

THE CULTURAL AND IDEOLOGICAL PRECONDITIONS  
FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A COMPARATIVE  
STUDY OF THE JAPANESE AND THE SINHALESE  
BUDDHIST COMMUNITY OF SRI LANKA

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## ABSTRACT

Japan is one of the success stories in Asia, being the first non-Western country to achieve the status of an economic superpower. Sri Lanka on the other hand, fell behind after independence. The reason for this decline was not the lack of 'objective' conditions for economic development but rather due to the absence of the subjective conditions. Max Weber always stressed the primacy of the subjective factor as against the objective factors in the process of economic development. The objective of this study would be to examine the cultural and ideological preparedness of the Sinhalese Buddhist majority community of Sri Lanka to embark on the path towards economic development within the universe of discourse opened up by Weber with his 'Protestant ethic' thesis. The following facts emerge.

- \* The Japanese have a general outlook on life which is 'this worldly' and even Japanese religions are ambivalent towards the other world and their main concern is with well-being in this life.
- \* The Japanese had a strong, purposive political leadership in the Samurai who took the country at a forced pace into modernization and development.
- \* The common people of Japan adopted as their own, the ideology and outlook of the Samurai elite. Hence a purposive, proactive attitude was easily achieved in matters relating to economic development.
- \* The way of thinking of the peasantry never became the ideological norm in Japan even though they formed the vast majority of the population.

\* In contrast to the Japanese, the Sinhalese Buddhist community of Sri Lanka has an all pervading religious ideology which gives primacy to soteriological salvation.

\*The Sinhalese never had a purposive political leadership like the Samurai. Japan had a warrior-aristocracy but Sri Lanka had a *farmer-aristocracy*.

\* There was neither a warrior tradition nor a trading tradition in Sinhalese society. Hence, certain vital attributes for the development of an entrepreneurial economy such as risk-taking and profit making have been traditionally alien to Sinhalese society.

\* After independence, the guiding principle of the Sinhalese has been the 'way of thinking' of the peasantry, as the Sinhalese lacked a worthy *elitist* tradition to draw inspiration from.

\* Socialism gained acceptance among the Sinhalese as Sinhalese ideologues tended to connect socialism with their idealized view of traditional Sinhalese peasant society.

\* Socialist experimentation for over two decades in the post-independence era tended to accentuate the historical weaknesses of the Sinhalese. The socialist practice of discouraging private initiative and enterprise and placing the blame for all their shortcomings on the evil machinations of the 'imperialists' 'capitalists' and other such bogey's became one of the mainstay's of Sinhalese ideology.

\* This combination of socialistic economic practices and the passive, directionless way of thinking common to the peasantry precluded the economic development of Sri Lanka.

\*Despite the fact that Teravada Buddhism posits soteriological salvation as the final goal, this was to be the aspiration of a chosen few - the monks while the laity were expected to be no less 'this worldly' than anybody else.

\*Hence the Teravada Buddhist lay ethic is very 'this worldly' and no less 'Protestantic' than the actual Protestant ethic that Weber spoke of.

\* However, this aspect of the Teravada lay ethic though well known virtually to the entire Buddhist population, is *never* practiced as it has been completely submerged by the overdetermining peasant tradition.

\* Despite the weight of peasant tradition in Sinhalese society, a very definitive Sinhalese entrepreneurial tradition has come up from the 'low country' and specifically from the South of Sri Lanka.

Thus certain favourable ideological and cultural preconditions for the economic development of the country are not totally absent among the Sinhalese. However, these elements are yet to be accentuated and harnessed for the purpose of national development. While there has been increasing interest in adopting Japanese style management practices and economic practices in Sri Lanka, it has been shown that Japanese style management and economic practices are successful only where the attitudes of the people towards matters of economic development approximate in some way to that of the Japanese. From the foregoing, it can be seen that the Sinhalese Buddhist majority community of Sri Lanka despite historical weaknesses, do have certain characteristics which can be harnessed for the purpose of economic development. However, major changes have to be made in the ideological sphere before a concerted drive towards economic development can take place. Given the changes that have taken place on the political front over the past two decades of free market economic ascendancy, the minds of the general public is now open and receptive for ideological change.