



ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF  
SINHALA LANGUAGE  
AND CULTURE

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*De:shama:nya*

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## FOREWORD

This is a book of an unusual kind. In a sense, it is an encyclopaedia but an encyclopaedia of a different kind. It differs from a traditional encyclopaedia in four basic ways: first, it presents facts not alphabetically but thematically; second, the themes do not cover all aspects of knowledge but only those related to Sinhala, the language and the culture in which it is embedded; third, all contributions are by the same author; and, finally there is an underlying theme that brings all the essays together: the intrinsic link between language and thought.

Sinhala (pronounced in three syllables: ‘sin’ like English ‘sing’, ‘ha’ like English ‘her’ and ‘la’ like ‘ler’ in English ‘seller’) is spoken by about sixteen million Sinhalese living in the island of Sri Lanka and by about another two million living abroad, particularly in Australia, Canada, France, United Kingdom and the United States of America.

Sinhala is one of the two national languages of Sri Lanka, the other being Tamil, also spoken in the state of Tamil Nadu in South India. They belong genetically to two families of language: Sinhala to the Indo-Aryan sub-family of Indo-European, and Tamil to Dravidian. Though they trace their genetic origin to two distinct language families, they were in close contact for many centuries, making Sinhala the most unique member of the Indo-Aryan family.

Sri Lanka has been a multi-lingual society from time immemorial. At the time of the first wave of migration from India, under Prince Vijaya, six centuries before the Common Era, the islanders spoke at least four languages: those of the Yakkhas, the Na:gas, the Rakkhasas and the De:vas.

The earliest Sinhalese Buddhist monks were tri-lingual. They knew, in addition to their own language, Sinhala, two others: Pali, the vehicle of Theravada Buddhism and, Sanskrit, the vehicle of Mahayana Buddhism. Some had access to Indian Prakrits such as Ma:gadhi, Ardha Ma:gadhi and Saurase:ni.

Before the arrival of the Portuguese, at the turn of the sixteenth century, an “educated” Sri Lankan was one who knew, in addition to Sinhala, three other languages: Pali, Sanskrit and Tamil.

A contemporary Sinhala poet declared that he was composing his poem in Sinhala for the benefit of the “uneducated” (*dada*) who did not know ‘*demala*’ (Tamil), ‘*saku*’ (Sanskrit) and ‘*magada*’ (Pali):

“*demala saku magada no hasala sataṭa dada*”

Recent colonial history, however, reduced the island into a bi-lingual society. Educated Sri Lankans knew English, the language of the colonial masters, in addition to their own, Sinhala or Tamil. English served as a ‘lingua franca’ and it was labelled a ‘link language’.

Sri Lanka has now entered a new phase in her political and linguistic history. A ‘Ten Year National Plan’ (2012-2022) is on foot to bring about a Tri-lingual Sri Lanka. This Plan “sets the foundation for a national initiative to encourage the acquisition of trilingual skills and competencies by all citizens of the country. The National Plan provides the impetus for the equal development and promotion of the two national languages in all spheres of life. It envisages restoring a culture of language learning in the country” (Preamble).

Hence the immediate need to outline the nature and structure of the Sinhala language and its origin and evolution in all its facets for the benefit of both native and non-native speakers. It is hoped that this book of essays, will also inspire non-native speakers to learn to speak and write Sinhala.

An island language, like an island culture, is diverse and colourful. Winds, both geographical and cultural, that blew from all directions have added colour to make this island language and culture one of the most remarkable in South Asia.

The twenty-five essays are more or less independent of each other. Each essay consists of a number of units, most of which run into two pages. These units will cover all aspects of a topic in question almost in an encyclopaedic spirit.

It is hoped that this treasury of knowledge will not only enrich your knowledge of the nature, structure, origin and evolution of the Sinhala language but also inspire you to appreciate the island culture that produced it.

I hope you will enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it.

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