

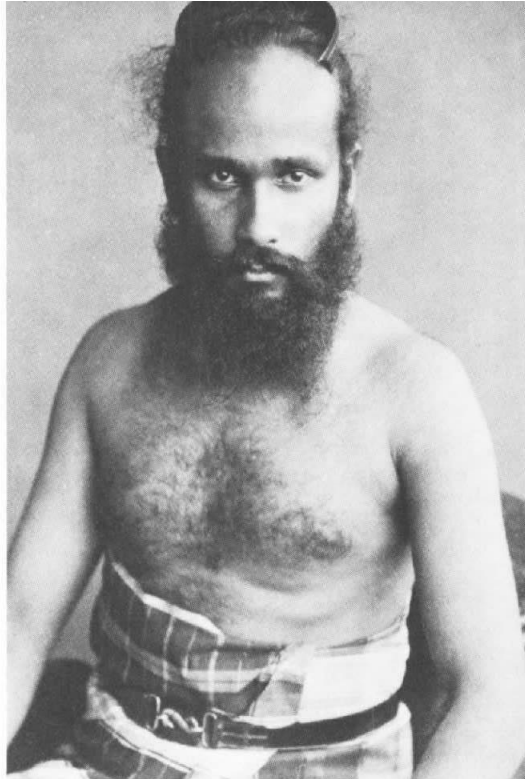
They have long been viewed in the popular imagination as a link to the original hunting-and-gathering societies that gradually disappeared as the Sinhalese spread over the island. In the 1980s, Veddah lived in the eastern highlands, where some had been relocated as a result of the Mahaweli Ganga Program. They have not preserved their own language, and they resemble their poorer Sinhalese neighbors, living in small rural settlements. The Veddah have become more of a caste than a separate ethnic group, and they are generally accepted as equal in rank to the dominant Goyigama caste of the Sinhalese (see *Caste*, this ch.).

Ethnic Group Relations

The different ethnic groups are not evenly spread throughout the island, but live in concentrated areas, depending upon where they settled historically (see fig. 6). The Indian Tamils are heavily concentrated in the highland districts, especially in Nuwara Eliya, where they constitute almost half the population. This settlement pattern reflects their strong relationship with the plantation economy for which they provided much of the unskilled labor. The Sri Lankan Tamils, on the other hand, make up more than 95 percent of the population in the Jaffna Peninsula, more than 70 percent of the population in Batticaloa District, and substantial minorities in other northern and eastern districts. This pattern reflects the historical dominance of Tamil kingdoms in the northern half of the island. The Muslims are not in the majority anywhere, although they make up large minorities in Mannar District on the northwest coast and in the east coast districts; their strongest presence is in Amparai District, where they comprise 42 percent of the population. The Sinhalese exist in substantial numbers everywhere except in the Jaffna and Batticaloa districts, and in some southern districts they comprise almost the entire population. Colombo District approaches the closest to an ethnic melting pot, with a Sinhalese majority and substantial Tamil and Muslim minorities. Colombo is also home to most of the Burghers (72 percent) and Malays (65 percent).

In many cases, the different ethnic communities live in separate villages or sections of villages, and in towns or cities they inhabit different neighborhoods. The fact that primary education is in either Tamil or Sinhala effectively segregates the children of the different communities at an early age. Business establishments run by, or catering to a specific ethnic group, tend to broadcast their ethnicity by signs either in Sinhala or Tamil, each of which possesses its own distinctive script. Sports teams tend to include members of only one community, while Buddhist and Hindu religious services

*Sinhalese man
wearing sarong, circa 1910
Courtesy Library of Congress*



*Tamil nautch
(dancing girl), circa 1910
Courtesy Library of Congress*



are automatically limited to one ethnic group. Relatively few persons are fluent in both Tamil and Sinhala, and accents betray which native community a person belongs to very quickly. Countering the intense pressures favoring segregation, however, are official government policies that treat all citizens equally and numerous personal networks within neighborhoods and among individuals that link members of different ethnic groups and foster friendships.

Ethnic segregation is reinforced by fears that ethnic majorities will try to dominate positions of influence and repress the religious, linguistic, or cultural systems of minorities. The Sinhalese are the overwhelming majority of residents within Sri Lanka, but they feel intimidated by the large Tamil population in nearby India; the combined Tamil populations of India and Sri Lanka outnumber the Sinhalese at least four to one. The recent memories of Tamil prominence in colonial and postcolonial administration, combined with a modern renaissance in Tamil consciousness in south India, are constant reminders of the potential power of the Tamil community. The Sinhalese feel quite isolated as the only group in the world speaking their language and professing their variant of Theravada Buddhism. The Tamils, on the other hand, are a minority within Sri Lanka. They cannot be sure of Indian support, and they experience increasing restrictions on social mobility as the Sinhalese majority increases its hold on the government. Anti-Tamil riots and military actions in the 1980s alienated a large sector of the Tamil community. In the middle are the Muslims, who speak Tamil but whose religious and cultural systems are alien to both other ethnic groups. Muslim leaders increasingly seek to safeguard the cultural heritage of their own community by adopting a public stance of ethnic confrontation.

Social Organization

Caste

Nature of Caste

When the Portuguese began to trade extensively with South Asia, they quickly noticed a fundamental difference between South Asian societies and those of other world areas. In India and Sri Lanka, societies are broken up into a large number of groups who do not intermarry, who are ranked in relation to each other, and whose interactions are governed by a multitude of ritualized behaviors. The Portuguese called these groups *casta*, from which the English term *caste* is derived. In South Asia, they are described by the term *jati*, or birth. According to traditional culture, every person is born into a particular group that defines his or her unchangeable position within society.

One of the most basic concepts underlying caste is purity. On one level this idea translates into a concern for personal hygiene, but the concept ultimately refers to a psychic or spiritual purity that lies beyond the physical body. A religious interpretation associated with Indian thought asserts that personal salvation or enlightenment is the ultimate goal of life, and that the individual goes through many lives and experiences before attaining sufficient knowledge to transcend the material world. Those beings who have gone farther on this road to enlightenment have purified their consciousness and regulate their lives in order to prevent more gross experiences from interfering with their progress toward salvation. Those groups of people whose life-styles are the purest are farthest along on the spiritual road and are most deserving of respect. These ideas about purity offer a rationale for dividing society into a large number of groups, ranked according to the purity of their life-styles or occupations. The persons in each group must be careful to preserve the relative purity of their own group and to avoid close contact with persons of lower purity; otherwise, they may sully or "pollute" themselves or the members of purer groups.

The idea of psychic purity blends with a series of traditional notions about pure or polluting substances and about behaviors and rituals, resulting in a rich system that explains caste segregation and modes of caste interaction. It is possible for people to transmit their qualities to others by touching them or by giving them objects. In extreme cases, even the shadow of a very low-caste individual can pollute an individual of the highest, priestly castes. If the physical contact is intimate or if people have manipulated certain objects for a long time, the intensity of the transmitted qualities increases. Simple objects such as tools, for example, may change hands between persons of different caste without problem. Food, however, which actually enters and becomes part of a person's body, is a more serious matter. Cooked food, involving processing and longer periods of contact, is more problematic than uncooked food. There is thus a series of prohibitions on the sharing of food between members of different castes. Members of higher castes may avoid taking food from members of lower castes, although lower-caste persons may not mind taking food from members of the higher orders. The most intimate contact is sexual because it involves the joining of two bodies and the transmission of the very substances that determine caste for life. Sexual contact between persons of different castes is discouraged, and intercaste marriage is rare. When intercaste sexual affairs do occur, they are almost always between men of higher caste and women of lower caste, for it is less polluting to send forth substances than to receive them. In the

distant past, women who had sexual contact with men of lower castes were killed, and they would still be ostracized today in some villages. When polluting contacts occur between members of different castes, personal purity may be restored by performing cleansing rituals. In general, these concepts of purity prevent partaking of meals together and intermarriage between different castes, regulate intercaste relations through a wide variety of ritual behaviors, and preserve deep-seated social cleavages throughout Sri Lanka.

There has been a strong tendency to link the position of different castes in the social hierarchy to their occupations. Groups who wash clothes or who process waste, thus coming in contact with undesirable substances from many persons, are typically given low status. In both Hindu and Buddhist thought, the destruction of life is very ignoble, because it extinguishes other beings struggling for consciousness and salvation. This idea has rationalized views of fishermen or leather workers, who kill animals, as low and impure groups. In many cases, however, the labeling of an occupational group as a caste with a particular status has depended on historical developments rather than theories of purity. As the village farming economy spread over time, many tribal societies probably changed from hunters and gatherers to low-status service castes, ranked below the landowning farmers. Many poor agricultural laborers in Sri Lanka remain members of low castes as well. Other immigrant groups came to Sri Lanka, fit into particular occupational niches, and became known as castes with ranks linked to their primary occupations. Castes with members who accumulated wealth and power have tended to rise gradually in their relative positions, and it is not uncommon for members of rising caste groups to adopt vegetarianism or patronize religious institutions in an attempt to raise their public ritual status.

Caste among the Sinhalese

The dominant caste among the Sinhalese population is the Goyigama. Although the government keeps no official statistics on caste, it appears that the Goyigama comprise at least half the Sinhalese population. The traditional occupation of this caste is agriculture, and most members are still peasant farmers in villages almost everywhere in Sri Lanka. In traditional Sinhalese society, they monopolized the highest positions at royal courts and among the landowning elite. In the democratic society of the twentieth century, their members still dominate the political scene. In most villages they might be no richer than their non-Goyigama neighbors, but the richest landlord groups tend to be Goyigama, while the poorest agricultural laborers tend to include few Goyigama.

In the Central Highlands, some traditions of the Kingdom of Kandy survived after its collapse in 1818, preserved in unique forms of the caste system until the postindependence period. The most important feature of the old system was *rajakariya*, or the “king’s work,” which linked each caste to a specific occupation and demanded services for the court and religious institutions. The connection of caste and job is still stronger in the Central Highlands, and at events such as the Kandy Perahera, an annual festival honoring gods and the Buddha, the various castes still perform traditional functions. The Goyigama in the highlands differ from those of the low country because they preserve divisions within the caste that derive from the official ranking of noble and commoner families in the old kingdom. Honorific titles hearkening back to ancestral homes, manors (*vasagama*), or noble houses (*gedara*) still marked the pedigrees of the old aristocracy in the 1980s, and marriages between members of these families and common Goyigama were rare. In the low country, these subcastes within the Goyigama have faded away, and high status is marked by European titles and degrees rather than the older, feudal titles.

There are still major differences between the caste structures of the highlands and those of the low country, although some service groups are common to both. The southwest coast is home to three major castes whose ancestors may have immigrated but who have become important actors in the Sinhalese social system: the Karava (fishermen), the Durava (toddy tappers—see Glossary), and the Salagama (cinnamon peelers). Originally of marginal or low status, these groups exploited their traditional occupations and their coastal positions to accumulate wealth and influence during the colonial period. By the late twentieth century, members of these castes had moved to all parts of the country, occupied high business and academic positions, and were generally accorded a caste rank equal to or slightly below the Goyigama. The highland interior is home to the Vahumpura, or traditional makers of jaggery (a sugar made from palm sap), who have spread throughout the country in a wide variety of occupations, especially agriculture. In the Kandy District of the highlands live the Batgam (or Padu), a low caste of agricultural laborers, and the Kinnara, who were traditionally segregated from other groups because of their menial status. Living in all areas are service groups, such as the Hena (Rada), traditional washermen who still dominate the laundry trade; the Berava, traditional temple drummers who work as cultivators in many villages; and the Navandanna (Acari), traditional artisans. In rural environments, the village blacksmith or washerman may still belong to the old occupational caste groups, but accelerating social mobility

and the growing obsolescence of the old services are slowly eroding the link between caste and occupation.

Caste among the Tamils

The caste system of the Sri Lankan Tamils resembles the system of the Sinhalese, but the individual Tamil castes differ from the Sinhalese castes. The dominant Tamil caste, constituting well over 50 percent of the Tamil population, are the Vellala. Like the Goyigama, members are primarily cultivators. In the past, the Vellala formed the elite in the Jaffna kingdom and were the larger landlords; during the colonial period, they took advantage of new avenues for mobility and made up a large section of the educated, administrative middle class. In the 1980s, the Vellala still comprised a large portion of the Tamil urban middle class, although many well-off families retained interests in agricultural land. Below the Vellala, but still high in the Tamil caste system, are the Karaiya (see Glossary), whose original occupation was fishing. Like the Sinhalese Karava, they branched out into commercial ventures, raising their economic and ritual position during the nineteenth century. The Chetti, a group of merchant castes, also have a high ritual position. In the middle of the caste hierarchy is a group of numerically small artisan castes, and at the bottom of the system are more numerous laboring castes, including the Palla, associated with agricultural work.

The caste system of the Tamils is more closely tied to religious bases than the caste system of the Sinhalese. Caste among the Sri Lankan Tamils derives from the Brahman-dominated system of southern India. The Brahmans, a priestly caste, trace their origins to the dawn of Indian civilization (ca. 1500 B.C.), and occupy positions of the highest respect and purity because they typically preserve sacred texts and enact sacred rituals. Many conservative Brahmans view the caste system and their high position within it as divinely ordained human institutions (see Hinduism, this ch.). Because they control avenues to salvation by officiating at temples and performing rituals in homes, their viewpoint has a large following among traditionally minded Hindus. The standards of purity set forth by the Brahmanical view are so high that some caste groups, such as the Paraiyar (whose name came into English as "pariah"), have been "untouchable," barred from participation in the social functions or religious rituals of other Hindus. Untouchability also has been an excuse for extreme exploitation of lower-caste workers.

Although Brahmans in Sri Lanka have always been a very small minority, the conservative Brahmanical world-view has remained



Elephants bathing in a jungle river
Courtesy Embassy of Sri Lanka, Washington

strong among the Vellala and other high castes. Major changes have occurred, however, in the twentieth century. Ideas of equality among all people, officially promoted by the government, have combined with higher levels of education among the Tamil elites to soften the old prejudices against the lowest castes. Organizations of low-caste workers have engaged in successful militant struggles to open up employment, education, and Hindu temples for all groups, including former untouchables.

The Indian Tamils are predominantly members of low castes from southern India, whose traditional occupations were agricultural labor and service for middle and high castes. Their low ritual status has reinforced their isolation from the Sinhalese and from the Sri Lankan Tamils.

Caste Interactions in Daily Life

The divisions between the castes are reaffirmed on a daily basis, especially in rural areas, by many forms of language and etiquette. Each caste uses different personal names and many use slightly different forms of speech, so it is often possible for people to determine someone's caste as soon as the person begins speaking. Persons of lower rank behave politely by addressing their superiors with honorable formulas and by removing their headgear. A standard furnishing in upper caste rural houses is a low stool (*kolamba*),

provided so that members of lower castes may take a lower seat while visiting. Villages are divided into separate streets or neighborhoods according to caste, and the lowest orders may live in separate hamlets. In times past, low-caste persons of both sexes were prohibited from covering their upper bodies, riding in cars, or building large homes. These most offensive forms of discrimination were eliminated by the twentieth century after extensive agitation.

Outside the home, most social interactions take place without reference to caste. In villages, business offices, and factories, members of different groups work together, talking and joking freely, without feeling uncomfortable about their caste inequalities. The modern urban environment makes excessive concern about caste niceties impossible; all kinds of people squeeze onto buses with few worries about intimate personal contact. Employment, health, and educational opportunities are officially open to all, without prejudice based on caste. In urban slums, the general breakdown of social organization among the destitute allows a wide range of intercaste relationships. Despite the near invisibility of caste in public life, caste-based factions exist in all modern institutions, including political parties, and when it comes to marriage—the true test of adherence to ritual purity—the overwhelming majority of unions occur between members of the same caste.

Family

Among all ethnic and caste groups, the most important social unit is the nuclear family—husband, wife, and unmarried children. Even when economic need causes several families (Sinhala, *ge*; Tamil, *kudumbam*) or generations to live together, each wife will maintain her own cooking place and prepare food for her own husband as a sign of the individuality of the nuclear family. Among all sections of the population, however, relatives of both the wife and the husband form an important social network that supports the nuclear family and encompasses the majority of its important social relations. The kindred (*pavula*, in Sinhala) of an individual often constitute the people with whom it is possible to eat or marry. Because of these customs, local Sinhalese society is highly fragmented, not only at the level of ethnic group or caste, but also at the level of the kindred.

The kinship systems of Sri Lanka share with most of South Asia and the Middle East the institution of preferred cross-cousin marriage. This means that the most acceptable person for a young man to marry is the daughter of his father's sister. The most suitable partner for a young woman is the son of her mother's brother.

Parallel cousins—the son of the father's brother or the daughter of the mother's sister—tend to be improper marriage partners. There is a close and special relationship between children and their aunts or uncles, who may become their fathers-or mothers-in-law. Special kinship terminology exists in both Tamil and Sinhalese for relatives in preferred or prohibited marriage categories. In many villages, people spend their entire childhood with a clear knowledge of their future marriage plans and in close proximity to their future spouses. The ties between cross-cousins are so close in theory that persons marrying partners other than their cross-cousins may include a special ritual in their marriage ceremonies during which they receive permission from their cousins to marry an outsider. The system of cross-cousin marriage is ideally suited to maintaining the closed ritual purity of an extended kinship group and retaining control over property within a small circle of relatives.

The vast majority of marriages in Sri Lanka are monogamous, that is, they involve one woman and one man. Unions between one man and more than one woman (polygyny) are neither illegal nor unknown, however, and wealthy men can take several wives if they can afford to support the families. Unions involving one woman and more than one man (polyandry) are also legal and possible.

In the Kandyan region, descent and inheritance are traced through both spouses: both husband and wife possess their own property and may bequeath it in equal shares to their descendants. In the low country, where Dutch Roman Law is in effect, marriages create joint property between husband and wife, which on their death is divided among their heirs. On the east coast, Tamil Muslim families trace descent and inheritance through the mother, and men will typically reside with their in-laws. There is a preference for living near the husband's family in most areas of the country, although a family with no sons may prefer that a son-in-law live nearby and manage their lands. Among all the variations of inheritance and descent, the husband is typically the manager of the nuclear family's property and represents his family in most public duties and functions.

In the rural areas of Sri Lanka, traditional marriages did not require a wedding ceremony or legal registration of the union. The man and the woman simply started living together, with the consent of their parents (who were usually related to one another). This type of customary marriage still survives, although it has been declining in recent years. In 1946 about 30 percent of marriages in Sri Lanka were not registered, but in 1981 that figure had declined to 10 percent. Most such unions were concentrated along the north and east coasts and in the Central Highlands. Legal

divorce is easy to obtain, and divorces of customary marriages occur through mutual consent of the partners in consultation with their extended families. Most marriages, however, are quite stable because of the considerable social pressure and support exerted by kindred of both the husband and the wife. In 1981 the divorce rate per 10,000 persons amounted to only 30.5.

Most Sri Lankan families have small means and do not spend large sums on wedding parties. Among wealthier families in both the countryside and the cities, marriages occur more often between families that were not previously related, and more elaborate ceremonies take place. In such cases the bride may receive a substantial dowry, determined beforehand during long negotiations between her family and her future in-laws. Preceding these well-publicized affairs are detailed discussions with matchmakers and astrologers who pick the most auspicious times for the marriage. Except for some of the well-educated urban elite, the parents arrange all marriages, although their children may meet future spouses and veto a particularly unattractive marriage. The average age at marriage has been increasing in recent years because of longer periods required for education and establishing a stable career. In 1981 the average age of grooms was twenty-seven or twenty-eight, and the average age of brides was twenty-four. Betrothals arranged by parents could begin much earlier, and in rural areas marriages between persons in their early teens still occurred. Whatever the arrangements, however, marriage and the propagation of children were the desired state for all groups, and by age thirty-nine, 86 percent of both sexes had married at least once.

All ethnic groups in Sri Lanka preserve clear distinctions in the roles of the sexes. Women are responsible for cooking, raising children, and taking care of housework. In families relying on agriculture, women are in charge of weeding and help with the harvest, and among poor families women also perform full-time work for the more well-to-do. The man's job is to protect women and children and provide them with material support, and in this role men dominate all aspects of business and public life. At the center of the system are children, who mix freely until puberty and receive a great deal of affection from both sexes. As they enter their teens, children begin to adopt the adult roles that will keep them in separate worlds: girls help with household chores and boys work outside the home. Among the middle- and upper-income groups, however, education of children may last into their early twenties, and women may mix with males or even take on jobs that were in the past reserved for men. There has been a tendency to view the educational qualifications of women as a means for obtaining favorable



*Tamil woman and child
Courtesy Susan J. Becker*

marriage alliances, and many middle-class women withdraw from the workplace after marriage.

Religion

Buddhism

The Life and Message of the Buddha

The founder of Buddhism was a man named Siddhartha Gautama, a prince of the Sakya clan in what is now Nepal during the sixth century B.C. Popular stories of his life include many miraculous events: before his birth his mother experienced visions that foretold his future greatness; when he was born, he could immediately walk and talk; wise men who encountered the child predicted that he would become either a great sage or a great emperor. Behind these legends is the tale of a young man reared in luxury, who began to question the meaning of life. At the age of thirty, he abandoned his home (including his beautiful wife and child) and wandered throughout northeast India as a beggar, searching for truth.

Gautama studied under several religious teachers and became adept at techniques of meditation and self-imposed austerity. Finally, he sat down under a bo (pipal) tree and resolved not to move from that spot until he had achieved perfect enlightenment. He entered into deeper and deeper concentration, until he finally

reached an understanding of the nature of existence and the purpose of life. He thus became the one who knows, the Buddha (from the verb *budh*, to know or understand). At first he debated whether other beings would be able to comprehend the knowledge that he had gained, but compassion moved him to bring his message to the world and lead others to enlightenment. He spent the next fifty years traveling throughout northeast India, discussing his knowledge with all sorts of people. By the end of his life, his message and example had attracted large numbers of converts, from kings to beggars, from rich men to robbers. At his death around 483 B.C., he left behind a dedicated group of disciples who carried on his work.

The Buddha summed up his message in Four Noble Truths that still form the core of Buddhist belief. The first truth is that life is suffering (*dukkha*). The material world, thoughts, emotions, and ideas are all transitory and do not express or contain any eternal truths. All beings repeatedly experience pain and loss as they pass through innumerable lives, never able to emerge from a conditioned existence (*samsara*) created through their own consciousness. The second truth describes the cause of suffering as attachment to the world and the products of one's own consciousness. This attachment, or craving for existence, causes beings to create mental views of the world and believe they are correct, to form relationships with other beings, to struggle and desire. Such efforts are in vain because none of these strategies allows them to escape from their limited, suffering world. The third truth says that the way to break the limiting trap of *samsara* is to stop attachment. Once one has concentrated awareness so intensely that all material and spiritual phenomena appear empty, without real substance, then existence becomes liberated and suffering ceases. The fourth truth is the Noble Eightfold Path of behavior, which roots out attachment and the conditioned view of the world and leads toward the state of enlightenment (*nibbana*—*nirvana*, see Glossary) gained by the Buddha. The true follower of the Buddha rejects the world, becomes a full-time searcher after truth, and practices meditation that concentrates awareness.

The Buddhist Community

In the absence of the Buddha, the custodian of his message is the assembly (*sangha*—see Glossary) of monks who carry on his work. The members of the Buddhist assembly practice the discipline (*vinaya*) set forth by the Buddha as a system of rules for a monastic order. The discipline calls for strict control over the senses and dedicated meditation by the individual monk (*bhikku*—see Glossary). Following the Buddha's example, the monk should spend the

morning begging for food from the lay community, then abstain from meals after noon. He should shave his head, wear orange (or yellow) robes, and own only his clothes and a begging bowl. He should avoid all sexual contact or any other forms of sensual pleasure. The *bhikku* should rest in one place for an extended period only during the rainy season, when groups of mendicants may stay together in communal houses (*vihara*). Elaborate rules evolved for admitting novices to the monastic community and conferring ordination on *bhikku* who passed through a period of initiation and training. The strict organization of the monastic order created a solid basis for the preservation of the Buddha's message and a readily adaptable institution that was transplanted in a variety of social environments throughout Asia.

Buddhism in Sri Lanka has its roots deep in one of the earliest variants of Buddhism that survives in the world today. The Sinhalese call their beliefs Theravada, or "the doctrine of the elders." Their tradition, frequently described as Hinayana (meaning "lesser vehicle"), preserves a clear understanding of the Buddha as a man who achieved enlightenment and developed monks (*arhat*) as accomplished followers of his teachings. This tradition differs from the more widespread Mahayana ("great vehicle"), which often treats the Buddha as a superhuman being and fills the universe with a pantheon of enlightened figures (*bodhisattvas*) who help others achieve enlightenment. In Sri Lanka, people do not officially worship the Buddha, but show reverence to his memory. The most striking expressions of public reverence are *dagoba* or *thupa* (stupa), large mounds built over sites where relics of the Buddha or a great monk are buried. The *dagoba* in Sri Lanka preserve a spherical shape and a style of architectural embellishment that link them directly to the monuments originally erected over the Buddha's remains in ancient India. The traditions of the Sinhalese indicate that their oldest *dagoba* are at least 2,000 years old, from a period when genuine relics of the Buddha came to Sri Lanka. The conservative nature of Sinhalese Buddhism is strengthened through the preservation and living tradition of ancient scriptures in the Pali (see Glossary) language. A dialect related to Sanskrit, the classical language of India, Pali is probably close to the popular language in northeastern India during the Buddha's time. The monks of Sri Lanka have kept alive an unbroken Pali transmission of monastic rules, stories of the Buddha's life, and philosophical treatises that may constitute the oldest body of written Buddhist traditions.

For people who do not become monks, the most effective method of progressing on the road to enlightenment is to accumulate merit

(*pin*) through moral actions. One who performs duties faithfully in this world, who supports the monastic order, and who is compassionate to other living beings may hope to achieve a higher birth in a future life, and from that position accumulate sufficient merit and knowledge to achieve enlightenment. Meritorious activities include social service, reverence of the Buddha at shrines or at *dagoba*, and pilgrimage to sacred places. Gifts to monks rank among the most beneficial merit-making activities. Lay devotees invite monks to major events, such as a death in the family or the dedication of a building, and publicly give them food and provisions. In return, the monks perform *pirit*, the solemn recitation of Pali Buddhist scriptures. Although the average person may not understand a word of the ancient language, simply hearing the words and bestowing presents on the monks accumulates merit for the family or even for deceased family members. Some wealthy donors may hold gift-giving ceremonies simply for the public accumulation of merit. The monks thus perform important roles for the laity at times of crisis or accomplishment, and they serve as a focus for public philanthropy.

Popular Sinhalese Religion

There is no central religious authority in Theravada Buddhism, and the monastic community has divided into a number of orders with different styles of discipline or recruitment. The broad outlines of the modern orders originated in the eighteenth century. By that time, monastic personnel came entirely from the upper levels of the Goyigama caste, and enjoyed easy lives as recipients of income from monastic estates worked by lower castes. The official line of monastic ordination had been broken, since monks at that time no longer knew the Pali tradition. In 1753 the Kandyan king fulfilled his duty as a protector of Buddhism by arranging for Theravada monks from Thailand to ordain Sinhalese novices. These initiates set up a reformed sect known as the Siyam Nikaya (the Siamese order), which invigorated the study and propagation of the ancient Sinhalese heritage. The order remained a purely Goyigama enclave. By the nineteenth century, members of rising low-country castes were unhappy with Goyigama monopoly over the *sangha*, and rich merchants arranged for Karava youths to receive ordination from Thai monks. These initiates formed a new sect called the Amarapura Nikaya, that subsequently split along caste lines. Disputes over doctrinal matters and the role of meditation led to the establishment of another order, the Ramanna Nikaya, in the late nineteenth century. In the 1980s, the Sinhalese *sangha* of 20,000 monks fell into three major orders, subdivided



*Like father, like son: two generations of Buddhist monks
Courtesy Paige W. Thompson*

into “families”: the Siyam Nikaya contained six divisions; the Amarapura Nikaya, twenty-three; and the Ramanna Nikaya, two. Each family maintained its own line of ordination traced back to great teachers and ultimately to the Buddha. Caste determined membership in many of the sects.

The members of the Buddhist monastic community preserve the doctrinal purity of early Buddhism, but the lay community accepts a large body of other beliefs and religious rituals that are tolerated by the monks and integrated into Sinhalese religion. Many of the features of this popular religion come from Hinduism and from very old traditions of gods and demons. Sinhalese Buddhism is thus a syncretic fusion of various religious elements into a unique cultural system.

There is a thin boundary between reverence for the Buddha’s memory and worship of the Buddha as a god, and the unsophisticated layperson often crosses this line by worshiping him as a transcendent divine being. The relics of the Buddha, for example, have miraculous powers; the literature and folklore of the Sinhalese are full of tales recounting the amazing events surrounding relics. During the construction of a Buddha image, the painting of the eyes is an especially important moment when the image becomes “alive” with power. At the Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, where the Buddha’s Tooth Relic is enshrined, rituals include elements from Hindu

temple worship, such as feeding and clothing of the Buddha (see Hinduism, this ch.). In general, devotees believe that the Buddha's enlightenment makes him an all-powerful being, able to control time and space and all other supernatural beings.

The Buddha is so pure and powerful that he does not intervene personally in the affairs of the world. That is the job of a pantheon of gods (*deva*) and demons (*yakka*) who control material and spiritual events. The Buddha never denied the existence of the gods or demons, but said that attention to these matters simply detracts from concentration on the path to enlightenment. The Sinhalese believe that the all-powerful Buddha has given a warrant (*varan*) to a variety of spiritual entities that allows them to regulate reality within set boundaries (*sima*). For help in matters of everyday life, the Sinhalese petition these spiritual entities rather than the Buddha. Near many *dagoba*, or shrines of the Buddha, there are separate shrines (*devale*) for powerful deities. After reverencing the Buddha, devotees present prayers and petitions to the gods for help with daily life. The shrines for the gods have their own priests (*kapurala*), who practice special rituals of purification that allow them to present offerings of food, flowers, or clothing to the gods. Propitiation of demons occurs far away from Buddhist shrines and involves special rituals featuring the assistance of exorcists.

The popularity of different deities changes over time, as people come to see particular deities as more effective in solving their problems. The principal gods include Vishnu (also a Hindu god, identified by Buddhists as a bodhisattva, or "enlightened being," who helps others attain enlightenment), Natha, Vibhisana, Saman (the god of Adams Peak and its vicinity), and the goddess Pattini (originally an ordinary woman whose devotion to her husband, immortalized in poetry, elevated her to divine rank). During the twentieth century, the god Vibhisana has declined in popularity while the god Kataragama, named after his hometown in Moneragala District, has become extremely powerful. The annual Kataragama festival brings tens of thousands of worshipers to his small town, including Hindus who worship him as a manifestation of the god Murugan and Muslims who worship at the mosque there. This common devotion to sacred sites and sacred persons is one of the most important features of popular religion in Sri Lanka.

Another example of this religious syncretism is the cult of Sri Lanka's leading oracle, Gale Bandara Deviyo, who originally was a Muslim prince slain by the Sinhalese to prevent his accession to the throne. He is revered by Buddhists and Muslims alike at his shrine in the town of Kurunegala (in Kurunegala District). As transportation and communication facilities have expanded in

modern Sri Lanka, there has been a big expansion of major pilgrimage sites that are jointly patronized by Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims, thus providing a commonality that may lead to closer cultural cooperation among competing ethnic groups.

Buddhism and Politics

Buddhism plays an eminent political role in Sri Lanka and serves as a unifying force for the Sinhalese majority. Although the monks must renounce worldliness, they of necessity maintain close relationships with the lay community, whose members must supply them with food, shelter, and clothing. During the past century, as Sinhalese nationalism fueled lay devotion to Buddhism, there was a proliferation of lay support organizations, such as the All-Ceylon Buddhist Congress, the Colombo Buddhist Theosophical Society, the All-Ceylon Buddhist Women's Association, and the Young Men's Buddhist Association. The state has similarly retained close ties with the *sangha*. Since the time of Asoka, the first great Indian emperor (third century B.C.), the head of state has been seen by Buddhist thinkers as the official protector of Buddhism, the "turner of the wheel of the law" (see Historical Perspective, 1802-1978, ch. 4). One of the recurring problems in the history of Sri Lanka has been a definition of the state as the official supporter of Buddhism, which in turn has been the religion of the ethnic Sinhalese. To be successful among the Sinhalese, a government must provide visible signs of its allegiance to the *sangha* by building or maintaining *dagoba*, judging disputes among the orders of monks, and fostering education in the Pali Buddhist tradition.

Individual monks and entire sects have involved themselves in party politics, but seldom do all families and orders unite behind a coherent policy. When they do unite, they are a potent political force. In 1956, for example, a rare union of monastic opinion gave crucial support to the election of the Sinhalese political leader Solomon West Ridgeway Diaz (S.W.R.D.) Bandaranaike (see Sri Lanka Freedom Party Rule, 1956-65, ch. 1). As of 1988, the *sangha* controlled extensive estates in the interior of Sri Lanka and retained an independent power base that, combined with high status in the eyes of the Sinhalese population, gave the Buddhist orders influence as molders of public opinion. Monks remained prominent at rallies and demonstrations promoting ethnic Sinhalese issues.

Hinduism

Whereas Buddhism claims a historical founder, a basic doctrine, and a formal monastic structure, Hinduism embraces a vast and