

# Sri-Lankan Community Profile – older people

**-PLEASE NOTE:** *This profile provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to the diverse older Sri-Lankan people who live in the S.E. 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. Information about relevant services & activities is also included. **This profile was developed through consultation with community leaders, clergymen and we wish to acknowledge the great support provided by the community towards creating this resource.***

## Introduction

Sri Lanka (formerly known as Ceylon) is a tropical island lying close to the southern tip of India and near the Equator. Sri Lanka is an ethnically and religiously diverse country comprised mainly of Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims and Burghers.

In Sri-Lanka Sinhalese speaking are the major ethnic group (73%) and they are mainly Buddhist or Christians. Those who speak Tamil make the second largest ethnic group (13.9%). Tamils can be Hindus or Christians. Both Sinhalese and Tamil are the official languages spoken in Sri Lanka. The third major group is based on religion. They are the Sri-Lankan Muslims and they speak either Sinhalese or Tamil. The fourth major group -the Burghers - are mainly descendants of European colonists from the 16th to 20th centuries and they may speak English, Sinhalese or Tamil. Burghers mostly follow the western way of life and are very much assimilated into the Australian society. Most Sri-Lankans are able to speak English. The main languages spoken at home by the Sri Lankan-born population in Victoria are Sinhalese (44%), English (37.1%) and Tamil (16%). (ABS Census 2006)

## Migration to Australia

- Sri Lankans (formerly referred to as Ceylonese) have been settling in Victoria since the 19th century. In the 1871 census, 58 people were recorded as of Sri-Lankan origin. They probably immigrated as laborers or gold prospectors. Most were Burghers.
- The end of the White Australia Policy in 1973 saw increasing numbers of Sinhalese and Tamil settlers in Victoria.
- By 1976, 9,061 Victorians were of Sri Lankan birth. Ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka in 1983 resulted in a significant intake of immigrants under the Special Humanitarian Program. Subsequently, Sri Lanka-born arrivals have come here under the Family Reunion Program, or as Skilled or Independent immigrants.
- The recently ended ethnic war saw more Tamil refugees coming in boats to Australia.

Today, Sri Lankans make up the ninth largest immigrant group in Victoria, with 31,484 people recorded in the 2006 census. Sri-Lankans are generally well educated and many work as professionals across accounting, medicine and engineering fields. Reading Sri-Lankan newspapers is seen as a common practice in many Sri-Lankan elders clubs.

## Local Demographics: Sri-Lankan Residents in the South East Region. (ABS 2006)

	City of Greater Dandenong	City of Kingston	City of Casey	Cardinia Shire
<b>Total population of LGA</b>	<b>125,520</b>	<b>134,622</b>	<b>214,961</b>	<b>57,116</b>
<b>Total number of Sinhalese residents</b>	<b>1735</b>	<b>528</b>	<b>3257</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>Total number of Sinhalese residents over 55 years of age</b>	<b>201</b>	<b>94</b>	<b>207</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Total number Tamil residents</b>	<b>1297</b>	<b>649</b>	<b>105</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Total number of Tamil residents over 55 years of age.</b>	<b>154</b>	<b>93</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>00</b>

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## Languages

Quite often Sri-Lankans will not need an interpreter- nevertheless always inquire if required because quite often many will not be able to understand spoken English well enough, especially in an interview/assessment situation.

## Religion:

The key religions practiced in Sri-Lanka are Theravada Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity and Islam. The majority of Sri-Lankans follow Theravada Buddhism which places emphasis on the relentless effort that is required to gain enlightenment and the difficulty of that path. Hinduism is the second most practiced religion in Sri-Lanka and Hindus believe in a Supreme God, whose qualities and forms are represented by the multitude of deities which emanate from him. Christianity is the third most popular religion in Sri-Lanka. **But in Australia in this particular region of Victoria majority of Sri-Lankans are Christians especially Catholics followed by Buddhists and Hindus.**

Sri-Lankans take religion very seriously. In Sri-Lanka Hindus would have a special space in their home where they would have images of Hindu Gods, incense sticks, a small light globe, fresh flowers & sometimes a bit of ash and a red powder. This room/space known as a “pooja” room and held very sacred by the Hindus. In Australia this same practice is common, although the space may be smaller like a cupboard or any allocated space in the home that contains the above mentioned. Usually this particular space would be enclosed. It would be good for a worker to request permission from a client before entering a “pooja” room or “pooja” space.

Hindu women also place a small dot between the two eyebrows and this known as “Pottu”. Most married women would keep a red color “Pottu” and unmarried women would keep black or any other color “pottu”.

Buddhist both in Sri-Lanka as well as in Australia would have framed images of Buddha portrayed in the walls of their homes. Some may have an altar constructed under the image and on the altar they may have a vase with fresh flowers or incense sticks.

## Attitudes and issues with ageing

- Inability or unwillingness to care for one’s elderly relatives is deeply shameful, and is seen as a failure in their responsibility and obligation to support and care for their elders.
- Respect for parents and elders is strong.
- Generally the Sri Lankans believe that when parents come to a stage where they can no longer do anything physically and financially for themselves, it is the duty of younger generation specifically adult children to look after elders. In return it is expected that the elders will look after the grand children.
- As a token of respect, it is customary to address any elders as “aunty”, “uncle” or any other form of relationship although they may not be your own relatives.

## Attitudes to disability and mental illness

- Traditionally many superstitions have impregnated the Sri-Lankan communities, associating disability and individuals who have disability, with misfortune and perceiving them as omens of bad luck.
- As a result, carers of people with a disability may not seek support services.
- A strong cultural stigma is attached to mental illness. Many mental illnesses are not considered as such, eg. depression and dementia, therefore people may be reluctant to access mental health services.

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- Many believe and rely on cures through herbal medicines which have no ill side effects. This is known as 'Ayurvedic' treatment in Sri Lanka and it can provide treatment for broken bones, sprains, asthma, aches and pains of joints etc. Herbal oils are used for massage as well. This treatment is available in Australia.

## Naming Conventions

- The Sinhalese community usually have two names. The first may indicate the place from which their family originated, the title or profession of the head of the family or any other special characteristic of the family that prevailed at the time. The second name is the name given to the person at birth.
- Tamil Hindus use their fathers' name first and the given name last. They use the given name as the surname.
- Both Sinhalese as well as Tamils after migration to other countries have shortened their names to suit western conventions.
- Christians usually have two given names one English name and a Sinhalese/Tamil name and the fathers' name comes last and is used as the surname. Among some Christians, being identified by their family names, which are carried on for generations, is the practice.

## Communication Styles

- People are very sociable. Family visits and gathering are very common.
- Out of respect, Sri-Lankans don't call their older persons by their given name.
- When a Sri-Lankan person meets another they greet each other by putting their hands together; bringing them up to the chin level closer to the chest saying "Ayubowan" in Sinhalese or 'Vanakkam' in Tamil. Often females refrain from shaking hands with males. A hand-shake may be appropriate if a woman is educated or in a profession. Usually handshakes are gentle not firm. But with second generation migrants hand shakes are very common among males as well as females.

## Gender issues

- Sri Lankan society continues to be male dominated, women taking the expressive and emotionally supportive role, and men the instrumental and practical role, the two complementing each other. As such the women become anchored in the family as wives, mothers, and household managers, while men become anchored in the occupational world outside the home.
- As a result of globalisation, Sri Lankan women are now becoming more and more aware of their rights and participate in the labor force etc.

## Customs/Values

- Customs are seen as the positive things that Sri-Lankans practice, eg: showing respect for parents and teachers, visiting families if death occurs, helping the poor and needy.
- The family is recognized as the central unit of the social organisation. It includes a wider circle of closer relatives who are grand-parents, grand children, uncles, aunts, nieces and nephews.
- Elders of the family and community play a big role in ceremonies like naming the new born, puberty, marriages and deaths.

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- Mostly any planned events are done at the auspicious times chosen by the astrologers according to the horoscope of the person involved.
- Some Buddhist and Hindus are strict vegetarians. But most Buddhists and all Hindus would refrain from eating meat on the days they attend Temple ceremonies.
- The Sinhala Buddhists and Tamil Hindus of Sri Lanka conduct various religious rites from their birth itself to death. Buddhists and Hindus do not fail to visit the temple shortly after a new baby is born to the family, after marriage ceremony and when deaths have occurred. They pay homage to the Buddha or the relevant Hindu Gods and perform religious rites.

## Key Festivals

The Sinhala and Tamil New Year is jointly celebrated by all Sri-Lankans between the 12-14th of April.

### Buddhists

Vesak: The birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha is celebrated on the first full moon day in May.

Poson Day: The introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka is celebrated on the Full moon day in June.

### Hindus

Thaipongal: Farmers Festival honors the sun God and is celebrated on 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> of January.

Diwali: The festival of lights when presents are given is celebrated between late October and mid-November. Small lamps are lit inside and outside houses, to bring good luck.

English Greeting	Closest English pronunciations	Sinhalese	Closest English pronunciations	Tamil
Hello	aa yu boo va n	ආයුබෝවන්	Vanakam	வணக்கம்
Good morning	su ba u dae sa na k	සුබ උදෑසනක්	Kalai Vanakam	காலை வணக்கம்
Good Bye	nae va ta ha mu ve mu	නැවත නමු වෙමු	Sendru varukirean	சென்று வருகிறேன்
Yes	oww	ඔවු	Aam	ஆம்
No	Naha or na	නෑහෑ	Illai	இல்லை
Thank You	Stoo thi	ස්තූති	Nandri	நன்றி

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**This resource list of services (other than Council HACC), has been prepared for aged care staff in the Council areas of Kingston, Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia. Some services and activities listed are in fact available to residents beyond these four municipalities.**

<p>South Eastern Region Migrant Resource Centre Level 1 314 Thomas Street Dandenong 3175 Ph: 9706 8933 Fax: 9706 8830</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multicultural PAG core Monday Dandenong and Friday Doveton</li> <li>• Multicultural PAG high Tuesday Noble Park</li> <li>• Multicultural PAG core-high Wednesday Noble Park</li> <li>• Carer Support Program</li> <li>• Volunteer Visiting Program</li> </ul> <p><i>Eligibility: Greater Dandenong, Casey &amp; Cardinia</i></p>
<p>City of Greater Dandenong MacKay Street Centre 6 MacKay Street, Springvale Ph: 8558-7902</p>	<p>Sri-Lankan Planned Activity Group</p> <p>Mondays 10.00am – 3.00pm</p> <p><i>Eligibility: City of Greater Dandenong</i></p>
<p>LAK-Handa Sri-Lankan Elders Association 46-50 Queens Avenue, Springvale President : Gamini Fonseka – 9799-6308</p>	<p>Group meets weekly on Fridays 10.00am-2.00pm provides social gatherings, guest speakers, cultural performances and excursions for the elderly Sri-Lankans.</p>
<p>Tamil Senior Citizens Fellowship Oakleigh Hall 142 Drummond Street Oakleigh 3166 Ph: 9857 0204, 9354 6169 PO Box 5063, Clayton South 3168</p>	<p>This group meets monthly on the 3rd Saturday of the month from 10.30am-3.00pm provides social gathering guest speakers, cultural performances and excursions for the Tamil community in Victoria.</p>
<p>Sri Lankan Elders Welfare Association (SEWA) John Pandazopoulos hall, 78 Power Road Doveton - 3177 Ph: 0417 331 232 / President Tissa Amarasekera</p>	<p>Group meets weekly from 10.30am – 2.00pm. Provides social activities and a number of classes for its members including computer skills and strength training, outings, social gathering, guest speakers etc.</p>
<p>Tamil Women’s Association Dandenong 186 Foster Street East Dandenong 3175 Ph: 9799-4037/Gloria Johnpillai</p>	<p>This group meets fortnightly from 10.00am-1.00pm. Provides social gathering guest speakers and gentle exercise for the Tamil community.</p>
<p>Sinhala Cultural &amp; Community Service Foundation Of Victoria. Moorleigh Community Centre. 90, Vignell Rd East Bentleigh. Ph: 9572-5177 President: Dr.Olga Mendis</p>	<p>Meets fortnightly on Sundays 9.30am-3.00pm. Provides Social support programs, guest speakers, social outings etc.</p>
<p>Ceylonese Welfare Association Paddy O Donahue Hall, Noble Park. Earnest Spencer Vanderzeil 9793-2728</p>	<p>Group meets every Thursday fortnightly 9.00am-2.00pm. Provides social gathering social outings, guest speakers etc</p>
<p>Burgher Association Burgher Association Hall , 358, Haughton Road, Clayton 3168 Ph:9884-4500/ Vice president Doyne Caspersz</p>	<p>Group meets to provide social support, outings etc</p>