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▶ ASIA

## BACKGROUND

**Land and Climate.** The island nation of Sri Lanka sits fewer than 20 miles (32 kilometers) off the coast of India. Covering 25,332 square miles (65,610 square kilometers), it is slightly larger than West Virginia. About 32 percent of the land is forested (down from 80 percent due to deforestation). The north and east are flat and require irrigation to cultivate rice. Ancient hydro-engineering techniques are still in use and are admired even by the modern engineers currently expanding the irrigation system. Sri Lanka's south-central region is mountainous. Two peaks (Mount Pidurutagala and World's End Peak) are located near the center of the island. Tea, rubber, and coconut plantations dominate the central mountains, although terraced rice paddies are not uncommon. Sri Lanka has a tropical climate; temperatures average 80°F (27°C) year-round. Highland areas are cooler but also receive more rain than lowland regions. Seasonal monsoons affect the island.

**History.** The original inhabitants of Sri Lanka were the Vedahs, but little is known about their history. Around 500 B.C., an Indo-Aryan group led by Prince Vijaya migrated to Sri Lanka and formed a small kingdom. The present-day Sinhalese descended from this group. In 307 B.C., the Indian prince Mahinda, son of the great Buddhist king Asoka, introduced Buddhism to the Sinhalese. While Buddhism later flourished in India, it remained strong in Sri Lanka. Hindu Tamils also came to the island at an early date and have kept some cultural and religious ties with the state of Tamil Nadu in India. A second Tamil migration occurred in the 19th century when the British brought them from India to work on tea plantations.

Sri Lanka was well-known to other nations throughout history, including the Romans and early Arabs (who called the island Serendip). Coastal areas came to be dominated by var-

ious European powers, including the Portuguese (16th century), Dutch (17th century), and British (beginning in 1796). Inland areas remained autonomous until the 19th century. In 1815, the British won control of the entire island by defeating the last native ruler, the King of Kandy. Britain then established the island as the Crown Colony of Ceylon.

The island peacefully obtained independence from Britain in 1948. The nation has held successive free elections since that time. A 1971 Maoist uprising, which was forcibly suppressed, helped initiate a new constitution that changed the name of the country from Ceylon to Sri Lanka ("resplendent island") and introduced limited socialist measures such as industry nationalization.

Another constitution in 1978 declared the country a democratic socialist republic and created a strong presidency. About the same time, ethnic Tamil factions seeking an independent Tamil state (*Tamil Eelam*) in northern Sri Lanka began an insurgency against the government. In the 1980s, Tamil clashes with ethnic Sinhalese led to thousands of deaths. At the same time, Sinhalese Maoists again attempted to overthrow the government at the cost of some 60,000 lives.

Violence peaked in 1987. The government granted the Tamil language official status, implemented other reforms, and accepted India's offer to send troops into Tamil areas to establish peace. Although the separatists had originally agreed to turn their arms over to the Indian forces in exchange for autonomy, they instead began fighting the Indian troops. By 1988, the Sinhalese were violently protesting the presence of the Indians, and a new government under President Ranasinghe Premadasa negotiated the withdrawal of Indian troops in 1990.

Premadasa's actions won the short-term cooperation of

## Sri Lanka

Tamil guerrillas, who halted militant activities to participate in elections. Moderates gained several seats in the national Parliament. However, fighting broke out again, and entire villages were massacred by opposing ethnic groups. By the end of 1991, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) had taken control of many areas north of Vavuniya, including Jaffna. In 1993, Tiger terrorists assassinated Premadasa, and his United National Party (UNP) lost subsequent elections in 1994.

Heading a leftist coalition called the People's Alliance (PA) was Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. Elected president on a platform of bringing peace to the country, she immediately opened talks with the LTTE. Hopes for peace were high until 1995, when negotiations collapsed and fighting erupted once more. In a massive offensive, government troops recaptured many parts of the Jaffna peninsula, and the president offered a peace proposal to grant limited autonomy to Tamils and revise the constitution. By 1997, however, war still raged and the government increased military spending to counter rebel advances.

In the 1998 local council elections in the north, former Tamil rebels gained majorities in most areas. Despite this step toward greater Tamil autonomy, the LTTE continued its war and sponsored deadly terrorist attacks in Colombo. In 1998, after the deaths of two elected officials, Sri Lanka's military took over because new civilian elections could not be held safely. A Tiger offensive retook the Jaffna peninsula and other areas, forcing the government to withdraw. Negotiations in February 2002 resulted in a cease-fire. Although the cease-fire has largely held, peace talks broke down in April 2003, making the prospect of lasting peace even more remote.

### THE PEOPLE

**Population.** Sri Lanka's population of 19.7 million is growing annually at 0.83 percent. Colombo, the capital and largest city, has two million inhabitants. Jaffna has a population of about 500,000. The ethnic Sinhalese constitute 74 percent of the population and are concentrated in the southwest. The Tamils are divided into two groups: the Ceylon Tamils (12 percent), whose ancestors lived on the island for centuries, and the Indian Tamils (6 percent), whose ancestors were imported during the British colonial era. About 300,000 Tamils live outside of Sri Lanka; many are refugees either in India or the West. Tamils live in the north, east, and south-central areas. Moors (locally called Muslims) comprise 7 percent of the population. Malays, Burghers, and Veddahs constitute the other 1 percent. Burghers are descendants of Dutch colonists, and Veddahs are a remnant of the island's original inhabitants.

**Language.** Both Sinhala and Tamil are designated as national languages in Sri Lanka, but Sinhala is the primary official language. It is an Indo-European language with roots in Sanskrit and Pali. Its written form is more formal than the spoken version. Tamil belongs to the Dravidian group of languages. About 10 percent of the population speaks English, the primary language of business.

**Religion.** Since the introduction of Buddhism by the Indian prince Mahinda, Sri Lanka has been a stronghold of Theravada Buddhism, the more conservative branch of the religion. It is practiced by nearly 70 percent of the population, primarily among the Sinhalese. Although freedom of worship is guaranteed by the constitution, Buddhism has special status. About 15 percent of Sri Lankans (mostly Tamils) are Hindus. Many Buddhists also honor various Hindu deities. Tamil worship centers on the Hindu god Shiva, but many gods exist in the

hierarchy, each having a specific purpose. For instance, women pray to Paththini for health and fertility; business professionals seek the blessings of Kataragama (or Skanda); and students can receive help with their studies from Saraswathi or Ganesh. Muslims, who comprise 7 percent of the population, are almost entirely Moors. Eight percent of Sri Lankans are Christians.

**General Attitudes.** Sri Lankans are friendly and have relatively open attitudes. They value their ethnic and religious identity, loyalty to one's group, and respect for others. Ethnic divisions run deep, and few people socialize outside of their respective groups. Tamils resent Sinhalese domination, and many still distrust official attempts to broaden their autonomy.

The two greatest values in society are the family and education. Family members help one another and are close-knit. Parents will sacrifice or work all their lives to provide their children with as much education as possible. Nearly all young people desire a good education. Teachers and persons with a university degree are highly respected in society. Material wealth is also desired, and people are willing to work hard to obtain it. The wealthy, especially those who have become successful in private business, are respected, but in a different way than educated people are. In other words, family and education are still more important than money.

The traditional caste system that once dominated society is fading in public life. Most Sri Lankans do not discuss it, and being from a lower caste usually does not limit one's economic or political mobility. However, since one's surname gives indication of caste, everyone is aware of his or her place within the system, and that awareness does play a role in social interaction. That is, people still marry and associate with others of the same caste. For religious ceremonies, certain castes perform certain functions.

**Personal Appearance.** Sri Lankans take great pride in their appearance; it is rare to see a person not wearing clean and pressed clothes when away from home. Although the youth and people in cities wear Western-style clothing, traditional forms of dress remain popular. Women may wear a tight blouse and a *saree*, a wraparound dress that reaches to the ankles. The *saree* is made from a very long piece of fabric. It is draped over the shoulder and wrapped at the waist in a way that creates tailoring without being sewn. Women also wear a *redda* (a wrap-around skirt that is tucked at the waist) with a *hatte* (blouse) that leaves the midriff bare.

Traditional attire for men may include loose-fitting trousers combined with a long shirt that reaches to mid-thigh. The shirt has long, loose sleeves and buttons to the neck. Men might also wear a *sarong* (a piece of cloth wrapped around the waist, sometimes held by a belt or *lungi*) that reaches to the ankles. This is worn with a *banian* (a sleeveless shirt) and a handkerchief draped over the right shoulder. An urban man is unlikely to wear a *sarong* in public, but often changes into one after arriving home. In rural areas, the *sarong* is used for everyday public attire.

### CUSTOMS AND COURTESIES

**Greetings.** Forms of greeting vary between ethnic groups. The traditional greeting of placing one's palms together in front of the chest and bowing the head slightly is widely practiced. In formal circumstances, this is accompanied by the Sinhalese phrase *Ayubowan* or the Tamil *Vannakkam*. Both terms mean "May you be blessed with the gift of a long life." The Muslim greeting *Assalamu alaikum* (Peace be upon you) is common.

Men often shake hands with men while greeting, but they do not touch women in public.

Titles are important to Sri Lankans, even among close friends. Acquaintances and strangers use the more formal equivalents of “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” and “Miss.” If one is speaking English, the title precedes the surname; otherwise, it follows the name. Colleagues might use the title with a given name. Among close friends and relatives, familial titles replace formal titles. For example, in Sinhala one addresses an older male friend as *aiya* (older brother), a younger female cousin as *nangi* (younger sister), and so on. It is common (even among those who do not speak English) to address an older man or woman as *uncle* or *auntie*.

**Gestures.** Sri Lankans use the right hand for passing objects and eating. The left hand is reserved for personal hygiene. People use both hands when giving and receiving gifts; a gift presented with only one hand is not given wholeheartedly. To express sincere or gracious giving of any object, one can touch the right forearm with the left hand while giving with the right. Men often hold hands in public, but it is improper for members of the opposite sex to do so. Women are forbidden to touch a Buddhist monk.

The head is considered the most sacred part of the body; the bottoms of the feet are the least sacred. Sri Lankans do not generally touch another’s head, though they may pat a child’s head in encouragement. Greater taboos are associated with the feet. Sri Lankans do not use a foot to point at anything and they are unlikely to place feet on chair bottoms or coffee tables. Pointing with the index finger is impolite. One beckons with the hand held at head level, palm facing out, and all fingers waving together. It is improper to pass between two people in conversation; if it is unavoidable, the passer ducks slightly and apologizes before passing. People remove their shoes before entering Buddhist temples or Hindu shrines.

Wagging or tilting the head from side to side indicates agreement. Shaking it gently during conversation means one is listening. But shaking it firmly with the mouth closed can mean “no.”

**Visiting.** Visiting is a favorite pastime. Sri Lankans are very hospitable and strive to make all guests comfortable. Friends often drop by unannounced and are warmly received. Sri Lankans also enjoy inviting relatives and friends to their homes. In such a case, guests may bring a small gift of food or other item. Depending on the hosts, guests might remove shoes before entering the home. Once seated, guests are offered tea, usually sweetened with milk and sugar. It is impolite to refuse such an offer, although one can ask for a substitute (such as water). Hosts usually offer simple snacks, and guests are obliged to eat a little bit. While most visiting occurs in the home, Sri Lankans also enjoy meeting at parks or restaurants, and they often take short sight-seeing excursions together.

**Eating.** Lunch is generally the largest of three daily meals. The family eats together, and all members eat with the right hand. The mother serves men and any guests before other members of the household. After the meal, most people drink water and wash their hands in a bowl of water.

## LIFESTYLE

**Family.** The extended family is important in society. Even if a nuclear family has its own household, it often will live very close to relatives. The husband dominates the family, but the wife manages the household and influences all family matters. Women have economic and political opportunities outside the

home but are expected to maintain all household responsibilities as well. Women do not go out alone after dark. Parents expect to provide their children with all basic needs, even into adulthood. The elderly receive deep respect, and younger family members often yield to their advice and counsel. Children expect to care for their elderly parents when necessary.

**Dating and Marriage.** Dating in the Western sense is not common in Sri Lanka. Boys and girls get to know each other mostly through school, but getting together (even in groups) generally is not done. If a young couple desires to have a serious relationship, they are expected to eventually marry. Such couples do go out to parks and so forth, but not always with the knowledge of their parents. More and more people are choosing their own mates, especially in urban areas, but arranged marriages are still common. Sexual purity is an essential part of the marriage contract on the part of the woman. Marriage between members of different ethnic groups is socially unacceptable.

The timing of various wedding events—when the parties arrive, hold the ceremony, sign papers, leave, arrive at their new home—is governed by astrology. Each event is calculated to the minute so as to give the marriage the best possible start. Weddings are a time for family, friends, and food.

**Diet.** Rice and curry are staples in Sri Lanka. Each ethnic group has contributed dishes to the overall cuisine. A variety of curries (from the Sinhalese) are popular. Sri Lankans typically consume little meat, but they do eat large amounts of legumes (from the Tamils) and nuts. A main meal usually begins with rice or bread, followed by a curry or *dahl* (lentils) and a vegetable (cabbage or carrots). One popular food is *pol sambol*, scraped and spiced coconut. *Katta sambol* is a very spicy mixture of fried onions and chilies. The Burghers are known for their cakes and sweetmeats.

Sri Lankans of all religions seek to avoid those things that would cause spiritual pollution. Because food enters the body, it is considered a prime source of potential pollution. Those who adhere strictly to Buddhist doctrines do not eat flesh of any kind. However, some Buddhists include fish or eggs in their diet. Hindus do not eat beef or pork, and Muslims do not eat pork.

**Recreation.** Cricket is the most popular sport in Sri Lanka, followed by soccer, table tennis, volleyball, and netball (for girls). Most sports are played by men, although girls play them in school. Attending Western and Sri Lankan movies are favorite pastimes. During New Year festivities, Sri Lankans participate in activities ranging from indoor games just for women to outdoor sports such as wrestling or elephant racing.

**The Arts.** Sri Lanka has long delighted in the dramatic arts, and both live and puppet theater are popular. Theater and dance are closely related and frequently promote traditional values. Elaborate, brightly colored costumes and graceful hand, foot, and body motions are integral to the performance and the message. Folk theater often includes masks and traditional ritual and lore. Folk music, often played on small drums and sitars, is popular throughout the country. Urban youth like electric keyboards and guitars.

Buddhism has had a visible impact on the arts of Sri Lanka. Ancient Buddhist ruins are seen as architectural treasures. Temples and shrines dot the country. Decorative, carved facades, statuettes, and devotional items are a source of inspiration to contemporary architects and artists. Wood and stone carvings are among the most sophisticated arts.

**Holidays.** Every full moon (*Poya Day*) is a holiday. *Wesak*

## Sri Lanka

*Poya* in May is celebrated as Buddha's day of birth, enlightenment, and death. Each major religion has at least one national holiday. For example, the country marks *Idul Fitr* (a feast at the end of *Ramadan*, the Islamic month of fasting) and *Idul Adha* (Feast of the Sacrifice) for Muslims. Christians celebrate Easter (including Good Friday) and Christmas. *Deepawali* (Festival of Lights) is a Hindu holiday celebrating the triumph of light over darkness. Thousands of lights decorate stores and homes at this time of goodwill. Many other religious holidays honor Buddha or Hindu deities. The Tamil *Thai-Pongal* Day marks the "return" of the sun after a month of evil days; the sun brings a new period of goodwill. The Sinhala and Tamil New Year usually is celebrated in April with great fanfare and rejoicing. Political holidays include National Day (4 Feb., commemorating Sri Lanka's independence in 1948), May Day (1 May), and National Heroes Day (22 May).

**Commerce.** Generally, business and government offices are open weekdays from 8:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. and from 1 to 4:30 p.m. Larger towns have a daily open-air market; small towns have a weekly *polla* (market) day. Rural residents must travel to the nearest town on *polla* day to buy basic goods.

## SOCIETY

**Government.** Sri Lanka's central government is headed by a president, who is chief of state and head of government. The president is directly elected to a six-year term. Only limited power is given to the prime minister, who is chosen by the 225-seat Parliament. Members of Parliament are elected to six-year terms. Each of the nation's eight provinces has control over local affairs. The voting age is 18. Rural villages often have a chief or headman.

**Economy.** Despite growth potential and an educated workforce, the economy has been hampered by the financial and human costs of war. The economic growth rate, generally moderate, could be significantly higher if peace were firmly established. Rising inflation has galvanized thousands to protest. Foreign investment and tourism have tapered off due to the conflict.

Agriculture employs 38 percent of the labor force but does not contribute as much to export earnings as industry, which is dominated by apparel manufacturing. Tea, rubber, and coconuts account for most agricultural exports. Unemployment is high, but the private-sector job market is growing. Income distribution is unequal. Sri Lanka benefits from foreign assistance and remittances from the roughly one million Sri Lankans who work abroad (mostly in the Middle East). The currency is the Sri Lankan *rupee* (LKR).

**Transportation and Communications.** Buses, taxis, and *tuk-tuks* (small three-wheeled vehicles) are plentiful in urban areas. Major cities are linked by paved roads and rail service. Other roads are not paved and may be difficult to travel in some areas. Rural residents travel on foot, by bicycle, by bus, or by *tuk-tuk*. Few Sri Lankans own cars. Traffic moves on the left side of the road.

Many newspapers are printed in Tamil, Sinhala, and English; the government has enforced strict censorship due to security issues. However, bans were temporarily lifted for parliamentary elections. Radio and television broadcasts are

## DEVELOPMENT DATA

Human Dev. Index* rank	99 of 175 countries
Adjusted for women	80 of 144 countries
Real GDP per capita	\$3,180
Adult literacy rate	95 percent (male); 89 (female)
Infant mortality rate	15 per 1,000 births
Life expectancy	70 (male); 76 (female)

available in the major languages. Private homes often lack telephones, but post offices have public phones. Mobile phone use is spreading, even to small villages. Both urban areas and villages usually have communications centers with internet capability.

**Education.** Schooling, which begins at age five, is free and compulsory at the primary and secondary levels. Sri Lanka's adult literacy rate is among the highest in Asia. For young people, the rate approaches 100 percent. Nearly all Sri Lankan children complete primary schooling and roughly 90 percent go on to complete the secondary level. The average adult has completed seven years of school, a high achievement for the region. Many schools remain open even in disputed areas.

The government stresses the development of vocational skills, but traditional values also help maintain a strong liberal arts track. University education is free. Entrance to universities is based on "A-level" exams (patterned after the British model). The competition for slots is so intense that students often pay to take after-school "private tuition classes" that help prepare them for the exams. Even if students do not get into college, a good "A-level" score will help them get a better job.

**Health.** Sri Lanka has both public and private healthcare facilities. Private hospitals and clinics provide higher quality (but expensive) care. In rural areas, traditional medicine known as *ayurvedic* stresses the use of herbs and natural cures. Malaria is one of the nation's most serious diseases. Other mosquito-borne illnesses, such as dengue and encephalitis, are also common. War injuries include those sustained by child soldiers used by Tamil rebels.

## AT A GLANCE

### Events and Trends.

- Believing that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe was ready to concede too much to the LTTE, President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga dissolved Parliament in February 2004 and scheduled new elections for April. Three months earlier, the president used her powers to oust the defense, interior, and information ministers appointed by Wickremesinghe and assumed control of those ministries herself.
- A split between rival factions of the LTTE threatened to complicate the fragile peace process in early 2004, when a commander of the LTTE's eastern forces expressed a willingness to negotiate a separate agreement with the Sri Lankan government.

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