

Introduction

The Pearl of the Indian Ocean, the Paradise Isle of the East, the Teardrop of India – just a few of the many names used to describe the ‘resplendent island’ of Sri Lanka, formerly Ceylon. It’s a magical land of breathtaking charm and azure beauty but it is also a place of deep ethnic and religious division.



History

It is thought that Sri Lanka’s history began around 500 AD when the Sinhalese migrated to the island from India. Legend has it that the first settlers were led there by a man named Vijaya, the first Sinhalese king. Later in about 260 AD Buddhism was introduced and became an integral part of Sinhalese culture. Buddhism, coupled with a sophisticated irrigation system, became the foundations of classical Sinhalese civilisation.

When the first Portuguese traders arrived in 1505 in search of cinnamon and spices they found an island divided into seven warring kingdoms. The inability of the kingdoms to fend off intruders meant that by 1521 the Portuguese were able to gain control of the island.

Over the 16th century the Portuguese and Sinhalese were involved in many disputes. Many of the lowland Sinhalese, influenced by the Portuguese, converted to Christianity but the Buddhist majority disliked Portugal’s influence and,

in 1602, the king of the island appealed to the Dutch for help. In 1638 the Dutch attacked and by 1660 most of the island (except for the kingdom of Kandy) was under the control of the Dutch. Dutch law continues to play a significant part in Sri Lankan jurisprudence today.

Dutch control was cut short by the arrival of the British in 1815 who seized the island, including the kingdom of Kandy, creating the Crown Colony of Ceylon. A plantation economy developed under the British with tea, rubber and coconut plantations flourishing.

In 1919 the Ceylon National Congress was founded to campaign for greater autonomy. In 1931 the British granted Ceylon limited self-rule and a universal franchise. Finally on 4 February 1948 the British granted Ceylon independence.

In 1972 the country became a republic and took the name Sri Lanka. Today, Sri Lanka is a parliamentary democracy with the president as the head of state.

Since the 1970s serious conflict has arisen between the northern Tamils, who want a separate Tamil state, and the Sinhalese majority. In 2002 the Sri Lankan government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam entered into a ceasefire agreement. However, negotiations on a final settlement, brokered by Norway, came to an end in 2003. In April 2006 the level of violence sharply increased in the north and east of the country. Thousands of Tamils have fled to India and further afield.

Current challenges

- ▶ The Boxing Day tsunami of 2004 killed around 40,000 Sri Lankans and displaced between 400,000 and 500,000 people. Half the fishing fleet was destroyed.
- ▶ The deteriorating security situation in Sri Lanka has resulted in over 1,000 refugees fleeing to India in the first six months of 2006 alone, adding to the 60,000 refugees who have already left Sri Lanka since the civil war began 20 years ago.
- ▶ Over 300,000 people have been internally displaced by the ongoing conflict in the north and east of the country.

- ▶ One third of Sri Lankan children are underweight and about 30 per cent of women and children under five are anaemic.

BMS involvement in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is one of BMS World Mission's oldest partners, with the first BMS worker beginning work on the island in 1812. BMS works closely with the Baptist Church and other partner bodies in Sri Lanka.

Background Information

The land

The Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is situated south of India in the Indian Ocean. From the coast the land, which is mostly flat and rolling, rises to a central mountain range 1,500 metres above sea level. The island has over 1,600 km of beaches.

The country has climate links with three continents. Monsoon winds drive against Sri Lanka's mountains creating lush vegetation in the south. The northern half of the island is a dry zone. Around 40 per cent of Sri Lanka is covered in tropical forest.

Sri Lanka has many natural resources – such as gems, limestone, clay – and a diverse fauna and flora. The main Sri Lankan exports are diamonds, textiles and clothing, tea, coconut produce and petroleum products. The country's chief agricultural crops are paddy, tea and rubber.

There are 19 million people in Sri Lanka composed mostly of Sinhalese (74 per cent), Tamil (18 per cent) and Moor (seven per cent). There are two official languages – Sinhala and Tamil.

Religion

The main religions in Sri Lanka are Buddhism (70 per cent), Hinduism (15 per cent), Christianity (eight per cent) and Islam (seven per cent). Sometimes, due largely to the multi-ethnicity of the island, elements of all the main religions combine with the indigenous culture to create religious practices unique to Sri Lanka.

Religion is an inseparable part of Sri Lankan society affecting everything from politics and laws to everyday life. Despite the diversity expressed in Sri Lankan society there is growing anti-Christian sentiment. Increasingly Christians are being

targeted, churches destroyed and Christian workers killed. A Buddhist party, the Jathika Hela Urumaya, which accuses Christians of forcibly converting people to Christianity, has tried, for a number of years, to get parliament to pass an anti-conversion law which will prevent anyone wishing to convert from one religion to another.

The Sri Lanka Baptist Sangamaya (Union) has 22 churches with over 5,000 members.

Prayer points

- ▶ Pray for the Church in Sri Lanka which faces enormous persecution; that God would strengthen Christians, give them words to speak in their defence and an ability to love those who are persecuting them.
- ▶ Pray for the government of the island to prevent the anti-conversion law from being passed and that the island would become an example to its neighbours of diversity working together harmoniously.
- ▶ Pray for reconciliation between the Tamils and Sinhalese; that they would put aside their differences, embrace their uniqueness and celebrate their multiplicity.

FURTHER INFORMATION

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