

An Investigative Study on the Factors Affecting the Formation of Subcultures in Sri Lanka

Amarasiri Wickramaratne

Department of Languages, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil

Correspondence: amarasirw@seu.ac.lk

Abstract

Although Sri Lanka is a relatively small country, it possesses diverse topography and climate. Its status as an island has historically allowed for frequent maritime contact with other regions. As a result, various ethnic groups have settled in Sri Lanka over time, especially along its coastal areas. In 1815, the entire island came under British rule. During this period, the British brought thousands of Tamil laborers from India to work on the country's colonial plantations. This influx altered the composition of the local folk culture. These new ethnic communities eventually integrated with the Sinhalese—the majority population in Sri Lanka who speak Sinhala as their mother tongue. This study investigates the formation of subcultures in Sri Lanka and explores the commonalities among these groups. Prolonged linguistic and cultural contact has led to the emergence of hybrid languages and blended cultural practices. When such cultural exchanges persist over one or two generations, a new cultural identity often emerges, incorporating elements of both the dominant and minority cultures. Sri Lankan culture has historically been shaped by Indian influence, especially through the introduction of Buddhism. With state support, this new cultural framework gradually replaced pre-existing local traditions. The aim of this study is to explore the transformations that occur when one culture absorbs or blends with another, while also preserving some original features. There have been periods in which Tamil influence significantly shaped Sri Lankan society, contributing to increased cultural and linguistic complexity. Later, coastal regions fell under Portuguese control. A community of Portuguese descendants still resides in the Batticaloa district, where the influence of nearby Tamil culture remains strong. Cultural adaptation and mutual influence have been ongoing between these groups. One notable case is the village of Mailankarachchi in the Batticaloa district, which emerged for professional reasons. In the 1950s, Sri Lanka's first paper factory was established in Valachchenai—a predominantly Tamil and Muslim area. The factory attracted Sinhalese workers, some of whom married into the local Tamil community and settled in Mailankarachchi. Data on their cultural assimilation was gathered through participant observation and documentary analysis. Initially, the settlers established a Sinhala-medium school and a Buddhist temple. The second generation—born of

mixed Tamil-Sinhalese parentage—adopted Sinhala as their mother tongue. However, by the third and fourth generations, Tamil had become the dominant language. The Sinhala school transitioned into a Tamil-medium institution, and the Buddhist temple became neglected. His case illustrates how cultural hybridization can shift across generations, first integrating into the Sinhala cultural sphere, then transitioning into the Tamil sphere. The resulting subculture, shaped by labor migration and intercultural marriage, may be identified as the ‘paper culture’—a subculture twice hybridized through socio-economic and linguistic contact.

Keywords: cultural hybridization, paper culture, cultural contact, subculture, coexistence