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# Tea, Tension, and Temple Bells: A Social History of Modern Sri Lanka

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## Introduction

Sri Lanka's unique position at the crossroads of the Indian Ocean has long made it a prize for conquerors, traders, and missionaries. Yet beneath its often idyllic surface lies a history as layered and complex as its legendary teas. "Tea, Tension, and Temple Bells" embarks on a journey through more than two centuries of Sri Lankan social history—one marked by colonial conquest, economic transformation, cultural resilience, and hard-fought struggles for justice and identity.

The story begins at the close of the 18th century, when British colonial forces rapidly dismantled the independence of the last native Sinhalese kingdom at Kandy. The British did far more than install new rulers; they reordered the economy and society from the ground up, introducing plantation agriculture on a massive scale. Coffee, and then tea, became not just commodities but organizing forces that shaped the island's landscapes, introduced new forms of labor, and drew thousands of migrant workers from southern India. This era of economic revolution sowed seeds of both prosperity and lasting division.

Colonial transformations did not unfold in a vacuum. Against the backdrop of British rule and Christian missionary ambition, a powerful revival of Buddhist identity gathered force. Reformers and lay Buddhists rallied to reassert their traditions and culture, intertwining religious resurgence with the early stirrings of Sinhalese nationalism. The dynamism of these movements reveals the double-edged legacy of colonialism: while introducing unprecedented change, it also galvanized local communities to protect and reinvent cherished identities.

As independence neared and nationalism sharpened, Sri Lanka's multi-ethnic tapestry became more frayed. Policies meant to affirm a Sinhalese-Buddhist majority—especially in language and citizenship—deepened the marginalization of Tamil and Indian Tamil minorities. The decades that followed saw these unresolved tensions flare into violent conflict, from the JVP's leftist rebellions to the devastating civil war waged by the LTTE, and the crackdowns that scarred the island from Colombo to Jaffna. These convulsions are inseparable from the plantation legacies and nationalist rivalries first set in motion under imperial rule.

Yet the story of Sri Lanka is not only one of division and struggle. It is equally the story of resilience—of families who remade their destinies in the plantations, of educators who expanded horizons for women and the poor, and of citizens who rose up to demand peace and justice in an era of globalization and rapid change. The intricate interplay of caste, class, gender, and ethnicity shapes every chapter of this collective narrative.

In tracing Sri Lanka's transformation from a colonial outpost to a modern but troubled nation, this book aims to provide more than a chronology of events. By weaving together economic change, cultural revival, and the legacy of ethnic politics, it invites readers to grasp the deeper roots of Sri Lanka's ongoing challenges—and to see in its history both a mirror and a lesson for similar societies facing the burdens of colonial legacy, cultural resurgence, and the search for inclusive nationhood.

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## CHAPTER ONE: Colonial Shadows: Sri Lanka before 1796

Before the British officially claimed the entirety of Ceylon in 1815, the island had already endured centuries of foreign encroachment and internal power struggles, laying complex foundations upon which future colonial powers would build. The narrative of modern Sri Lanka often begins with the British, yet to fully grasp the profound changes they wrought, one must first appreciate the intricate tapestry of polities, economies, and cultures that existed before their final dominion. This earlier history was not a static prelude but a dynamic period of adaptation, resistance, and the continuous reshaping of identity.

For millennia, Sri Lanka, known to ancient traders as Taprobane, had been a vital hub on the maritime silk road, connecting East and West. Its strategic location and abundant natural resources, particularly cinnamon, pearls, and precious stones, attracted merchants and adventurers from across the globe. Arab, Chinese, Roman, and Persian traders all left their mark, influencing local economies and introducing new ideas and technologies. These early interactions, though primarily commercial, hinted at the island's vulnerability to external forces and its long history of engaging with diverse cultures.

The island's early political landscape was characterized by a succession of powerful kingdoms, primarily Sinhala Buddhist, that rose and fell in different regions. The ancient capitals of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa stand as testaments to sophisticated hydraulic civilizations, with vast irrigation systems supporting flourishing agriculture and impressive architectural achievements. These kingdoms were not always unified, and periods of internal strife and competition for supremacy were common. This fragmented political reality would later prove advantageous to foreign powers seeking to establish a foothold.

The 16th century marked a significant turning point with the arrival of European colonial powers. The Portuguese were the first to establish a substantial presence, arriving in 1505. Driven by a thirst for spices, particularly cinnamon, and a zeal for proselytization, they gradually extended their influence along the coastal areas. The Portuguese introduced Catholicism, built forts, and disrupted traditional trade networks, forcing local rulers to contend with a new kind of aggressive foreign power. Their presence, though limited to the maritime provinces for much of their tenure, irrevocably altered the island's political and religious landscape. The Kandyan Kingdom, nestled in the central highlands, remained a resilient stronghold of Sinhala Buddhist culture and a symbol of indigenous resistance against European incursions.

By the mid-17th century, the Dutch, eager to break the Portuguese monopoly on the spice trade, arrived on the scene. They systematically ousted the Portuguese, culminating in the capture of Colombo in 1656. The Dutch East India Company (VOC) established a more formalized and extensive colonial administration, focused on maximizing profits from cinnamon, pepper, and coffee. They introduced Roman-Dutch law, which continues to influence Sri Lankan jurisprudence today, and developed a comprehensive system of land registration and taxation. The VOC's presence further entrenched the division between the coastal regions under European control and the independent Kandyan Kingdom, which, despite occasional alliances with the Dutch against the Portuguese, maintained its sovereignty in the interior. The Dutch era saw the introduction of new crops and intensified exploitation of existing resources, laying early groundwork for the plantation economy that would flourish under the British.

The Kandyan Kingdom, throughout the Portuguese and Dutch periods, represented the enduring spirit of independent Sri Lanka. Its kings, though often engaged in complex diplomatic maneuvering and occasional warfare with the European powers, preserved Sinhala Buddhist traditions and resisted direct foreign rule. The mountainous terrain provided a natural defense, making it difficult for European armies to penetrate and hold the interior. This strategic advantage allowed Kandyan culture to thrive, maintaining its unique political structures, religious practices, and artistic traditions. The kingdom served as a refuge for those seeking to escape European influence and became a powerful symbol of national identity, even as the coastal areas fell under foreign sway.

The social structure within the Kandyan Kingdom and the pre-colonial coastal areas was intricate and largely defined by a hierarchical caste system, distinct from the rigid *varna* system of India. Among the Sinhalese, the *Govigama* (cultivators) caste held a dominant position, controlling most of the land and exercising significant political influence. Other castes, such as the *Karava* (fishermen), *Durawa* (toddy tappers), and *Salagama* (cinnamon peelers), were associated with specific occupations and held varying degrees of social status. This system, though not as religiously codified as in India, dictated social interaction, marriage patterns, and access to resources and power. It was a system of interdependent relationships, where each caste performed specific duties for the wider society.

Economically, pre-colonial Sri Lanka was predominantly agrarian, with rice cultivation forming the backbone of its sustenance. The sophisticated irrigation systems developed by ancient kingdoms were still in use, supporting a largely self-sufficient rural population. Trade, both internal and external, played a vital role, with indigenous merchants facilitating the exchange of goods between different regions and with foreign traders. Cinnamon, precious stones, and elephants were key exports, while imports included textiles, metals, and other luxury items. This economy, though impacted by European demands, largely retained its traditional character before the

dramatic shifts introduced by later colonial policies.

Religion, particularly Buddhism, profoundly shaped pre-colonial Sri Lankan society and culture. The *Sangha* (Buddhist monastic order) held considerable influence, advising kings and serving as custodians of knowledge and culture. Buddhist temples were not merely places of worship but centers of learning, social welfare, and community life. The intertwining of Buddhism with state power and national identity was a defining feature of the Kandyan Kingdom, where the Tooth Relic of the Buddha was revered as a symbol of legitimate rule. This deep-seated religious identity would become a powerful force in later resistance movements against foreign domination and in the shaping of modern Sri Lankan nationalism.

Education in pre-colonial Sri Lanka was largely informal and religiously oriented. Monastic schools, associated with Buddhist temples, provided instruction in Buddhist scriptures, Sinhala language, and traditional arts and sciences. This system, while accessible to many, focused primarily on religious and cultural transmission rather than a broad-based secular curriculum. Among the elites, some received education in specialized fields like medicine, astrology, and statecraft. The arrival of European powers introduced a new dimension to education, with Christian missionaries establishing schools to promote their faith and English language. These early missionary schools, though limited in reach, represented the first significant challenge to the traditional educational landscape and foreshadowed future debates about language and identity in education.

As the 18th century drew to a close, the Dutch, embroiled in the European Napoleonic Wars, found their grip on Ceylon weakening. Their presence, though impactful, had primarily been confined to the coastal areas, with the Kandyan Kingdom steadfastly maintaining its independence in the interior. The stage was set for the arrival of yet another European power, one with a far more ambitious agenda and the military might to enforce it. The British, with their burgeoning global empire, viewed Ceylon as a crucial strategic asset, a naval base commanding vital Indian Ocean trade routes. Their impending arrival would mark the beginning of an entirely new chapter in Sri Lanka's history, irrevocably transforming its economy, society, and political destiny. The existing divisions—between European-controlled coast and indigenous kingdom, between different castes and religious groups—would be exploited and deepened by the new colonizers, setting the stage for the complex social history that was about to unfold.

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