buddha or otherwise handle images of Buddha sacrilegiously. Do not give Buddhist monks money directly, since they are forbidden to touch it; instead, place donations in the box found at the entrance to the temple. Hand any other object to a monk with both hands.

When visiting a mosque or temple, wear clothing that covers your legs and arms (both men and women), and remove your shoes and hat at the door. Remember, leather articles are often restricted and always impolite.



Business Entertaining

- It will not be uncommon for you to be invited to a local home for a visit or a meal. If this happens, it is good manners to reciprocate with a meal in a restaurant in your hotel.
- It is not impolite to drop by unannounced, especially if the family has no phone. The best times to visit are between 4:00 and 7:00 P.m.
- Meal times are 7:00 to 8:00 AM for breakfast, noon to 2:00 P.m. for lunch, and 7:00 to 10:00 P.m. for dinner.
- Be prepared for as much as two or three hours of talking and socializing before a meal. It is advisable to have a small snack before going.
- At a meal, communal dishes are placed in the center of the table and each person serves himself or herself. Do not let the serving utensils touch your plate, and never use your left hand. There usually will be no utensils, since people eat with their hands. Bread and rice balls are used to scoop up curries and vegetables. Watch your host. This technique takes a bit of practice. If your meal is served on a plantain leaf, do not eat it; that plantain leaf is your plate!
- Do not serve yourself large portions, but leave room to compliment your host and hostess by returning for two or three helpings. When you are finished, politely refuse additional servings.
- Buddhists are vegetarians, Hindus do not eat beef, and Moslems do not eat pork.
- When eating out, the person who initiates the invitation is the one who will pay for the entire meal.
- Good topics of conversation include families, home, schools, and sights of Sri Lanka. Topics to avoid include the ethnic strife between the Tamils and Sinhalese, relations with India, religion, the caste system, and sex.

Time

- Local time is 5 1/2 hours ahead of Greenwich Mean Time (G.M.T. + 5 1/2), or 10 1/2 hours ahead of U.S. Eastern Standard Time (E.S.T. + 10 1/2).

Protocol



Greetings

- The traditional greeting is to place your hands together at chin level, bow slightly, and say namaste, meaning “I salute the god-like qualities within you.” Aai bowan is the Sinhalese greeting. Foreigners are not expected to initiate this gesture, but returning it will be appreciated.
- As a result of British influence, the Western mode of greeting, shaking hands, is also appropriate for either sex.
- At a party, greet and shake hands with everyone in the room.



Titles / Forms of Address

- It is customary to address a Sinhalese person as Sir (Mahattaya) or Madam (Nona) following their last names, or simply by this title alone. Tamils have no titles such as this, so they will use Aiyaa (father) or Ammaa (mother) instead to an older person, connoting respect.
- Use the title Doctor for medical doctors or those holding degrees.
- Each of Sri Lanka's many cultures has different naming patterns. It is best to ask someone how he or she prefers to be addressed. (See the chapter on India for further details on naming patterns.)



Gestures

- Nonverbal signals for agreement are reversed from those in Western countries. A nod of the head means "no," and shaking your head from side to side indicates "yes."
- Pointing with your Finger is considered rude. Beckon a person by waving your fingers with the hand extended, palm down.
- Smiling can be considered as flirtatious.
- The head is considered sacred, and the feet are dirty. Therefore, do not touch another's head and do not prop your feet up on desks or chairs.



Gifts

- If you are invited to a home for a meal, a gift is not expected but will be appreciated. Good gifts include fruit, imported chocolates, and crafts from home.
- Before giving liquor, be certain that the recipient drinks alcohol; if so, then a bottle of imported whiskey would be a good choice.



Dress

- Business dress is usually conservative, but cool, in consideration of the climate. Men should wear a light shirt and pants. Jackets and ties are rarely worn. Women should wear a modest, light blouse and skirt. Your Sri Lankan counterpart will probably dress conservatively.
- Nice, yet cool clothing is appropriate for casual wear. Shorts; low-cut, revealing, or sleeveless clothing; and bathing suits are inappropriate for women except in resort areas or on the beach. Western dress is common among youth.