

Approximately 16 million members of the Sinhalese ethnic group live throughout the world. They are the dominant people of Sri Lanka, the beautiful island situated off the south-east coast of India. In Sri Lanka, where they comprise about 75 per cent of the nation's population, they primarily inhabit the verdant central and south-western areas. There are an additional 1.5 million Sinhalese people scattered around the world.¹

The Sinhalese are one of the few Buddhist peoples in the world that speak a language from the Indo-European linguistic family. Sinhalese is closely related to the language spoken in the Maldives, but the Maldivians are almost completely Muslims, while most Sinhalese are Buddhists. The Sinhalese have absorbed much Hindu influence because of their close proximity to India. This influence can be seen today, for example, in the many castes (which are unusual for a Buddhist group) among the Sinhalese people.

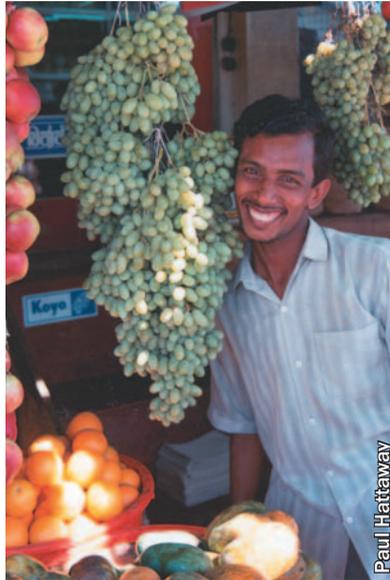
The Sinhalese first arrived in Sri Lanka at least 300 years before the Christian era. Various colonial powers have controlled Sri Lanka (formerly called Ceylon) for much of its history. The Portuguese, Dutch and British all had turns running the island for almost 450 years. The British finally relinquished control in 1948, and Sri Lanka was granted independence. Since that time the Sinhalese have been in almost constant conflict with the Hindu Tamils in the north of the country, who demand an independent state. The three million Tamils in Sri Lanka have been funded by their Tamil cousins in India, where they number

more than 60 million. Full-scale war was declared in 1983, which has resulted in tens of thousands of deaths.

Buddhism was introduced to Sri Lanka in the 3rd century AD. Over the centuries, the strong Theravada sect of Buddhism blossomed among the Sinhalese. They are responsible for the spread of Theravada Buddhism to much of Southeast Asia. The Pali script was also exported from Sri Lanka and became the basis for orthographies such as Thai, Burmese and Khmer.² Today, Buddhism among the Sinhalese has become extremely syncretistic. It is not unusual to see statues of Mary, Jesus, Hindu deities and Buddha worshipped together.

According to tradition, Sri Lanka first received the gospel from the Apostle Thomas in the early days of the Christian era. In AD 537, a Nestorian reported numerous churches on the island. The Portuguese assumed control of Sri Lanka in 1505 and introduced Catholicism, followed by the Dutch who forced many Sinhalese to convert to the Reformed Church.³ The Sinhalese Bible was translated in 1823. Today there are some huge Pentecostal churches in Colombo City, and approximately 4 per cent of the Sinhalese people follow Christ.

Buddhist leaders have reacted furiously in recent years to the strong evangelistic efforts of Christians. Mobs of Buddhists, often led by monks, have burned down dozens of churches, stabbed pastors and even a six-year-old pastor's son, poisoned Christians' wells and beaten numerous church-goers.⁴ They have forced a change in the Sri Lankan constitution, making it illegal for people of one faith to proselytize people of other faiths.



Paul Hattaway



Population:

15,558,200 (2000)
17,098,500 (2010)
18,791,200 (2020)

Countries: Sri Lanka, Singapore, India, Maldives, USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Midway Islands, Saudi Arabia

Buddhism: Theravada
Christians: 620,000

Overview of the Sinhalese

Other Names: Sinhala, Singhalese, Singhala, Cingalese, Chingalese

Population Sources:

14,045,000 in Sri Lanka (2001, P Johnstone and J Mandryk [2000 figure])
12,000 in Singapore (2000, B Grimes [1993 figure])
2,800 in India (2001, FMC South Asia)
1,500 in Maldives (2001, FMC South Asia)
also in the USA, Canada, United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Midway Islands, Saudi Arabia

Language: Indo-European, Indo-Iranian, Indo-Aryan, Sinhalese-Maldivian

Dialects: 1 (Rodiya)

Professing Buddhists: 90%

Practising Buddhists: 60%

Christians: 4%

Scripture: Bible 1823

Jesus film: available

Gospel Recordings: Sinhalese

Christian Broadcasting: available

ROPAL code: SNH

Status of Evangelization

