

REPRINTED FROM THE GENERAL REPORT OF THE
CENSUS OF CEYLON 1946—Vol. I Part I

A Note on the Ethnology of the Races of Ceylon

By

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CHAPTER VII

(II) A NOTE ON THE ETHNOLOGY OF THE RACES OF CEYLON

by

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I—Social Characteristics

A "Race"¹ according to the scientific definition, is a group of people showing similar tendencies, features and mental make up ; whilst a fusion of such groups may be called a nation. The binding force of a nation may be a common language, blood or land.

From the anthropological point of view, Ceylon is one of the most interesting Islands of the world. In this land, in addition to a main cultural stock, whose prototype can be traced to India, there are several other racial groups—particularly the late European and Asiatic mixtures—which would repay biological research and study.

The two major communities of the Island are the Sinhalese and the Tamils, whose racial history reaches back to the remote past. At the very outset it should be stated that the division of the Sinhalese into Up-country and Low-country Sinhalese is the result of historical accident and betokens no racial distinction. With the passing of the Maritime Provinces into European hands, the territory in the central mountainous region which still remained under the rule of the Sinhalese kings was distinguished as the Up-country. The rest of the land was called the Low-country. There is more justification for the division of the Tamil-speaking population into Ceylon Tamils and Indian Tamils. The former have settled down in Ceylon for centuries, while the latter have been attracted to these shores in search of gainful employment, as traders or estate labourers, without severing themselves completely from the land of their birth.

The same distinction holds between Ceylon Moors and Indian Moors.

Burghers the descendants of the Dutch and Portuguse ; Europeans ; Eurasians and Malays make up the chief minor racial entities.

THE SINHALESE

The historical foundation of the Sinhalese race was laid on the day when Vijaya and his followers landed in Ceylon. With the assistance of a native Princess, Kuveni by name, he conquered the Island and its people—the Yakkas and the Nagas. Racial discrimination against these indigenous tribes was silently proclaimed by the rejection of Kuveni's claims to be lawful queen. Kuveni and her daughter Disala and her son Jivāhattha were banished to the Samanalagala region where the mother was killed by her people and the children grew up to marry each other and found the Vedda race. Vijaya invited a princess from Madura (Central India) to be his queen, and she came accompanied

¹ Carr-Saunders.

by other princesses and ladies as her companions. The marriages were solemnized and the Aryan occupation of Ceylon was confirmed. The newcomers and aboriginal inhabitants—called homogeneously the Veddas—continued to live as separate units, but from time to time they intermarried and co-mingled, giving birth to the Sinhalese people of today.

SOME PRIMITIVE TRIBES

In this mixture of races which united to form a new nation, the Veddas stand out as the earliest racial element. Naturally, very few of the present-day Sinhalese have been able to escape Vedda admixture, as evidenced by features and other ethnic characteristics.

The Veddas as a distinct tribe today number only a few thousands and inhabit portions of the Uva and Eastern Provinces. The wonder is that these unfortunate derelicts of humanity have managed to survive in the inhospitable dry zone of the Island. Their isolation may have certainly helped to preserve certain elements of their individuality and culture. There is certainly a case for protecting the Veddas from extinction, not as experimental material nor as living human curios, but as citizens forming a distinct social group.

Apart from the Veddas there are a number of other tribal units of considerable interest to the ethnologist.

In the environs of Uda Dumbara and Kurunegala live scattered families of people known as Kinnaras, weavers of mats—the so-called Dumbara mats—embodying traditional art motifs. Although they bear a superficial resemblance to the Veddas, they are a different group. Short-statured and coarse-featured, with long hair, the Kinnaras eke out a wretched existence and are treated as practically outcastes by the general population. How this tribe came to this degradation and have at the same time preserved the fine art of weaving mats of exquisite design, remain mysteries.

Then there are the Vanni¹ folk who live in the area known as the Vanni Hat Pattu which lies south of Anuradhapura and extends towards Kurunegala. They are long-headed, short-statured, dark-skinned people resembling the Veddas not only in their physical appearance but also in cultural make-up. Some families bear, in fact, names reminiscent of Vedda names. They are, however, proud of their ancestors, even claiming superiority over the people among whom they dwell.

Legend and literature have preserved colourful stories about the Rodiyas², another distinctive tribal group. Their beautiful damsels have captivated even royalty: The story of Prince Sali providing the most famous example. Tradition has associated the Rodiyas with Princes and nobles, the aristocratic bearing of their maidens lending some point to this surmise. But how they received their royal blood, whether as outcastes or otherwise, is not yet known.

The Rodiyas are outcastes, despised but feared. Begging has been to this day their traditional vocation. Although there is nothing against their employment in some gainful occupation, tradition and custom are still strong enough for them to remain professional mendicants. There is a popular fear about the curse of a Rodiya who is refused alms. It is generally believed that the women resort to prostitution and are well off on that account.

Rodiya women are tall, well-built, fair and attractive, besides possessing a dignified bearing and carriage. The men are not so handsome, and are often poor physical specimens. The tribe had at one time certain feudal obligations to perform, such as cleansing fields, making leather ropes and burying carcasses; but these are things of the past. The women dance and are trained to walk on the rope, while the men beat the drum and sing. The entertainment they provide still attracts attention at the Kandy Perahera and at festivals at Anuradhapura.

¹ Neville, H. Taprobanian, Vol. 3, page 15.

² cf Neville, H. Taprobanian III pages 80, 82, 85 Casie Chetty, S. C., J. R. A. S. Vol. II, Pt. II.

All these tribal groups—the Veddas, the Kinnaras and the Rodiyas—are believed to possess an innate and mysterious power which can be turned against others. It is doubtful whether this power is attributed to magic or is derived from jungle association. One may observe with what fear the village folk feel the axes and other objects belonging to the Veddas, how greatly the magic power of the Kinnaras is dreaded and how the very approach of a Rodiya is regarded as a bad omen. Their physical touch or the supposed magical influence they exert are believed to cause harm ; therefore avoidance of them as agents of evil has been traditionally observed. Whatever the psychological reasons for the degrading isolation in which these tribes live, it is certainly an injustice to deny them the common amenities of civilised life.

THE CEYLON TAMILS

The Ceylon Tamils are presumably descendants of early settlers who arrived in this Island from India. Some of them were of Alpine and Armenoid stocks, although the majority were powerful bands of Tamils who conquered the Northern territory and caused it to be abandoned by the Sinhalese. The Tamils continued to pour in either as conquerors or settlers to such an extent that in about the second century B.C. Elara's kingdom threatened the Sinhalese.

During the Christian era, the Malabars, Cholas, Cheras and Pandians attempted in turn to overrun the Island, but failed. For several centuries, however, Tamil influence was widely felt not only in social and cultural spheres but in the racial composition as well. There were periods of peaceful settlement when the races lived in amity as neighbours and intermarriages took place. This practice became very common during the later Kandyan period.

Although the Tamils do not possess such minute shades of difference in the divisions of castes as prevail among the South Indians, they can count a considerable number of castes in their social organisation. Most of these divisions are on a functional basis on orthodox lines. To a superficial observer the striking difference of colour among the Jaffna Tamils might suggest a division into a fair and a dark grouping. The Vellalas, who belong to the darker and more numerous section, are mostly round-headed Alpines and Armenoids. Amongst others the lighter in colour generally belong to the higher grade. The prevalence of a Sinhalese racial admixture among the Jaffna Tamils can be traced among the Koviars who though Tamil in name are probably descendants of Sinhalese captured in the wars.

The Tamil population¹ of the present day is spread over the whole Island with concentrations in the North, Eastern and North-Central Provinces. They speak Tamil, a main branch of the Dravidian group of languages.

THE MOORS

The Arabs who wrested the maritime trade of the ancient world from the Phoenicians, were acquainted with Ceylon from the early Christian period. The presence of Roman and Greek coins may be a clue to ancient trade with the Mediterranean lands. It is unlikely that the Arabs went far beyond Ceylon, since the Chinese handled the trade with the farther East. This circumstance encouraged local settlements of Arab traders which increased from the sixth century A.D. onwards.

In the ninth century, ports of call such as Beruwala, Galle and Puttalam attracted Moor traders who established trading depots at these places. Some of them married Sinhalese or Tamil women and settled down permanently. Even today their names, mode of life and dress betray such an admixture. That the Sinhalese kings recognized them is shown by the Moorish settlers being given

¹ Tambipillai, V. J.,—J. R. A. S. Vol. XXI., 1908.

titular ranks and honorific names, which are used to this day. This group, called the Sonahars, are cultivators and tie their hair in a knot like the Sinhalese. They are fair in colour and are Mediterranean by race ; but they talk Tamil as that was the language used by the South-East coastal traders at that time.

There is another group of Moors popularly called Coast Moors whose ancestry appears to be different from the previous class. They, too, were traders and spoke Tamil ; but they are the descendants of the original Arabs who had settled down along the coastal districts of South-West India. The Indians of these areas were the dark-hued population belonging to dark-skinned Dravidian stocks, speaking a Dravidian tongue. Intermarriages between these races and the Arabs produced a race called the Sammanhar which adhered to Islam and followed the culture of the Mohammedan population. Their descendants were the Coast Moors who settled down in Ceylon from time to time.

Strangely, the light-eyed, fair-skinned, tall and handsome Indian Moors, who are of Turkish extraction, did not come to Ceylon until very recent years.

THE EUROPEAN ELEMENT

European racial infiltrations have influenced the racial composition of the Sinhalese less widely and deeply than those already mentioned. Very little is known of early European contacts, but from the 14th century onwards records exist for determining the effects of infiltrations of the peoples of the West. Under the Portuguese certain classes are permitted to intermarry with the people of the Island. So long as the Portuguese power continued, Portuguese citizens commanded respect and enjoyed privileges. But on the conquest of the Island by the Dutch, the Portuguese and their mixed descendants, known as Portuguese Burghers, came down in the social scale. They still exist and are chiefly occupied as mechanics, shoe-makers and artisans.

The same fate might have befallen the Dutch settlers but for the patronage extended to them by the British. The Burghers, as they are called today, found employment as clerks in Government and Mercantile offices, while several of them have distinguished themselves in the learned professions.

The British settlers in Ceylon discouraged racial mixtures for a variety of reasons of which colour discrimination and racial prestige were perhaps paramount. But despite such discouragement, the European planter in colonial exile, sometimes solaced himself with the company of the daughters of the land. The offspring of these unions, which introduced additional European blood into the national stem, are known as Eurasians.

There have also been a number of marriages contracted between Sinhalese or Tamils with European girls. Few such marriages have been successful, a number of factors contributing to their failure, such as incompatibility with the new social relationships.

OTHER RACIAL GROUPS

There still remain to be considered a number of racial groups which despite free association with the Sinhalese have continued to maintain their identity. To this class belong the Kaffirs, the Malays, the Mukkuvars, the Paravars and the Kuravans.

The Kaffirs¹ were brought to Ceylon either as slaves or as militia during the time of the Sinhalese kings. The Portuguese, Dutch and English employed them as musicians in the regimental bands. Consequently Kaffir settlements grew up near the military forts. Today, one finds them in

¹ Ceylon at the Census 1911, p. 244.

Colombo and at Puttalam in a small village called Sellankandal. Their dances, songs and tunes (namely Cafferinna, Chikoti and Baila) are still popular among the mechanic class, and have strangely enough assumed a national character as well.

The Malays in Ceylon are supposed to have been brought by the Dutch who employed them as soldiers. But there are stories to the effect that they were in the Island at an earlier date. The English continued to employ them as a military unit.

These Malays have married Sinhalese, Tamil and Moor women with the result that their Mongoloid characteristics are fast disappearing. They are followers of Islam and live practically in every part of the Island but are concentrated at Colombo, Hambantota, Badulla and Kandy.

The Mukkuvars¹, who are probably descendants of craftsmen brought over by the Sinhalese kings from India, live near Puttalam and Batticaloa. Their chief occupation today is fishing. Some of them are Christians, while others are Muslims. That they belonged to a matrilineal society may be observed by a study of their laws of inheritance.

The Paravars, who prefer to call themselves Bharathas, are traders who spend a short time in Ceylon and then return to India.

Both the Mukkuvars and Paravars are dark and long-headed.

The only nomadic group of people living in Ceylon are the Ahikuntakas, otherwise called Kuravans. They are a South-Indian Telegu speaking people who live in makeshift palmyrah huts seldom staying in one place for more than two or three days. They resemble Indian estate labourers and come under the class of gypsies. They are well-known as snake-charmers, astrologers and thieves.

The Colombo Chetties must also receive mention in a racial description of the people of Ceylon. The term does not include the Nattukottai Chetties, who have formed themselves into a guild for carrying on business in Ceylon and are only temporary residents of the Island.

The Colombo Chetties are descendants of early Chetty traders and money-lenders who intermarried with the Sinhalese and Tamils. They are mostly Catholic converts and have been in Ceylon for a very long time. They speak Sinhalese and are considered in Colombo to be respectable enough to practise connubium with the higher caste Goigama Sinhalese.

The Vaggei are another racial group who have not been completely absorbed by the Sinhalese. They are a small community and live in the Anuradhapura, Kurunegala and Mullaitivu Districts.

The foregoing survey will enable the reader to perceive that the races which inhabit Ceylon are an amalgamation of several distinctive types. When one realises the diversity of the racial elements and the variety of cultural complexes that have contributed to the making of the Ceylonese national pattern, the existence of racial or caste distinctions would seem to have little meaning.

II—Physical Characteristics

The human constituents of the people of the Island arranged under social types have been enumerated above. The classification into physical types, irrespective of caste, class or racial distinctions, may now be undertaken.

The present Vedda population cannot be left out, as undoubtedly it forms the basic structure of the later Ceylonese composition. This itself is an admixture of three human types, viz., Negrito, Australoid and Mediterranean. It is an observable fact that the lower stratum of the population shows definite signs of a Vedda element which must not be confused with that prevalent in the Vanni folk.

¹ Brodie, A. O., J. R. A. S. Vol. II, Pt. 11.

The present population is apparently a very mixed one. It has been the result of various admixtures repeatedly mixed amongst themselves as well as with foreign elements that were introduced from time to time.

With the data so far available on the general observations, combined with the results of observation and measurement of individuals from the different parts of the Island, it may be possible to classify the present population under the following types :—

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|------------------------------|------------------|
| 1. Vedda (a) open eyed | 6. Melanid |
| (b) Gond | 7. Mediterranean |
| 2. Pre-Dravidian | 8. Negroid |
| 3. Sinhalese dolicos (Vanni) | 9. Mongoloid |
| 4. Sinhalese brachys | 10. European |
| 5. Armenoid | |

VEDDA AND PRE-DRAVIDIAN

The Vedda as a type can quite easily be recognized, although the Vedda himself is a mixture of more than one racial element. It is a regularly persisting type prevailing chiefly in the Badulla District. One is often impressed by the reticent shy manner of a Vedda. He is a thin, small-made man of a dark complexion with wide open eyes. He has a small head, narrow and long, thin lips, dark wavy hair, scanty body hair, except in the Australoid type that has profuse body hair and beard. The eyes are small, open, dark-brown and dark in colour. The nose is broad and flat with wide alae, except the Mediterranean element that has a fine straight nose. The skin colour is dark and tends to be oily. Some of his average measurements are as follows :—

Stature	...	...	...	1,578 mm.
Cephalic Index	...	...	...	72·6
Cranial Capacity	...	...	...	1,227 cc.
Nasal Index	...	...	...	73·1

The Pre-Dravidian type, though not so common, does actually crop up generally in the Tamil speaking areas of the Island. It may be the continuation of a very early element in the population. The type itself is vigorous and is bound to persist. It is a thick-set, rugged type with apparent virility, and is characterised by a long and narrow head with heavy eye-brows, thick lips, wide mouth and nose and defined features. There is no prognathism. The hair is very dark and wavy, body hair being scanty. The eye colour is dark-brown or dark. The skin colour is invariably dark or black. The stature varies from medium to tall showing a big-boned structure.

SINHALA DOLICO AND BRACHYS

The Sinhala Dolico type may be graphically described as the Vanni type. It is the common type of the so-called Vanni districts and Up-country. This forms the backbone of the Sinhalese peasantry in the dry zone. This type is weak and emaciated, probably the result of malnutrition and environment. The amateur may confuse this with the Vedda type although this is quite different. He has a long narrow head with a slight alveolar prognathism. He has thin lips with fine teeth, slightly wavy dark hair, moderate body hair, small eyes dark or brown in colour, small narrow nose, skin colour dark brown or black and is of short or medium stature. Some of the measurements of this type are as follows :—

Stature	...	...	...	1,592 mm.
Cephalic Index	...	...	...	73·3 cm.
Cranial Capacity	...	...	...	1,268 cc.
Nasal Index	...	...	...	74·9

Sinhala brachys, probably the Vijayan type, comprise the bulk of the Sinhalese population and together with the Vanni type constitute the Sinhalese of the present day. In general appearance he looks an aristocratic noble type with a provocative affinity to the Bengalis of today. He has a long and broad head. At times certain individuals show a marked alveolar prognathism and a general tendency to alveolar prognathism and dental protrusion. The lips are somewhat thick, hair is dark and slightly wavy with profuse body hair. Eyes are fairly large and dark in colour. The nose is narrow and straight. The skin colour varies from brown to fair. Some of the measurements of this type are as follows :—

Stature ...	...	...	...	1,609 mm.
Cranial Capacity	...	...	...	1,298 cc.
Cephalic Index	...	...	...	80·8
Nasal Index	...	...	...	69·9

OTHER RACIAL TYPES

The Armenoid type is not uncommon in the Island. It is found mostly among the Tamils. He has a heavily built body with a tendency to corpulency. He has a short broad head that is brachycephalic. Prognathism is absent. He has thick lips with the lower lip tending to be pendant, dark, light wavy hair with profusion of body hair. The eyes are somewhat long. The nose is prominent with a hooked beak shape. His skin colour varies from fair to dark and the stature ranges from medium to tall.

The Melanid type is not uncommon amongst the Sinhalese. It is an ancient type and may be easily distinguished from the Pre-Dravidian and Vanni as it lacks both the rugged coarseness of the former and weak appearance of the latter. The head length is medium, so is the breadth. He is brachycephalic and shows no prognathism. His lips are thin, he has very dark hair, moderate body hair, dark eyes, straight fine nose, and very dark almost black skin colour. The stature varies from short to very tall.

The Mediterranean is a fine-featured handsome type, quite common in the Island. He is of delicate build and average proportions. His head is long and narrow. He shows no prognathism. His lips are thin, and his hair is dark and wavy with sparse body hair, his eye colour is brown, nose is straight and skin colour is brown or fair. He is of medium size in stature.

The Negroid type is sometimes traceable amongst the Sinhalese and Tamil population. It is very difficult to miss this as the colour, lips, hair and facial prognathism betray the ethnic elements. The general appearance is unpleasant at first. The individual shows great energy which has accounted for his success. His head is long and narrow, face is prognathous, lips thick and hair is dark, wavy and curly. The body has very little hair. His eyes are brown and small, nose is broad and short with wide alae. Skin colour is dark-brown or quite black. He is medium to tall in stature and dolicocephalic. He has generally a thick set body.

The Mongoloid element is of very recent introduction and preserves the ethnic traits fairly markedly. This type is seldom observed among the Sinhalese or Tamils but the Sinhalese cannot be considered altogether free of certain traits. Mongolian appearance may develop as a pathological condition. The head is short and wide. There is no prognathism. The lips are thin. Hair is straight and dark in colour. Body hair is almost absent. The eye is almond-shaped with an epicanthic fold. The nose is not prominent but broad and flat. The skin colour is light-brown or pale yellow. He is medium to short in stature and effeminate in general appearance.

The European type is also of recent development and can be fairly easily detected on observation. But in certain cases the European admixture can scarcely be noticed. The general appearance and build are European. The head form varies from round to narrow. There is no prognathism. His lips are thin. His hair is straight but of light colour. The eye colour varies from brown to grey or even blue. The nose is straight and fine. The skin colour is fair. He varies from medium to tall in stature.

The following observation may be made regarding the Sinhalese round headed type. Such a type, although found scattered amongst the Sinhalese speaking parts of the Island, seems restricted in the Indian Continent to the West Littoral and East Bengal or Mysore. Could this in any way point to the early origin of the Sinhalese to any one of those two main areas ? The present evidence is insufficient to posit such an origin purely on physical measurements. But the social kinship when studied with physical attributes seems to favour such a view.

INTERMIXTURE OF RACIAL TYPES

The foregoing sketch shows that the composition of the Sinhalese racial stock has been affected by the environment in which the people lived. From the time of Vijaya onwards the march of racial progress has been through an intermixture of pre-existing racial types and of later arrivals.

But definite Tamil and European types can be traced in the Sinhalese population of today. Vedda affinities may also be detected, particularly among the Up-country Sinhalese. There are not many Sinhalese who show the true Nordic characteristics according to European standard of measurement. But a large proportion of the population consists of a round-headed element, resembling the Alpine type, which may be the survival of the Aryan race. The Vanni folk belong to the long-headed Mediterranean type. The intermediate mesocephalic type, probably the result of the fusion of the two earlier types, predominates in the Island.

It is likely that the sub-stratum of the population of Ceylon is a Negrito type on which are superimposed Australoid and later Mediterranean types, followed by the brachycephalic Alpine or so-called Aryan type.

There is a strong probability of a further component from the little-suspected area of the Indonesian islands.

