

SRI LANKA, TAMIL

Jaffna refers to the northernmost peninsula of Sri Lanka and to the ancient Tamil city (pop. 200,000) which is located there. The Tamil word for Jaffna is *Yālpāṇam*, derived from the legend of a blind minstrel from the Chola country who played the *yāl*, an ancient stringed instrument. In terms of educational achievement, public virtues, and cultural politics, the Jaffna peninsula has always been regarded as the center of Tamil civilization in Sri Lanka. Many of the earliest leaders of the Tamil literary and religious revival of the nineteenth century came from Jaffna, including Arumuga Navalar (1822–1879), whose teaching and scholarship on Śaiva Siddhanta philosophy and whose early efforts to found Hindu schools and to publish Tamil literature were highly influential in South India. Even the poorest Jaffna vegetable farmer is extolled as a paragon of thrift and hard work, the Scotsman of Sri Lanka. Both the Tamil dialect of Jaffna, as well as the Tamil dialect spoken in the eastern Batticaloa region are distinct from that of Tamilnadu, preserving a more archaic vocabulary and a colloquial pronunciation which is closer to the literary standard. Yet it is also in Jaffna that the most bitterly fought battles for low caste and Untouchable temple entry rights raged in the twentieth century against the vested powers of conservative *Veḷāḷar* caste landowners and temple managers. In the eyes of many Sri Lankans, the image of Jaffna society suffers from an impression of rigidity, hierarchy, and an attitude of superiority, but there is also well-earned respect for the sons and daughters of Jaffna who have achieved so much on the basis of their initiative, cleverness, and hard work.

To many non-Sri Lankans, the term "Jaffna" is loosely applied to the entire Tamil-speaking portion of the island, extending from north of Chilaw on the west coast, across the northern quarter of the island, and down the eastern coastline as far as Trincomalee, Batticaloa, and Pottuvil. This northeastern arc is conceived by Tamil nationalists in Sri Lanka as "Tamil Eelam" (*Īlam* is a Tamil name for the island), a historic zone of Tamil ethnic settlement dating back before the

formation of the Kingdom of Jaffna in 1200–1400, C.E., and before the period of imperial Chola conquest and colonization around 1000 C.E., to even earlier periods of Sri Lankan civilization. Unfortunately, modern archaeology, which could shed a great deal of light on these ancient multi-ethnic settlements, has been severely hampered by twentieth-century ethnic politics. The “Estate Tamils” whom the British recruited in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century from Tamilnadu to pick tea in the central Kandyan highlands are culturally and socially distinct from the much older Tamil communities in the northeast.

Śaivite Hinduism is the predominant religion of Tamils everywhere in Sri Lanka, and non-Brahmin priesthoods are common. In both the Jaffna and the Batticaloa regions the cult of the goddess *Kaṇṇaki* (Sinhala *Pattini*), heroine of the Tamil epic *Cilappatikāram*, is a popular tradition, and several famous temples reenact the story of Draupadī (*Turōpatai*) from the Mahābhārata epic. Christianity has also been an important factor for the Tamils. As early as 1813 the American Missionary Society launched western-style Christian schools in the heart of Hindu Jaffna. This gave the educated children of high caste Jaffna Tamil families favored access to professional careers during the colonial era, a pattern of conspicuous achievement which provoked an anti-Tamil backlash from the majority Sinhalese community in the decades following Independence in 1949.

Tamil-speaking Sunni Muslims of the Shāfiʿī legal school (termed *Moros* or “Moors” by Portuguese, Dutch, and British rulers; *Cōṇakar* or *Muslim* in Tamil) are found throughout the island, but their largest settlements in the northeast are in Puttalam, Mannar, Trincomalee, and especially the Batticaloa and Amparai districts. The Muslims owe their religion and part of their ancestry to medieval Arab spice traders plying the Indian Ocean, but both Tamils and Muslims also have historical connections to South India. Scholars have noted a mixture of Tamilnadu and Kerala-derived customs and social practices in Jaffna, but the distinctive matrilineal and matrilocal family patterns as well as popular oral traditions of sorcery (*mantras*) associated with the Malabar Coast are strongest among Tamils and Muslims in the eastern Batticaloa region.

References

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