



# BIBLE-BASED LITERACY FOR ILLITERATE PEOPLE

**“I don’t know how to read!” —  
Isaiah 29:12 (NIV)**

**A fun moment in a literacy class graduation in Pakistan when a young woman is just about overwhelmed by the Bibles that the graduates receive.**

PHOTO CREDIT: @Bible Society of Pakistan

Around the world one billion people are unable to read or write. In 1966, UNESCO created International Literacy Day to highlight the issue of illiteracy, which this year was celebrated on 8th September.

The United Bible Societies (UBS) also has a focus on literacy work. UNESCO has officially recognised the work of UBS in this field. This year, Bible Societies are running forty-four Bible based literacy programmes with the aim of reaching 100,000 people. Literacy programmes bring ownership of illiteracy back into local communities, changing lives, one person at a time.

# PAKISTAN

**In Pakistan, the literacy rate for women is 62 per cent. However, among Christian women the literacy rate is only 34 per cent. Many Christian women are trapped in low-paid work such as working in brick kilns, factories, and on farms. They work long hours for very low wages – just as their ancestors have done for generations.**

Through its Beacon in the Darkness of Illiteracy programme, the Pakistan Bible Society is reaching out to Christian women with literacy classes. **Partnering with churches, 5,000 women are enrolled in literacy classes this year. They are taught by 260 teachers under the supervision of twenty-six supervisors.**

One woman whose life has been changed through the classes is Haniya\*. Sadly, Haniya lost her father when he was killed during suicide bombing attacks which took place at two churches on 15 March 2015 in Youhanabad, which is the Christian-majority part of the city of Lahore.

Although Haniya's father never had the opportunity to go to school, Haniya decided to join the literacy classes run by her local church. Now, her new-found literacy skills have enabled her to find employment as a supervisor in a local garment factory. She takes garments home and distributes them to other women for finishing, for which she receives a small commission. "I can sort them according to size, tie them in bundles, and tag them," says Haniya.

But Haniya has not only benefitted in practical terms, she also now knows how to read the Bible. At a recent Pakistan Bible Society Annual General Meeting Haniya was honoured to be able to read a Scripture passage from the Bible in front of the gathered assembly. "If my father had seen me read the Bible in the Big Church in front of the gathering, he would have been proud. I am thankful for our church leaders, teachers, and the Pakistan Bible Society for providing the beacon of light in our lives that were once darkened by illiteracy," she says.

*\*Name changed.*

**Pakistani women taking part in a literacy class.**

PHOTO CREDIT: @Bible Society of Pakistan





A group of around 80 participants who took part in tutor training for the Mentawai Literacy project on 29th April 2023.

PHOTO CREDIT: ©Bible Society of Indonesia

## INDONESIA

**In Indonesia, Bible Society is running Bible-based literacy classes for people in the Mentawai Islands, which lie approximately 150 kilometres off the coast of West Sumatra. According to UNESCO, Indonesia ranks second-to-last out of sixty-one countries in terms of global literacy, ahead only of Botswana. Many fourth graders struggle with simple reading and arithmetic.**

Initially, churches in East Sumba, the Mentawai Islands and on Nias Island

approached Bible Society Indonesia requesting that it run literacy classes in their areas. Bible Society conducted surveys to assess the need and the work was started. In 2021 – 2022, it ran classes in East Sumba. In 2023 – 2024, it is running classes in the Mentawai Islands. In 2024 – 2025, it will be running classes on Nias Island.

One person who has benefitted from the programme is Metusalak. Metusalak does not know when he was born. He did not go to school, and he never learned to read. He is a farmer who grows cashew trees which produce cashew apples and cashew nuts.

"I am one of the elders in my church. I do all the tasks that an elder does such as singing, praying, and visiting church members. The only thing I could not do was to read the Bible and the weekly announcements. I longed to be literate so I could read the Bible for myself. When I heard about the literacy programme, I enrolled instantly.

"But after several weeks I realised I am not young anymore. Learning to read was difficult for me. Sometimes I was so exhausted after working in my fields all

day. In addition, there is no electricity in my house. When it gets dark, I need to use an oil lamp. So, reading and writing after 6.00 pm is a real challenge! But again and again, I reminded myself that I want to read the Bible for myself. Now, I can read Scripture. I can fulfil my task as an elder. Alleluia!"

***Around 1,500 people will attend the literacy programme in the Mentawai Islands this year.***

**A literacy class taking place in the Mentawai Islands.**

PHOTO CREDIT: ©Bible Society of Indonesia



# SRI LANKA

**In Sri Lanka, the country is facing its worst economic crisis since independence in 1948. This, along with the COVID-19 pandemic means many children are missing out on their schooling. In 2022, the Ceylon Bible Society began a literacy programme for children and youth in Colombo. It is now taking the programme out to other areas such as Nuwara Eliya, a city in the hill country of Central Province.**

Bible Society provides training for literacy teachers through Literacy Syllabus Development Workshops. They are taught by the Literacy Advisor for the UBS Asia Pacific region. The workshops cover topics such as the conceptual foundations of literacy, the phases of literacy, and materials development.

The classes began in the Nuwara Eliya region on 17th February 2023. Partnering with churches, 135 illiterate children from impoverished backgrounds were identified and invited to join the programme. Some are orphans. Others are from families where the parents are unemployed.

One family is so poor they were living in a cupboard under the stairs in a flat. The father earns only \$8.00 per day in daily wages, and it is impossible for him and his wife to send their three sons to school. So, they were delighted when they learned of the literacy classes and were able to send their children to them. "My youngest son and my second youngest son were very poor in reading and writing but after they joined this class, now they can read well, and I can clearly see their improvement," says the father.



**Two Sri Lankan girls with literacy booklets.**

PHOTO CREDIT: Wilakshitha Mendis

Another girl who is attending the classes is Binuri. Her family is very poor, and they live in a coastal area. Binuri's mother wanted her to go to the classes as previously Binuri could only read a word by spelling the letters out one by one. Now her reading and writing are improving, and she can read an entire word out loud.

The classes run two days a week for two hours per day. The children learn to read simple Bible stories in the languages of Tamil and Sinhala. At the end of each class the children are given a hot meal as many families are struggling. The children have also started improving in other ways such as in cleanliness, manners, and punctuality, and they are attending Sunday School.



**Watch a video of this project in Sri Lanka.**

In countries such as Pakistan, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, Christian women like Haniya, poor farmers like Metusalak, and children are trapped in a downward spiral of illiteracy and poverty.

By supporting Bible-based literacy programmes, you are enabling long-term change to enter into people's lives as they acquire the new-found literacy skills they need to function adequately in their societies. For the first time, a farmer may be able to read the label on a packet of seeds. A mother may be able to understand a household bill. And a child may be able to read a school booklet.

Will you prayerfully consider partnering

with us in this work to help bring literacy programmes to illiterate people in Pakistan, Indonesia, and Sri Lanka? Your gift would make such a difference. Thank you and God bless you.

Yours sincerely



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Neels J. van Rensburg'.

**Neels Janse van Rensburg**  
CEO

P.S. When you support literacy programmes you are helping to change the lives of illiterate people, one person at a time.

*Boys in Sri Lanka working in their exercise books.*

PHOTO CREDIT: Wilakshitha Mendis



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Bible House • 144 Tory Street • Private Bag 27 901, Marion Square, Wellington 6141  
Freephone: 0800 424 253 • Tel: 64 4 384 4119 • CC22121 • [www.biblesociety.org.nz](http://www.biblesociety.org.nz)



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