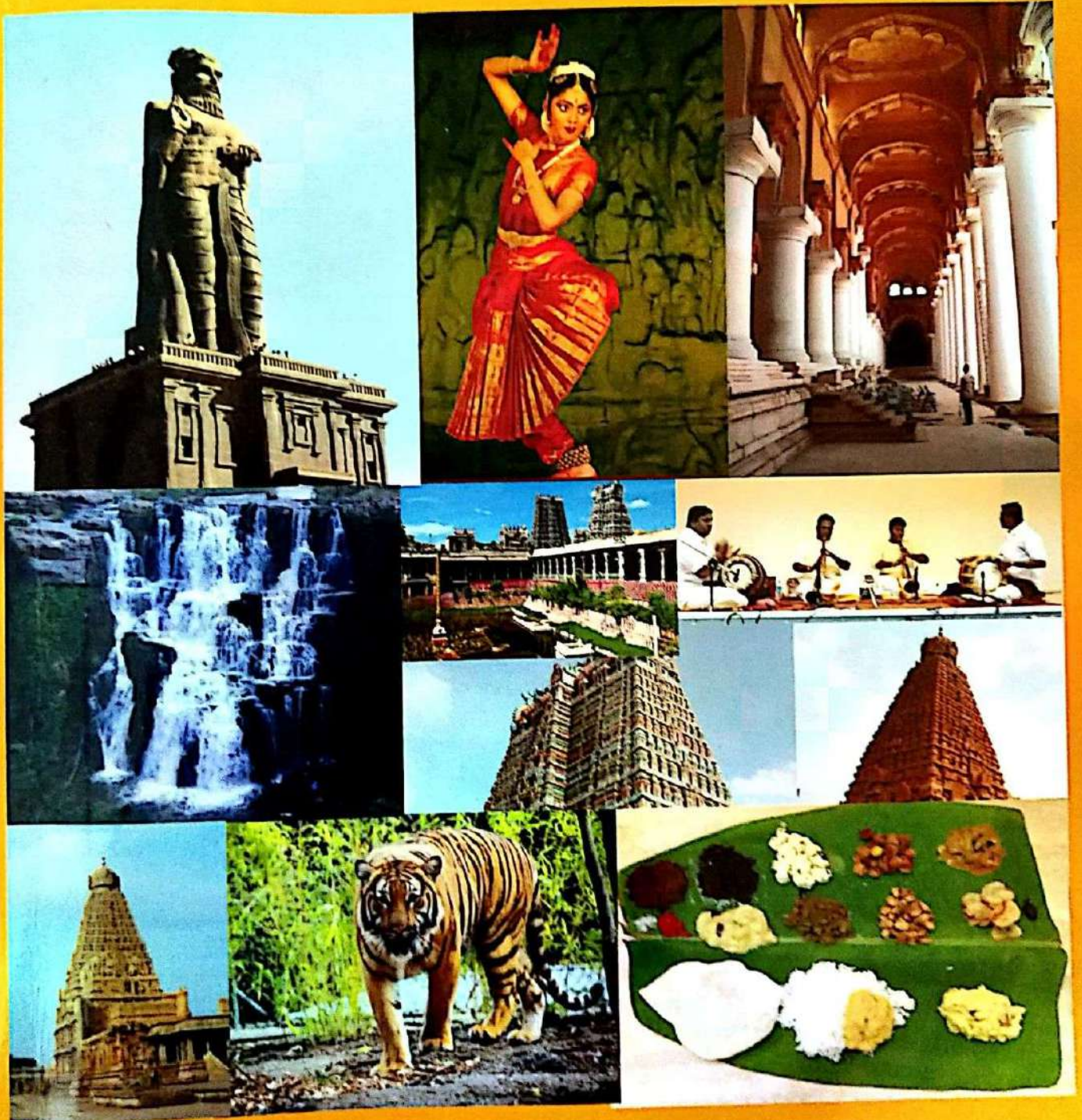


# Indian culture and tradition

(In the light of Historical Studies)



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## Tamil Coolie Emigration: A Passage To Sri Lanka, 1833-1917

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### Introduction

The socio-economic conditions created by the British colonialism in India forced many of the peasant and artisanal groups to move out of their country in search of livelihood. As the British pursued a policy of nonintervention, in the context of famines since 1833, the starving multitude had to emigrate to work on coffee or tea estates and sugarcane plantations of overseas countries. Emigration of Indian labourers into Sri Lanka (later Ceylon) started early in 1820s. In the initial phase, emigration of Tamil labourers into Sri Lanka was temporary in nature. However, the impoverished conditions of Tamil peasantry forced them to seek permanent employment in the plantations of Ceylon. The waves of emigration became stronger by the beginning of the third quarter of 19th century.

The objective of the paper is to study the emigration of Tamil labourers from Madras Presidency to Sri Lanka in the 19th century and first quarter of the 20th century. It has been classified into three parts. Initiation of the cash crop cultivation in the island country in 1820s by the British Sri Lankan Government, the initial cultivation of the Coffee, the Tamil indentured emigrant laborers influx into the coffee plantations and later into the tea plantations are narrated in the first and second part. The exploitative nature of the white planters of the Sri Lanka and the abominable living condition of the Tamil emigrant labourers in the Sri Lankan plantations are highlighted in the final part.

### I

The total area of Sri Lanka is 25,352 square miles. The island has two distinct types of climate; one is activated by the rain-winds that bring 'monsoons' from May to September. The Sinhalese language is believed to have so much in common with Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, Gujarati, Bengali and Marathi languages of India. If the Vedas, Nagas and Yaklahas are looked upon as the Pre-Aryan settlers in Ceylon, the Sinhalese and Tamils are regarded as the Post-Aryan migrants into the island. Both the Sinhalese and the Tamils are migrants from India but they belong to different racial stocks.

The British gained control of the island in 1815 and transformed it from subsistence agriculture to plantation economy. Coffee growing began in the 1820's in Ceylon, with the first crop being produced in 1823. But it was developed well only during the following decade, when much land was cleared and estates were opened up by individual planters backed by investment of capital.

The persons first to open up plantations in Ceylon were private individuals and English Government officials serving in Ceylon. The East India Company's officers rushed to Ceylon to invest their capital from England. The original sources of foreign capital in Ceylon were the savings of British officials and capital brought by private capitalists from England. Another source of capital in the later years of the coffee industry was the savings of the British public at large which were mobilized through the medium of limited joint stock companies. It appears that the first coffee plantations come up on lands granted by Sir Edward Barnes, the Governor of Ceylon, at Sinhapitiya and Weyanwattee near Gampola. Colonel George Bird was the planter.