

The Bicultural Inclusion Support Services (BISS) Team at GoodRun Solutions
has researched the information provided in this publication through the referenced sources.
No responsibility is taken for the accuracy of the information supplied.
www.goodrunsolutions.com.au 2009

SINHALESE OF SRI LANKA – INFORMATION SHEET

BACKGROUND

The Sinhalese (pronounced sin–huh–leez) come from Sri Lanka, located at the southern tip of India. The name *Sinhalese* refers to the myth that the people of the major ethnic group, known as Sinhalese, are in fact descended from a mythical Indian princess and lion. The Portuguese landed in Sri Lanka in 1505 and named the country Ceylon. Dutch and English control of the island followed until independence in 1972. The Sinhalese make up approximately 80% of the 15 million people. Many Sinhalese still abide by a caste system. It is less stringent than in India and it is disappearing, particularly in the cities. It is mostly apparent in marriage. It is estimated that at least half of the Sinhalese belongs to the highest caste, the agricultural *Goyigam*. The other castes are washermen (*Hinna*), metalworkers (*Navandanna*), and drummers (*Berawa*). The *Rodiya* (formerly travelling beggars) are considered to be among the lowest castes.

LANGUAGE

The language spoken is *Sinhala*. The Sinhalese language developed separately from the languages in India. It has been influenced by Pali (the sacred language of Buddhism) and by Sanskrit and Tamil. It has its own alphabet. There are three official languages in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Tamil and English.

RELIGION

Most Sinhalese people follow the Theravada form of Buddhism that remains true to the original teachings of Buddha. Buddhist monks, known as *bikkus*, play a significant role in the day to day life of the Sinhalese.

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

SINHALESE NEW YEAR - in April marks the end of the harvest. Observers visit the temple and take a ritual bath. Women begin the celebrations with drum playing.

VESAK FESTIVAL - in May commemorates the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha.

ESALA PERAHERA - occurs annually in the city of Kandy. The Tooth Relic of the Buddha is paraded through the streets on the back of an elephant. A procession of decorated elephants marches through the streets.

SOCIAL CUSTOMS

Sinhalese rites of passage involve a mixture of Buddhist customs and folk traditions. Rural Sinhalese believe that if a pregnancy is difficult it is due to evil spirits and they will call on a magician to deal with the problem. Strength and beauty are valued attributes and so at the birth of a child the newborn is given a few drops of human milk and a small piece of gold. The Sinhalese believe in reincarnation and karma. Death rites are fairly simple. White clothes are worn as a symbol of mourning.

MARRIAGE: The Sinhalese generally marry within their own caste, however, there are levels within each caste and it is accepted that women marry men of equal or higher standing. Astrology is used to aid the decision of a rightful match. It is customary for the wife to move in with the husband's family, however, more couples nowadays, if they can afford it, will move into their own house. The woman's role is to bear and raise children with the preference being for sons. Generally women are treated respectfully.

SOCIAL ETIQUETTE: Like many other Asian countries the Sinhalese clasp their hands in front and bow slightly when they greet people. The greeting *Ayubowan* is said. The European style of handshaking is becoming more common and even the women will kiss friends and relatives on both cheeks.

CLOTHING: Though many Sinhalese wear western dress; a sarong called a *sarama* is still worn. The men wear a shirt on top of the *sarama* and the women wear a tailored short sleeved jacket.

CHILD REARING PRACTICES: Children are venerated and given enormous attention by the whole family. The introduction of solid food and the beginning of learning the alphabet are marks of maturation and seen as significant milestones in the child's growth.

CUISINE

The Sinhalese do not say 'thank you' but a phrase that means 'may you receive merit'.

The staple meal is rice and curry. Orthodox Buddhists are vegetarian. Many Sinhalese dishes are cooked in coconut milk. Many Sinhalese, who are not orthodox Buddhists, eat meat, poultry, fish and eggs.

References:

<http://www.everyculture.com> (accessed on 18/07/08)

<http://www.everyculture.com/Sa-Th/Sri-Lanka.html> (accessed on 18/07/08)

http://www.the-south-asian.com/Sep2003/esala_perahara.htm (accessed on 18/07/08)

The Bicultural Inclusion Support Services (BISS) Team at GoodRun Solutions contracted a registered translation service to support the development of this resource. No responsibility is taken for the accuracy of the information supplied.

KEY WORDS: SINHALESE

WORD	TRANSLATION	PRONUNCIATION
hello	hello	
Goodbye	bye	
Yes	ow	oh
Please	Karunaa karala	Ka-roo-naa-ka-rah-lah
No	epaa	e(as in echo) paah
Thank you	sthoothi	s-thoo-tea
mummy	ammaa	U (as in up) maa
Daddy	Thaa the tahaa	Thu-t-thaa
Toilet	toilet	
Water	vathura	Vu(as in culture) thoo-ra
Eat	kanna	Ka (as in 'cu't)ner
Drink	bonna	Bo-ner
lunchtime	Kaama kana velaava	Kaa-merm-ker-ner-wee-lah-were
Change nappy	Maaru karanna	Mah-roo-ka ner
Play time	Sellam karan velaava	Sell-lum-ka-ra-ner-velava
Sleep time	Nidaa ganna velaava	Ni-daa-ga-na-velaava
Thirsty?	Thibahada?	Thi(like in 'thin')ber-ha-da
Don't worry	Baya venna epaa	Bu(like 'bu'ck)-year-we(like 'we't)ner epaa
Don't cry	Andanna epaa	Un-done-na-epaa
Be careful	Parissam venna	Pa-ree-sum-venna
Come here	Mehaata enna	Me-har-t-en(like 'e'cho)ner
Hat	thoppiya	Tho-pier
Bottle (baby)	Kiri bothlaya	Kir-boh- thu (like'thu'd)la-year
Milk	kire	kiri
Shoes	sapaththu	Sa-pa-thoo
Wash hands	Ath so danna	U (as in 'u'p) the -so-done-ner
teeth	duth	The (with a harsh tone to the 'th')
banana	Kesel gedi	Ke -sel-ge-di
orange	dodam	Doe - duhm
fruit	palathuru	Pa-ka-thoo-rooh
sick	Saneepa naha	Sunn-nee-pa-na-ha
walk	avidinna	Avi-din-na
food	kaama	Ca (like cat no 't') mer