

Sri Lankan Culture and its Diversity

By

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Abstract

Sri Lankan culture has the influence of Southern India, Buddhism and Indonesia. Its beauty lies in its diversity, rituals and culture which are rich and have survived the influence of the outside world. Its ravishing heritage, stupas, architecture, sculpture, paintings, folklore, music, dance and handicraft, festivals attract tourists from every nook and corner of the world. Religion plays an important role in moulding Sri Lankan culture and traditions

Keywords

Culture, hues, Mosaic, tradition, religion, music, handicrafts, tourism

Introduction

Lanka is one of few countries that can be called a land of great and rich cultural diversity. Sri – Lankan culture has lots of customs and rituals which date back to more than 2000 years and are passed on from one generation to another. The country has a rich artistic tradition infused with fine arts, music, dance, visual arts, architecture etc. Basically colour, creativity and commerce abound when it comes to arts and crafts in Sri- Lanka.

Tradition is the landmark and people have been creating everything from jewellery to gemstones, masks to ceramics, sculpture, and painting. The varying degree of colonial impact, modernizing influences, wealth and income add various hues to its cultural hues and mosaic.

Architecture

The architecture of Sri- Lanka displays a rich variety of architectural forms and styles. Buddhism influenced Sri Lankan architecture since it was introduced to the island in 3rd century BCE. Techniques and forms developed in India, China and later Europe transported via colonialism played a significant role in the architecture of Sri- Lanka. Most forms of Sri Lankan arts and crafts have been inspired by Buddhist culture which has absorbed and adopted countless regional and local traditions. In most instances, Sri Lankan art originates from religious beliefs and is represented in its architecture, sculpture, and paintings.

Stupas

The most enthralling monuments are great stupa, gigantic in size and shape, antiques but reconstructed in the course of the centuries. They mostly have a triple circular base, a hemispheric dome with a miniature railing on the top and a multiple parasols that solidifies into the conical structure in the course of time. Stupas are constructed with bricks, covered with plaster and white paint. They are often decorated with sculptures. There are many stupas in the capital city of Anuradhapura, at Polonnaruwa. The enormous one Jetavana is now largely ruined.

Small stupas were placed in a circular building with a domical metal and timber roof supported by concentric rows of pillars. This form was found in ancient India also and was known as caityagrha and very popular in Sri- Lanka though it also disappeared from the country quite early. It housed the image of Buddha.

Sculptures

The earliest sculpture, perhaps, is from the platforms or vahalakadas of the katakana Cetiya, at Mihintale and reveals an archaic style indebted to 1st century -BC Indian sculpture of Sanchi and Amaravati regions. A certain simple characteristic of most Sinhalese work is present even at this early stage. The first Buddha images show a strong relationship to examples from Andhradesa of the 2nd- 3rd century AD but often possess considerable

vigour, revealing the contribution of the local sculptor. Now many images are being restored and are in bad shape.

Dated monuments can't be found out from the 5th to the 12th century but notion of stylistic development can be understood by comparative Indian examples. A great seated Buddha in Anuradhapura brings to the mind school of Sarnath of 5th - 6th century. At Isurumuni some marvellously carved sculptures depict elephants at play, a seated man with the head of a horse carved in the background. They have similarities with the South Indian style of the 7th century. Fine examples of Sinhalese sculpture can be found in clearly chiselled ornaments. The row of animals placed at the bottom of the staircase testify to the Sinhalese decorative carving. At Anuradhapura and at other sites freedom of expression characterises the works.

A colossal Buddha, 42 feet high at Avukana is a figure of majesty and surpasses contemporary work in Southern India. After the 13th century, Sinhalese sculpture began to decline though work of some decorative value was produced up to the 19th century.

Painting

The rock at Sigurya is decorated with beautifully painted nymphs showering flowers, their torsos emerging from clouds. The paintings are dated back to the 6th century AD and resemble contemporary work in India. The next group of wall paintings come from Tivamka-patima-Ghana at Polonnaruwa. The figures are unique. Eighteenth-century paintings with their flat figures arranged in horizontal rows reflect the contemporary styles of southern India. One of the most notable aspects is many forms of paintings on caves walls and temples such as The frescoes found at Sigiriya and religious paintings found in the temples in Dambulla and the temple of the Tooth Relic in Kandy.

Dance

Sri Lanka is home to many dance styles which include classical, folk and dance drama. It has three main endemic dance styles – Udarata (endemic to kandy), Pahatharata (endemic to southern areas) and Sabaragamu (endemic to Kegalle and Rathnapura)

Music

The two big influences on Sri Lankan music are Buddhism and Portuguese colonizers. Buddhism arrived in Sri Lanka after Emperor Ashoka's children propagated it to Lanka. While the Portuguese arrived in the 15th century, bringing with them cantiga ballads, the ukulele and guitars, along with African slaves who further diversified the musical roots of the island. Traditional Sri Lankan music also includes the hypnotic kandyan drums - drumming was and is very much part of music in both Buddhist and Hindu temples in Sri Lanka. Most western parts follow western dancing and music.

Masks

Masks belong to Sri Lankan folklore and are used in healing rites and rituals. Known as devil dances, some are dance drama performances that narrate tales and are enacted by dancers and actors wearing Masks. One of the ancient acts is the 18 Sanni which represents diseases or ailments caused by Yakkas (devils). Eighteen Masks carved to represent the torment felt through these diseases are worn by an exorcist and a toilet, a devil dance is performed. Other popular dances or dramas are kolam and Raksha. Masks are popularly used in festivals and processions.

Handloom

In earlier times handloom was reserved exclusively for the royalty and rich of the country and special villages were designed to promote the craft. Now it has become an entrepreneurial activity which is being practised by generation after generation. Among handloom products in Sri Lanka are curtains, cushion covers, home decor items, saris and garments, books files and bags. Handwoven fabrics with vibrant and verdant hues with motifs and patterns have become a favourite of shoppers.

The designs found on the Dumbara weaver's products are specific to the Sri Lankan culture and reflect the tradition within its intricate weave - work. Traditional wooden handicrafts and clay pottery are found around hilly regions while Portuguese-inspired lace work and Indonesian - inspired Batik are also available.

Batik

Batik's intriguing designs and combinations offer an independent view into the picturesque landscapes, flora and kandyan era designs. Each stage of the production process is done by hand and it is fabricated entirely on pure cotton or silk fabric.

Wood Carving and coir products

Traditional wood carving includes ornaments and jewellery pieces, figurines, lacquer products, boxes and toys. Carved wooden furniture and household items are also a popular buy amongst locals and foreigners alike. To purchase or even to get your own customized wood carving shops in Moratuwa are popular destinations.

Processing coconut husk, coir rope is spun by hand and products like carpets, mats, brooms and brushes are made.

Pottery

One of the oldest lines of craftwork, pottery is popular in Sri Lanka. Clay pottery consists of a spinning wheel and soft clay, ready to be moulded into the required shape and then keeping shaped pot in a brick oven to solidify the figurine. The clay pots with village charm draw many to buy these products. Clay Pottery is mostly practised in a small village Molagoda, a small village situated along the Colombo-Kandy Road.

Cane and Brass Products

Cane products are found in areas like such as Bibile in the Monaragala district, Polonnaruwa and Weweldeniya in the Gampaha where Cane is grown. Cane products like tables and chairs, baskets, containers, and decorative items are found in almost every household. Brass products including artefacts are used for the religious purpose such as oil lamps and household products such as chairs, containers, and baskets can be found on the pavements of Colombo.

Lacquer work

These skillfully made traditional handicrafts are a very popular choice of tourists to seek as souvenirs depicting Sri Lankan culture. The base product for traditional lacquerware is a wax derived from a species of insects which is imported from India. Now along with traditional tools new tools are used to make exquisite designs with deft details. Colourful and bright walking sticks, handles of flags and hand fans, bowls, vessels, and vases are seen all over the island.

Cuisine

Primarily influenced by Southern India, Indonesia and the Netherlands, Rice is the staple food along with curry (fish, chicken and mutton) and several other curries are made with vegetables and lentils. Other dishes include pickles, sambals, made of scraped coconut mixed with chilly and pepper, dried Maldivian fish and lime juice. This is supposed to increase appetite and is good for the digestive system. Coconut milk and Mallung (chopped leaves mixed with grated red onions) are found in every household. Sri Lanka is known for spices and Sri Lankans use spices liberally in their food. Tea is a popular beverage of the country.

Conclusion

The culture of Sri Lanka is influenced by many factors but has managed to retain much of its ancient aspects. Mostly it has been influenced by its Buddhist heritage. Its rich tradition gets reflected in the above-mentioned facets of its life. Sri Lanka's culture is diverse as it varies from region to region. Its rich culture gives a boost to tourism in the country. Tourists from different countries visit it regularly.

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About the Author

Dr. Ritu Kamra Kumar is Officiating Principal in Mukand Lal National College, Yamunanagar, Haryana, India. An avid writer and an academic, she has contributed more than 350 write-ups, Middles, articles, short stories, and poems in National. Around 30 research papers of hers have been published in national and international research journals and anthologies. She is the honorary executive editor at Ink dew Times.

