

POVERTY OF WRITERS

Usvatte-aratchi

I have for some time now been interested in Sinhala (Tamil) writing for the intelligent reader on a variety of subjects. There is hardly anything to read on the public debt problem, the recent crises in the world economy, the emergence of China and India as economic giants in the world, the environment problem in the context of the world economy and many another problem. Those familiar with other areas will readily speak about scarcity in their own fields of work.

I suspect that the main reason for this dearth of reading material is that it is not rewarding and indeed punishing to write in Sinhala seriously on this sort of subjects and themes. The major reason is that there is no market for such books. We buy books after meeting our daily expenses and saving some small amount of our income to meet emergencies and to spend in old age, out of what is called 'discretionary income'. When incomes are low, as in our country, discretionary income is low. Therefore the average person has no money to spend on buying books. Those in our society with discretionary income are few and tend to read in English, mostly cheap fiction and therefore would not buy Sinhala (Tamil) books. There are, no doubt, a few who both have the income to spend and read in the local languages. This number is far too small to permit a decent income to a scholar with competence to write such books. The contrast with India is striking. There are some 250 million there out of 1.2 billion who have substantial discretionary income and book writing and publishing is a flourishing business. Dr. Ramachandran Guha who recently spoke in Colombo is an example of one such successful author in India. He writes in English only. I don't know about writers in local languages. In Sri Lanka we do not have that species.

Yet I receive several volumes of books in Sinhala a year distributed free. They are mostly on religion and morality. I find them painfully repetitive and utterly boring. So I do not read them beyond the title page. So far as they are written by a bhikkhu or other clergymen they are looked after by the laity who support them and need no other reward. The Social Scientists' Association is an exception and does publish high quality books on serious subjects in Sinhala (Tamil?). Another set of books I receive are published for free distribution by several NGOs financially supported from overseas. I presume the writers are paid reasonably well by these institutions. These books are for the most part related to conflict resolution and similar subjects. What is significant is that there are no domestic sources of money to pay authors and meet the cost

of publication. Without such support, we will not have serious writing in local languages on subjects that matter. Governments in this country, the present one in particular, are in high dudgeon that NGOs receive assistance from overseas for various purposes. (This is normal for a government which would wish to destroy all opinion contradicting it.) Where would NGOs look for money here unless they were putting up a stupa or a ranveta? I have had most disappointing experience trying to raise money locally and would not waste on such ventures any time again, unless I were to be far more religious than I ever imagine myself to be.

Here is a good cause on which foreign donors can be effective. At the moment there are no books coming out with foreign help, unless they be on the ethnic issue or women's' problems. Foreigners also pay for public opinion surveys by NGOs. However, what sense do people make of these findings when they lack basic learning in the principles that underlie the rationale for undertaking that sort of work, in the first place? (There is no point talking to the few hundred who read and write only in English.) What purpose economic surveys, when nobody can read the surveys with a knowledge of economic principles that underlie reasons there for? I submit that the subjects foreign funds now support are overdone and that this money can be far more effective paying for writing and publishing books on subjects of the kind I have mentioned. The books must be sold and not distributed free. But the prices can be subsidized with such financial aid. Authors must be paid adequately to avoid recruiting people who have no other way of occupying their time. A person must be able to say no to a consultancy with some international agency and take on this work and keep herself fully employed in writing. The funds should be so administered that a contracted author does not walk away with the advance payment. This kind of activity will be far more productive than a hundred seminars conducted by visiting scholars usually of dubious competence.

Authors must be free to write once a theme has been agreed upon. The choice of themes must be the privilege of the author with a right to approve or otherwise by the financing agency. It is unlikely that each agency would finance more than two books a year and if several of them adopt this sort of programme, we might have three or four books coming out every year, a great bonanza to Sinhala (Tamil) readers. ■

Courtesy, *The Island*, 28 August 2011