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## Veddhas

### Profile

The Veddhas or Waaniy-a-Laato (forestdwellers) of Sri Lanka are an indigenous group whose ancestry, according to legend, is traceable to the prehistoric inhabitants of the island. The Veddhas preserve a direct line of descent from the island's original Neolithic community dating from at least 14,000 BC. They inhabited the island before the arrival of both the Sinhalese and the Tamils.

Veddhas are distinguished by their hunting and gathering way of life, by their unwritten language, which is closely related to but distinct from Sinhalese, by their beliefs in traditional gods and ancestor spirits, and by the importance of ancestral lands to all aspects of their life. They live mostly as nomadic forest-dwellers in the remote eastern parts of the country.

The 1981 census does not provide any figures relating to the Veddha population but classifies them in the category of 'others', which is numbered at 2,000 individuals. The numerical strength of the Veddhas is fast dwindling, primarily because many of them are being assimilated into Sinhalese and Tamil society. Although no precise figures are available, the estimated population in 2006 is just below 2000.

### Historical context

The majority Sinhalese, both as part of their culture and as a result of the island's mythical and legendary history, however, regard Veddhas as 'evil' and unwanted. According to popular legend Vijaya, the leader of the original colonists from north India, who is said to have founded the first Sinhalese kingdom, married an indigenous princess as his first wife. He subsequently cast aside his princess and their two children for another princess from south India more suited to his rank and position. As the legend goes, while the indigenous princess returned to her 'demon people', the siblings fled to the forest and upon attaining maturity married each other and became forebears of the 'Veddhas'.

Veddhas have experienced drastic changes in their means of livelihood since the 1930s, when colonization schemes involving a massive influx of Sinhalese and Tamil settlers encroached on their homeland, the forests. This process has continued with large irrigation projects, the Gal Oya in the 1950s and the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme in 1977.

Government policies have favoured assimilation and conversion of Veddhas into settled agriculturists as a means to their economic and social enhancement and as a way to bring them into the national mainstream. The rights of the Veddhas have lately been eroded as a result of environmental policies that have involved the conversion of their traditional land into a national park. On 9 November 1983 the traditional Veddha lands, comprising 51,468 hectares, were designated a combined 'catchment area' and a forest and wildlife reserve. This project, conducted under the auspices of the Department of Wildlife Conservation, has meant the exclusion and separation of the Veddhas from their own lands and the loss of their traditional hunting grounds and honey sites. Amid conflicts between the majority Sinhalese and minority Tamils, ever since the independence of Sri Lanka, the plight of the Veddhas has been all but

ignored.

## **Current issues**

The Vedas continue to face discrimination and harassment. One aspect of assimilation has been through forcible inter-marriages with Tamil and Sinhalese people. Another problematic area is that of the continue exposure of forced relocation and marginalisation of the Veddahs. The Nomadic life style of the Veddahs is under threat with the Veddah leaders complaining that the government has continued to encourage encroachment and grabbing of their lands.

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