An Interview with P. N. Cumaranatunga on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

LeRoy Robinson

Palavinnege Nandanapala Cumaranatunga, a free-lance journalist, is the editor of DANA, the international journal of the Sarvodaya Movement.

He was born on June 21, 1922, at Katukurunde in the Habaraduwa area of the Galle District in southwest Sri Lanka.

As a child he attended the Dharminka School, Katukurunde, where the language of instruction was Sinhala.

He obtained his pre-university education in English at St. Aloysius College, Galle; Christ Church College, Baddegama; Mahinda College, Galle; St. Servatius College, Matara; and Rohana Vidyalaya, Matara.

Under private tutors in Galle, he studied for an Inter Arts examination, London University, and qualified in English, Sinhala, Pali and Geography, in 1948. From 1949 to 1951, at the Pembroke Academy, Colombo, he read for his B. A., London University, in English, Sinhala and Geography. Entering the University of Colombo in 1952, he read English, Sinhala and Economics for his First in Arts. He passed the London University B. A. examinations in Consitutional Law, Constitutional History and Sinhala, in 1954.
He was a teacher of English in Sri Lankan schools for 15 years: Anuruddha College, Nawalapitiya, 1954; Dharma College, Kandy, 1955; Vidyakara Vidyalaya, Maharagama, 1958-1961; Sri Lanka Vidyalaya, Maradana, 1961-1967. In two schools he was an athletics and cricket coach.

In 1967 he gave up the teaching profession and joined the Independent Group of newspapers as a journalist. He served as sub-editor of The Sun, the Independent Group's daily English language newspaper. He later joined the Lake House Group of newspapers. He worked as a sub-editor on Janata, a Sinhala daily, and on the Daily News, an English language newspaper.

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Robinson: Thank you for consenting to do this interview. And thanks to Basil Fernando for introducing us by letting me read your recent translation of Munidasa Cumaranatunga's Piya Samara poem in memory of his father.

Cumaranatunga: Thank you, too. I've read your interviews with Dr. A. V. Suraweera and Dr. Wimal Dissanayake, and I think your academic readers in Japan will find them useful introductions to certain aspects of culture in Sri Lanka.

Robinson: Piya Samara (Remembering Father) was written in honor of Cumaranatunga's father. In praise of his father: "Your words were few, being meaningful. With equanimity you treated both friend and foe". The poem gives a strong impression of an admirable man. Would you brief-
ly say something about him? And, when was the poem written?

CUMARANATUNGA: It was written in 1936. Munidasa's father, Don Abias Cumaranatunga, was a well-known man in the region south of Matara, in Dickwella, where he was born. You've read the poem, so you know he was a physician. He practiced Ayurveda, indigenous medicine. He was good at acupuncture, too.

ROBINSON: The poem says the father expended all his wealth to make medicine to treat his patients free.

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes. Don Abias had inherited wealth. And it was traditional in Sri Lanka then for doctors--they were mostly well-to-do--to render their services without remuneration. Of course, it was also customary for patients to offer doctors gifts in return. Don Abias is said to have had many buffaloes that were branded with his name by his patients in parts of Ruhanna like Tangalla, Ranna, Koholankala...He probably never saw most of them.

He was an erudite person. He had studied Sinhala, Sanskrit, Pali and Tamil. Also the Theravada Buddhist doctrines.

ROBINSON: If his father's surname was Cumaranatunga, like yours, why was Munidasa's Cumaratunga?

CUMARANATUNGA: Munidasa used the surname Cumaranatunga most of his life, but towards the end he changed it to Cumaratunga because he said it was incorrect to have the na syllable in the English spelling.

ROBINSON: Then is your last name spelled incorrectly?

CUMARANATUNGA: Yes. My surname should be Cumaratunga. But our names are registered with the government as
Cumaratunga, so we have to continue with the wrong spelling.

**Robinson:** The English spelling of Sinhala names is often inconsistent, anyway.

**Would you say something about Munidasa Cumaratunga’s mother?**

**Cumaratunga:** Her name was Dona Gimara Mutukumarana. She was a woman of the landed gentry of Dickwella. According to one Parampara Pustakaya—that means a book of family lineage; it was possessed by her family. According to that book, her family was the descendants of a brother of the queen of King Veera Parakramabahu. That was in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

**Robinson:** What kind of a place is Dickwella? The poem gives the impression of a small town.

**Cumaratunga:** It has a small harbor. For fisheries. There are a few textile companies. There’s a tourist industry centered around two or three small hotels.

As you enter Dickwella from the west—it’s twelve miles south of Matara—there is the Waalukaramaya temple. That’s where Dickwelle Buddharakkita lived.

**Robinson:** Who was he?

**Cumaratunga:** He was a poet. He wrote *Kavyadeepani*, A Lamp to Poetry. He was one of the foremost students of Venerable Sitinamaluwe Dhammajothi, who was the first Siyam Nikaya monk in the Low Country. He was the founder of Siyam Nikaya there in 1755. *Siyam* is Siam and *nikaya* is sect.

**Robinson:** That’s the most conservative Buddhist sect in Sri Lanka, isn’t it?
Interview with P. N. Cumaranatunga

Cumaranatunga: Yes. But more to the immediate point, there is the Ramana Nikaya temple that Munidasa’s father Don Abias worked to set up. Don Abias also founded a school named Moggaleeputta Tissa Sinhala School. Munidasa went to school there as a boy. Its name was recently changed by the government to Munidasa Cumaratunga Vidyala.

Robinson: What was Dickwella like in the past?

Cumaranatunga: It used to be a coastal townlet. Semiurban. The trunk road to Hambantota passed through it. There was also another road through Dickwella that passed the Wevurukannala Buddhist temple and went to Sitinamaluwa and Tangalla.

You see, for several centuries Dickwella had been a market center. There was a fair; rural people went there from neighboring villages to sell their products. It was more or less self-sufficient. The sea provided fishing grounds. There were paddy fields and coconut gardens. A few cinammon groves.

Robinson: Primarily a Buddhist area?

Cumaranatunga: The Tamil population in Dickwella is almost nil. There was a Moorish trading community. Naturalized Moors. There is a Moslem mosque. There had been a Christian church too.

As for Buddhism, I mentioned the Wevurukannala temple. About two miles from there, at Galagama, there used to be a small temple where the author of Kahakurulu Sandeshaya lived in the 15th century. That means Golden Oriole Message.

Robinson: I’ve been told a little about the old Message
poems: an important message is delivered to a god by a bird. The message asks the god to bless an important person. Who was the author of this one?

**Cumaranatunga:** His name was Dickwelle Samanera. He was a novice of the Kandavuru clan. He wrote the poem in the reign of King Veera Parakramabahu. He was a kinsman of a former high priest of Wevurukannala, Venerable Welihitiye Siri Sumana, who himself was a scholar and poet. Munidasa went to a pirivena run by Venerable Kahawe Ananda at Wevurukannala. He learned the rudiments of Pali and Sanskrit there. He also listened to lessons taught by John Kavitilleke, a poet, who taught his elder brothers.

**Robinson:** To come back, when was Munidasa Cumaratunga born?

**Cumaranatunga:** He was born in July 1887. July 25th. He died March 2nd, 1944. He passed away at “Hevana”, his home in Gorakapola, Panadura, sixteen miles south of Colombo.

**Robinson:** Incidentally—or maybe not so incidentally—are you related to Munidasa Cumaratunga in some way?

**Cumaranatunga:** Munidasa was my father’s younger brother. But I can assure you that I can speak about Munidasa objectively. Relationship has nothing to do with it.

**Robinson:** As I told Basil Fernando, until I read your translation of *Remembering Father*, I knew mostly about Munidasa Cumaratunga that he was an ardent nationalist—Basil Fernando says “patriot”. Would you say something about his way of thinking?

**Cumaranatunga:** Do you know Sugathadasa Pathravitana?
Robinson: The scholar of Ancient Sri Lanka?

Cumaranatunga: No, that's Senerat Paranavitana. But, by the way, he admired Munidasa too and presided over the Cumaranatunga commemoration in Kandy in 1957.

Sugathadasa Pathravitana was the editor of Gulf News. He left Sri Lanka, at least temporarily. He was in the Middle East. He was a critic here—literature, drama, films. He was the features editor of the Daily News for several years, then editor-in-chief. He's one of the few Sri Lankans widely read in European literatures, particularly English literature. He's down on modern Sinhala literature. Says it has little to offer in comparison to European literatures. Fiction is imitative here, he says, in most cases borrowed from the West. Criticism here is second-hand...

Robinson: Did Pathravitana write about Munidasa Cumaranatunga?

Cumaranatunga: That's the reason I bring him up here. He said the only exception to the rule I just quoted is the writing of Munidasa. He wrote about Munidasa in the Ceylon Daily News. In the summer of 1963. I can quote him: Munidasa Cumaranatunga is an original thinker. Unlike many others who felt intimidated by English literature and the language spoken by the white colonial rulers, Cumaranatunga never quailed in the presence of an alien tongue and an alien culture.

Pathravitana has also written very well about Munidasa as a social thinker, and I can't do much better than repeat what he said. He said Munidasa stirred the Sinhala intelligentsia of his time out of the apathy they had fallen into under British rule. The Sinhalese, especially the intellec-
tuals, were so enslaved they were losing their identity. Losing the Sinhala idiom. In Pathravitana’s words, the Sinhalese authorities were hailing their very chains of enslavement as golden. Munidasa wanted to liberate the Sinhala language from foreign influence. He tried to rouse the Sinhala nation to the danger posed by their intellectual subjection.

ROBINSON: Pathravitana could have said all that about many nationalists of the 1920s and 30s, couldn’t he?

CUMARANATUNGA: On that point, he pointed out that among the Sinhala nationalists of the first half of the century Cumaratunga occupied a position different from theirs. Have you heard about Anagarika Dharmapala and Harischandra Vallisinghe, to name only two?

ROBINSON: I don’t remember hearing the name of Harischandra Vallisinghe before, but once when I was reading about Colonel H. S. Olcott, the American who founded the Theosophical Society in 1875 and came to Sri Lanka in 1880 and organized the Buddhist education movement here, I learned that Anagarika Dharmapala was stimulated by him. He was a man of great personal force, Anagarika Dharmapala. He strongly opposed the Westernizing influence here.

CUMARANATUNGA: Well, yes. Munidasa was inspired by Anagarika Dharmapala and Harischandra Vallisinghe. But they conceived the national struggle in mainly religious terms. They were against the Christian missionary influence here.

Cumaratunga gave the national movement wider scope than that. As Pathravitana pointed out. Munidasa’s slo-
gan was the land, the people, the language, and he drew supporters from among Buddhists and Christians, from the political right to the political left. Even today he has many admirers in the United National Party, which is now in power, the Sri Lankan Freedom Party, the Communist Party, the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, as well as among Catholics and Buddhists.

Robinson: But wasn’t Munidasa Cumaratunga antireligious?

Cumaranatunga: Pathravitana has answered that kind of question very well too. Munidasa’s writings are sometimes used to show he was anti-religious, or he was a materialist. As you probably know, his diatribes against some Buddhist priests were very vitriolic. Basically he insisted that the things of this world should be our first concern, then the things of the next world. Pathravitana said Munidasa was a rationalist. He was trying to rid the country of alien influences. For him to preach spiritualism would have frustrated the very purpose he had set his heart upon. He was down-to-earth.

Robinson: Then was Munidasa Cumaratunga partial to any particular sect of Buddhism?

Cumaranatunga: There is no evidence to show that Munidasa had any Nikaya bias. He had friends and followers in all Nikayas. But he was not completely happy about the Buddhist clergy’s being divided on the Nikaya basis. You know ever since the founding of the Siyam Nikaya at Kandy in 1753 the Buddhist clergy has been divided here on the basis of caste or social class. This is not in keeping with the true spirit of Buddha’s doctrine. The caste element in the Buddhist Sangha tends to create a division
not only among the clergy but also among the laity also.

Robinson: You say Munidasa was not completely happy with this division. Did he express his objections in writing?

Cumaranatunga: He wrote an essay called "Nikaya Saamagrīya", Union of Religious Sects. Munidasa upheld King Parakramabahu the Great's action of uniting the three Nikayas that had existed for nearly a thousand years in Lanka. In short, Parakramabahu disrobed the monks whom he knew did not deserve to be in robes. Let me quote Munidasa: "Parakrambahu removed the cancer of Nikaya division that was defiling the Sangha and the country..."

I should add that at that time—about 1169 A.D.—the Nimaya division did not have a caste foundation as it does now. The division in the time of Parakramabahu was on ideological grounds.

Robinson: To go back again, what was Munidasa’s role in the Sinhala Revival?

Cumaranatunga: In my opinion, Munidasa was the central figure in the Sinhala Revival although he died in 1944 and the Revival is usually dated in textbooks around 1956, when S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake came to power. Politicians took up the cause, Munidasa’s cause, to ride to power. The one who profited most was Bandaranayake. He was able to fulfill his lifelong ambition, to become Prime Minister, in the election of 1956.

Robinson: But you’ve already mentioned Anagarika Dharmapala and Harischandra Vallisinghe as influencing Cumaranatunga.

Cumaranatunga: Yes, the seeds of the Sinhala Revival had
been sown before the appearance of Munidasa on the scene. Besides these two men, there were Piyadasa Sirisena and John de Silva, literary men, who were among the most notable activists at the time.

As I said, Anagarika Dharmapala and Harischandra Vallisinghe were concerned primarily with religion. The revival of Buddhist consciousness in the face of Christianity and the political power it wielded. Sirisena was also interested in Sinhala culture and used literature to spread his views. De Silva used the drama. All of them had a heavy religious bias. Religion became the dominant element in their campaign. The slogan was Religion, Country and Nation. But country and nation were relegated to second place. Their concept of country and nation was too limited in any case, because neither the country nor the nation was entirely Sinhala Buddhist. The four of them expressed views on political independence from England now and then, but they never seriously campaigned for it, did not participate in any independence movements.

Robinson: You started to say something about Munidasa Cumaranatunga’s different outlook.

Cumaranatunga: Yes. Munidasa saw an inherent weakness in this slogan of Religion, Country and Nation. To him, it had a divisive effect. All Sinhalese were not Buddhists. So he replaced Religion with Language. He made language the most important element. He wanted language to bind together all the inhabitants of our country; although they belong to different ethnic groups and follow different faiths. He encouraged the Tamils and Muslims to learn Sinhala. He had many Tamil and Muslim friends. Some Tamils
and Muslims contributed articles in Sinhala to *Subasa*. He also started the Hela Havula.

**Robinson:** *Subasa?* Hela Havula?

**Cumaranatunga:** *Subasa* is a journal he published to propagate his social philosophy: Basa (Language), Desa (Country), Resa (Nation). Hela Havula, the Sinhala Fraternity.

The Sinhalese were once known as Helas. *Hela* means light from the sun, the great light. They were sun worshippers. A non-flesh eating society, Their diet consisted of rice, curd, milk, honey, yams, fruits, vegetables. In October 1941 Munidasa Cumaratunga gave a talk on this and said the Helas were related to the Greeks and the Greeks were also Helas earlier. Hela and Elu both mean the same in Sinhala, by the way.

**Robinson:** Perhaps we can come back to this later. But now, on the aspect of language, what was there in the linguistic situation in the 1920s and 1930s, say, that impelled Cumaratunga to emphasize the slogan of Language so much?

**Cumaranatunga:** I've already touched on this. To put it another way, then, the Sinhala political leadership was then confined to the English-educated elite, as it is even now. One of them, Sir D. B. Jayatilleke, was a Sinhala scholar of some standing. Yet he favored the use of English. These leaders used Sinhala only when they addressed political meetings where the majority of the people attending knew only Sinhala. In short, they used Sinhala as a vote-catching device.

**Robinson:** What was the language situation in the educational system then?
Interview with P. N. Cumaranatunga

Cumaranatunga: The national Education Department and the University College--this later became the University of Ceylon, Colombo--the official centers of education were both colonial in outlook. They upheld the view that the medium of instruction should be English. Can you believe that even our native language, Sinhala, was taught as a second language through English?

Of course, there were Sinhala schools. Some were run by the Education Department. They were called Vernacular Schools. Instruction was given in Sinhala. Or in Tamil.

The point is Munidasa Cumaratunga was the first man to say instruction in the schools should be given through Sinhala, that the language of education should be Sinhala, that debate and discussions at political assemblies should be conducted in Sinhala. And he vigorously campaigned for that.

Robinson: Did Jayatilleke, a Sinhala scholar, oppose that?

Cumaranatunga: Jayatilleke and his political elite opposed Munidasa. Professor G. P. Malalasekera, who was in charge of teaching Pali and Sinhala at the university, opposed him. They opposed him in every way.

Jayatilleke was knighted by the King of England for supporting the colonial administration in the island, for supporting colonialism in education. Malalasekera was conferred imperial honors, too, for his role in the propagation of the colonial system.

Some of the people you've interviewed for your series on aspects of culture in Sri Lanka have mentioned the novelist Martin Wickramasinghe, but I want to give you
another "aspect" of him. Before Wickramasinghe became known as a novelist, he was an editor of two leading Sinhala newspapers. From about 1930 to 1950 or so.

Robinson: Which two newspapers?

Cumaranatunga: The Dinamina (Light of Day) and the Silumina (Crestgem). The first was, is, a daily, the second a weekly, both published by the Lake House Group. Dinamina has had the largest circulation among Sinhala newspapers for several decades. The Lake House Group was and still is the most influential of the newspaper publishers in Sri Lanka. Then English language newspapers dominated the scene. The newspaper magnates were always for English, even if they published in Sinhala. Today the Lake House Group is controlled by the government in power and has been since 1972 when it took over the State.

But to get to the main point, Martin Wickramasinghe never had the will or the guts to write one word in his editorials in support of Munidasa Cumaranatunga's proposal to make Sinhala the medium of instruction in the schools and the language of administration in government. In short, Martin Wickramasinghe was well paid and looked after by the newspaper bosses, who were in favor of using English for everything that mattered. He was given imperial honors too. By the Queen of England. The M. B. E., Member of British Empire. For the services he rendered to England for the smooth continuation of our colonial subjection. In 1933 Munidasa engaged in a public debate with Wickramasinghe. In journals. About the authorship of two classical Sinhala texts.
Robinson: Maybe we can discuss this in detail later. But for now you said Cumaratunga campaigned for Sinhala as the language of education and government administration. How did he campaign?

Cumaratunga: In many ways. In journals for one. On the public platform. He confronted people like Jayatilleke in the late 1920s and Malalasekera in 1940 directly in public debates about literature and language.

Here is a good example. Munidasa was an inspector of schools in the Education Department. He was openly critical of the then existing colonial education system. He was forced to give up his post in 1923. So he launched a movement to educate the Sinhala people by non-formal methods. He made many speeches in public to propagate his views on language, literature, history, religion, society, government ...

Another example? In 1953 he inaugurated the Sinhala Samajaya, the Sinhala Society, to disseminate the use of good language in both speech and writing. As I said, he started a journal called Subasa in the late 1930s. In 1939. Good Language. As I've already said, Munidasa thought Sinhala was becoming an uncivilized language. He said a people who use an uncivilized language are themselves uncivilized. He wanted to arrest what he considered a decline in Sinhala. In 1934 he began to publish a weekly newspaper. He edited it himself. Lakmini Pahana. Lakmini is gem of Lanka. Pahana is lamp. So, Lamp unto the gem of Lanka. In this newspaper he campaigned for clarity in language usage.

He called for educational reforms. He wanted to raise
the consciousness of the Sinhala people in regard to culture and politics and society. Let me quote him: "A base, corrupt, inelegant and insipid language will produce a weary and miserable mentality". Once he accused the Education Department like this: "The Department has done and is still doing everything to make the Sinhala language lawless, graceless, powerless and worthless. Language without dignity produces men and women without dignity...as base as beasts...who can be made to stoop to any meanness".

Robinson: How successful was Munidasa Cumaratunga in his campaign for Sinhala?

Cumaranatunga: He was successful to some extent. As you know, Sinhala became the language of instruction in the schools, the language of administration, the language of debate in the legislature. This happened in 1956.

But since most persons in charge of adopting Sinhala instead of English were neither interested in the exercise nor sufficiently competent, it was performed in a half-hearted and shoddy manner. In the sphere of education in particular, the use of Sinhala was supplemented in a haphazard way. Some Sinhala people were more or less forced into the situation of using Sinhala instead of English. Naturally, their performance was below par. So it is doubtful that what Cumaratunga expected has been fully achieved. Sinhala and its literature have suffered most due to the incompetence of those who manage affairs and their lethargic attitude. Their negative approach.

As regards the use of Sinhala now, the situation may even be much worse than it was then. Some university
professors have publicly stated this. The students seem to be using various kinds of jargon, not clean Sinhala.

**Robinson:** Was Munidasa Cumaranatunga opposed to the study of English?

**Cumaranatunga:** No. Not at all. He never said that English should not be studied. Or any other language. In fact, he wrote the "Bilingual Ladder", a newspaper column designed to teach English to the Sinhala-educated people. What he emphasized was that first place ought to be given to Sinhala. Sinhala had to be studied with more seriousness.

**Robinson:** To what extent is the ethnic tension here in Sri Lanka the result of the Sinhala Revival?

**Cumaranatunga:** The ethnic tension now being experienced here cannot be attributed to the Sinhala Revival. Of course, Munidasa wanted Sinhala to be the sole medium of administration in a unitary state of Sri Lanka. His aim was to teach Sinhala to Tamils and Moors. He thought a single language of administration was the only feasible solution for a small nationally independent state with a unitary structure of government. He encouraged Tamils and Moors to learn Sinhala. He had many Tamil friends, by the way. Some of them and some of his Muslim friends too contributed articles in Sinhala to *Subasa*.

Self-seeking politicians on both sides messed up the whole language issue.

**Robinson:** How do you account for the ethnic tension?

**Cumaranatunga:** Historically, the Sinhala-Tamil division in local politics here began around 1918. Cumaratunga started his Sinhala Revival activities in 1921. At that time the
division was a power-group phenomenon. The distrust between the political leadership of the two communities developed gradually for nearly sixty years. The manner in which the Sinhala politicians mishandled the implementation of Sinhala as the official language estranged the Tamils further. On the other hand, both the Tamil political leaders and the Sinhala political leaders used the language issue to gain political power and to insure the safety of their own positions in their respective areas.

Robinson: You started to say something along these lines when you talked about S. W. R. D. Bandaranayake's using the language issue to fulfill his ambition of becoming prime minister.

Cumaranatunga: Yes. Bandaranayake had started the Sinhala Maha Sabha, the Great Association of the Sinhalas, in 1934. Cumaranatunga joined it. Then, at a session in Anuradhapura, Bandaranayake, its president, moved to get the name of the association changed to Swadeshiya Maha Sabha, the Great Association of the Indigenous. Indigenous here means generally the people who have been living here for a considerably long time and adopted the culture of the island as their own. Cumaranatunga defended the retention of the word Sinhala eloquently. The motion was defeated. Anyway, as soon as Cumaranatunga realized the Western-educated leadership of the association was not concerned with Sinhala language or culture with any seriousness, he left it.

As for Bandaranayake, he was not for Sinhala at any time in his political career, but he was forced into accepting Sinhala for Lanka as a political slogan, actually the main
one of the 1956 general elections. On the other hand, the United National Party, whose leaders were also English-oriented, was never genuinely interested in Sinhala either, but they also had to change their policy as a matter of strategy to face the predominantly Sinhala electorate.

Robinson: How about other political parties?

Cumaranatunga: To be candid, no other political party at the hustings then was seriously interested in Sinhala except the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna (Peoples United Front), led by Phillip Gunawardene. There was an influential section in the M. E. P. of Cumaranatunga's followers and former students.

Robinson: Would you mind saying a little more about Subasa (Good Language)?

Cumaranatunga: Subasa was a literary journal. Cumaranatunga owned and managed it for almost four years. When he died, it was continued by Jayantha Weerasekera, Abiram Gamhewa, K. P. Susith and others. It contained several features that no other Sinhala journal had ever had--literary criticism, linguistic discussions, short stories, poems of young writers, commentary on the contemporary literary scene. As Munidasa did in all journals he managed, he included in Subasa articles by those who opposed his views. In fact, he invited criticism.

Robinson: And Hela Havula, the Sinhala Fraternity?

Cumaranatunga: As I said, Hela Havula was founded in 1941 to promote Basa, Desa and Resa. Its inauguration was at "Hevana", Cumaranatunga's home in Panadura. Its first chairman was A. P. Jayamanne, a lecturer at the Maggona Training College. He was a Catholic. The name Hela
Havula itself was proposed by Jayantha Weerasekera, whom I just mentioned; he was Munidasa’s best friend, a journalist and scholar. After Munidasa died, he led Hela Havula.

The members of Hela Havula included several young Buddhist monks, Catholic priests, Protestant ministers, Ayurvedic doctors, school teachers, notaries, clerks.

Cumaratunga had a charismatic personality, you know, and under his guiding spirit this nucleus developed into a nationally formidable force. It spread fast, and branch associations were started in Colombo, Moratuwa, Kalutara, Galle, Gampaha, Kegalle, Kandy, and many other places too numerous to mention.

Robinson: Who were some of the other men important in Hela Havula?

Cumaratunga: Eddi Fernando, for one, the headmaster of a school in Moratuwa. And Abiram Gamhewa was headmaster of a school in Panadura. They were among the seven officers. There were notable people like Venerable Kodapoda Gnanaloka, the Reverend Father Moses A. Perera, Venerable Warakagoda Seelaratane... I doubt that you know any of these people.

Robinson: That’s correct. So the next question is who is the Venerable Kodagoda Gnanaloka, for example?

Cumaratunga: He’s the present president of Hela Havula. He’s the Chief Sangha Nayaka of the Southern Province. The Siyam Nikaya. He used to be the principal of Vidya-chandra Pirivena at Ahangama, a seat of learning in Galle. Later, for several years, he was head of the Buddha Sravaka Dharma Pitaya at Anuradhapura. That’s a state-
administered educational institution exclusively for Buddhist monks. He's one of the co-editors of the Sinhala Thripitka, the Buddhist canonical texts. He also edited the Amawatura, one of the foremost works of classical Sinhala prose. He wrote the Prakrutha Manjari to explain Prakrit, which is said to be the origin of the Sinhala language. He used to contribute regularly to Munidasa's Subasa and Lakmini Pahana. He gave an address at Munidasa's funeral at Gorakana Cemetery in 1944 that gave a good description of Munidasa's character.

ROBINSON: What did he say?

CUMARANATUNGA: Let me quote from a central passage here.

"Cumaratunga Munidasa did not hesitate to state what he thought was the truth even at the expense of courting unpopularity. He was very upright. He always thought freely and encouraged free thinking... He kept on learning and renewing his knowledge. He was always prepared to change his view when he discovered new evidence that proved his earlier view unacceptable."

For one full month after Munidasa's death the local newspapers and magazines carried numerous memorial poems and articles. Of course, the Dinamina wrote a short critical editorial, and the Silumina completely ignored his death, carrying only a short report of his funeral.

ROBINSON: You just said Kodagoda Gnanaloka contributed to Lakmini Pahana, Lamp unto the gem of Lanka. Would you describe this publication?

CUMARANATUNGA: Lakmini Pahana is considered the first registered Sinhala newspaper. It was founded as far back as 1862. By Koggala Pandithatilleke. A scholar, poet,
writer, debater. It was later taken over by a world famous Buddhist scholar named Kanndamaanage Matara Dhamarathne. He operated it almost single-handedly for forty-two years without a break until 1924.

Munidasa revived it in 1934. He carried several important features that had an impact on the general public. There were articles on doctrinal matters by the eminent Buddhist monk Venerable Balagoda Ananda Metteya. There was a forum on language--grammar, idiom, composition. I've already mentioned "Bilingual Ladder" to encourage the study of English. There was literary appreciation, literary criticism. Many writers and scholars participated. There were fiction stories. There was a social review section, Asaranayage Kannalawuwa, Pauper's Plea, that held the mirror up to the foibles of the contemporary society.

Robinson: What kind of journalist was Munidasa Cumaranatunga himself?

Cumaranatunga: As a journalist, he introduced a lucid style into Sinhala journalism. He innovated headlines by having them in the present tense. They were highly effective. They conveyed a sense of proximity and credence. Most of his headlines used short words, two or three or four or five letters. Expressive and complete in sense. Terseness was rare in Sinhala journalism at that time.

The news was reported briefly in Lakmini Pahana. But nothing important was missed. Especially in the reporting of foreign news. Foreign reporting, by the way, was far from satisfactory in those days.

In his editorials, Cumaranatunga adopted a bold, forth-
right, independent attitude. He discussed educational, and political and economic and religious questions openly. If he considered any policy of the government unsuitable or in any harmful to society, he did not hesitate to be critical. His editorials were so forthright and incisive that they re-oriented the semi-colonial thinking of his age. They did much to remove the slavish mentality and irrelevant traditionalism of the Sinhala people. In fact, they are still influential even after four decades of political independence.

Robinson: Almost everything you say about Munidasa Cumaranatunga is related more or less to language. Was he a linguist?

Cumaranatunga: Yes, he was. He mastered Sanskrit, Pali, Sinhala. He studied Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, and other allied Indian languages. He studied English. He studied Latin, Greek, Dutch and Portuguese.

He wrote a grammar of the Sinhala language, Vyakarana Vivaranaya. He wrote a treatise on the Sinhala verb. He wrote—in Sanskrit—a grammar and composition textbook, Sanskritha Sikshmargaya. He developed a comprehensive correspondence course for the study of Sanskrit and Pali and Sinhala. And he wrote critical commentaries on the Sinhala classics; in all of them, he explained morphology, etymology, and philology.

He was a lexicographer too. He intended to do a Sinhala dictionary, and he did do a lot of work on it, but he died before he could finish it. But you can find examples of his lexicography in his commentaries on the classics. In Subasa he regularly analyzed and defined words in a regular feature column.
I must add that he engaged in polemics on linguistics—in debates about linguistics. For example, in the Pali Wadaya, the Pali Controversy, he adduced evidence that Pali was a language innovated by the Maha Vihara bhikkus of Anaradhapura. That is, he established that a language by this name never existed in India, nor did it have an alphabet of its own.

Robinson: Did Munidasa Cumaratunga also engage in literary "wadayas"?

Cumaranatunga: Yes. He was a literary critic too. Yes, he initiated and participated in the Kukavi Wadaya, the Poetaster Controversy. That was a debate that lasted over two and a half years.

It was a debate about Kavyasekeraya. Kavya is poetry. Sekara is the string of flowers worn around the head. So, highest string of flowers of poetry. Kavyasekeraya is the longest of the classical poems. About 15 cantos. Over 850 stanzas.

Robinson: About eight times longer than your translation of Piya Samara, Remembering Father. When was the poem written? Who wrote it? What is it about?

Cumaranatunga: It’s about the life of Pandit Senake. It’s one of the Jataka stories. It was written in the fifteenth century. By a scholar and linguist, Venerable Sri Rahula Vachissara of Demataane. He later became Sangha Raja—head of the organization of Buddhist priests. He made Viyayaba Pirivena in Totagamuwa, Galle, the most illustrious seat of learning, Oriental learning, in the fifteenth century. He belonged to the Kandavuru Kulaya, the Soldier Clan. The Shatriya caste, the Royal caste. He was a
kinsman of King Parakrabahu VI of Kotte.

Robinson: What was the Kukavi Waday a about?

Cumaranatunga: Well, Kavyasekeraya had been considered the greatest Sinhala poem and Sri Rahula Vachissara the greatest poet. That was until Munidasa examined the poem critically. He proved its author had borrowed heavily from Sanskrit classics, particularly the poems of Kalidasa, Kumaradasa, Bharavi, Magha... Do you know any of these names?


Cumaranatunga: To continue on this point, Munidasa showed some of Kavyasekeraya was borrowed from other Sinhala classics such as Kavusilumina and Sasadawa. Sasa is hare, Dawa life story, a story of a previous life of the Buddha when he was born as a hare. In short, Kavyasekeraya was full of plagiarism. Munidasa said it was not the work of a genuine poet but a poetaster. This is not like the borrowings of Eliot or Pound, say; Rahula was in fact translating Sanskrit poetry into Sinhala and pretending as if it were his own.

Robinson: Who were Cumaratunga's opponents in this debate? When was this debate?

Cumaranatunga: In 1925 Munidasa contributed literary criticism to the newspaper Swadeshamitraya, Friend of the indigenous people. Swadesha is indigenous and Mitraya is friend. This was a well-known Sinhala daily newspaper. It was edited by D. P. Wickramarachchi. Munidasa's article on Kavyasekeraya appeared in June 1925 and sparked off the controversy. It concluded at an assembly of scholars.
at Ananda College in February 1927. The chairman of the meeting was D. B. Jayatilleke, whom I’ve already mentioned two or three times, a Sinhala scholar knighted by the King of England for his support of the colonial administration. Almost all the literati of the day were ranged against Cumaratunga. They took up cudgels against him, verbal ones, for his “sacrilege”, his negative criticism of Kavyasekeraya and Sri Rahula.

Besides proving plagiarism, Cumaratunga showed how the poet had distorted words in order to achieve rhyme, how he had committed grammatical errors, many of them. More important, Munidasa also criticized the poem’s overworked theme. It’s the story of Pandit Seneka, which is related so briefly in the Sattubhanta Jataka Tales. In Kavyasekeraya it’s stretched out to fifteen cantos—irrelevant descriptions without any bearing on plot development—its lack of balance, lopsided characterization, blatant obscenity.

Another aspect of Munidasa’s speech at Ananda College needs to be mentioned, and that is his concept of criticism. All literary works should be critically evaluated, he said, no matter how prestigious they are, ancient or modern. Just because an opinion has been expressed by the ancients or scholars it should not be accepted without examining its veracity. Quoting—translating—directly: “One who through fear of rebuttal refrains from putting forth new views but takes as gospel truth everything that the ancients have said and parrot-like repeats them is a burden on society”.

**Robinson:** What other kinds of literary criticism did Munidasa Cumaratunga do?
Interview with P. N. Cumaranatunga

As I said before, he did critical commentaries on other Sinhala classical writings. He wrote prefaces to modern poems like *Wawuluwa* (Character of the Bat), *Havilla* (Curse), *De Vinaya* (Discipline that Burnt). He wrote a book on the appreciation of poetry, *Kavi Shikshawa* (Exercise in Poetry), mainly poems of the Matara period. In 1939 he wrote *Prabhandopadeshaya*, a book of essays on Sinhala prose composition and criticism. Prabhandanda is composition or essay. Opadesha is instructions. So, instructions toward prose composition.

Did Munidasa Cumaratunga do what these days is called creative writing?

Munidasa worked in almost every genre. He even wrote a treatise on classical Sinhala music, *Hela Meesiya*. In 1944. And he was the first person to write a treatise on a Sinhala musical tradition based on classical and folk poetry. In the 1940s Munidasa composed hymns and other songs. "Battle Song", for example. And "National Anthem". One of the most popular songs, national songs, "Lanka Lanka Pembara Lanka", Lanka Lanka My Beloved Lanka, has been set to music by Sunil Santha with words by Arise Ahubudu, a pupil of Munidasa. Sunil Santha was the most popular Sinhala singer; he is dead now.

Who sings these songs today?

Ivor Dennis, for example. Gilbert Gooneratne. They were pupils of Sunil Santha and continued the tradition. School children sing them. Television and radio play them. Tunes and songs belonging to this tradition are played by school and armed forces bands.
Robinson: Is Munidasa’s “National Anthem” the national anthem of Sri Lanka?

Cumaranatunga: Munidasa’s “National Anthem” is not the one accepted by the government of this day. Nevertheless, it is sung by children. It is played over the radio.

Robinson: Did Munidasa Cumaranatunga write poetry besides Remembering Father? Did he write short stories, or plays, or novels?

Cumaranatunga: No, he didn’t write novels, but he did write poems and short stories. He wrote children's stories too. And drama.

Robinson: What kind of drama?

Cumaranatunga: Verse dramas, for example. Two of his most popular plays were Nikam Hekiyawa, Ability without Effort, in 1941, and Dorata Weduma, First Outing, in 1940. They were performed in 1941 for primarily Hela Havula audiences but non-members could also attend. No admission fee was charged.

Robinson: To choose one, what is Nikam Hekiyawa about?

Cumaranatunga: It's a satire on the idiocy prevailing in the society of that time. The targets of Munidasa’s satire are those who do not bother to learn a craft in the proper manner in order to gain the required skill. The coconut tree climber does not learn to climb before attempting to pluck coconuts. The fisherman does not learn the technique of fishing before he tries to catch fish. Instead of studying medicine the doctor tries to treat patients. The painter tries to paint his wife's picture without acquiring the art of painting.

May I say the situation has not changed even today.
It may even be worse. Society has lost its bearings. It has become imitative. A victim of commercialism.

May I also say it’s a pity that you can’t read Sinhalese. Humor and satire are difficult to translate into English, particular the pun.

Robinson: Would you say something about Munidasa Cumaranatunga’s stories for children?

Cumaranatunga: They are stories for children written in genuine Sinhala idiom. Munidasa studied child psychology, and he designed them to familiarize children with correct Sinhala and to help them to cultivate sound human qualities and a sense of independence and a love of country.

Robinson: Please describe one or two of these children’s stories.

Cumaranatunga: We are calling these children’s stories, but they can also be appreciated by adults.

His most famous stories were Hath Pana, Seven Lives, Magul Kama, Wedding Feast, and Heen Seraya, Power of the Tiny. As for Hath Pana, for example, its central characters are Kirihami, a peasant, and a Buddhist monk. They symbolize traditional religious faith. Keep in mind that for several centuries the Sinhala Buddhist society, especially the peasantry, has been strongly influenced by the Buddhist clergy.

So Kirihami believes the monk can do no wrong. The monk cannot tell an untruth. So Kirihami has implicit faith in the words of the monk, who tells him he would die when his feet and head were equally cold. He is obsessed by the monk’s words on death. As a result, he dies seven times alive.
After Kirihami’s seventh death, he is finally rescued by a young woman in the jungle who marries him, wins him over to her way of thinking, and who succeeds in curing him by sorcery, and he lives to die a natural death long afterward.

For the average Sinhala Buddhist there are two religions. The one created by monks out of Theravada Buddhist doctrine. And folk religion. The young woman in Hath Pana represents the folk religion. It is an aspect of folk religion that brings Kirihami back to normal. The theme of Hath Pana is that if one takes what the clergy say too seriously one can get into difficulties.

Robinson: Munidasa Cumaratunga probably did not endear himself to the clergy.

Cumaranatunga: He opposed the clergy, some of them, not only in stories for children but also more directly. In an English language journal, Helio—he founded that one in 1941—he said, I quote: “The pundits of the temple have created a language of their own which is at once insipid and inelegant”. And in the mid-1930s he was critical of the corruption in some sections of the Buddhist clergy here at that time: “The sinful monks who eat up our brains along with our rice are the hordes of Mara”.

Robinson: Munidasa Cumaratunga seems to have been an iconoclast in many fields. Was he ever attacked as Dr. Ediriweera Sarachchandra, the playwright, was some time ago?

Cumaranatunga: That kind of attack is not a common occurrence in Sri Lanka. But, yes, Munidasa was confronted by a gang of rowdies once, during his last public speech,
in 1941, at Ambalangoda. But he spoke so eloquently and so convincingly that some of the men who had been hired to assault him came to him at the end of the meeting and apologized and gave him money for his cultural campaign.

Robinson: What kind of poetry did Munidasa write besides Remembering Father?

Cumaranatunga: In general he wrote what may be called “freedom poetry”. He wanted to encourage people to think logically and rationally, with freedom. He tried to inculcate a sense of independence in his readers, a desire to work for intellectual and political freedom. Some titles of these freedom poems are “Teachers, protect your land”, “False Merit”, “Nation or Religion?”

He also wrote a lot of nature poetry. Reflective poems. Memorial poems. “Brother’s Death”, for one. Self-revelatory poems, like “My Fault”. He also wrote lullabies. Oscar Gunawardena has translated some of these poems.

Robinson: You said Munidasa Cumaranatunga innovated in journalism. In poetry, too?

Cumaranatunga: He discarded traditional poetic methods almost completely. He used narrative only when it was functionally essential. He made poetry more organic. He employed dramatic technique, giving poems a concreteness lacking in traditional poetry. He selected his topics from everyday life. “Elephant”. “Vegetable Vendor”. “Vagabond”. “Clock” …

Robinson: The title of the poem “Teachers, protect your land” reminds me of a question I should have asked earlier when you mentioned Munidasa Cumaranatunga was a school inspector at one time in his career. Would you say
something about him as an educator?

Cumaranatunga: To begin with, he was a trained teacher. Then he became principal of a government school, an English school, at Kadugannawa, near Kandy. He was there from 1909 to 1917. Then, from 1917 to 1922, he was an inspector of schools in the Negombo and Panadura regions. His clash with the authorities of the colonial Education Department that I talked about before, the clash over educational policies, led to his resignation. But after a short time he was appointed principal of Nittambuwe Teacher's College. He was there from 1927 to 1929.

Robinson: Was he an innovator there too?

Cumaranatunga: He re-oriented the whole curriculum there. He produced a group of teachers who became some of the most eminent teachers and school heads. He encouraged Robert de Zoysa to found the Balapitiya Teacher's Training College, where he became principal in 1930.

Even after leaving the Education Department and the teacher's training colleges, he continued his work as an educator. While he was still connected with the Education Department, he had edited a set of readers used in schools at that time. After he left the Department, he wrote a famous set of readers, Shikshamargaya, that became the most popular set of Sinhala readers during the period when principals and teachers had the right to select textbooks for their schools themselves.

Perhaps the best way for me to sum up Munidasa's basic thinking on education is to quote from a series of articles he wrote on education, Shikshaka Vruthyiya, Teaching Profession: The education system in the country.
is a conspiracy to enslave the people. It does not reckon each person's potential, inborn talent, inventive ability. It is like salted porridge served out to all alike—sick or well—without discrimination, tasteless, and it destroys the urge for activity, encourages condemnation of craft and industry, induces slavish thinking that servility is higher than mastery. It is a vicious education forced down the throats of the competent and the incompetent, the wise and the foolish, the rich and the poor, the willing and the unwilling. With what result? To find none who would come forward saying, "This suits my talent".

Robinson: One final question? Is Munidasa Cumaratunga, that is, his writings, are they still widely read in Sri Lanka?

Cumaratunga: I'm glad you've asked that question. But I'm afraid my answer will surprise you.

Robinson: I understand that Professor Ediriweera Sarachchandra, the foremost Sinhala playwright here, once said Munidasa was the father of modern Sinhala literature.

Cumaratunga: Professor Sarachchandra said the father of modern Sinhala literary criticism.

To answer the question, though. Various articles—over 500—appeared in the daily press in the last twenty years or so—the Daily Mirror, the Daily News, the Sun, the Island, to mention only English language newspapers. Articles written by people like N. C. Palavinnege, K. C. Liyanage, Oscar Gunawardene, and I've already mentioned Pathravithana.

Robinson: Please identify these people. Briefly.

Cumaratunga: Palavinnege contributes articles to the daily
press on cultural and historical matters. Liyanage is a literary critic who used to be an official in the Official Languages Department of the government. Oscar Gunawardena is a science teacher. He writes poetry in English. He's a forthright and independent critic of films, drama, music.

Besides these, a few dons, university teachers, in Sinhala departments, people like Ananda Kulasuriya at Peradeniya University, and K. N. O. Dharmadasa, a linguistics professor there, and Ariya Rajakaruna and Sarathchandra Wickramasuriya, they have written about Munidasa Cumaratunga now and then.

But in academic circles Munidasa is largely ignored. None of his literary work has ever been prescribed for university entrance examinations, for example. This would probably be the only way the university students of the Sinhala departments could be made to appreciate, or even critically reject, what Munidasa wrote.

Let me finish with academics--they are not taken seriously by the general reader here--by quoting from an article by Oscar Gunawardena commemorating Munidasa Cumaratunga's 97th birthday: The Halls of Learning can offer fellowships into the mechanics of the Sinhala language, pre-history, and make investigations into folk music, drama and drums. Alas! how many treatises have been written on Cumaratunga and his contributions to society in these Halls of Learning?

ROBINSON: How about outside the halls of learning?
CUMARANTUNGA: Outside, Munidasa is read very widely. Ordinary Sinhala-educated people read him and write a
lot about him. He was very much liked and appreciated by the peasants and common people. Even today there are common people who talk about him in glowing terms.

**Robinson:** One more question? You are the editor of DANA, the journal of the Sarvodaya Movement. What kind of a journal is DANA?

**Cumaranatunga:** *Dana* means sharing. *DANA* is a monthly published in English by the Sarvodaya Institute for Development Education. It's the International Journal of the Sarvodaya Shramadan Movement of Sri Lanka. It's devoted to the propagation of Sarvodaya philosophy and the practice of Sarvodaya, which is Sri Lanka’s largest national volunteer movement. Its leader, its founder and president, is Dr. A. T. Ariyaratne. *DANA* also serves as a communication link between Sarvodaya and its friends and well-wishers in Sri Lanka and abroad. It provides a forum for free dialogue relating to community development and character building of humanity through the awakening of all.

**Robinson:** Awakening?

**Cumaranatunga:** *Sarvodaya* means universal awakening. Awakening of all by voluntarily sharing people's resources, especially their time, thoughts and efforts.

**Robinson:** What kind of volunteer activities in particular?

**Cumaranatunga:** Village uplift programs. Rehabilitation programs. Dr. Ariyaratne was awarded the King Boudouin International Development Prize for substantial contributions towards the development of a Third World Country. You should try to contact him. He's in direct touch with the rural folks here, Sinhala, Tamil and Moor.

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