

## TAMIL CULTURAL PROFILE

**PLEASE NOTE:** This profile provides an overview of some of the cultural information relating to the Tamil speaking people who have originated from Sri Lanka but live in the South Eastern Region of Melbourne. This description may not apply to all people as individual experiences may vary. However this profile can be used as a guide to some of the issues that may concern your clients. Information about relevant services and activities are also included.

**We gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Tamil Senior Citizens Fellowship Victoria in preparing this profile.**

### Introduction

The island of Sri Lanka lies to the south of the Indian subcontinent. The island has long been inhabited by two main cultural groups, the Sinhalese from south of Sri Lanka and Tamils from the north.

Tamils around the world have a strong desire to establish Tamil culture, religion, art, drama, dance, music, philosophy, architecture, sculpture and related topics.

### Migration

- Tamil migration to Australia began in the early 1970s and is continuing at a slow but steady pace.
- In 1983 the civil disturbances in Sri Lanka caused a sudden rise in the number of Tamils migrating to this country. By 1986, there were 22,519 Sri Lanka born migrants including Tamils, Sinhalese and Burghers settled in Australia.
- In the following decades, many were fleeing the conflict in Sri Lanka between Tamils separatists and Sinhalese. Most of them arrived as humanitarian entrants under the Special Assistance Category (SAS) Class 215, introduced by the Australian Government in 1995.
- Additionally, there was also significant migration of Tamils under the Family Migration Program, the Onshore Protection Program and the Skilled Migration Program. They are generally middle class well educated, fluent in English and readily employable. All Tamil migrants travelled to Australia by air.

### Local Demographics:

#### Tamil speaking residents in the South East Region - ABS 2006

	City of Greater Dandenong	City of Kingston	City of Casey	Cardinia Shire
Total population of LGA	125,520	134,622	214,961	57,116
Total no. of Tamil speaking residents	1,297	649	1,005	6
No. of Tamil speaking residents, 55 years & over	154	93	101	-

## **Language**

- Tamil is a Dravidian Language which originated in South India.
- Tamil Culture and Tamil Language are estimated at 5000 years old and Tamil is one of the living classical languages of the world. Native of South Asia, Tamil is recognised as one of the national languages in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Singapore.
- It is also spoken widely in other Indian Ocean Islands like Mauritius, Fiji, as well as in U.K., U.S.A, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa etc. The Tamil speaking population around the world is about 65 million.
- The Tamil language is an ancient one with a rich literature dating back to more than 3,000 years. The literature is basically grammatical, moral and religious and also there exists medical and astrological values.

## **Religion**

- As a community Tamils believe in God and in worship. The majority of the Tamils living in Sri Lanka are Hindus. They worship God Siva, Ganesh and Murugan and Goddesses Saraswathi, Lakshmi and Durga. The Hindus in Melbourne have built two big temples, one at Carrum Downs and the other at the Basin near Boronia.
- A smaller number of the Tamils are Christians; they are generally regular church goers. They worship in a church of their denomination. The local Tamil Christians worship in two of the churches in Dandenong and Oakleigh. Services in Tamil are conducted once a month while the other weekly services are conducted either in English or are bilingual.

## **Attitudes and Issues with ageing**

- Tamils have a great respect for their elders who are consulted on important decision making. Respect is given by standing up when an elderly person enters the house or when speaking to an elderly person.
- Children are trained to obey and respect elders; parents, grand-parents and members of the extended families.
- It is customary for the children to care for their aged parents. Even many of the migrants practice this tradition. In return the parents too are very helpful by taking care of the grand-children.

## **Attitudes to Disability and Mental Illness**

- Normally people would look at people with disability and with mental illness with sympathy or say it is 'Karma'; the result of evil deeds of their previous birth. Mental illness and disability are stigmatized and not openly discussed within the community. Even in this modern world some people do believe it is a bad omen when they are getting out attending to an auspicious event and see a person with a disability.

## Customs/Values

- The family ties are very important to the Tamils. The first unit consists of father, mother and their children. The second is grand-father, grand-mother, and the families of the siblings. The next would be formed out of marriage attachment to wife's or husband's relations. Religion is an important source of value, ideals and aspiration. It also provides a location for community life.
- Customs and traditions are followed in birth, puberty, marriage, death and various religious annual ceremonies. The maternal uncle has prescribed duties to perform at customary functions for example at the naming of a new-born child, when a girl attains puberty and in marriages. It is also customary for women to wear 'Pottu'; girls who are not married wear black while the married women wear red. Flowers are worn in the heads of married ladies as a symbol of blessedness.
- The 'Saree' - a 6 meter material in length draped, is the traditional dress of the Tamil lady while 'Vershti' - a 4 meter material tied round the waist and a shirt on top, is for men.

## Communication styles

- When a Tamil person meets another they greet each other by putting their individual hands together; bringing them up to the chest saying 'Vanakkam'. Often females refrain from shaking hands with males. A hand-shake may be appropriate if a woman is educated or in a profession. Usually the handshakes are gentle not firm.

## Greetings

English Greeting	Tamil Greeting	Closest English Pronunciation
Hello	Vanakkam	Vanakkam
Good Morning	Kalai Vanakkam	Kaalay Vanakkam
Good Evening	Malai Vanakkam	Maalay Vanakkam
Goodbye	Poitu Varan	Pooitu Vaaren
Yes	Aam	Aam
No	Illai	Illay
Thank you	Nandri	Nandri

## Health beliefs and practices

- Expatriate Tamils strongly believe in western medicine and rarely resort to traditional native treatments that are still practiced by many at home. However, their attitude to mental illnesses and some forms of western treatment such as psychiatry is ambivalent.
- The Tamil community generally regards disability as shameful and a strong stigma is still attached to mental illness. There is therefore a need for some urgent work in this area, in particular to point out that effective treatments are available for these problems as well as to advise them about the many benefits the government offers for the disabled and their carers.

- Many believe and rely on cures through herbal medicines which have no side effects. This is known as 'Ayurvedic' treatment in Sri Lanka and there are many hospitals that provide native 'Ayurvedic' treatment for broken bones, sprains, asthma, aches and pains of joints etc. Herbal oils are used for massage as well. Meditation and Yoga are also practiced to create balance between the mind and body.

### **Naming Conventions**

- Hindus use their fathers' name first and the given name last and use the given name as the surname. The Christians usually have two given names one English name and a Tamil name and the fathers' name comes last and is used as the surname. Among some Christians, they could be identified by their family names, which are carried on for generations.

### **Key Hindu Festivals/significant dates**

Thaipongal (festival of harvest; honouring Sun)	-	14 <sup>th</sup> January
Thaipoosam (honouring Siva & his son Mugugan)	-	January/February
Vale festival (honour the War God Skanda)	-	July/August
Sivarathri (in honour of Siva)	-	February/March
Hindu New Year	-	14 <sup>th</sup> April
Ganesha Sathurthi (honour Ganesh son of Siva)	-	August/September
Navarathri (honour Goddess of knowledge Saraswathi, Wealth Lakshmi & courage Durga)	-	September/October
Deepavali (festival of lights- victory of good over evil- and return of Rama after his period of exile)		November
Skandasashti (6 days of fasting honouring Murugan)-		October/November

### **Key Christian Festivals**

Christmas	25 <sup>th</sup> December
New Year	1 <sup>st</sup> January
Good Friday	March/April
Easter	March/April

**Services & Activities useful for older Tamil people  
in Kingston, Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia \***

<b>Contact</b>	<b>Activities</b>
<p>Tamil Senior Citizens Fellowship Victoria 142 Drummond Street Oakleigh.</p> <p>Contact Person: Mr. N. Sivarasa , Secretary, TSCF Ph: 9561 0782 Mobile: 0402 749 879</p>	<p>The Tamil Senior Citizens Fellowship meet on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of every month 11.00 am to 3.00 pm.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural activities</li> <li>• Information Sessions, incl. health issues</li> <li>• Lunch is provided</li> <li>• Annual trips</li> </ul>
<p>Tamil Senior Women's Group Citizens' Advice Bureau (CAB) 186 Foster Street East Dandenong, Vic. 3175 Contact Person: Gloria Johnpillai Ph: 9799 4037</p>	<p>The group meets once a month</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Information sessions eg, health issues</li> <li>• Social interaction</li> <li>• Gentle Exercise</li> </ul>
<p>Tamil Senior Men's Group Burger Recreation Club 358 Haughton Street Clayton, Vic. 3168</p> <p>Contact person: Dr. N. Shanmuganathan Ph: 9857 0204</p>	<p>The group meets Wednesday 10.30am - 2 pm</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indoor games</li> <li>• Socialize over lunch</li> </ul>
<p>Leighmoor Adult Day Centre 185 Wickham Road, Moorabbin Vic. 3189 Ph: 9532 1094 Fax: 9532 3831 <a href="mailto:mdesa@moorfields.com.au">mdesa@moorfields.com.au</a></p>	<p>Indian/Sri Lankan outing group.</p> <p><i>Eligibility: Kingston</i></p>
<p>South East Region Migrant Resource Centre Level 1 314 Thomas Street Dandenong 3175</p> <p>Ph: 9706 8933 Fax: 9706 8830</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multicultural PAG core Monday Dandenong and Friday Doveton</li> <li>• Multicultural PAG high Tuesday Noble Park</li> <li>• Multicultural PAG core-high Wednesday Noble Park</li> <li>• Carer Support Program</li> <li>• Volunteer Visiting Program</li> </ul> <p><i>Eligibility: Greater Dandenong, Casey &amp; Cardinia</i></p>
<p>New Hope Migrant &amp; Refugee Centre 40 Grattan Street Prahan 3181</p> <p>Contact for PAG: Peter Kalathas Contact for ESL: Franca Pupillo</p> <p>Ph: 9576 4038</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Multicultural Planned Activity Group High Needs people.</li> <li>• Multicultural English classes (Tuesday &amp; Friday)</li> </ul> <p>Venue: Moorleigh Multicultural Centre Bignell Rd, East Bentleigh</p> <p><i>Eligibility: Kingston</i></p>

**\* This resource list of services (other than Council HACC), has been prepared for aged care staff in the Council areas of Kingston, Greater Dandenong, Casey and Cardinia. Some services and activities listed are in fact available to residents beyond these four municipalities.**