

# Lifestyle of Our Ancestors

## Introduction

Naturally we have a liking to learn the history of our country. Therefore, often we read books, newspaper articles, magazines and stories, etc. that were written on history. By now we have learnt many things about the history of our country including stories about kings, religious leaders, officials who were involved in administrative affairs and about tanks and reservoirs of ancient Lanka. In this lesson we will learn about the lifestyle of the people of ancient Sri Lanka.

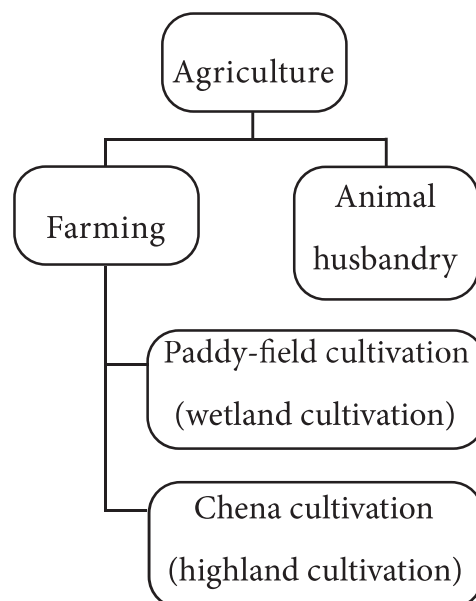
## Economy

The people who lived in our country in the olden days engaged in various occupations to earn their livelihood. Engaging in farming, trade, craftwork and animal husbandry are some examples for such occupations. Accordingly, the ancient people adopted their lifestyle based on three key areas, namely;

- agriculture
- craftwork
- trade

## Agriculture

Most of the ancient people of our country lived in villages. Unlike the present-day society, they led very simple lives, and their needs were very limited. One of the biggest challenges they had to face was to produce the food they needed for subsistence. In order to overcome this challenge, most of the people selected agriculture as their main source of livelihood. The agricultural sector of those days consisted of two main categories, namely chena cultivation or highland cultivation and paddy-field cultivation or wetland cultivation.



## Chena Cultivation

Chena cultivation is also called highland cultivation. Food crops like grains, vegetables and yams that were needed for basic subsistence were cultivated in chenas. Chena cultivation was done using rainwater.

Chena cultivation is considered to be the oldest method of cultivation in the world. In Sri Lanka, too, chena cultivation is a very old method of cultivating crops.

A particular area of land prepared by clearing some extent of wilderness and setting fire to it is called a chena. The chenas of the olden days are referred to as “**Sen**” in Ummagga Jathaka and as “**Pitibim**” in stone inscriptions. An extent of land in a forest, usually one which was situated a little away from the homes of the farmers, was selected for making a chena. Preparing of a land for a chena was done with manual labour either individually or in groups.

According to a story that the Mahavamsa tells us, five brothers of a certain family who lived in the village of Niselvitiya in a colony named Giri in Ruhuna during the reign of King Kawanthissa, got together and cleared a forest to prepare a chena for cultivating black gram.

Farmers had to toil to prepare a chena. In the process of cultivating a chena, the farmer had to carry out a number of tasks until the harvest had been gathered.

The process of chena cultivation involved these steps:

1. Selecting a suitable land for the chena
2. Cutting down the wood, clearing the land and setting fire to it
3. Removing stumps and roots and tilling the land

A chena thus prepared by clearing and setting fire to a virgin land is called a “*navadeli hena*” which means a chena that is being cultivated for the first time. Such virgin lands are considered to be extremely fertile farming lands.



Fig. 1.1 A virgin land (*navadeli hena*)

4. In addition to such tasks, the chena farmer had to look after the cultivation until the harvest had been gathered and also to protect it from wild animals like elephants, wild boars, sambur, porcupines and monkeys. In the olden days, farmers adopted various methods to protect their chenas from wild animals. Some of those methods included:

- building a stockade
- making a bonfire
- keeping guard from a watch hut

5. With the start of the rainy season, farmers started cultivating crops in their chenas. Various kinds of cereal crops like millet and kurakkan were mostly cultivated in chenas. According to literary sources, crops like green gram, *ma karal* (long beans), paspalum, ginger, mustard, cumin, a kind of paddy named *el wee*, sesame, cotton, and sugarcane, and vegetables like *karabatu*, solanum, brinjal, ash pumpkin and pumpkin, and various kinds of yams like *innala* and sweet potato were cultivated in chenas.

Earlier, even paddy was cultivated as a chena crop. The kind of paddy that was cultivated in chenas was called *el wee*. A chena or field in which *el wee* was cultivated was called an '*el hena*'. Literary works of the olden days speak of '*el hal*', the rice obtained from '*el wee*'. According to an ancient book entitled '*Seehalawaththu*', King Dutugemunu's son Prince Saliya was given that name because the *el wee* harvest of the season during which the prince was born was bountiful. 'Sali' is another name for '*el wee*'. In the past, *el wee* was sometimes cultivated in paddy fields, too. '*Rath el*', '*bibili el*' and '*indi el*' are examples for various kinds of *el wee* that were cultivated in chenas.

6. A chena was usually abandoned after it had been cultivated once or twice and the harvest had been gathered. After the chena had been abandoned, it became an area of wood once again and the farmers went for another land for cultivating their crops.

Simple tools like *keththas* (big knives), mamoties and sickles were used in chena cultivations.



Fig. 1.2 Several agricultural tools that were used in the past

We come across various terms in our language that were typically used related to chena cultivation. Although the terms that were used in the Anuradhapura era are not found at present, the following terms that were used in the recent past are useful in understanding the language usage that relates to chena cultivation:

- navadeli hena* – a chena that has been prepared after setting fire to a virgin land
- gini yathikawa*– shouting aloud in order to chase the animals away before setting fire to the chena
- heli kataa* – a scarecrow that was made using a clay pot as its head



Fig. 1.3  
A scarecrow

## ↓ Activity

Fill in the following table with information related to chena cultivation.

Cultivated crops	Special features	Tools used	Terms used

## Wetland Cultivation

Apart from chena cultivation, the most widespread method of cultivation that existed in the past was wetland cultivation. Wetland cultivation was also called paddy field cultivation or irrigated cultivation. Wetland cultivation was mostly done using irrigation water. Tanks and anicuts were constructed and water was supplied to paddy-fields through canals. Cultivating paddy fields with rainwater, too, was done in small scale.

The labour of a family was sufficient for cultivating a paddy field for the subsistence of the family. However the area of cultivated land had to be extended with the increase of population. Sources reveal that a tank had been built in each village during the era of the Anuradhapura kingdom. Those tanks were called village tanks. Persons that have been referred to as “wew hamika” or “vapi hamika” in the ancient stone inscriptions



must be the ones who built the village tanks or the ones who owned them.

As the water that was collected in the village tanks was not sufficient to cultivate large paddy fields, ancient kings built large tanks and dams. The Minneriya tank that was built by King Mahasen is an example for such large tanks. Because of the great service rendered by King Mahasen towards the advancement of the irrigation sector, he began to be called as “Minneri God”.

Paddy fields are usually cultivated twice a year. A period of the year during which paddy is cultivated is called a season. We often hear mention of two such seasons, namely;

- *Maha* season, and
- *Yala* season

Paddy was sometimes cultivated in an intermediate season in addition to the two main seasons. The stone inscription in Thonigala reports that paddy had been cultivated in three seasons, namely, Akala hasa (*maha* season), Madhahasa (intermediate season) and Pitadhada hasa (*yala* season).

Farmers had to toil to prepare the paddy field for cultivating paddy. Preparing the paddy field involved carrying out a number of activities.

Tilling the land was done using a plough that was pulled by buffaloes. It is called ploughing. As the soil is upturned when ploughing, the weeds get covered with soil and they naturally

decay and enrich the soil. The machines that are used for ploughing at present cause a lot of damage to the soil, but the methods of ploughing used in the past did not cause any damage to the environment.

Then the farmer divided the land into smaller fields with weir-like bunds in order to manage water – to retain the water required for the cultivation and to drain off the unwanted water. After the field has been prepared in this manner, it is sown with paddy.

Animals, particularly insects and birds, often damage paddy cultivations. Therefore farmers adopted various traditional methods to protect their cultivations from the time paddy was sown until the harvest had been gathered. Some of these methods included:

- standing the head part of coconut fronds along the bund and here and there in the middle of the paddy field.
- lighting wicks that had been soaked in oil.

Strips of rags were twisted into wicks and those wicks were soaked in *mee* oil (oil extracted from the seeds of the tree named ‘*mee*’) and were tied to *kaduru* sticks which were then stood in the paddy fields and the wicks were then lighted. Such methods were adopted in the past to repel insects.

Tools like the plough, *poruwa*, sickle, and mamoty were used in paddy cultivation.



Fig. 1.4  
Ploughing



Fig. 1.5 An old sickle



Fig. 1.6 Gathering harvest together

Harvesting of the paddy is commenced when the crop is ripe. It is called 'paddy cutting'. In the past, it was done completely with human labour. The paddy thus cut was threshed using buffaloes. After threshing, the paddy was safely stored until it was taken for consumption. The farmers built a storage bin called '*vee bissa*' for storing paddy.

It was the women who ground the paddy and made the two varieties of rice called raw rice and boiled rice which are cooked for consumption. Raw rice is made by grinding paddy in its raw form while boiled rice is made by grinding paddy which has been boiled and then dried.

In the ancient times, the villagers had established the good habit of consuming food thriftily avoiding waste until the harvest of the next season was gathered.

Some of the terms that were typically used in wetland cultivation were:

*goyam madinawa* - thresh the paddy  
*goyam kolaya* - a pile of cut paddy  
*kamatha* - the threshing floor



Fig. 1.7  
*Vee bisso*  
 (traditional paddy storage bin)

## ↓ Activity

Fill in the table with information related to wetland cultivation.

Cultivated season	Special features	Terms used	Tools used

## Animal Husbandry

In addition to chena cultivation and wet land cultivation that have been discussed above, animal husbandry, too, was another main source of livelihood of the ancient people. Animal husbandry means rearing of animals for obtaining meat, milk, and eggs for food and rearing them for agricultural and transportation purposes. Since ancient times, cattle, goats, poultry and pigs had been reared by the livestock farmers of our country.

Cattle are animals that are very important to man as they can be used to obtain milk as well as for agricultural activities and transportation purposes. Because of this reason rearing cattle was very popular in the ancient society. Cows that were used to obtain milk were called “**kiri geri**”, which meant ‘milch cow’. In the past, five nutritious things such as **milk curd**, **buttermilk**, **ghee** and **butter** were obtained from cows. They are known as ‘**pasgorasa**’ (five tasty food obtained from cow). In the past cattle were



not reared for the purpose of obtaining meat, and eating beef was not popular either. In cattle farming, those who were employed to look after and graze cattle were called cowherd (cow-boy). Ancient sources mention of villages called '*gopala gam*' where cowherds lived.

According to the Mahavamsa, King Pandukabhaya had spent his childhood in a village of cowherds called Doramadala.

As ancient people did not have modes of transport as efficient as those used at present, they used cattle for transportation of people and goods.

The cattle that were used for transportation purposes were called '*gel meevun*' and '*gel gon*'. Transporting goods in a pack that was placed on the back of cattle or 'pack-bull' was called '*thawalama*'.

Poultry farming was done in order to obtain eggs and meat. In addition to that, goats had been reared for their milk and meat.



Fig. 1.8 *Thawalama* "pack bull"



Fig. 1.9 Thresh paddy using animals

## Craft Industry

There were different types of craft industries established for the needs of the ancient people. People who were skillful at producing goods worked in these industries. They were known as craftsmen and they sometimes lived in groups.



It is visible that these industries sprung in the areas where raw materials could be obtained easily.

The following are some of the craft industries that existed in the past:

Craft	Craftsmen	Goods produced
Metals (iron, brass, gold, silver)	blacksmith (one who makes iron tools)  goldsmith (one who makes objects from gold)  copper worker (one who makes copper articles)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• agricultural tools - big knives, axes, sickles, ploughs, bows, swords, shields, spears</li> <li>• jewellery – necklaces, bangles, earrings, head dresses</li> <li>• copper articles</li> </ul>



Fig. 1.10 Bellows used in iron industry on the left and several iron nails found in archaeological excavations on the right

Craft	Craftsmen	Goods produced
pottery	potter	roofing tiles, bricks, pots
sugarcane		molasses, jaggery, sugar
cotton (textile industry)	weaver	textiles
gems	gem cutter	cutting gems, polishing gems

## ↓ Activity

Fill in the following table using information regarding industries of ancient Sri Lanka.

Industry	Craftsmen	Products	Tools used



Fig. 1.11  
Making clay  
pots using  
pottor's wheel

## Trade

Trade, too, was one of the main sources of livelihood of ancient people. Therefore ancient Sri Lanka had a highly flourished trade. As in the present-day, there existed two types of trade activities, namely:

1. trade within the country, and
2. trade with foreign countries

Trade within the country is called internal trade while trade with foreign countries is called external or foreign trade.

## Internal Trade

Although barter was the most preferred system of trade in the ancient times, coins, too, were occasionally used in exchange of goods.

Bartering is the system of exchange by which goods are directly exchanged for other goods. Although cash should usually be paid when buying goods, in bartering, other goods are given in exchange of what is bought instead of paying in cash.

Together with the expansion of trade, there evolved trade cities. Anuradhapura and Magama are two examples for such trade cities. Sometimes such trade cities had been referred to as 'nigama' in ancient sources. Those who became wealthy by engaging in trade lived in these cities. It seems that there have also been foreigners as well as locals among such people. Those who were engaged in trade organized themselves as separate groups. Such trade organizations were called "puga". There were several trade guilds into which foreign traders had organized themselves. Nanadesi and Wala Nghjiyar are examples for such trade guilds. Each of such trade guilds used separate symbols in order to establish their identities. They were called 'seals'.



Fig. 1.12 A hasebu kahapana coin (sealed or branded coins) found at the Ampara Rajagala archaeological excavation site. (Original coin on the left and its replica on the right)

Hasebu kahapana are the first coins used in Sri Lanka 2000 years ago. On this coin made of silver, there are symbols of a tree with leaves, an elephant and the sun. Finding this coin from Ampara area is a clear evidence that the use of coins was famous in other areas too except in Anuradhapura by 1B.C.

In addition to trade cities, there also existed trade villages which were involved in trade. Such trade villages were called 'pattana gam' or 'patun gam'.

Shops had been set up along the streets for selling goods. Various items like pots, textiles, jewellery and food items were sold in these shops. Sources report of an incident where the giant warrior Suranimala who came to Anuradhapura from a village called Magama in Ruhuna had bought perfume from a shop in Anuradhapura.

On one occasion, when King Udaya IV (946 – 954 AD) arrived in Mahiyangana Temple, the residents of the area complained to the King that various acts of injustice were committed at the market called 'Hopitigamu'

which was situated in the close-by Sorabora area. The King erected a stone inscription in order to prevent such acts of injustice. This inscription is called Badulla stone inscription pillar. The following are some of the laws and rules that relate to the control of the market as stipulated in that inscription:

- Goods that are being brought to the market should not be purchased before they enter the market.
- Balances and weights which had not been approved should not be used.
- Betel and areca nut etc. should be sold after placing them in proper halls.

- Taxes should not be charged on goods for carrying them through the market unless they are sold there.



### Activity

Write 05 sentences on the internal trade of ancient Lanka.

### External Trade

As Sri Lanka is located towards the centre of the Indian Ocean, it had a highly flourished trade relationships with foreign countries since ancient times. India, China, Rome, Persia, Arab and South Eastern Asia were prominent among those countries.

Items which were available in Sri Lanka namely, ivory, pearls, gems, spices, medicines, valuable timber and elephants were traded to foreign countries. In the past Sri Lanka was called '*Rathna Deepa*' (Island of Gems) because it had gained a high reputation for precious stones. Crockery, silk cloth, perfumes and horses were imported to Sri Lanka.

The harbours such as Dambakolapatuna in Kankasanthuri *Mathota* in Mannar, *Gokanna* in Trincomalee, and *Godawaya* Hambantota were very important for Sri Lanka's foreign trade.

It was in these harbours that loading of exported goods and unloading of imported goods were done.

Parts of imported objects that had been used in this country in the past and

different types of coins belonging to other countries have been found in archaeological excavations at various sites. Sources report that King Bhathikabhaya who once ruled the Anuradhapura Kingdom sent messengers from Lanka to Rome in order to import beads that he needed for the adornment that was made to decorate Ruwanweliseya.

These trade activities were mostly done along sea routes. Ships of different sizes were used to transport people and goods. Ancient sources reveal that ships belonging to countries like India and Persia often arrived in Sri Lanka. Sources available in China report that strong Sri Lankan ships consisting of several decks and flights of stairs were seen in the harbours of China.

Various officers had been employed to control the activities that were related to foreign trade. Sources reveal that there had been officers who performed duties related to harbours (customs officers).



Fig. 1.13 Chinese pottery found in Sri Lanka

The duty of those officers was to charge taxes from the ships that arrived in the harbours. Proof of this is given by the information that is available about the taxes that had been charged at Godawaya harbour.





Fig. 1.14 Old Chinese coins found in Sri Lanka



### Activity

Fill in the following table with information related to foreign trade.

Countries related to trade	Goods imported	Goods export-ed	Harbours in Sri Lanka

## Culture

Sri Lanka is a country where people of different ethnicities reside. Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim are those ethnic groups. They belong to different cultures. Therefore, diverse cultural characteristics that belong to different ethnicities are visible in our country. Culture can be defined as the collection of different characteristics such as beliefs, customs, social habits, clothes, food style, ethics, entertainment of a particular group of people in a society.

There was a great transformation in the ancient society with the introduction of Buddhism to our country during the rule of King Devanampiyatissa. People became disciplined in the society. Mutual cooperation developed. It was visible that people worked in mutual cooperation in common tasks such as constructing stupas, temples and aramas, tanks, dams and roadways. Such values are good examples from the past to learn at present. Let's discuss this further by taking a few examples of good customs that existed in the past.

### *Aththam* Method (Exchange of Labour)

*Aththam* method is the exchange of labour. Although the livelihood of the majority of people who lived in our country was agriculture, they used the labour of the family. But, the labour of a large number of people was needed for activities like gathering harvest. People got the assistance of their neighbours for this. Therefore, mutual cordiality, cooperation and assistance developed.

The method of giving the same amount of labour of the farmer to others for the assistance rendered to him existed in the ancient society. *Aththam* method was an example for that. Ancient sources contain stories about common people as well as kings who participated in agricultural activities.

There is a story about King Mahachuli Maha Tissa who ruled during the Anuradhapura kingdom disguised himself as a labourer and participated in a gathering of harvest.

## Marriage

Marriage is a very special occasion in a person's life. Ancient society considered marriage to be something that should be highly respected, for the unit that is called 'family' evolves from marriage. Even in the past, parents made every effort to arrange marriages for their children from families that suited their family backgrounds and lineages. Entering into marriage following customs and traditions with the consent and blessings of parents was the practice that was established in the ancient society. Children with moral virtues and good behaviour were admired by adults. Unlike in the present-day lavish wedding ceremonies which follow fashions, marriage ceremonies in the past were simple and meaningful and were conducted in a respectable manner.

In ancient societies, girls grew up under the protection of their parents. They were required to have proper training in cooking and keeping the house clean and beautiful.

It is stated in Sahassavaththupakarana that it is the responsibility of the parents to make their daughters skilled in cookery (cooking).

The great literary work Saddharmalankaraya reports that Ashokamala, the queen of Prince Saliya, prepared delicious meals.

Women who were highly skilled in cookery had been called as **madupachika** in ancient sources.

It is a good example for us to learn how children in the past were trained under their parents to support the family and to keep

house.

## Funerals

As far as funeral arrangements of the ancient society are considered, it has been revealed that there had been separate cemeteries allocated for different social groups. There also existed practices like cremation, burial of the ashes that remain after the cremation and depositing of corpses in tombs in forests had existed.

According to the Mahavamsa, 150 cemetery overseers had been employed to carry corpses during the reign of King Pandukabhaya, and there had been a separate cemetery for the people belonging to the Chandala caste. Some sources report that corpses were wrapped in sheets of cloth, were placed on a bier and were carried by four people.

After the death of a person, the relatives of the dead person are said to have offered some contribution to the next head of the family of the dead person. Such contributions may have been made in order to support the family of the dead person in case of any financial difficulty that the family may run into. The ancient people had the great quality of coming forward without any hesitation to support their relatives and neighbours when they run into trouble or when they suffer distress.

It was an ancient custom to refrain from playing the funeral drum in front of a religious place while a funeral procession is passing a religious place.

## Customs and Values

Our society which has a long history is rich with customs and values. Ancient people who were very keen in fulfilling their duties, respected and took care of adults. Ancient sources reveal how not only common people but kings too took care of their parents. The Mahavamsa records how King Aggabodhi VII who ruled during the Anuradhapura kingdom took care of his mother.

The King was very happy to care for his mother all day. He had started his chores early in the morning and the Mahavamsa records “applied oil in her hair, massaged the head, washed her and put her to sleep after applying perfumes on her body. He had even trimmed her nails and had bathed her. The King had put comfortable garments on her and washed dirty clothes all by himself”.

Ancient people led a religious and virtuous life. They had given alms according to their capability and had collected merits. Ancient information reveal that they lived as virtuous citizens.



### Activity

Write an essay on the lessons that could be taken from the ancient society to shape the present society.

## Summary

1. Agriculture, craft industry and trade were the main livelihoods of the ancient people.
2. Chena cultivation is the first type of cultivation that took place in the past. Under this cultivation, grains, yams, vegetables and fruits needed for the subsistence of the people were produced.
3. Although paddy cultivation was done as chena cultivation, due to increase in population paddy cultivation was done extensively.
4. Although there were two seasons for paddy cultivation apart from yala season and maha season, paddy cultivation was done as an intermediate season too.
5. Ancient people were used to engage in food security in order to prevent waste of food and for future consumption. *Vee bissa* (paddy storage bin) was a good example for this.
6. There were grades of craftsmen who were skillful in different crafts.
7. Sri Lanka had advanced trade relations with India, Greece, Persia, Arabia, China, Southeastern Asia from ancient time.
8. Ancient people had great values like looking after their parents and lived in mutual cooperation.