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### **The Plural Society in Modern Sri Lanka**

Veteran Sri Lankan theatre activist **Ravindra Ranasinha** focuses on the pluralism that is evident in the Sri Lankan society proves of an untapped resource with immense potentiality. If properly understood by the politicians, this multiculturalism could be made a focal point in bringing peace and harmony to the much damaged country due to a prolonged ethnic conflict.



**NO** nation could be welded together with mere slogans however often repeated. The welding together of a Nation should be a consciously directed programme based on an understanding of the ground realities that obtain. This writing focuses on the diverse segments that go to make up Sri Lankan society. It was garnered from the most authoritative and credible sources in the public domain.

It is this diversity and its concomitant multicultural mosaic that makes it so inherently rich. It is a yet untapped resource of enormous potential if harnessed properly - with visionary leadership at the helm. For convenience and in order not to give any community either prominence or precedence, the segments have been listed alphabetically.

#### **Bharathas:**

The Bharathas or Bharatakula identity is maintained by a relatively prosperous merchant group from India that settled amongst the Sinhalese in the Negombo area. According to the census categories in July 2001,

Bharatakula has been moved out of Sri Lankan Tamil category to simply stand as a separate ethnic group Bharatha, thus currently they are neither Sinhalese nor Tamil. They are primarily found in the commercial capital, Colombo and in towns north of it, particularly Negombo in the Western Province. Common last names adopted by Bharatakula include Fernando, Croos-Moraes, Peeris and Rubeiro. Fernando is the commonest last name. In India they were traditional fishers' merchants and traders. Most are Roman Catholics although a significant minority has remained Hindus. They have always been a peaceful and law-abiding community that is socially and economically active.

#### **Dawoodi Bohras:**

The Dawoodi Bohras are a very closely-knit community.

While the majority of Dawoodi Bohras have traditionally been traders, it is becoming increasingly common for them to become professionals. Within Sri Lanka many choose to become doctors. They are encouraged to educate themselves in both religious and secular knowledge, and as a result, the number of professionals in the community is rapidly increasing. They believe that the education of women is equally important to that of men, and many Dawoodi Bohra women choose to enter the workforce. Today there are approximately one million Dawoodi Bohras worldwide. The majority of these reside in India and Pakistan, but there is also a significant Diaspora resident in the West Asia, East Africa, Europe, North America and the East Asia.

Besides speaking the local languages, the Dawoodi Bohras have their own language called Lis?nu I-D?'wat". This is written in Arabic script but is derived from Urdu, Gujarati and Arabic. They have lived and worked in Sri Lanka for hundreds of years and pioneered in establishing many industries and businesses, mainly in the sphere of export-import.

#### **Burghers:**

The Burghers are a Euro-Asian socio-cultural group, indigenous to Sri Lanka, consisting for the most part of male-line descendants of European colonists from the 16th to 20th centuries (mostly Portuguese, Dutch, German and British) and local women, with some of Swedish, Italian, Flemish, Spanish, French and Irish origin. Today the mother tongue of the Burghers is English, but historically other languages were spoken by the Community, in particular the Sri Lanka Indo-Portuguese, a Creole language based on Portuguese and both Sinhala and Tamil. While much vocabulary is from Portuguese, its grammar and syntax is based on that of Tamil and Sinhala.

In the Census of 1981, the Burgher population of Sri Lanka was enumerated at 39,374 persons, about one third of one per cent. This has now grown to about 47,000 souls. The highest concentration of Burghers is in Colombo (0.72%) and Gampaha (0.5%). There are also similar, significant communities in Trincomalee and Batticaloa, with an estimated population of 2,700.

The Burghers were legally defined by law in 1883, by the Chief Justice of Ceylon, Sir Richard Ottley, given before the Commission which was appointed in connection with the establishment of a Legislative Council in Ceylon. They determined that Burghers were defined as those whose father was born in Sri Lanka, with at least one European ancestor on one's direct paternal side, regardless of the ethnic origin of one's mother, or what other ethnic groups may be found on the father's side.

Because of this definition, Burghers almost always have European surnames (mostly of Portuguese, Dutch and British origin, although it is not uncommon to also find German, French or Russian surnames). Burgher culture, which defines them best, is a rich mixture of East and West, reflecting their ancestry. They are the most westernized of the diverse groups in Sri Lanka. Most of them wear western clothing, although it is not uncommon for a man to be seen wearing a sarong, or for a woman to wear a sari.

A number of elements in Burgher culture have become part of the cultures of other ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. For example, baila music, which has its origin in the music of 16th century Portugal, has found its way into mainstream popular Sinhalese music. Beeralu lace making, which began as a domestic pastime of Burgher women, is now a part of Sinhalese culture too. Even certain foods, such as love cake, bol-fiado (layered cake), ijzer koekjes, frikkadels (savoury meatballs), and lampries have become an integral part of Sri Lankan national cuisine.

Burghers have a very strong interest in their family histories. Many old Burgher families kept stamboeken (from the Dutch for "Clan Books"). These recorded not only dates of births, marriages and deaths, but also significant events in the history of a family, such as details of moving house, illnesses, school records, and even major family disputes. An extensive, multi-volume stamboek of many family lineages is kept by the Dutch Burgher Union.

#### **Colombo Chetty:**

The Colombo Chetties are a relatively small community domiciled in the Western, North Western and Southern Provinces; many of them have been assimilated into or identified with the Sinhala and Tamil Communities Today the number stands at around 175,000 with high concentrations in the Western and North Western Provinces.

In 1984 on a representation made by Shirley Pulle Tissera who was then the General Secretary of the Sri Lanka Chetty Association, the Government of Sri Lanka decided to classify the Colombo Chetties/Sri Lanka Chetties as a separate and Distinct ethnic group in all official documents, ratified by the Registrar General's Department which notice was published in the Observer Newspaper of 17 October 1984. The National Census

on population conducted in 2001 enumerated the Colombo Chetties as a separate and distinct ethnic group.

Most Sri Lankans are themselves astonished at the number of ethno-socio-and religio-cultural segments that go to make up the Sri Lankan Nation, still in the process of being formed. Many have yet to understand that this heterogeneity is one of this country's greatest strengths and the best advertisement for its renowned tolerance. That image was tarnished because of bigotry and chauvinism and now needs to be refurbished anew to restore the renown of our common Motherland.

#### **Sri Lanka Chinese:**

The Government decided to grant citizenship to the stateless people of Chinese origin who have been living in the island for a long time, perhaps over 150 years. The Cabinet recently approved a memorandum submitted by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickremanayake, who is also the Minister of Internal Administration.

Approximately 200 persons of Chinese origin were permanently residing in Sri Lanka as stateless citizens due to their inability to obtain Sri Lanka citizenship under the existing legislation. These persons are early migrants from China mainly during World Wars I and II and even before as peddlers, traders, restaurateurs and dental technicians. They are famous for their 'Chinese silk shops' and their hotels serving Chinese cuisine modified for the local palate. They intermarried with Sinhalese, Burghers, and Malays and have many descendants scattered all over the island from Ampara to Kandy, Galle to Trincomalee, and from Bandarawela to Chilaw.

Although most of the early migrants have passed away, their descendants, who have been born and raised here, are permanently residing in this country. Therefore, the Cabinet wisely has decided to grant citizenship to them through an Act of Parliament. Some of the families are Li, Shu, Chang, Liou, and several others which are thriving.

#### **Sri Lanka Kaffirs:**

The Kaffirs (English, also cafrinhas in Portuguese or k?piriy? in Sinhala) are an ethnic group in Sri Lanka who are partially descended from 16th century Portuguese traders and the African slaves who were brought by them. The Kaffirs spoke a distinctive Creole based on Portuguese, the Sri Lanka Kaffir language, now extinct. Their cultural heritage includes the dance style known as Manja. Curiously, Kaffringna is not their music and belongs to the Burghers of the East Coast.

The word Kaffir is an obsolete English term once used to designate African natives from the Eastern and Southern coasts. "Kaffir" derives in turn from the Arabic kaffir, "unbeliever", which was used by the Arab traders to refer to those unconverted Africans. The Kaffirs were brought to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, Dutch and British, as a part of the military forces and for domestic work. Portuguese seafarers carried the first kaffirs to what was then Ceylon in the 1500s, most likely from Mozambique. Later, the British brought others to fight in "kaffir regiments."

The descendants of the freed African slaves are still a distinctive community near Puttalam in the North-Western province of Sri Lanka. There was some contact between the Kaffir and the Burghers, communities of partly European ancestry on the East Coast of the Island at Trincomalee and Batticaloa.

#### **Khojas:**

Khojas enjoy a good business reputation and are said to have a keen sense of competition. They are described as neat, clean, sober, thrifty, and ambitious, and enterprising, cool, and resourceful in trade. They are great travelers by land and sea, visiting and settling in distant countries for purposes of trade. The Sri Lanka Khojas have business connections with the Punjab, Sind, Bengal, Myanmar, Singapore, China, and Japan; with ports of the Persian Gulf, Arabia, and East Africa; and with England, the United States, and Australia. They have also gained high places in the professions as doctors, engineers, and lawyers.

The Khojas are an ethnic group in India and Pakistan, formerly a Hindu trading caste, founded in the fourteenth century by a famous saint, and followers of the Agha Khan, the spiritual leader of the Ismaili sect. They live in the Punjab, in Sind, the Rann of Kachch, Kathiawar, and down the western coast of India; in Zanzibar and elsewhere on the east coast of Africa; and in scattered groups under the name of Mawalis. "Khoja" is the form used in India for the Persian term "Khawajah," meaning "a rich or respectable man; a gentleman; an opulent merchant."

#### **Malays:**

The Malays of Sri Lanka (also known as Ja-Minissu) originated in Southeast Asia and today consist of about 50,000 persons. Their ancestors came to the country when both Sri Lanka and Malacca were colonies of the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch and the British. Most of the early Malay immigrants were soldiers, posted by the Dutch and British colonial administrations to Sri Lanka, who decided to settle on the island. Other immigrants were members of noble houses from Indonesia who were exiled to Sri Lanka and who never left. The main source of a continuing Malay identity is their common Malay language. In the 1980s, the Malays made up about 5% of the island's Muslim population, making them one of the smallest segments of the Sri Lankan population.

#### **Memons:**

Memons are Indian Sunni Muslims and entrepreneurs who settled in Sri Lanka for business opportunities during the Colonial period. Some of these people came to the country as far back as the Portuguese period; others arrived during the British period from various parts of India. They are originally from Sind in modern

Pakistan. Today in Sri Lanka they number over 10,000 and are mostly settled in Colombo.

They have contributed immensely to the economic life of the country, not only as importers and traders of various essential goods, but also as manufacturers and exporters of high quality garments that have today become a major source of foreign earnings. They also have their own Member of Parliament, the Hon. Hussein Bhalla who presently serves as Deputy Minister of Plan Implementation under the UPFA Government.

**"Sonakar" or "Sonar," Moors:**

This dynamic community represent 7.36 per cent of the total population of Sri Lanka (1989). Sri Lanka Muslims represent a number of different ethnic groups, three of which are recognised in the 1984 government Census: Sri Lanka Moors, Malays and Indian Moors, the majority of whom are ethnic Tamils from Southern India.

Tamil is the established tongue of the Sri Lanka Moors. In recent years, because of political considerations, many have learned the Sinhala language and some children study it in school but they prefer to educate their children in English. With the exception of the Bohras, who are Shiites, all of the other groups are Sunni Muslims. Soon after settling in India, Muslim Arabs began arriving in the eighth century. According to legend, they established themselves in Bentota and married Sinhala women. By the tenth century, they were a powerful merchant class. According to the historian Ibn Battuta, in the thirteenth century, Colombo was a Muslim city.

As we have seen, each segment of the Sri Lankan population has contributed to its development and prosperity in manifold ways. These groups also continue to mix and by so doing continue to enrich the already heterogeneous gene pool. As a strategically-positioned Island in the southernmost extremity of South Asia, it has attracted people from all directions save Antarctica and this has contributed to its diversity.

Indeed, history and circumstance has woven a beautiful tapestry out of these different strands. Unfortunately, a vociferous lunatic-fringe has attempted to burn holes in this tapestry whilst others desperately strive to patch the holes.

**Sindhis:**

Sindhis are an Indo-Aryan language speaking socio-ethnic group of people originating in Sind which is part of present day Pakistan. Sindhis that live in Pakistan are predominantly Muslim, while many Sindhi Hindus emigrated to India when British India was divided in 1947. The Sri Lankan community had established itself here from early British times. Sindhis usually flourish in business particularly that of cloth and textiles. Most Hindu Sindhis are identifiable by the "ani" at the end their last names like Ambani, Hirdaramani, Lalvani, Bharwani, Motwani, Vaswani, Chellani, Khubani.

**Sinhalese:**

Sinhalese are a people who constitute the largest single ethno-socio-cultural group on the Island. In the early 21st century the Sinhalese were estimated to number about 14.8 million, or 70 per cent of the population. Their ancestors are believed to have come from northern India, traditionally in the 5th century BCE. Their language belongs to the Indo-European family.

Most Sinhalese are agriculturalists. The low-country Sinhalese of the southern and western coastal regions have been heavily influenced by European culture, while the Kandyan Sinhalese of the highlands are more traditional. The Sinhalese are Theravada Buddhists except for a Christian minority. Like some other peoples of Sri Lanka, the Sinhalese have a caste-based society borrowed from India and with a complex structure based largely on occupation. Marriage partners are usually taken from persons of the same caste, preferably from the children of the mother's brother or father's sister. Monogamy is the rule, although in the 19th century among the Kandyans a man may occasionally have had more than one wife or a woman more than one husband.

The Sinhalese divide themselves into two groups, the "Up Country people" or Kandyan and the "Low Country people." The Kandyans inhabit the highlands of the south-central region and constitute 38 per cent of the Sinhalese and 25.8 per cent of the national population (as of 1971). The Kandyan are the more conservative of the two groups. Culturally, religiously, and economically, they are closer to traditional Sinhalese ways.

The Low Country people, who primarily occupy the southern and western coastal regions, account for 62 per cent of the Sinhalese and 42.8 per cent of the national population. They served as middlemen for the trade with the interior, in which the Europeans were so interested, and they have adopted much of European culture.

Until recently, the Kandyan's attitude of aristocratic superiority toward the Low Country Sinhalese precluded marriage between them. But with the increase in wealth and sophistication of the latter, due to European and other outside influences, these barriers are gradually breaking down.

The Sinhalese are a peaceful, tolerant, friendly and hospitable people, quite insular in their outlook and easy to get on with.

**Tamils, Indian:**

The Indian Tamils of Sri Lanka are Tamil people of Indian origin in Sri Lanka. They are also known as Hill

country Tamils, Up-country Tamils or simply Indian Tamils. They are partly descended from workers sent from South India to Sri Lanka in the 19th and 20th centuries to work in coffee, tea and rubber plantations. Some also migrated on their own as merchants and as other service providers. These Tamil-speakers mostly live in the central highlands, also known as the Malayakam or the Hill Country yet others are also found major urban areas and in the Northern Province.

They are instrumental in the continuing viability and prosperity of the Plantation Sector economy. Generally, their socio-economic standard of living is below that of the National average. Politically they have supported most of the ruling coalitions since the 1980s.

**Tamils, Sri Lanka:**

Sri Lankan Tamil people or Ceylon Tamils are an ethnic group native to the Island who predominantly speaks Tamil. According to anthropological evidence, Sri Lankan Tamils have lived on the Island since the Second century BCE. Most modern Sri Lankan Tamils descend from the Jaffna Kingdom, a former kingdom in the north of the island and Vannimai chieftaincies from the east. They constitute a majority in the Northern Province, live in significant numbers in the Eastern Province, and are in the minority throughout the rest of the country.

Sri Lankan Tamils are culturally and linguistically distinct from the other two Tamil-speaking communities in Sri Lanka, the Indian Tamils and the Sonakar Moors. Genetic studies indicate that they are most closely related to the Sinhalese people than any other ethnic group, with both groups sharing a common gene pool of 55%. The Sri Lankan Tamils are mostly Hindus with a significant Christian population. Sri Lankan Tamil literature on topics including religion and the sciences flourished during the Medieval Period in the Court of the Jaffna Kingdom. Sri Lankan Tamil dialects are noted for their archaism and retention of words not in everyday use in the Tamil Nadu state in India.

**Veddahs:**

The aboriginal Vanniyala-Aetto, or "forest people", more commonly known as Veddahs or Veddahs, is an indigenous people of Sri Lanka. They were never numerous and are now few in number. Sinhala-speaking Veddahs are found primarily in the southeastern part of the country, especially in the vicinity of Bintenne in Uva Province. There are also Sinhala-speaking Veddahs who live in Anuradhapura District in the North Central Province. Another, largely distinct group, often termed East Coast Veddahs, is found in coastal areas of the Eastern Province, mostly between Batticaloa and Trincomalee. These Veddahs speak Tamil as their primary language.

Their language, usually referred to as 'Veddah,' is closely related to Sinhala, although much of its vocabulary (especially terms associated with the forest and their lifestyle) can not be traced to Sinhala and may be from an archaic language spoken before the adoption of the Sinhala language. Examples include the Wanniyala-Aetto word ruhang for friend, while the Sinhala word is yaluva There are also communities of Wanniyala-Aetto who speak Tamil in the East Coast.

Some observers have said Veddahs are disappearing and have lamented the decline of their distinct culture. Developments, and government forest reserve restrictions, have disrupted traditional Veddah ways of life. However, cultural assimilation of Veddahs with other local populations has been going on for a long time. Today many Sinhalese people and some East Coast Tamils claim that they have some trace of Veddah blood.

Intermarriage between Veddahs and Sinhalese is very frequent. The current leader of the Wanniyala-Aetto community is Uru Varige Vanniya. The story of our Motherland is not a story of one race or community alone, but a story of all the people and all the circumstances which have shaped its course. We have all been in the crucible and all have made sacrifices of life and limb to learn the lesson that we are fallible human beings.

**Every one in Sri Lanka today should feel proud of the contribution which his or her community has made towards the shaping and moulding of the Sri Lankan Nation. If we stand together, united, under ONE flag, as Sri Lankans, we will surely stand up and stand out and flourish. It is desperately important that those who live here today should recognize their contribution and should be proud of it not as an exclusive, superior or separate entity, but as ONE thread in the pattern we are striving so hard to weave.**

**We should be able to live, unsuspecting of each other, truly enjoying the variety and diversity of this mosaic of cultures. Appreciating our differences as the ingredients that contribute the 'spice' to the indigenous 'rice' is the starting point. Let's dance to the hot, pulsating rhythms of the Baila, the Kaffringha and Manja and sing the lyrics in Sinhala, Tamil, Creole, or English and celebrate the life we have.**

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