



SRI LANKA



Sowing the Seed in Sri Lanka

Shanthini Gnaniah, with Back to the Bible, describes Christian publishing in Sri Lanka.

Situated off the southernmost tip of the Indian peninsula lies the little island of Sri Lanka. Appropriately called the “Pearl of the Indian Ocean,” this teardrop-shaped island is blessed with natural beauty and bountiful harvests.

Sri Lanka, formerly known as Ceylon, is a predominantly Buddhist country where religion plays a vital role in the lives of the people and in

The country’s population of over 19 million is comprised by a Sinhala majority and a Tamil minority. Sinhala is the official language spoken by 74 percent of the population, while the Tamil language is used by 25 percent of Sri Lanka’s citizens. In recent years, lives have been lost, property destroyed and families divided due to the bitter ethnic conflict between the two communities.

with translations of books originally published in English. Over time, the need to publish books that are more relevant to the native population became evident and soon original works in Sinhala and Tamil began to enter this publishing market.

Back to the Bible

Over the past 30 years, Back to the Bible, one of the major Christian publishers in Sri Lanka, has produced a fine selection of more than 100 titles in Sinhala and in Tamil. In addition to books, Back to the Bible produces devotionals and song books. Copies of radio messages are often requested in printed form. Back to the Bible has regularly offered literature free of charge to its radio listeners.

Back to the Bible publishes 4250 copies of a daily devotional in the Tamil language. These are distributed on subscription basis. More than ten percent of these are sent to Tamil refugees who fled the country due to the ethnic conflict and to migrant workers in the

Middle East. There is a need for good Bible commentaries in the Tamil language and Back to the Bible has plans of commencing this work.

Back to the Bible also publishes a bimonthly magazine and a journal in English. The magazine is very popular. Circulation for the journal has been limited to supporters and radio listeners of Back to the Bible. However, efforts are being made to introduce this to the entire English speaking community in Sri Lanka.

Other Publishers

Other ministries in Sri Lanka have made very important contributions towards publishing high quality Christian works.

The Every Home Crusade publishes magazines in English, Sinhala and Tamil. Circulation stands at around 4000 magazines per month among Christians in Sri Lanka.

The Bible Society in Sri Lanka, the oldest Christian organization in the country, has many tracts, Bibles, Bible portions, children’s comics, color-

Though Sri Lanka is predominantly a Buddhist country, publishers are free to produce and distribute Christian literature.

politics. Christianity was introduced to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese, Dutch and British who occupied and ruled the country for many centuries. Sri Lanka gained independence from the British in 1948.

In the midst of the violence and strife that has torn the country apart and ruined its economy, efforts to publish Christian literature have continued. Publications initially got under way

ing books and cards with Scripture verses for all occasions. With Every Home Crusade, The Bible Society in Sri Lanka published *Cover To Cover*, a guide to read through the Bible in one year, printed in Sinhala and Tamil.

Lanka Bible College has published a useful selection of Christian text books for seminary students. It also publishes commentaries, books on pastoral ministry, church history, Christian ethics, and a theological dictionary. Most are by local authors, though a few are translations from the English language. To date, 45 titles in Tamil and 49 in Sinhala have been published and distributed to students at Lanka Bible College and other seminaries across Sri Lanka. These books are offered at discount rates to needy students. Twenty new titles are due to be published soon.

The International Bible Society has been involved in translating and publishing Bibles in Sinhala and Tamil.

Pragna Publishers has sought to publish evangelistic books in Sinhala.

Christian Literature Crusade, New Life, and many other evangelical organizations and churches, have also commenced publishing books and commentaries in the vernacular languages.

Challenges and opportunities

It is not easy to raise the finances needed to provide literature free of charge. Because of this, in recent years the Sinhala publishing industry has

slowly been changing from non-profit entities to profit-making ventures. The availability of economically priced, good literature published in India brings some competition into the market. It takes some effort to select topics for publication and the needs of the people are vast and varied.

Distribution of Christian literature is mainly through churches and Christian book stores. Book stalls at Christian events have also been a good venue for literature sales, especially when evangelistic teams go out on missions to outlying areas. Recent years have seen a marked increase in the number of Christian book shops.

Secular book stores do not seem to be popular sales outlets for Christian

literature. Ways to sell books in this venue are being explored. Eye-catching professional advertisements are also planned.

Christian radio broadcasts to workers in the Middle East have opened up new opportunities for literature distribution to the migrant Sinhala community through Christian book stores there. Letters received from workers in the Middle East show that they often feel lonely and depressed. Sinhala literature will meet their needs and will also be an asset to those ministering to this community.

Christian publishers are grateful for the freedom they have to publish and distribute Christian literature in Sri Lanka. The country has a literacy rate of over 85 percent

and free education is available to all children over five years of age. Despite this, the reading habits of the majority Sinhala community are rather poor. It is a challenge for publishers to motivate them to read and to purchase Christian literature. The reading habits of the Tamil community in Sri Lanka are also showing a downward trend, due to the influence and popularity of TV, videos and radio. Nevertheless, Christian publishers in Sri Lanka pray that Christian literature will help the citizens of this country, torn apart by violence and strife and desperately in need of peace, find true peace.❖



The Christian sign on the building above shows the three main languages used in Sri Lanka: Sinhala, Tamil, and English.