

MARGINALITY IN THE BURGHERS

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This study attempts to analyse marginality in the Burgher community in Sri Lanka and in Australia. It examines the interaction between the Burghers and the dominant communities in Sri Lanka, namely the British who were a colonial elite and the Sinhalese. It also discusses the reasons for Burgher migration to Australia and the acculturation of the Burghers to Australian society. The analysis is made within the theoretical framework of marginal man.

With British colonialization of Sri Lanka, the Burghers were subordinated and relegated to an intermediary position between the ruling elite and the indigenous population. This resulted not only in their political and social marginalization from the ruling elite, but simultaneously their marginalization from the indigenous population. What characterized the Burgher's dual marginality in Sri Lanka was their willingness to accept most of the customs and traditions of the British culture, including the English Language but at the same time unequivocally rejecting the Eastern culture of the indigenous population. Their acceptance of the British culture reduced their marginality in relation to the colonizers and this worked to their advantage during British colonial rule. With political independence however, the situation changed. Their Euro-ethnocentricity now became a handicap because they were identified by the Sinhalese as part of the previous colonial structure.

The Burgher migration to Australia may be seen as an attempt to escape the marginality they faced in Sri Lanka. However, contrary to their expectations, the Burghers found that they were marginal in the Australian situation. Although the Burghers had strong European orientations, many of them on emigration discovered that they were culturally marginal to mainstream Australian society. Considered in Sri Lanka as a Westernized people, they were now considered Eastern by the Australians. The Burghers differed culturally in some of their traditions and customs, including differences in the food they consumed and more importantly in their formal and informal social interactions. Thus, they had merely exchanged one form of marginality for another.