

## **Sri Lankan Cultural Profile**

**PLEASE NOTE:** *This profile provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to the diverse groups of Sri Lankan people who live in the Eastern Region of Melbourne. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. However this profile can be used as a guide to some of the issues that may concern your clients. This is an update of the profile in the Home and Personal Care Kit developed by the MIC in 2004.*

### **Introduction:**

- The Sri Lankan-born community in Australia is made up of three main ethnic groups; the British, Dutch and Portuguese, collectively known as Burghers who are the direct descendants of Europeans during colonial times, and the Sinhalese and Tamil communities. The majority of Sri Lankan people in Australia live in Victoria and New South Wales.
- The Sri Lankan-born population are mostly from urban backgrounds with high education levels and work in professional occupations. More recently moderately educated, less affluent migrants from rural areas have arrived in Australia. These migrants are predominately para-professionals, such as mechanics meeting the changing economic, technical and professional needs of Australia and family members immigrating under the family reunion category.
- Three decades of war which ended in May 2009 had led to hostilities between the Sinhalese and Tamil extremists. As the country has not recovered yet flow of humanitarian and economical entrants still continues.
- It is important to remember that there is also a southern Indian-born Tamil community in Australia.
- This cultural profile will look at the broad cultural factors of these three main groups, remembering that they are very different.

### **Migration:**

- From 1948 to late 1960's, most Sri Lankan-born migrants to Australia were British subjects many of them were British, Dutch and Portuguese descendants. These British subjects began immigrating when Sri Lanka (previously Ceylon) became independent as many suffered a massive loss in social, political and economic influence in Sri Lanka.
- Tamil speaking students arrived from Sri Lanka under the Colombo Plan after the Second World War.
- In the 1970s mainly Sinhalese and Tamil professionals migrated to Australia due to political unrest and for increased economic opportunities, migrating directly from Sri Lanka and from second countries such as England, America, New Zealand and Singapore.
- Migrants from Sri Lanka in the 1980s were mainly Tamil speaking. They mainly arrived as humanitarian entrants, later sponsoring family members under the family reunion program.

## Local Demographics: Sri Lankan-born residents in the Eastern Region

Local Government Area	Total Sri Lankan-born Population	50-59 years	60-69 years	70-79 years	80 years and over	Total number of Sri Lankan-born people aged 65 and over	People aged 65+ as a % of the Sri Lankan-born population
City of Boroondara	869	118	87	62	34	137	16%
City of Knox	1990	475	183	86	56	213	11%
City of Manningham	619	142	92	41	18	93	15%
City of Maroondah	353	77	37	37	16	64	18%
City of Monash	4335	742	403	233	125	513	12%
City of Whitehorse	1458	281	137	128	58	247	17%
Shire of Yarra Ranges	204	57	37	11	4	29	14%
Eastern Region	9828	1892	976	598	311	1296	13%

(ABS Census 2006 & MAV Data 2006)

- At the 2006 Census, there were 31,486 Sri Lankan-born persons in Victoria (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).
- The median age of the Sri Lankan-born population is 42 compared to 37 years for the total Victorian population (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).

## Language: Sinhalese-speaking people in the Eastern Region

Local Government Area	Total number of people speaking Sinhalese at home	50-59 years	60-69 years	70-79 years	80 years and over	Total number of Sinhalese speaking people aged 65 and over	Sinhalese speaking people aged 65+ as a % of the Sinhalese speaking population
City of Boroondara	393	31	26	10	9	31	8%
City of Knox	944	164	33	16	21	46	5%
City of Manningham	222	23	17	6	3	15	7%
City of Maroondah	153	26	9	3	0	6	4%
City of Monash	2362	283	106	37	16	93	4%
City of Whitehorse	675	77	32	10	7	32	5%
Shire of Yarra Ranges	35	6	6	0	0	3	9%
Eastern Region	4784	610	229	82	56	226	5%

(ABS Census 2006 & MAV Data 2006)

## Language: Tamil-speaking people in the Eastern Region

Local Government Area	Total number of people speaking Tamil at home	50-59 years	60-69 years	70-79 years	80 years and over	Total number of Tamil speaking people aged 65 and over	Tamil speaking people aged 65+ as a % of the Tamil speaking population
City of Boroondara	303	37	23	15	6	31	10%
City of Knox	739	134	44	15	9	45	6%
City of Manningham	279	75	39	6	0	31	11%
City of Maroondah	47	7	3	3	0	6	13%
City of Monash	1883	286	100	87	40	166	9%
City of Whitehorse	518	118	22	22	20	49	9%
Shire of Yarra Ranges	12	9	0	0	0	0	0%
Eastern Region	3781	666	231	148	75	328	9%

(ABS Census 2006 & MAV Data 2006)

- The main languages spoken at home by the Sri Lankan-born population in Victoria are English (37.1%), Sinhalese (44.0%) and Tamil (16.0%) (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).
- 3.2% of the Sri Lankan-born population in Victoria identified as speaking English 'not well' and 0.4% spoke English 'not at all' (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).
- 39.8% of the Sri Lankan-born population in Victoria assessed themselves as speaking English 'very well' and 18.6% as 'well' (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2008).
- Burghers are English speaking.
- Muslim Sri Lankans are mainly Tamil speaking but they do not share Tamil ideology and customs.
- The three main Sri Lankan languages have been the centre of political controversy since the adoption of Sinhalese as the official language in Sri Lanka in 1956.

## Religion:

- The majority of Sinhalese are Theravada Buddhist with a minority of them being Christians.
- The majority of Tamils are Hindu.
- There is a minority Muslim community that is Tamil-speaking.
- The majority of European descendants (Burghers) are Christians.

## Attitudes and Issues with Ageing:

- Traditionally elderly Sri Lankan people have been supported by their extended family. However this has reduced in recent times.
- Sri Lankan-born people are generally familiar with government provided services and resources for the elderly.
- General barriers to accessing services for the elderly may not be as significant within the Sri Lankan community as English language proficiency is generally higher than other groups and similar services are provided by the government in Sri Lanka.

## Attitudes to Disability and Mental Illness:

- The disabled are perceived negatively in Sri Lanka, often seen as a burden to their families and may be considered omens of bad luck. They are excluded from the social mainstream and find it difficult to access educational opportunities and employment.
- Sri Lankan-born people with a disability in Australia are largely cared for and protected by their family and community.

## Attitudes to Death and Palliative Care:

- For further information please see resource:

Palliative Care for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities: Cultural profiles to assist in providing culturally sensitive Palliative Care, 2009, Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne),

[http://www.miceastmelb.com.au/documents/pdaproject/Palliative\\_care\\_resource\\_for\\_workersAug2009.pdf](http://www.miceastmelb.com.au/documents/pdaproject/Palliative_care_resource_for_workersAug2009.pdf)

## Customs / Values:

- Burghers are westernised in language, religion and cultural norms.
- Christian Sinhalese and Tamils who arrived between the 1960s and 1970s are also westernised and have tended to integrate into Australian society.
- The Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils who arrived later have made every effort to hold on to their traditions and identity while wanting to integrate into Australian society. Teaching their ethnic language and culture to the younger generation is very important. For many, their ethnic language is still the choice for communication in the home.
- There is a caste system amongst the Tamil and Sinhalese communities but they are not as powerful in Australia and are most influential in marriage arrangements.
- The most important social unit is considered to be the nuclear family, even when extended family members live together. Members of the extended family support the nuclear family.

## Communication Styles:

- Handshaking (soft) has become the norm in Australia, although with older women and orthodox Hindus this may not be acceptable.
- The traditional greeting, of placing ones hands together and bringing them up towards the chest is still practiced.
- Sri Lankan-born people have a respectful and courteous communication style.

## Naming Conventions:

- Most Sinhalese and Tamils usually have two names, a traditional name and one modified version, for life in Australia. The traditional Sinhalese name comprises of several parts. The first name is the House or Tribe name, always ending in “GE”. It is sometimes referred to as the “GE-name” and means ‘of’, and it is not often used in Australia. The second is one or more individual names and third a surname. Women usually adopt their husband’s surname, but also keep their own GE-name on marriage. The Sinhalese usually use an initial to indicate the first name, rather than writing the whole name.
- The Tamil people use their father’s name as the surname first, and their own individual name second. Tamil women take their husband’s first name as their surname on marriage.
- It is important to use titles when addressing elderly Sri Lankan people.

## Health Beliefs and Practices:

- Sri Lankans practices a western model of medicine in conjunction with traditional remedies.
- Herbal remedies are also used, such as Ayurveda, traditional systems of medicine practiced in India and ancient Sri Lanka which places great emphasis on treatment by the use of herbal medicines, aromatherapy, nutrition, massage and meditation to create a balance between the mind and body.

## Greetings:

English Greeting	Sinhala (Closest English Pronunciation)	Tamil (Closest English Pronunciation)
Hello	KO-HA-MA-DA	KAL-AI VAN-A-KAM (good morning) MA-LAI VAN-A-KAM (good evening)
Goodbye	ARE-YOU –BO-ONE	PAAR-KA-LAM
Yes	OH-OO	AAM
No	NAHA / NA	ILLAI
Thankyou	STOO -TEA	NANDRI

## Key Sinhalese Festivals / Significant Dates:

- Duruthu Perahera (First visit of Buddha to Sri Lanka) *Full moon day in January*
- Sinhalese and Hindu New Year Festival *14<sup>th</sup> of April (Solar Calendar)*
- Vesak (Birth, Death & Enlightenment of Buddha) *Full moon day in May*
- Poson (Buddhism brought to Sri Lanka) *June full moon*
- Esala (A month of cultural celebrations) *July / August.*
- Unduvap (Sangamitta's memorial day) *December full moon*

## Key Tamil Festivals / Significant Dates:

- Tamil Hindu New Year Festival *14<sup>th</sup> of April*
- Thai Pongal (Harvest Festival) *14<sup>th</sup> of January*
- Deepavali (Festival of Lights) *November*
  - Victory of good over evil
- Navarathri Festival (Festival of nine nights) *September / October*
  - Day 1, 2, 3 of the festival Hindus pray to Durka (Goddess of Braveness)
  - Day 4, 5, 6 of the festival Hindus pray to Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth)
  - Day 7, 8, 9 of the festival Hindus pray to Saraswathi (Goddess of Education)

## Key Sri Lankan Festivals / Significant Dates:

- National Day *4<sup>th</sup> of February*
- Kataragama *July / August*

\* For other significant dates related to religious observances, refer to the Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist religious profiles.

\* To search for exact dates of key cultural and religious events, festivals and national days for this year, visit: <http://www.immi.gov.au/living-in-australia/a-diverse-australia/calendar-australia/>

## Local services useful for Sri Lankan-born residents in the Eastern Region

### Settlement Services

Provide information, referral and casework for refugees and family migrants who arrived in the last five years.

Name	Address	Contact
Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne)	Suite 2, Town Hall Hub, 27 Bank Street, Box Hill, 3128	Ph: 9285 4888
New Hope Migrant and Refugee Centre	18 Chester Street Oakleigh, 3166	Ph: 9563 4130

### Aged Care & Disability Support Services

#### **Migrant Information Centre Aged & Disability Services**

Address: Suite 2, Town Hall Hub, 27 Bank Street, Box Hill, 3128

Ph: 9275 6905

The aged and disability team aims to increase access to aged care and disability services for CALD communities in the EMR through working with CALD communities to promote those services, provide information and referral and supporting organisations to provide culturally appropriate care. The team also receives funding for specific projects in this area.

### Senior Citizens Groups

For more information please contact local councils or the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) on 9275 6905.

Name of the Club	LGA	Venue	Time / Day
Burgher Association of Australia Inc.	<b>Monash</b>	Burgher Association Hall 358 Haughton Rd Clayton, 3168	7:30pm 2nd Tuesday of the month
Sri Lankan Elders' Welfare Association	<b>Dandenong – but have membership from EMR</b>	78 Power Road Doveton 3177	10.00am – 2.00 pm Weekly on Monday
Tamil Senior Citizens Fellowship Vic. Inc.	<b>Monash</b>	Oakleigh Hall 142 Drummond St Oakleigh, 3166	10:30am – 3:00pm 3rd Saturday of the month

### Other Support Services

#### **Australia Sri Lanka Welfare Guild**

Address: 8 Heatherdew Close, Mount Waverley, 3149

Ph: 9700 2506

Promotes fellowship and encourages members to work together to improve the community.

#### **Buddhist Sri Lankan Association of Victoria**

Address: 7 Banksia Street, Clayton, 3168

Ph: 9543 4196

## **Sinhalese Cultural & Community Services Foundation**

Provide fortnightly social support day program on Sundays from 9.30am until 3pm.

Meeting Address: Moorleigh Community Centre, 92 Bignell Rd, East Bentleigh, 3165

Contact: Migrant Information Centre for more information if required.

## **Tamil Australian Friendship Society**

Address: P.O. Box 5811, Studfield 3152

## **Tamil Society of Melbourne**

Address: PO Box 3175, Wheelers Hill, 3150

Ph: 9560 7754

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BBC News, 2010, *Country Profiles – Sri Lanka*, viewed 20 April 2010, <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/country\\_profiles/1168427.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/country_profiles/1168427.stm)>.

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Victorian Multicultural Commission, 2008, *The Sri Lanka-Born Community in Victoria*, Fact Sheet No. A-61, viewed 20 April 2010, <<http://www.multicultural.vic.gov.au/images/stories/pdf/srilankafs-24apr08.pdf>>.