

8 Multi-cultural society

A human society is formed by various human groups. Their culture is created on the basis of the languages they speak, the religions they practise, their ways of behaviour, religious festivals, customs and manners and what they produce. Owing to the presence of diverse characteristics among cultures, that particular society turns into a multi-cultural society. For the weal and progress of human society unity and harmony among its members is essential and the diversity in culture too helps it. In this respect, Sri Lankan society is made up of several ethnic groups, several languages and several religions. There are varying cultures among the people. By studying this chapter you will acquire the skill necessary to preserve your identity as Sri Lankans living in harmony as members of a multi-cultural society.

8.1 The characteristics of a multi-cultural society

A multi-cultural society is formed by the process of merging several cultures. In order to understand the features of such a society, it is necessary to have a rough idea about the concepts of 'culture' and 'human society'.

'Society' is a word in common usage you are familiar with. You too are one member of the society. The human group consisting of all the people who exert an influence on you, either beneficial or harmful in sustaining your life or moulding your character, and interact with you, can be defined as a human society in simple terms.

Culture is defined as the forces that guide all the temperaments found in human society. They are as follows:

- Religion
- Language
- Family background
- Economic background
- Beliefs
- Equipment used
- Associates
- Customs and manners
- Attitudes
- Politics
- Education
- Technology
- Locality in which one lives
- Infrastructure facilities

Based on the combined effects of the above factors various cultures are formed. These factors differ from country to country, region to region and from time to time. It is clear that culture is not a permanent or stable phenomenon.

Various philosophers have expressed various views on 'Culture'.

Culture is regarded as a basis for Literature, History and Arts.
- *Bertrand Russel*

Culture is not an individual creation.
- *Claude Leve Strauts*
(*A French Arthropologist*)

Different ethnic groups live in most countries of the world. One can hardly imagine the existence of a culture confined to one single ethnic group anywhere in the world. Among the members of the society, the beliefs, religions, languages, customs, manners and arts differ from each other and we notice similarities too among them. Let us take India for example. There are a large number of ethnic groups in India such as Hindu, Gujarati, Marathi, Tamil, Karnataka, Bengali and Muslim. They speak different languages and follow various religions. Their cultures too are different from one another.

Even in major powers of the world such as England, France, America and Germany too these ethnic features are found. For example, the American continent is one formed by various ethnic and religious groups. Yet all of them represent one community.

The main feature of the world is diversity. The challenge before the world community is to work as one single human family identifying this diversity.

Even within the same country in the same race, the nature of the culture differs according to region as well as the geographical location. There are differences in the culture of the fisher folk in the coastal belt of Sri Lanka and that of a village close to it.

Sri Lanka is comprised of ethnic groups following different religions, speaking different languages and living in different areas. This means that there are different cultures in our country. People belonging to all these cultures live together. There are marriages among them. This builds up relationships among families. Each one gets the assistance of others belonging to different cultures, in the process of providing the day to-day needs. When providing or receiving services, cultural diversity is not taken into consideration. Although our society is made up of people belonging to different cultures, there exists mutual trust, unity, togetherness among them. All of them are "Sri Lankans". Such societies are called multi-cultural societies.

Considering the above facts, the main features found in a multi-cultural society can be identified.

Unity	Diversity
Country of domicile	Language
Administration	Religion
Law (Legal system)	Customs and traditions
Providing and receiving services	Attitudes and beliefs
National anthem/ National flag	Dress
National heritages	Literature/Arts

Activity I

List the reasons you think that have caused the rise of diverse cultures in various regions of Sri Lanka.

8.2 The multi-cultural society of Sri Lanka

Considering the size of the country, Sri Lanka holds a foremost position among the countries with the largest number of religions and languages. Two main causes have influenced the existence of a large number of religions and languages.

1. Sri Lanka inheriting a history of over 2500 years.
2. The relative location of the country.

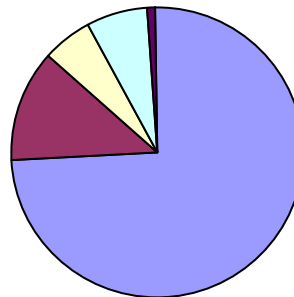
Various ethnic groups such as Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims, Malays and Burghers live in Sri Lanka. They follow the religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam and Christianity. Among the Sinhalese are Buddhists and Christians while there are Hindus and Christians among the Tamils too. Hence, Sri Lanka is a country representing the features of a multi-cultural society.

★ Ethnic groups of Sri Lanka

All the ethnic groups of Sri Lanka are recognized as citizens of the Democratic Socialist Republic and they recognize their motherland as a unitary state. The national aim of all these groups is to work towards the advancement of their motherland.

The percentages of the population of Sri Lanka by race - 2007

1. Sinhalese	-	74%
2. Sri Lanka Tamil	-	12.6%
3. Indian Tamil	-	5.5%
4. Moor(Muslim)	-	7.1%
5. Other	-	0.8%



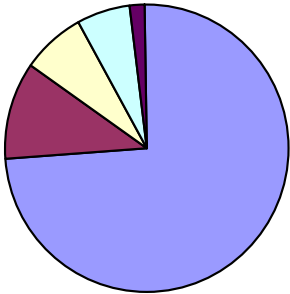
People belonging to these ethnic groups are employed in the public sector as well as in the private sector institutions. Players belonging to all these ethnic groups too are included in various sports teams representing Sri Lanka. All the citizens of the country are eligible to enjoy all privileges provided by the Government and the public sector. Thus we notice a union between Buddhism and Hinduism in association with Buddhist places of worship.

★ Religions of Sri Lanka

Percentage of population of Sri Lanka by religion - 2007

1. Buddhism	-	73.7 %
2. Hinduism	-	10.9 %
3. Islam	-	7.6 %
4. Christianity	-	6.2 %
5. Others	-	1.6 %

The majority of the Sinhalese of Sri Lanka are Buddhists. They live according to the religious teachings of Lord Buddha. These teachings are contained in the *Tripitaka*. (The Three Baskets). The Sinhalese Buddhists also believe in Hindu Gods and deities. In Buddhist temples and monasteries, devalas have been erected for various Hindu Gods and deities namely, Vishnu, Kataragama (Muruga) and Ganesha. Most Sinhalese Buddhists make offerings to Hindu Gods and worship them, and also organize peraharas (processions) to their blessings. Hindus as well as Buddhists visit Kataragama for religious rites and rituals.



Principal God of the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Tamils with an Indian origin is Lord Ganesha. Among the main Gods they worship are Vishnu, Kataragama Ganesha, Lord Venkateswara, Lord Akshmi. In the belief of ten incarnations (avatar) of God Vishnu, Lord Venkateswara is also represented. Hindus respect religious scriptures such as *Bhagavat* (celestial)

The Christian, Sinhalese and Tamils of Sri Lanka belong to various denominations such as Catholicism and Protestantism. They too belong to various sects that believe in God and recognize Lord Jesus Christ as the representative of God. Their main religious text is the *Holy Bible*.

Muslims hold prayers in praise of God "Allah". They recognize Mohammed Nabi as the representative of God. Their principal religious text is the *Holy Koran*.

★ The languages used in Sri Lanka

Out of the ethnic groups mentioned above, Sinhalese is the language used by the Sinhalese groups. Tamils use the Tamil language while the majority of the Moors too speak Tamil. The Malays mainly speak the Malay Language. The Burghers mainly speak English and Sinhalese. Often there are groups among them who can speak all three languages Sinhalese, Tamil and English. According to the constitution of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Tamil are declared official languages. English too is a recognized language in Sri Lanka. In school education, every pupil learns at least a few subjects in his or her mother tongue and learn the other two languages too.

8.3 Various cultural traditions, customs and festivals

Culture is not something that has sprung up instantly. It is a process that has been practised by people over a long period of time. Thus these practices are known as cultural traditions. The customs and traditions we follow too, have a long history. Customs and traditions have evolved based on religious teachings, attitudes, beliefs and other social values.

Customs and traditions that prevail among the people are also characteristics of culture. Customs are the good practices that are in use. Examples are worshipping the parents, and respecting the teachers. Such customs are those that have to be practised in day-to-day life.

Sinhalese new year rituals are examples of cultural traditions. People hold festivals centred round these cultural aspects. They are held focusing on religious or national objectives. The Sinhalese celebrate the festival associated with the temple of the Holy Tooth Relic based on religious objectives holding Dalada Perahara. Joining of Vishnu, Kataragama, Sath Paththini and Natha Devala peraharas with the main perahera of the Temple of Tooth Relic is a combination of Buddhist and



Fig. 8.1 -Worshipping the parents

Hindu Religious practices. The Tamils hold the Vel festival in honour of God while Christians celebrate Christmas and the Muslims, the Haj festival.



Fig. 8.2 - Cooking food according to the auspicious time is a Sinhalese New Year custom

8.4 Customs and traditions associated with various ethnic groups

Customs and traditions change with culture. There are several festivals related to the main cultures of Sri Lanka.

It is a custom to visit one's relatives during the Sinhala New Year season. Among customs are the Hindus sprinkling saffron water in front of the house and the Muslims performing ablutions prior to prayers.

Taboos (or prohibitions) are what should be avoided. Taking food during the inauspicious time on the eve of the Sinhala New Year and Muslims partaking meals during the Ramazan fasting season after sunrise and before sunset each day are considered taboos or prohibited practices.

In this manner there are several customs and taboos which every ethnic group observes from birth to death. According to each ethnic group, there are similarities and dissimilarities in these customs and taboos.

The cultures of Sri Lanka can be grouped as follows:

1. Buddhist Culture
2. Hindu Culture
3. Christian Culture
4. Islamic Culuture

The above cultures have emerged on the basis of religions. Most of the customs and traditions observed and festivals held are centred round religious customs and traditions.

★ Religious festivals and customs associated with Sinhala Buddhist culture

It is the Buddhist methods of teaching that guide the Sinhala Buddhists to mould their life. One main religious practice of the Buddhists is to offer flowers and lamps to the Buddha in the morning and evening. They perform these activities in the morning and evening either in the temple or at home. Hence it is one main religious practice of the Buddhists to shape their lives refraining from committing the five cardinal sins.

Buddhist religious festivals

- Vesak Festival
- Poson Festival
- Esala Festival

Apart from the above mentioned Buddhist religious festivals, on the full moon paya days that occur every month, religious programmes such as offering alms (dana) observing sil (sila) and meditation (Bhavana) are conducted in Buddhist places of worship.

Vesak Festival

Buddhists celebrate the Vesak Festival to mark three events of the birth of Prince Siddhartha, his Enlightenment and the Buddha's demise (Parinibbana). The Buddhists who engage in the three meritorious acts of dana (charity), sila (morality) and Bhavana (meditation) on this day, offer flowers and lamps to the Buddha, decorate the houses, temples, schools and the roads, hold poojas venerating the Enlightened One.

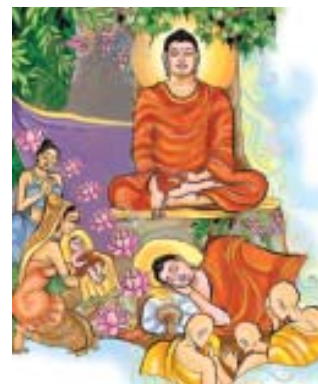


Fig. 8.3 Holy three events of Lord Buddha

Poson Festival

Commemorating the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka by Venerable Mahinda Thera who is deemed an 'Anubudu' (a second Buddha) by the Buddhists, the Poson Festival is held almost throughout the island in June. In these celebrations elaborate Poson processions carrying an image of Venerable Mahinda Thera are held. Holding Poson festivals particularly in Anuradhapura, Mihintale and all temples throughout the island express a feeling of gratitude for the most Venerable Mahinda Thera.



Fig. 8.4 - Mihintale

Esala Festival

Holding the Dalada Perahara (Procession in connection with the Temple of the Holy Tooth Relic) as a ritual to honour the Tooth Relic is one of the main religious festivals celebrated by Sinhalese Buddhists from ancient times. Focussing on the month of Esala (July) religious activities of dana (charity), sila (morality), Bhavana (meditation) are held in Buddhist temples throughout the island.



Fig. 8.5 - Sri Dalada Perahara

Rites, rituals and processions are held in honour of Lord Buddha and Gods and deities at temples and shrines such as those at Kataragama, Alutnuwara and Devinuwara.

★ Buddhist rites performed on various occasions in life

The Sinhala Buddhists of Sri Lanka conduct various religious rites from their birth itself to death. Buddhists do not fail to visit the temple shortly after a new baby is born to the family, pay homage to the Buddha and perform religious rites.

The Buddhists who perform religious rites at various stages in life in this manner, hold *poruwa rites* on the occasion of weddings with the participation of both parties - the bride and the bridegroom by performing religious rites. At the *poruwa* ceremony *Jayamangala gathas* are recited and the new couple is blessed according to Buddhist tradition.



Fig 8.6 - Poruwa rites



Fig. 8.7
An alms giving

When a Buddhist dies, it is a Buddhist custom to perform funeral rites by bestowing merit on the deceased, offering cloths to the clergy for that specific purpose recapitulating the impermanence of life. Seven days after the death of the person a member of the clergy is invited home and made to deliver a sermon and the following day alms are offered to the monks, thereafter transferring merit on the dead person.

In this manner, the Buddhist community here does not fail to perform religious rites at various stages in their life.

Activity II

Gather information about Buddhist places of worship and Buddhist customs and prepare a report.

★ Religious festivals and customs associated with Hindu Culture

The Tamils who follow Hinduism, perform their religious rites according to the Hindu culture.

Hindu culture has originated based on the Hindu religious customs and practices built around Maha Brahma, God Siva and other deities.

The Tamils who follow Hinduism perform rites and rituals focusing on Gods and deities such as Siva, Vishnu, Kataragama (Muruga), Ganesha and Kali. Rituals are performed either at home or in the Kovil. They commence their day-to-day activities by praying to God.

Hindu religious festivals

- * Thaipongal
- * Deepavali
- * Maha Sivaratri

are considered the main religious festivals of the Hindus.

Thaipongal

This is considered a Hindu cultural festival. In this festival celebrated on two days in January, milk rice is prepared on the first day and offered to Sun God. On the second day the bull who helped the farmer in agricultural activities is decorated exquisitely and fed as a honour of gratitude.



Fig 8.8



Fig. 8.7

Deepavali Festival

The main feature of the Deepavali festival is illuminating every Hindu household and lighting lamps in veneration of Gods praying to dispel darkness and bring about light.



Fig. 8.9
Dispel darkness by
lighting lamps

Maha Sivaratri

During this festival offerings are made for God Siva and religious rites and rituals performed.



Fig 8.10
God Siva and Goddess Parvathi

Hindu religious customs performed on various occasions in life

Hindus in Sri Lanka perform Hindu religious practices on different occasions in life. They perform various rites and rituals invoking the blessings of Gods and deities from the day a child conceives; even naming the baby is done according to religious customs. Wedding rites are performed under the guidance of the priest who is known as Kurukkal. They perform rituals for Gods and deities headed by God Ganesh. At this ceremony after the bride's father gives over his daughter to the bridegroom the groom offers her the wedding dress and other ornaments. Wearing this dress and the ornaments, the bride comes to the groom after which, guided by the priest, Kurukkal, the couple offers incense, flowers and fruits etc. to the Gods. Here the priest is given presents and the couple is blessed wishing them to live like the star Arundathi. Next the couple greets the relatives and gets their blessings. Thus, Hindus make it a point to perform the marriage ceremony with all the marital customs in an elaborate and elegant manner.

At the death of a Hindu too, the priest performs funeral rites, praying to God, for the soul of the deceased. The cremation of the dead body is done with the guidance of the eldest son in the family.

As stated above, Hindus make it a point to perform rites and rituals at different occasions in their life, in association with the kovil.

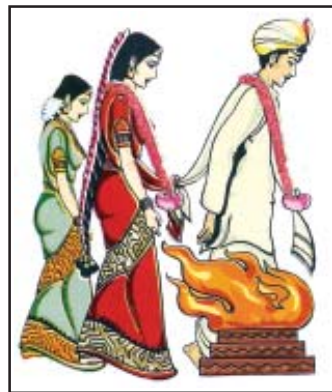


Fig 8.11 A Hindu Wedding

Activity III

Make a booklet containing information about Hindu religious festivals.

★ Religious festivals and customs associated with the Christian Culture

Christians of Sri Lanka pay special attention on two religious festivals related to the Christian Culture. They are,

- * Christmas
- * Easter

Christmas

The Christmas is celebrated in order to commemorate the birth of Jesus Christ that falls on December 25 every year. On that day, all the Christians celebrate in all festivity the birth of Christ which occurred in a stable in Bethlehem.



Fig. 8.12
Birth of Christ and Christmas decorations



Fig 8.13
Crucifixion of Christ

Easter

Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross as a result of a conspiracy by sinners. To commemorate this sinful act Good Friday is observed and to commemorate the resurrection of Jesus Christ Easter is celebrated.

★ Christian religious customs performed on various occasions in life

Christians in Sri Lanka visit the church with the new born child, get the baby baptised by the Father and pray to God.

The Christian who works according to the Christian religious customs on various occasions in life, enters into matrimony too in the presence of the church Father. On this occasion the Christian Father gets the blessings of God showered on the couple in the presence of the relatives of both parties after saying prayers.



Fig. 8.14
The baptism of a child



Fig. 8.15
A Christian Wedding Ceremony

At the death of a Christian, another religious custom performed by the Christian Father is to pray for the soul of the deceased.

It is a Christian religious practice to get the blessings of God on various occasions in life as indicated above.

★ Religious festivals associated with Islamic Culture

The main Islamic religious festivals are,

- Milad-Un-Nabi
- Ramazan (Ramalan)
- Haj Festival

Milad-un-Nabi

Muslims who celebrate the birthday of Prophet Mohammed, celebrate this festival as mentioned in the Holy Koran giving charity donations to the poor and the destitute.



Fig 8.16
Milad-un-Nabi

Ramazan

The Ramazan (Ramlan) Festival is one of the most important festivals of the Muslims. Muslims who engage in a fast (avoiding food) for 30 days avoiding food from sunrise to sunset pray to God Allah. During the fasting season they visit their Masjid and engage in prayers. The Ramzan festival is held in order to celebrate the fast.



Fig. 8.17

Haj Festival

Mecca is the holiest place of worship of the world Muslim community. The rich Muslims go there on pilgrimage. Those who are not very affluent go to the mosque in their locality and engage in prayers remembering those who went on pilgrimage to Mecca.



Fig 8.18
Mecca Holy Land

Activity IV

Prepare a booklet on the Islamic religious festivals in Sri Lanka and the various religious practices Muslims perform on different occasions in life.

Islamic religious rites performed on various occasions in life

The Muslim who prays at the birth of a child blesses the child by reciting Azhan stanzas and blowing air into the child's ear. At this moment he makes it a point to insert a drop of honey into the baby's lips.

At a marriage ceremony, the bride's father gives over his daughter to the bride-groom. Here as a mark of gratitude the groom presents the bride's father with jewellery and dresses (magr). In this manner, Muslim marriage ceremonies are performed according to Islamic rites, in the presence of all the relatives.



Fig. 8.19
Islamic wedding ceremony

When a Muslim dies, the first and foremost thing to do is to bathe the body. Thus the body is dressed in white and prayed to God. The body is deposited in the Kabur, religious stanzas are chanted and within 24 hours after death it is taken to the burial ground and after performing the religious rites, it is buried.

Sacred places of religious significance

Sri Lankan Buddhists make it a point to worship the sacred places, namely the Temple of the Holy Tooth Relic, sacred Bo Tree (Sri Maha Bodhi), Sri Pada (Adam's Peak), Kelaniya Temple, Ruwanweli Seya and so forth at any time in their life.



Fig. 8.20
Temple of the Holy Tooth Relic



Fig 8.23
A Hindu Kovil

Hindus regard Nallur Temple, Koneshwaran Temple in Trincomalee, Kataragama, Munneswaran Temple in Chilaw as prominent places of worship. They visit these places and perform their rites and rituals.

Muslims perform religious practices at the local masjid and say prayers to God.

Apart from the churches in their locality, Christian devotees visit the churches at Talawila, Kochchikade, Wahakotte and Madhu and recite prayers.



Fig 8.22
A Masjid



Fig. 8.21
Kochchikade Catholic Church

Out of these places of worship, Buddhists, Hindus and Christians visit Sri Pada irrespective of their religions and pay homage to the sacred foot print. Buddhists and Hindus visit Kataragama Kandasamy Kovil and Munneswaram Kovil in Chilaw in common, perform religious rites and rituals there.

There are several common objectives relevant to character development arising from the religious objectives of all faiths. Clemency, kindness, compassion, unity, peace, altruism, non-violence, respecting the elders, respect for teachers, venerating the clergy and priesthood, common interest, social service, helping the destitute, respecting others and other religions, conserving the environment. All these are common aspirations of all faiths.

8.5 Unity for National Development

In a society made up of several ethnic groups, one finds several religions, languages and customs and manners. Even in a society having only one language and one religion, there can be various profiles. It is a common feature in human society.

Although the cultures of various countries differ, there are several similarities too among them. There are similarities in the culture of India, and that of Sri Lanka.

'Our Culture' - authored by Rajakeya Panditha Ven. Baddegama Wimalawansa Thero

In the cultures of a country there are similarities as well as dissimilarities. It is a common feature in multi cultural society. Accordingly, the culture it determines co-existence or harmony among the ethnic groups that make up that society and not antagonism among them.

"Culture should be one of the foundations that helps to build understanding among the people of the world."

Scientist - Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

Every ethnic group holds its religion and culture in high esteem. Those citizens gain an idea about their religion from their parents, elders and the clergy from their childhood itself. Accordingly, they receive a religious discipline too. They go to their temple, kovil, masjid or church and engage in religious rites and rituals.

Although several cultures exist in human societies, their common feature and aspiration is the progress of human society and social development. Through this, it is anticipated that the children develop the esteemed trait of respecting others irrespective of language, religious and ethnic or racial differences. This will enable them to perform a specific service for national development and the upliftment of their fellow citizens.

"National Development is the reflection of national culture"

- Dr. Ananda Kumaraswamy

Understanding and cordiality among various cultural groups develop due to good qualities that are built up culturally. It was on account of this cultural tie that all the ethnic groups of this country joined together during the Tsunami catastrophe. Thus cultural understanding and co-existence are essential for the weal of Sri Lankan society. Culture is never a partition that separates humans. Culture and ethnic groups can be described as a process that maintains mutual cordiality. The special feature in diversity is that it is dedicated to build unity. This co-operation performs a special function for the development of the country ignoring racial, religious, language and cultural differences. This, then will lead to a fruitful national development. Towards this end, it is the responsibility and duty of an intelligent good citizen to fulfil his obligations and duties while respecting cultural diversity. This will bring about co-existence, peace, national development and harmony among ethnic groups.

To act according to the line in the National Anthem of Sri Lanka which says, "Since we are children of the same mother, let us forge ahead incessantly" (*Eka mawakage daru kala bawina, Yamu yamu wee nopama*) is the duty of all citizens in a multi-cultural society.

Activity V

1. Prepare an article for a children's newspaper on the places of worship in your locality.
2. Write an essay on "National and religious unity."

Summary

- A multi-cultural society exists in a country where people of various cultures live under the same system of government while maintaining the identity of their own cultures.
- Sri Lanka too is a country with a multi-cultural society.
- There are customs and traditions, and festivals associated with different cultures.
- Cultural diversity should be exploited fruitfully for the economic development of the country.