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Multi-Ethnic People and Culture in Northern Sri Lanka: A Study Based on the Kingdom of Jaffna

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history

Received: 1 October 2026

Revised: 5 October 2026

Accepted: 5 October 2026

Article ID

MS-2026-0012

Peer review

Double-blind peer review

Keywords

Jaffna Kingdom

Northern Sri Lanka

Tamils

Sinhalese

Muslims

ABSTRACT

Northern Sri Lanka has been a region of distinctive cultural traditions since ancient times. This study considers Northern Sri Lanka primarily as the territory associated with the Jaffna Kingdom. Although Tamils constituted the majority population and Hindu culture was influential, Buddhism also had an impact on the region. In addition, Sinhalese, South Indian communities, Javakas, and Muslims arrived and settled in Northern Sri Lanka for political, economic, and religious reasons, contributing to its multi-ethnic character. During the medieval period, the emergence of the Jaffna Kingdom strengthened Tamil political and cultural influence. Although the kingdom was predominantly Tamil and Hindu, other ethnic communities continued to live in the region. South Indian migration, the establishment of Vanni settlements, and the arrival of the Portuguese further contributed to the cultural diversity of Northern Sri Lanka. This study adopts a historical approach using primary sources, including Pali and Tamil literary works, European accounts, archaeological evidence, inscriptions, and field observations, together with secondary sources such as books, research articles, journals, and websites. The main objective is to examine the multi-ethnic character and cultural diversity of Northern Sri Lanka during the period of the Jaffna Kingdom.

How to cite this article: G., J., & Dr.R.Udaiachandran (2026). Multi-Ethnic People and Culture in Northern Sri Lanka: A Study Based on the Kingdom of Jaffna. *Tamilmanam International Research Journal of Tamil Studies*, 12(05). <https://doi.org/10.63300/tm12052026.13>

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1. Introduction

The northern part of Sri Lanka has been a region with distinctive cultural traditions since ancient times. The region is referred to as Naga Nadu, Nagadipa, and Nagabumi in ancient Pali and Tamil literature and inscriptions. Recent archaeological studies have confirmed that people lived in this region from prehistoric times. Tamils have constituted the majority population in the region since historical times, and Hinduism has been an important religious tradition among them. However, literary and archaeological evidence indicates that other ethnic groups, including Sinhalese, South Indians, Javakas, and Muslims, also lived in the region and

contributed to its religious and cultural diversity. Although Tamils had lived in the region since ancient times, a strong royal tradition emerged among them during the medieval period with the establishment of the Jaffna Kingdom. Although this kingdom was predominantly Tamil and Hindu in its political and cultural character, Sinhalese communities also lived there and followed Buddhist traditions. The geographical proximity of South India further facilitated the movement of people from different parts of South India to Northern Sri Lanka for political, economic, social, and religious purposes. The arrival of Tamils from Tamil Nadu contributed to the growth of the Tamil population and culture in Northern Sri Lanka. Muslims also lived in the region and contributed to its commercial activities, while Islamic culture became established among them. During the later period of the Jaffna Kingdom, the arrival of the Portuguese introduced European cultural influences and Christianity to the region. Thus, the multi-ethnic and multicultural character of Northern Sri Lanka can be understood through the different communities that lived in the region from ancient times to the period of the Jaffna Kingdom.

1. Northern Sri Lanka and the Indigenous Peoples

Northern Sri Lanka was identified in ancient times as the region situated opposite Anuradhapura. Pali literatures refer to this area as Uttaradesa. Historians generally consider Northern Sri Lanka to include the Jaffna Peninsula, surrounding islands, the Vanni region, Mannar, and Trincomalee. Pali literature, which describes the early history of Sri Lanka, refers to the Yakkhas and Nagas who lived in different parts of the island and sometimes describes them as supernatural beings. These literary traditions associate the arrival of humans in Sri Lanka with the arrival of Vijaya. However, archaeological studies conducted in many parts of Sri Lanka, including Northern Sri Lanka, have confirmed the presence of prehistoric human communities long before this traditional date. Middle Palaeolithic stone tools discovered at Iranamadu indicate that human occupation in Northern Sri Lanka dates back to approximately 125,000 years ago. Subsequently, evidence indicates the presence of Mesolithic communities in several areas of the region from about 37,000 years ago. Evidence of Megalithic culture, dating to around 1000 B.C.E., has been identified at sites such as Kantharodai, Anaikottai, Karainagar, Velanai, Delft, and Mannar. These archaeological findings provide important evidence concerning the communities that inhabited Northern Sri Lanka before the historical period.

Archaeological evidence has provided information about the Megalithic communities of the region, while literary references to the Yakkhas and Nagas have also been considered in discussions concerning the early inhabitants of Northern Sri Lanka. Archaeologist Siran

Deraniyagala has suggested that the Naga people were associated with the communities that developed civilization and history towards the end of the stone period. Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions identified at Megalithic sites have also been used to discuss the relationship between these early communities and the later Tamil population. Place names associated with the Nagas are found in several parts of the northern region. Recent archaeological investigations conducted by Pushparatnam in the Nagapaduvaan area have also identified evidence associated with Naga worship. These findings indicate the importance of the Naga tradition in the history of Northern Sri Lanka and provide evidence for the antiquity of the communities that later formed part of the Tamil cultural landscape. Thus, evidence from archaeology, inscriptions, literature, and place names suggests that the northern region had an established population from prehistoric and early historical times. It also indicates that Northern Sri Lanka became a region of cultural interaction as different communities came into contact with one another.

1. Multi-Ethnic People in Northern Sri Lanka before the Jaffna Kingdom

Although Tamils had lived in Northern Sri Lanka since historical times, there is limited evidence to demonstrate the existence of a continuous and strong Tamil royal tradition during the early period. Therefore, the ancient political history of the region remains unclear. Nevertheless, historical evidence indicates that the Jaffna Kingdom emerged in the northern region during the 13th century C.E. Before the establishment of this kingdom, literary and archaeological evidence indicates the presence of communities such as Tamils, Sinhalese, South Indians, Javakas, and Muslims. Their religious and cultural traditions also existed in the region. Therefore, Northern Sri Lanka was not an isolated cultural region. Rather, it was a region where different communities interacted through political relations, migration, trade, religious activities, and settlement. The following sections discuss the major ethnic communities that contributed to this multi-ethnic character.

1.

a. Tamils

Although Tamils have lived in Sri Lanka since ancient times, the early history of the Tamil community remains partly unclear. Some information can be obtained from occasional references to Tamils and the northern region in Pali literature. Recent archaeological and epigraphic studies, however, have provided additional evidence regarding the antiquity of the Tamil population. Archaeological studies have revealed the antiquity of human communities associated with the northern region, while inscriptions provide evidence concerning language and ethnic identity. The early written form of Tamil, Tamil-Brahmi, is represented in pottery

inscriptions discovered at sites such as Iranamadu, Poonakari, and Kantharodai. Tamil-Brahmi inscriptions from Vavuniya and Trincomalee, dating approximately to the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.E., also provide evidence of Tamil activities. These inscriptions include references associated with Tamil traders and demonstrate the presence of Tamil-speaking communities during the early historical period. Sangam literature *Kuruntokai* also refers to Ezlathu Bhuthanthevanar, who is identified as a Tamil poet associated with Ezlam. Sitrapalam mentions him as a Tamil poet who went to Tamil Nadu from the Northern Sri Lanka. Such evidence indicates that Tamils had established a distinct presence in Northern Sri Lanka from early historical times.

Hindu culture also had an important place among the Tamil population. The presence of the Vel symbol and Sulam at the ancient settlement centre of Kantharodai has been associated with religious practices. The ancient temples of Thirukoneswaram, Thiruketeeswaram, and Nakuleswaram further provide evidence of Hindu religious traditions in Northern Sri Lanka. At the same time, literary evidence, particularly the Mahavamsa, refers to the presence of Buddhism in the northern region after its introduction to Sri Lanka. Archaeological remains associated with Buddhist culture have been identified at places such as Kantharodai, Delft, and parts of the Vanni region. The existence of Buddhist traditions among Tamil communities has led some historians to discuss the phenomenon as Tamil Buddhism. The Buddhist tradition that existed in the region appears to have declined over time, particularly with the increasing influence of Hindu devotional traditions associated with the Pallava period. Subsequently, Tamil society developed politically, economically, socially, and culturally through continued interaction with South India. Pallava religious and cultural influences, followed by Chola political and economic influence, contributed to the development of Tamil society. Under Pandya influence, the Tamil political tradition became further established and eventually contributed to the emergence of the Jaffna Kingdom as a distinct Tamil political centre in Sri Lankan history.

3.2. Sinhalese

Although the Sinhalese have historically constituted the majority population in southern Sri Lanka, they also maintained connections with Northern Sri Lanka, where Tamils formed the majority. One important reason for this was the political influence of the Sinhala kingdoms, which extended into the northern region at different periods. It can be seen that this region has been under the influence of the Sinhala kingdom since the arrival of Devanampiya Tissa in Northern Sri Lanka. From that time on, the Sinhala kingdom of Southern Sri Lanka was dominated by this region from time to time. The Vallipuram gold plate of Vasabha, the Mannar

Kachcheri Pillar Inscription of Kassapa IV, the Mantai inscription of Kassapa V, the Kurunthakulam inscription of Mahinda III, the Kantharodai inscription associated with Udaya I or Kassapa IV, and the Nainativu inscription of Parakramabahu I provide evidence concerning political and religious connections between the Sinhala rulers and Northern Sri Lanka. The *Mahavamsa* and *Culavamsa* also provide information regarding the involvement of Sinhala rulers in Buddhist activities in the northern region.

The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* provides additional information concerning the relationship between the Sinhalese and Northern Sri Lanka. According to this source, during the reign of the Pandu king, Sinhala people settled in the coastal area near the Nakuleswaram temple and engaged in fishing activities. They were later expelled because their activities were considered to have affected the sanctity of the temple. The source also provides information concerning relations between Sinhalese and Tamils in the northern region. These accounts suggest that Sinhala people-maintained connections with Northern Sri Lanka from ancient times. Their presence was influenced by political relations, economic activities, and religious traditions. During the Jaffna Kingdom period, Sinhalese communities continued to live in the northern region, although their relationship with the Tamil rulers varied according to political circumstances.

1.

a. South Indians

The geographical proximity of Northern Sri Lanka to South India facilitated close relations between the two regions from ancient times. These relations were based on political, economic, social, and religious factors. Communities from South India, including Tamils, Keralas, Telugus, and Kannadas, maintained connections with Northern Sri Lanka, although the influence of Tamils from Tamil Nadu was particularly significant. Evidence of South Indian connections with Northern Sri Lanka can be traced to the Before Common Era. The arrival of Baluga at the port of Mahatittha with the intention of assisting Ellara during the war with Duttagamini and the tradition that King Gajabahu brought the worship of Kannagi to Sri Lanka through Northern Sri Lanka illustrate such connections. The invasion and rule of the Pandu king in the 5th century C.E. also demonstrate the political influence of South India. The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* refers to the Pandu king in connection with activities in the Keerimalai area.

South Indian influence became more visible during the Pallava period through the Bhakti movement. The association of the Nayanmars with the temples of Thirukoneswaram and Thiruketheeswaram demonstrates the religious connections between South India and Northern

Sri Lanka. In the 9th century C.E. the Pandya king Srimara Srivallabha invaded the northern region, further demonstrating political connections between the two regions. With the rise of the Chola Empire, South Indian influence in Sri Lanka became stronger. Northern Sri Lanka acquired particular importance during the reigns of Rajaraja I and Rajendra I. The region became part of the Chola administrative system, and South Indians came to Northern Sri Lanka as soldiers, traders, administrators, and priests. These movements contributed to the growth of the Tamil population and the development of Tamil political and cultural traditions.

South Indian influence continued after the Chola period through the invasion of Kalinga Magha. His army included Kerala and Tamil soldiers, and the *Culavamsa* provides information concerning the activities and settlement of his forces in Northern Sri Lanka. Thus, South Indian influence was maintained through political movements, military activities, trade, migration, and religious connections. The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* also provides information concerning South Indian influence in Northern Sri Lanka. It refers to the arrival of South Indians during the time of Kulakottan and his settlement of the Vanniyars. The arrival of Thondaiman and Maruthapravalli is also mentioned in connection with South Indian contacts. The account of Yalpadi further refers to the invitation of Tamil people from South India to settle in the northern region. Although some of these accounts are regarded as legendary, they preserve traditions concerning long-standing connections between South India and Northern Sri Lanka.

3.4. Javakas

The Javakas originated from the Java region of Southeast Asia. Their influence in Northern Sri Lanka increased following the invasions of Chandrabhanu, the ruler associated with the Javaka kingdom. Chandrabhanu invaded Sri Lanka in 1247 C.E., reportedly with the intention of obtaining the sacred Tooth Relic of the Buddha and establishing political authority. His first invasion failed, and he later gathered forces, including Chola and Pandya soldiers, and established control over parts of northern Sri Lanka. He subsequently launched another invasion but was defeated. The Veera Pandya's inscription provides evidence concerning the Pandya intervention in Sri Lanka during this period. It indicates that the Javaka forces were defeated by the Pandyas and that political authority was subsequently transferred to Chandrabhanu's son. The political influence of the Javakas extended to areas including Jaffna, Vanni, and Trincomalee. Place names such as Chavakacheri and Chavankottai have traditionally been associated with the presence of the Javakas in Northern Sri Lanka. Literary and numismatic evidence also provides information about their activities in the region. Although their political presence was significant for a period, available evidence does not indicate a major long-term cultural influence on the Tamil population of Northern Sri Lanka.

3.5. Muslims

Arab contacts with Sri Lanka developed significantly from the 8th century C.E., particularly through maritime trade. Northern Sri Lankan ports played an important role in these commercial connections. Mantai was one of the major ports through which international trade was conducted, while other ports were also used as commercial routes. According to Rajanayakam Mudaliar, Muslim traders travelled to Jaffna through the northern ports and subsequently used maritime routes around the Elephant Pass area. The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* also provides information concerning Muslims who settled in the Mirusuvil area through South Indian connections. Their activities were primarily associated with trade and commerce. Thus, Muslim communities had connections with Northern Sri Lanka before and during the Jaffna Kingdom period. Their commercial activities contributed to the economic life of the region, while Islam became an additional religious tradition within the multi-ethnic society of Northern Sri Lanka.

4. The Jaffna Kingdom and the Multi-Ethnic People

The Jaffna Kingdom emerged in Northern Sri Lanka during the 13th century C.E. and continued until the early 17th century C.E. Its territory included the Jaffna Peninsula, surrounding islands, parts of the Vanni, Mannar, and, at different periods, areas connected with Trincomalee. The kingdom was predominantly Tamil in its population and Hindu in its cultural and religious character. However, the Jaffna Kingdom was not exclusively inhabited by Tamils. Sinhalese, South Indians, Javakas, and Muslims also lived within or maintained connections with the kingdom. During its later period, Portuguese influence increased and Christianity was introduced more widely. Therefore, the Jaffna Kingdom can be studied as a political formation in which several ethnic and religious communities lived and interacted.

4.1. Tamils

The period of the Jaffna Kingdom represents an important stage in the development of Tamil political and cultural identity in Northern Sri Lanka. Although Tamils had lived in the region since ancient times, the establishment of the Jaffna Kingdom strengthened their political, linguistic, and cultural position. The use of the Tamil language in inscriptions and the existence of Sethu coins provide evidence of the importance of Tamil political culture during this period. Hinduism also remained an important feature of the kingdom. The establishment, reconstruction, and patronage of Hindu temples demonstrate the close relationship between the Jaffna rulers and Hindu religious traditions. Thus, the Jaffna Kingdom period was an important

period in the development of a distinct Tamil political and cultural identity in Northern Sri Lanka.

4.2. Sinhalese

The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* provides information concerning Sinhalese communities living in Northern Sri Lanka during the period of the Jaffna Kingdom. It also describes attempts by the Jaffna rulers to maintain peaceful relations between Sinhala and Tamil people. According to the *Yalppana Vaipavamalai*, during the reign of Vickrama Cinkaiyariyan, a conflict occurred between Sinhalese and Tamils. Two Tamils were killed and several others were injured. After learning about the incident, Vickrama Cinkaiyariyan investigated the matter and punished the Sinhalese leader Punjibanda, who was considered responsible, along with others involved in the conflict. The action taken by the king brought the conflict under control. Later, Varotaya Cinkaiyariyan introduced regulations concerning religious practices in order to prevent further religious conflict. Martanda Cinkaiyariyan and Gunapusana Cinkaiyariyan are also described as rulers who governed the people of the kingdom without discrimination. These accounts indicate attempts to maintain peaceful relations among different communities. During the reign of Verotaya Cinkaiyariyan, a rebellion involving Sinhalese communities occurred with the support of Vanniyar chiefs. After suppressing the rebellion, the king punished those responsible. However, the Sinhalese rebels later apologised, and the king forgave them, thereby restoring peace. During the reign of Kanakasuriya Cinkaiyariyan, the Sinhalese supported the Vanniyars and later supported the invasion of Sappumal Kumara. This contributed to the political changes that brought the influence of the Kotte Kingdom into the Jaffna Kingdom.

The influence of the Sinhala political tradition in the Jaffna Kingdom increased considerably with the invasions of Sappumal Kumara, the adopted son of Parakramabahu VI. After an unsuccessful first attempt, he invaded the Jaffna Kingdom again and captured it. He ruled the kingdom for approximately seventeen years. During this period, he received the support of local chiefs and undertook the reconstruction of Jaffna and the Nallur temple, which had been affected by warfare. The Nallur Katiyam praises him for the reconstruction of the Nallur Murugan Temple, and recent studies have also associated coins with his activities at Nallur. Sappumal Kumara's rule ended in 1467 C.E., after which Kanakasuriya Cinkaiyariyan returned to power. Kanakasuriya later returned from Tamil Nadu with an army and restored the Jaffna Kingdom. Following the revival of the Jaffna Kingdom, some Sinhala communities moved towards southern Sri Lanka. The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* also records the departure of Sinhalese people during the reign of King Cankili. Although ethnic and religious tensions occurred from time to time, the political relations between the Jaffna Kingdom and the Sinhala

kingdoms of Southern Sri Lanka were not based solely on ethnic or religious conflict. The evidence suggests that the Tamil rulers of Jaffna generally attempted to maintain political stability among the different communities living in the kingdom.

4.3. Javakas

The Javakas, who had established a political presence in Northern Sri Lanka before the emergence of the Jaffna Kingdom, continued to live in areas such as Chavakacheri and Chavankottai during the Jaffna Kingdom period. Evidence also connects Javakas with military activities in southern Sri Lanka. According to the *Yalppana Vaipavamalai*, the Javakas living in the Jaffna Kingdom were eventually expelled during the reign of King Cankili. Thus, it can be understood that Javaka communities continued to have a presence in Northern Sri Lanka during the Jaffna Kingdom period. However, compared with the Tamils, Sinhalese, South Indians, and Muslims, limited information is available concerning their social and cultural activities during this period.

4.4. Muslims

The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* provides information concerning the Muslim population during the Jaffna Kingdom period. According to this source, Muslims who came through South Indian connections settled in areas such as Mirusuvil and engaged in trade. They travelled to markets in places including Chavakachcheri, Kodikamam, Eluthumattuval, and Mukhavil. The source also refers to a settlement called Usan. Muslims also lived in areas associated with Nallur and participated in commercial and military activities under the Jaffna rulers. They established places of worship, including mosques. Later, some Muslim communities moved towards the eastern part of Navanthurai. These accounts demonstrate that Muslims formed an important part of the economic and social life of Northern Sri Lanka during the Jaffna Kingdom period.

4.5. South Indians

South Indian influence was significant throughout the period of the Jaffna Kingdom. The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* provides information concerning the arrival of South Indians and their involvement in the establishment and administration of the kingdom. According to the tradition recorded in this source, Pandimalavan travelled to Madurai and brought Cinkaiyariyan to establish the Jaffna Kingdom. Nallur was established as the capital, and people from South India were invited to assist with administrative activities. The close relationship between the Arya Cakravartti rulers and South India further strengthened these connections. The traditions concerning their South Indian origins indicate the continuing political and cultural relationship between Jaffna and South India.

The arrival and settlement of the Vanniyars provide another important example of South Indian migration. The *Yalppana Vaipavamalai* and *Vaiyapatal* contain information concerning the Vanniyars and their role in the northern region. According to the *Vaiyapatal*, Vanniyars accompanied a princess who came to Northern Sri Lanka for marriage with the Jaffna king Cinkaiyariyan I. Following the marriage, the Vanniyars were sent to the Vanni region, where they were expected to establish control and pay tribute to the Jaffna Kingdom. The *Vaiyapatal* further indicates that the Vanniyars obtained additional forces from different parts of South India to establish authority over Adangapattu. Similar information is found in the *Yalppana Vaipavamalai*. Although these literary accounts contain traditional elements, they provide evidence of the long-standing memory of South Indian migration and settlement in Northern Sri Lanka. Thus, the movement of people from South India contributed to the demographic and cultural development of the Jaffna Kingdom. Soldiers, administrators, traders, priests, and other groups from South India maintained close connections with the kingdom and contributed to its political, economic, social, and religious life.

5. The Arrival of the Portuguese and the Penetration of Christianity

Although the Portuguese arrived in Sri Lanka in 1505 C.E., their direct contact with the Jaffna Kingdom developed later, particularly from 1543 C.E. Their arrival introduced new European political, military, cultural, and religious influences into Northern Sri Lanka. Portuguese military and administrative officials, soldiers, and clergy became increasingly active in the region. As a result, Portuguese cultural influence and Christianity began to spread. Although the Jaffna rulers generally resisted Portuguese political and religious expansion, Portuguese influence became firmly established after the conquest of the Jaffna Kingdom in 1619 C.E. During the Portuguese period, the Burgher community emerged and Catholicism became increasingly influential. Several Hindu temples were destroyed, and Catholic churches were constructed in some places. Materials from Hindu temples and other buildings were also reused in the construction of churches and other structures. Consequently, Hindu religious institutions experienced a major decline during this period. The arrival of the Portuguese therefore introduced a new cultural and religious dimension to Northern Sri Lanka. Their presence further contributed to the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character that had developed in the region over earlier centuries.

6. Conclusion

Northern Sri Lanka has been a region of distinctive cultural traditions and human settlement since prehistoric times. Although Tamils formed the majority and became the most influential

ethnic group in the northern region, historical, literary, archaeological, and epigraphic evidence indicates that other communities also lived in the region. Sinhalese, South Indians, Javakas, and Muslims contributed to the political, economic, social, and religious development of Northern Sri Lanka at different periods. South Indian migration was particularly significant because of the geographical proximity between South India and Northern Sri Lanka. Political movements, trade, military activities, religious connections, and migration strengthened the relationship between the two regions. The establishment of the Jaffna Kingdom further strengthened Tamil political and cultural influence while maintaining interaction with other communities. During the Jaffna Kingdom period, Tamils remained the dominant population, while Sinhalese, South Indians, Javakas, and Muslims continued to live in the region. Their presence contributed to the multi-ethnic character of the kingdom. The arrival of the Portuguese during the later period introduced European cultural influence and Christianity, adding another dimension to the cultural diversity of Northern Sri Lanka. Therefore, Northern Sri Lanka should not be understood only as a region inhabited by a single ethnic or religious community. Rather, its history demonstrates interaction among different communities over a long period. At the same time, Tamils maintained a strong and distinctive cultural identity and remained the most influential community in Northern Sri Lanka, particularly during the period of the Jaffna Kingdom. The historical development of the region can therefore be understood through both the continuity of Tamil culture and the interaction of different ethnic and religious communities.

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