An Interview with K. S. Sivakumaran on
Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

LeRoy Robinson

Kailayar Sellanainar Sivakumaran, a literary journalist, is Deputy Features Editor of *The Island*, an English language daily newspaper published by Upali Newspapers Ltd. in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

He was born in Batticaloa, the capital town of the Eastern Province on October 1, 1936.

He had his early education from 1947 to 1953 in Batticaloa at St. Michael's College, then managed by North American Jesuits. He then attended St. Joseph’s College, Colombo, until 1958.

Sivakumaran began his career as a journalist in 1960 working for a trade journal called *Industry*, now defunct.

From 1961 to 1969 he was a translator of Tamil for the Local Government Service Commission.

In 1966 he was selected as a relief announcer in Tamil for the commercial service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

In April 1969 he joined the S.L.B.C. in a permanent capacity as a Tamil translator in the News Division. He was later appointed as an assistant editor and subsequently held the post of a Duty Editor of the S.L.B.C.’s Tamil News until October 1979.

In 1974 Sivakumaran published his *Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka*. In 1979 he joined the United States Information Service, Colombo, handling work in English as an assistant to the Information Officer.
In 1980 he obtained his Bachelor of Arts from the University of Peradeniya, where, as an external candidate, he majored in English, Tamil, and Western Classical Culture.

In 1982 Sivakumaran published Sivakumaran Kathaihal, a collection of his short stories in Tamil previously published in newspapers.

His Eelaththu Thamil Navalgal (1956–1981), a collection of his reviews in Tamil on Sri Lankan Tamil novels, will soon be published.

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RBINSON: Would you say something about your family background?

SIVAKUMARAN: As you know, I'm a Sri Lankan, born a Tamil and Hindu. My father, Kailayar Sellanainar, hailed from Trincomalee, the other important harbor town besides Batticaloa on the Eastern coast. My mother, Thangathiraviyam, was from Batticaloa. Incidentally, Batticaloa is famous for its "singing fish". Neither of my parents is living now. My parents' ancestors were from the Northern region. My father's people were from Kantharodai. It's a place of archaeological interest in the sense that some excavations have been carried out in the area, and the findings may help to determine certain historical facts. My father joined the government service as a clerk. He steadily improved his position. On his retirement, he was an accountant in a government department. My mother's people were from Nallur, a town in Jaffna. This town is important for historical and religious reasons. In the early 16th century, when ancient Sri Lanka was divided into three kingdoms (Kotte, Kandy,
Jaffna), Nallur was the capital of Jaffna. Also, the famous Kandasamy Temple is situated in Nallur. Kandasamy is Lord Muruga or Lord Skanda.

ROBINSON: Apparently you have been influenced by a diverse cultural heritage.

SIVAKUMARAN: You can say that, partly due to the origins of my parents and grandparents, and my wife's, my in-laws', I unconsciously absorbed the character traits of various cultural traditions of the Tamil community living in the North and East of the country. My wife's father, Veluppillai, is from Kopay in the North. He's retired now. He was an assistant superintendent of surveys in the government service. Her mother, Amirthanayagi, is from Trincomalee. Furthermore, my family and I have been living in Colombo, the cosmopolitan metropolis, for the past 34 years, thus assimilating the various cultures. I count a lot of friends from various communities in the island. Living in a pluralistic social context gives me a sense of belonging to humankind. I believe in the ancient Tamil saying, Yathum Oore Yavarum Kealir, which means that any country is my country and all are my relations. I would consider myself a humanist, a liberal thinker with a progressive outlook.

ROBINSON: Would you like to say something about your own family?

SIVAKUMARAN: I married in 1966. My wife, Pushpavilojani, is also a graduate of the University of Peradeniya. She majored in History, Tamil, and Sanskrit, and passed out in 1960. She's competent in Sinhala, too. She's been a teacher, an editor of a government trade journal, and was attached to the Curriculum Development Center of the Ministry of Education. She's
presently an Assistant Superintendent attached to the Department of Examinations. We have two sons. Raghuram. He’s 20. And Anantharam, who’s 17. Raghuram is studying for a degree in aerospace engineering at Park’s College of St. Louis University in Illinois. He was being sponsored by my wife’s brother who recently died. Anantharam is studying in the GCE (A) class at Royal College, Colombo.

ROBINSON : May I ask how you translate your names, yours and your wife’s and sons’ names, into English?

SIVAKUMARAN : Sivakumaran refers to either of the sons of Lord Siva. In Tamil they are called Pillayar and Murugan. (Ganesh and Skanda). Kailayar is the one who lives on Mt. Kailash, that is, Lord Siva. Sellanainar means Loveable Lord. Pushpavilojani, my wife’s name, means a girl possessing beautiful eyes like flowers. Actually, her name should be pronounced and written as Pushpavilochani. Raghuram and Anantharam are two other name for Lord Vishnu.

ROBINSON : Do you have brothers and sisters?

SIVAKUMARAN : No sisters, but I have two younger brothers. Both married. One of my brothers, Thirukumaran, is attached to the computer section of the head office of the Ceylon Electricity Board. The youngest brother, Gnanakumar — he’s a twin, by the way; the other twin died when he was one and a half years old — is working as a company’s recreation manager in Saudi Arabia. My wife has an elder sister, Kamalalogini, who is married to Sivendran, and three younger brothers, Sivakumaran, Gnanakumaran and Rudrekumaran. A fourth brother, Vigneshwarekumaran, died of cancer recently in London.

ROBINSON : Now let’s talk about you and your work. First of all,
you started your career as a journalist on *Industry*, but you quickly went into government service. Was there any particular reason?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. My father advised me that I should hold a permanent and pensionable post in the government service, as he did.

ROBINSON: That’s a good reason. You began working in government service as a translator of Tamil for the Local Government. What is that?

SIVAKUMARAN: My office was a semi-government institution concerned with the appointment, promotion, transfer, and disciplinary action of local government employees in the municipal, urban and village councils in the island.

ROBINSON: Then, jumping ahead, what were your duties as Duty Editor of Tamil News in the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation?

SIVAKUMARAN: As Duty Editor, which was another name for news editor, I was in charge of the content of the news. And the presentation of the news. I was also in charge of the administration of the Tamil section of the news division. Assistant editors and news broadcasters were in my charge. Apart from broadcasting the news bulletins myself in Tamil, I also broadcast foreign affairs reviews and behind-the-news commentaries.

ROBINSON: What did your work for the U.S. Information Service consist of?

SIVAKUMARAN: At the U.S.I.S. I handled public relations, prepared draft media reaction reports, wrote press releases, edited official texts, made contacts with the media, did programming and library work, and audio-visual programming.
After office hours I read news bulletins in English for the S.L.B.C., particularly the 10:30 p.m. world news bulletins and the newscasts for South Asian listeners.

ROBINSON: Why did you leave that job?

SIVAKUMARAN: I had to leave the U.S.I.S. because of reduction of staff. Since I handled the work in English, the diplomats in the Embassy could do without me, as English was their medium of work.

ROBINSON: To come up to date, what do you do now as Deputy Features Editor at The Island?

SIVAKUMARAN: I used to be in charge of the Features section of the Sunday edition of the newspaper. That included the magazine section. Now I edit the Culture page. I also write a weekly column called “Gleanings.” I review books, plays, films. I write feature articles, on seminars, say, or personalities. In addition, I select material from foreign features for republication in The Island.

ROBINSON: Just what is the scope of the Culture page?

younger generations of Sri Lankans of the past achievements of these important people. Of course, I gather their opinions, too, on various cultural matters.

ROBINSON: I read Kenneth de Lanerolle's sketches of his childhood village, *Southern River*, many years ago. Some of the other people you mention are familiar, that is, their names are. Professor Sivathamby's, for example. Particularly, Dr. Sarachchandra's. He's usually credited with reviving Sinhala drama. Didn't Dr. Vithiananthan do something like that for Tamil drama?

SIVAKUMARAN: Professor Vithiananthan is widely recognized here for his popularization of Sri Lankan folk drama. He himself says he re-oriented Nattu Koothu stylized plays to suit modern times. He had seen Sarachchandra's *Maname* in 1956. In fact, Sarachchandra told Vithiananthan that many Sinhala folk plays had some connection with Tamil folk plays, especially Christian Tamil folk plays. Anyway, after that, Vithiananthan became more active in folk theatre. In the late 1940s he had already produced Professor Kanapathipillai's *Nattavan Nagara Vazkai* (Villagers' Urban Life). As a university project. The performers were students. In the early 1950s he also produced the late Professor K. Kanapathipillai's *Sankili*, an historical play about the last Tamil king of Jaffna. In 1952 he also did Kanapathipillai's *Udayar Midduku* at the University of Peradeniya. Incidentally, two other later well-known professors acted in this play. Kanagasabapathi Kailasapathi and Karthigesu Sivathamby. Kailasapathi was an editor of *Thinkaran*, a Tamil newspaper. He was a Tamil intellectual who fostered Sri Lankan consciousness among writers. He was also the pioneer in the modern sociological
approach to literary criticism. Kailasapathi was the author of many books in Tamil and one in English, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*. He also wrote a book on Tamil novels. And he wrote an introduction to my *Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka*.

ROBINSON: Many academics in Sri Lanka are quite active in the production of culture, aren't they? What is Dr. Vithiananthan's present academic status, by the way?

SIVAKUMARAN: He's the Vice Chancellor of the University of Jaffna. He's served three terms in that position. He had been at the University of Peradeniya for 25 years. Later he became the President and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Jaffna. You can say he went up the academic ladder slowly but steadily, starting as an assistant lecturer.

ROBINSON: What was his background?

SIVAKUMARAN: He was the son of an attorney in Tellipillai. He went to St. John's College in Jaffna. Then to the then University College. He got his Ph. D. from London University when he was about 26 years old. He wrote his dissertation about *Paththup Pattu*. That's an anthology of Sangam literature of the 2nd century A.D. It consists of ten works in song.

ROBINSON: Briefly, what are some of Dr. Vithiananthan's other academic writings?


ROBINSON: Before you said he re-oriented Koothu. How?

SIVAKUMARAN: He didn't change the dances or the songs, but
he introduced an element of drama into folk plays mostly taken from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. He shortened the duration of plays that often were very long. He tightened the production, he said. He made the Annavi drummers beat rhythms in consonance with the singing. He put what you might call the chorus to the side of the stage so as not to distract the attention of the audience from the actors. He did not use drops. Only a black curtain for the background. He left a lot to the imagination of the viewers. He says he “sophisticated” traditional folk plays.

ROBINSON: Has he written any plays himself?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, folk plays. That is, plays in the folk tradition. *Ravanesan*, for example. *Vali Vathai*.

ROBINSON: I suppose Dr. Vithiananthan is a teacher of drama?

SIVAKUMARAN: As President and then Vice Chancellor he has had a reduced teaching load, of course, but he taught literature in post-graduate courses. In the 1950s he was the Chairman of the Tamil Drama Panel of the National Arts Council. He went to Chilaw, Mannar, Mulaitivu, Trincomalee and other districts and put on drama festivals there and conducted seminars on drama script-writing. He helped put on school drama competitions. Now, in conjunction with the Jaffna Cultural Council, he does seminars and workshops in Tamil folk drama. He’s a teacher in the best sense.

By the way, if you’re interested in Nattu Koothu, you might like to know about a book published in Tamil a short time ago, even if you can’t read it. The Folk Arts Panel of the Jaffna District Culture Council published it. It’s called *Kattavarayan Naatakam*. It’s edited by Dr. E. Balasundaram, a senior lecturer in Tamil at the University of Jaffna. The
reason I mention it is that there are many styles in Koothu and this is a religious folk play associated with the worship of a minor god, Kaathavarayar. It's usually performed in Jaffna, Batticaloa, Trincomalee, regions where the rural peoples still worship so-called minor gods and goddesses. Dr. Balasundaram has visited various places where this play is performed as an oral operatic play without a written script. He has gathered scripts where he could and transcribed them and edited the play. To refer to Professor Vithiananthan again, in this book he makes a very important observation. That is that the Sri Lankan Tamils can be distinguished according to the regions they live in. That is, they have their own individual cultural characteristics region by region. One of the cultural aspects they have in common is the tradition of folk plays.

ROBINSON: I would like to change the subject to fiction, but before I do, you may like to say more about Dr. Kailasapthy, who wrote the introduction to your Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, thank you, I would. Professor Kailasapthy was admired in both literary and academic circles in Sri Lanka. He was magnanimous in imparting his knowledge. As I've suggested, his approach was basically scientific and sociological. He encouraged awareness of an identifiable Sri Lankan Tamil literature as distinguished from that of Tamil Nadu. As a literary critic, he tried to evaluate Western literary theories and to harmonize them with parallel concepts in Tamil literature. He radicalized the somewhat insular and tradition-bound art for art's sake Victorian approach to literature here.
ROBINSON: As long as you're introducing important Tamil professors who are active in cultural affairs, how about saying more about Dr. Karthigesu Sivathamby. I know he's the Head of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna and has been Chairman of the Tamil Drama Panel and the Tamil Literature Panel of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.

SIVAKUMARAN: Professor Sivathamby has a wide range of interests: history, sociology, economics, literature, theatre, cinema, mass communication. His areas of specialization are Tamil social and literary history, cultural communication among Tamils, and literary criticism. He's also interested in curriculum development, glossary making. He's written about 14 books in Tamil and three in English: The Tamil Film as a Medium of Communication, Drama in Ancient Tamil Society, and Literary History of Tamil. He considers himself a Marxist.

ROBINSON: You said before that when Sivathamby was a university student he performed on the stage as an actor. Is he still active in Tamil theatre?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, recently he's been involved in three or four productions in the North. Mam Sumantha Meaniyar (Those with Bodies That Carried the Soil) is the name of one. Mathoru Paham is another. These titles come from lines in devotional songs (thevarams) from the depth of Hindu culture. The plays are basically in the Koothu tradition I described before.

ROBINSON: You said Dr. Sivathamby considers himself a Marxist. How does he view contemporary Tamil literature?

SIVAKUMARAN: He thinks there's a debate going on now as to how social consciousness could or should be expressed in
fiction. He himself finds the whole ideology of progressivism in literature and the arts is not adequate enough in the current crisis. He says the challenges facing the arts today are new. He says the most important question is to what extent nationalism is a valid and necessary concept in social formation. For example, the theatre he is interested in developing in Tamil culture is what he calls Deshiya Ilakiyam, nationalistic literature. He thinks nationalistic literature contributed a great deal to the revitalization of Tamil literature as a whole in the 1960s and 1970s.

ROBINSON: Then let’s change the subject to fiction. Particularly, novels. What is the history of Sri Lankan novels written in the Tamil language?

SIVAKUMARAN: Let me answer your question by referring to a book on that subject by Silayoor Selvarajan. *The Growth of the Tamil Novel in Ceylon*. It was published in Tamil in 1967. Selvarajan says the first Tamil novel written by a Ceylonese —S. Ignacittamby of Trincomalee— was an adaptation of a Portuguese novella called *Orzon and Valentine*. That was in 1891. According to S. M. Kamaldeen, the first novel written by any Ceylonese was published in 1888. *Asenbae* by Siddique Lebbe, a Muslim. The second Ceylon Tamil novelist was T. Saravanamuttu Pillai, who wrote *Mohanangi* in 1895.

ROBINSON: Were there any Sri Lankan Tamil women writing novels at that time?

SIVAKUMARAN: No. Sri Lanka had to wait until 1924 for the appearance of the first woman novelist writing in Tamil. S. Sellammal. The title of her novel was *Rasadurai*. The second Tamil woman novelist appeared five years or so later. S. Rasaammal. Her novel was called *Saraswathi*. 
Look, to save time, let's just say that serious novels came to be written in Tamil by Sri Lankans only after 1956. Ilankeran. V.A. Rasaratnam. S. Ganeshalingan. Benedict Palan. C.V. Velupillai. S. Yoganathan. Chennai Aaliyan. And several others, since the '70's. They dealt with contemporary social themes in an analytical way. Have you ever heard of any of these people?

ROBINSON: Only C.V. Velupillai and S. Ganeshalingan. But why was 1956 the turning point? Because of the Sinhala Only language policy?

SIVAKUMARAN: As you know, Sri Lanka became independent from Great Britain in 1948. Before that time, Ceylonese literary efforts in Tamil did not press for a Ceylonese identity. The lives of Tamil-speaking Ceylonese were depicted as the continuity of a Tamil heritage derived chiefly from the literary tradition of South India. The pre-independence Tamil writers here were mainly interested in the advancement of religion. Between 1956 and 1963 a progressive literary movement in Tamil came into full force. It was the primary force in determining what Ceylonese Tamil literature was or should be. Realism and national identity were emphasized. There was a new political consciousness.

ROBINSON: What was the volume of Tamil literary activity at that time?

SIVAKUMARAN: Between 1948 and 1970 a total of 71 novels written in Tamil were published in Sri Lanka. There were 57 collections of short stories. There were 98 anthologies of poetry. There were 49 plays. Keep in mind that Sri Lankan Tamil writers had heavy competition from South India. There were not many readers of Ceylonese books in Tamil here.
There was only one main Tamil publishing house here. Many writers had to bear the costs of publication themselves. Many still do. They even had a hand in the sale and distribution of their own books.

One reason for the relatively poor sale of Ceylonese Tamil fiction is that hardly any of those books was used in education. Only a few books by Ceylonese Tamils were recommended as Tamil texts in higher grades. Even the libraries did not display books by Ceylonese Tamils. Another reason was much of the Tamil fiction here lacked popular appeal. Readers nurtured in the South Indian tradition of escapist reading matter were discouraged by the literary quality of the works I've been referring to. The Ceylon Tamil writers I've mentioned were socially committed. Like S. Ganeshalingan.

ROBINSON: Before you go into Ganeshalingan's work, could you go a little into fiction about the Tamils of Indian origin who mostly work on tea plantations in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: In the last part of the 1970s, a writer from Badulla by the name of Teliwatta Joseph depicted the life of tea workers in a collection of short stories called Naam Irukkum Nade (The Country We Live In). The title story stresses that those of Indian origin in Sri Lanka should consider the country they live in now as their own homeland. In another story he describes the backwardness of the educational system in the hill country where the tea plantations are located. And yet another story shows how youngsters in this area are corrupted by third-rate films. One other story is about a chaste girl who is driven into prostitution because of poverty.
A few years ago, three writers who come from the tea estate area put out a collection of short stories, *Thottak Kadilinlae* (In the Jungle of the Estates). It was published by the Matale Tamil Writers' Union. One story describes the dilemma of a married estate woman with two children who tries to avoid being molested by the estate's superintendent. She has to succumb; otherwise, her husband will lose his job. In another story, an old Tamil woman and a Sinhala foreman (kangany) help people in adversity regardless of their race connection. All the stories in this collection are ironic comments on the life patterns in the so-called jungle of estates in the tea country. This collection is important because it proves Tamil writers from estate areas are equally as imaginative and artistic as their counterparts in the North and East who usually get more attention. Anyway, these three writers represented in this collection write with firm convictions and an awareness of the realities of life in their area.

ROBINSON : Then, let's take up Ganeshalingan and his work.

SIVAKUMARAN : All right. But I want to repeat one point. Local Tamil writers like Ganeshalingan wrote realistic social novels. They were aware of the root causes of social problems. Take Ganeshalingan's *Neenda Payanam*, for example. The Long Journey. His first novel. *Neenda Payanam* is about the gradual changes taking place in a small village in the Jaffna area. Mainly social and political changes. In relation to the awakening of the so-called low caste people. The depressed class people. They tear down the barricades of social values rooted in religious beliefs. Eventually they become strong enough to gain representation in their own local government.
The novel describes their struggle, their long journey, for social and political emancipation. *Neenda Payanam* is a novel about caste. The caste problem cannot be said to have been solved here even now. It exists in some form or other in all grades of society. The irony is that even among the so-called low caste people there is a caste system. This novel ought to be translated into Sinhala or English or both. It ought to be filmed as Martin Wickremasinghe’s *Gamperaliya* was filmed.

ROBINSON: Speaking of translation, is there much translation going on between Sinhala and Tamil here?

SIVAKUMARAN: This is a very important question. A few Tamil works have been translated into Sinhala and English, but there is more translation from Sinhala into Tamil than from Tamil into Sinhala. There is a Jaffna monthly, *Mallikai* (Jasmine), which publishes many Tamil translations of Sinhala writing. I wish that more and more writing in the three languages used here could be made available, so that a better understanding prevailed among readers toward each other’s culture.

ROBINSON: What kind of Sinhala works have been translated into Tamil? Just a couple of examples, please.

SIVAKUMARAN: You know a little about Munidasa Cumaratunga. Sarogjini Arunasalam has translated his *Magul Kamae* (Kalyana Chappadu), *Hathpana* (Chettup Pilaitha Chinasamy), and *Heen Saraya* (Meliyar Midukku). T.Kanagaratnam has published a collection of twelve Sinhala short stories by people like Wickremasinghe, Sarachchandra, and A.V. Suraweera, whom you know. Its title is *Setu Bandanam*. Wickremasinghe’s novel *Gamperaliya* (Cramap Pirlvu) was
put into Tamil by M.M.Uwise. Works by K. Jayatilake and Karunasena Jayalath have been translated into Tamil by Thambi Aiyah Devadas. Many other Sinhala writers’ short stories and poems have also been translated into Tamil and published in Jaffna. In magazines like Mallikai and Alai.

ROBINSON: What about Tamil works into Sinhala?

SIVAKUMARAN: A couple of old Tamil epics, Silapadikaram and Manimekalai were translated by Hiselle Dharmaratne Thero. A few short stories by Ganeshalingan, Aluth Satanpata, were put into Sinhala by Ranjit Perera. Kanagaratnam, again, has translated some Tamil short stories, Demali Ketti Kathawa. K.G. Amaradasa has translated a few short stories into Sinhala.

ROBINSON: Have you done much translation from Sinhala or English into Tamil?

SIVAKUMARAN: I don’t translate from Sinhala. May I also say I am a bilingual (English and Tamil) writer? I have translated numerous non-fiction articles in English into Tamil. An article by Arya Abeysinghe and Iranganie Abeysinghe on contemporary English writing in Sri Lanka from New Ceylon Writing. I’ve translated poetry by Wimal Dissanayake, whom you have interviewed. I’ve also translated the views expressed in English by Mervyn de Silva, Reggie Siriwardene, D.C.R.A. Goonetilake, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Siri Goonesinghe, Tissa Kariyawasam, and others, into Tamil and published them in local magazines.

ROBINSON: Has anybody translated your work into Sinhala?

SIVAKUMARAN: A few of my articles have been translated into Sinhala by Susil Sirivardana and Piyal Somaratne and published in Mavatha and Navaliya.
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ROBINSON: To go back to Ganesalingan, what, briefly, is the plot of *Neenda Payanam*?

SIVAKUMARAN: A young man of the Sambattu Pallar caste is beaten up by Vellalar caste youths during a temple festival. He had slept in the temple premises allocated to the Vellalar or high caste. That's how the novel begins. But, briefly, this Sambattu Pallar young man has three young women friends. One belongs to a high caste. One belongs to his own caste. One belongs to a lower caste. He marries the last. By having the young man marry the latter young woman, Ganesalingan wants to stress the idea that reformation of society takes place first in the young man's own home.

ROBINSON: Would you describe a couple of Ganesalingan's other novels?

SIVAKUMARAN: His second novel was *Sadangu*. That refers to ceremonies or rituals. In this novel it means marriage ceremonies. *Sadangu* deals with all possible ceremonies and customs and observances associated with an average Jaffna Hindu rural wedding. Ganesalingan laughs at the foolishness of conservative people who only look to the old customs and ceremonies but who ignore the susceptibilities of the marriage partners whose marriage has been arranged for them. He scoffs at parents who refuse to see a new generation emerging, who thrust on their offspring their own concept of life rooted in a feudal society. Ganesalingan's third novel was *Sevvanam* (The Crimson Sky). It centers around an upper middle class business man who accumulated wealth suddenly in the midst of political and social changes. His foil is a trade unionist, university educated, who associates himself with the proletariat. The novelist suggests
a Marxist solution to eradicate social evils.

ROBINSON: I understand there are some Sri Lankan Muslims who write in the Tamil language. Would you say something about them?

SIVAKUMARAN: Let me mention Zubair, a Jaffna Muslim who writes under the pen name of Ilankeeran. He used to publish a literary magazine called Maragatham, but it died due to lack of adequate financial support. He then edited Tholilalie and then Janavegam, two political weeklies. He's one of the finest political analysts using the Tamil language in Sri Lanka. He himself is the product of the class struggle. As a Marxist and member of the proletariat, he has identified himself as a progressive writer. One of his novels, Thentralum Puyalum (The Breeze and the Storm), is set in Ceylon. The story centers on a lower middle class Muslim family in Jaffna. They are torn apart by conflicting values. The son falls in love with a rich girl in Colombo. They have a passionate relationship. She becomes pregnant. Her family force her into an abortion and then into a hasty marriage with a cousin who has the wealth and status and education they want in their daughter's husband. This experience, this betrayal, as the young man sees it, sours his attitude toward life. He falls a victim to both physical and mental disease. He dies. There's another love story running parallel to this one. The young man's sister loves a neighbor of a lower caste. In spite of severe opposition, their attachment deepens. They have the courage to venture on marriage. Progressive ideology thus triumphs at the end.

There are other Muslim writers like A. Abdus Samathu, Jalaldeen, M.M. Manssor, S.M. Nagoor Gany, et al, who
have depicted the Muslim life style in Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Has any critic in Sri Lanka written about Sri Lankan Muslims writing in Tamil?

SIVAKUMARAN: Professor Vithiananthan included an essay on this topic in Ilakkiya Thentral. The first person to write about this, though, was Professor M.M. Uwise, who wrote his M.A. thesis on the Muslim contribution to Tamil literature. A few years ago, Al-Haj S.M. Hanifa, an attorney at law, published Islamiya Ilakkiya Valarchchi, a collection of essays on Islamic writing in Tamil.

ROBINSON: What is the name of one Islamic Tamil literary work?

SIVAKUMARAN: Probably the most widely known piece is Chirapuranam. It tells the story of Prophet Mohammed. It’s poetry written in the style of a Tamil epic.

ROBINSON: In discussing translations, you referred to short stories. Would you say something about your collection of your own short stories?

SIVAKUMARAN: A general comment. The stories in Sivakumaran Kathaihal were written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and so they reflect the limited range of experience of an adolescent. Most of the stories were on psychological themes. They were experimental in form in the sense they were tight like a Western short story. Incidentally, the book came out of the printer’s at Batticaloa in a battered condition, and then it could not be circulated widely on account of the worsened conditions in the North and South.

ROBINSON: Why “battered”?

SIVAKUMARAN: Because the pages of the book were not collated into one unit. Lots of printing mistakes. Fourteen stories were planned but only seven were actually printed. There was
no jacket for the book. It was a slipshod job. But I couldn't blame the publisher. He had to print the book in a hurry and under trying conditions.

ROBINSON: How about describing a couple of these stories?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, one, "Ilai", is about the quarreling between a married couple. They separate, unite, separate. I used a lot of Tamil regional dialects. Another one, "Uraividam Melidam", is a sketch of a young man with an inferiority complex.

ROBINSON: My impression is that many writers in Sri Lanka deal with the inferiority complex theme.

SIVAKUMARAN: Most Tamil writers, however, ignore this aspect. Most writers concentrate on social realism. Only a few writers have written on psychological themes. But, yes, there's a story by A. Muttulingam, "Pakkuvam", which is a good one on the inferiority complex theme. It's written compactly. It's about the attainment of maturity of a young but unattractive woman immediately after her younger sister precedes her in biological change of life. The title translates as "Puberty". She has an inferiority complex. Her sister is more attractive and very popular, so she begins to be depressed. But a man comes to her rescue. He comforts her psychologically. He tells her she's pretty. He advises her to be more attentive to her personal appearance. Anyway, she becomes emotionally mature. "Pakkuvam" is a story of the 1960s. It was published in a collection called Eelathu Parisu Kathaihal (Sri Lankan Prize Winning Stories).

ROBINSON: Were there any stories in that collection that dealt with less subjective themes?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. Thiru Senthooran's story, "Urimaienge?"
(Where Are the Rights?), was about the failure of a Tamil tea estate worker to obtain Sri Lankan citizenship rights because of the laws and regulations prevailing at that time. The dialogue was colloquial. The characterization was realistic. On the other hand, another story in the same collection, "Nattukku Iruvar" (Two for the State) was merely a piece of propaganda.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, what is the Tamil for "stories" and "short stories" and "novels" and "fiction"?

SIVAKUMARAN: As you must have guessed by this time, kathaihal is stories. Short stories is ciru kathaihal. Punai kathaihal is fiction. Navalhal is novels.

ROBINSON: Would you comment then on some of the other Tamil writers of ciru kathaihal in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, but to begin with let's go back a little to the late 1930s. And early 1940s. One of the innovators of Tamil short story writing was a Divisional Revenue Officer by the name of N. Sivagnanasunderam. He used the pen-name Ilankayarone. In English, King of Lanka. He usually published his stories in South Indian magazines like Manikodi, Sooravali, Sakthi. He's dead now. As for the stories, Vellipathasaram (The Silver Anklet) was a collection of his stories published in the early 1960s. "The Silver Anklet", the title story, tells about the romantic attachment of a newly married couple. "Manithakurangu" (The Human Ape) deals with the open-heartedness of an ugly man who marries a beautiful but lascivious woman. "Anathai" (The Orphan) satirizes sophisticated women who have the license even to give birth before marriage and discard their children. Ilankayarone was essentially a formalist but his
stories were expositions of humanism.

ROBINSON: Who is one of the Tamil writers in Sri Lanka who mainly deal with social problems in short stories?

SIVAKUMARAN: S. Yoganathan. I mentioned his name before. He's a social realist, if that's what you mean. He usually probes the minds of his characters instead of objectively reporting the transitional conditions of society, but one of his stories, "Cholakam" (Southerly Wind), is a vivid description of the poverty and gloom in the lives of a fisher family in the North. Another one, "Kalaignan" (The Artist), exposes the character traits of pseudo-artists who refuse to look at and understand the sordid aspects of life around them. Yoganathan has published a few novels, too. *Iraval Thai Nadu* (Surrogate Motherland) is one of them. As Professor Sivathamby has said, Yoganathan used to speak of a Sri Lankan consciousness but now he suddenly feels that Sri Lanka is only a surrogate homeland. This is a story about alienation. Sivathamby says the title of this story sums up the disenchantment and the suffering of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka recently.

ROBINSON: Who are other important Tamil authors of realistic short fiction of this kind?

SIVAKUMARAN: I must mention the names of I. Santhan, K. Saddanathan, Theniyan and a few others. As an American, you may be interested in S. Kathirgamanathan. He died young in the early 1970s. At the age of thirty. He was among the first group of university graduates here who studied in the Tamil medium. Many of them became writers. Kathirgamanathan's "Vietnam Unathu Devathaikalin Deva Vaku" (Vietnam: The Holy Pronouncements of Your Own
Angels) is a short story that makes a strong statement. The main character, a patriotic young Vietnamese woman, condemns the American presence in Saigon. It's a condemnation of imperialism, American or French. That was Kathirgamanathan's last story. Speaking of Vietnam, K. Ganesh, a progressive Tamil poet who once edited a little magazine called Bharathi, has translated Ho Chi Minh's poems into Tamil. Ho Chi Minh wrote these poems in prison in South China in the 1930s. He wrote them in Chinese. They were translated into English by Eileen Palmer. In the early 1970s Ganesh translated them into Tamil from her English version. Ganesh is interested in introducing South East Asian writings to Tamil readers. He's also translated a collection of stories by Lu Sun, a Chinese writer who died in 1936, and an anthology of Bulgarian patriotic poetry.

ROBINSON: Let's get into poetry written by Tamil in Sri Lanka, too, but first would you mention at least one Tamil woman who writes short stories?

SIVAKUMARAN: Bhavani Alvapillai. That was her maiden name. She uses the name Bhavani. She startles her readers with highly shocking depictions of characters who attempt to defy the conventional social beliefs and morals of the Tamils. She deals with the romantic and sexual stirrings of young couples. She makes a sincere effort to put in plain words the undertones and hidden aspirations that often ripple and bubble around in the unconscious mind. Her collection of short stories published in the early 1960s, Kadavularum Manitharkalum (Gods and Men), is provocative. For example, one story called "Anbin Vilai" (Price of Love) is about the love and marriage of a brother and sister who do not
know they are of the same blood and kin. When they learn the truth, the wife commits suicide after leaving her daughter with her husband's brother. The daughter faces many challenging problems in society until she is rescued by her sweetheart who himself has to hurdle many obstacles. “Manipura”, another of Bhavani's stories, deals with the sexual relationship between two lovers on the eve of the young woman's marriage to another man. (Manipura is a species of pigeons or doves white in color.) “Saria Thapa?” (Is It Right or Wrong?) is the story of a married woman who hates her husband and her child. She falls in love with a friend of her husband. She undergoes an emotional struggle whether to stay with her husband and child or elope with her lover. The situations and the characters in stories like these create an impression that Bhavani is indifferent to the prevailing social barriers. However objectionable the contents of her stories may be, though, there is unity in their form.

I'd also like to mention Kohila Mahendran. She was trained as a science teacher. She was a medical student at one time. She writes with psychological depth. Her husband is a teacher too, and her father, now retired, used to be a school principal. Anyway, she is my favorite among the women writers in Sri Lanka writing in Tamil. She has an intellectual approach, artistic ability, psychological insight, and concern for tight story structure. One of her stories is about a woman science teacher. The narrator is one of her students. At a staff meeting the teacher suggests celebrating the New Year by distributing nutritious food to needy children. One of her students, the narrator, has told her that many of the school's students come from poor families and suffer from
malnutrition. She suddenly experiences the shock of learning things she did not know about her own environment. In another story Mrs. Mahendran exposes employment agents operating in Jaffna who take innocent people for a ride by promising them lucrative jobs in foreign countries and leaving them stranded. In this story an uneducated depressed-class woman is brought to Colombo by one of these agents who makes her believe Colombo is in Nigeria! He finds her a job as a maid-servant in a Tamil household. When she finally learns the facts, she puts the agent to shame.

ROBINSON: Has Kohil Mahendran written any novels?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, as a matter of fact, her first novel appeared recently. _Thuylum Oru Nal Kalaiyum_ (Even the Slumber Will One Day Be Disturbed). She raises the problem of the moral and psychological placement of a Tamil woman in a rigid, conservative Jaffna society. At a superficial level the story’s about platonic love and marital relationship. At a deeper level, it raises many questions about the freedom of choice or individualism of a woman in a male-determined society. The idea of revolt against hypocritical practices. The story judiciously includes as passing events current happenings in the North.

ROBINSON: You’ve mentioned _Mallikai_ (Jasmine), a Tamil literary monthly in the North. What kind of a journal is it? Are any of its editors fiction writers?

himself a member of the working class. He is proud he was born into a family of hairdressers. He himself worked in his own barber shop when he was young. In his fiction he deals with the problems of the down-trodden. He severely condemns caste differences, social discrimination, literary escapism, bourgeois sophistication. In *Pathukai*, published in the early 1960s, he portrays characters who belong to the lowest of the low, he satirizes pseudo-intellectuals, he depicts the love affairs of middle class people. As an editor, Jeeva, who proclaims himself a pro-Soviet communist, publishes contributions from non-Marxist writers and intellectuals. Even anti-Marxists are acceptable if they have contributed in a significant why to Sri Lankan Tamil arts and letters. In that sense, *Mallikai* is a journal of liberal ideas. It’s an open forum.

ROBINSON : What are the names at least of other Tamil literary magazines?

SIVAKUMARAN : *Alai* (The Wave). *Thayaham* (Motherland). *Puthusu* (New). *Vayal* (Field). There were others, now defunct. I want to add that a book called *Eelathil Irunthu Oar Ilakkiya Katal*, a compilation of views and interviews given by Dominic Jeeva, was published a few years ago. His views on arts and letters and the like.

ROBINSON : What was the main theme?

SIVAKUMARAN : His main point was that Lankan Tamil literature has its own intrinsic identity and that most Tamil writers here are socially conscious and write with purpose rather than just churning out cheap escapist pot-boilers. Literature should not merely reflect contemporary life but also serve a social function to improve present conditions.
Jeeva tends to dismiss anything other than Marxism as useless. For instance, he calls Jean Paul Sartre a fake. Existensialism a spent force.

ROBINSON: Now to get to poetry, is there at least one particular Tamil poet you'd like to call attention to?

SIVAKUMARAN: Eelavanan. His real name was M. Dharmarajah. He's dead now. His Akkini Pookal (Fire Flowers) was published in the 1970s. Eelavanan's poems express a love of humanity, the urge to see a new world emerging, determination to wipe out social injustices through collective efforts. Eelavanan attacks the "beauty" poets, the mere aesthetes, who fail to deal with the needs of the time. He wants songs to be sung for those people who burn like flowers in a furnace of flames. He means the underprivileged, the suppressed, the exploited. He hates war. He condemns genocide. He dreams of a socialist world in which everyone will live not only for himself but for everybody else.

I'd also like to mention Eelaganesh. His real name is N. Dharmalingam. His Pasikkul Pasi (Hunger within Hunger) was published in the 1980s. He also expresses a genuine concern for the human condition. He also expresses his inability to get things changed. He himself is an unwilling participant in the miseries of life. His poems are about love and poverty. In one poem, "Thottatu Pookal" (Estate Flowers), he describes the misery that pervades the life of the impoverished people working on the tea estates. In another poem, "Desame Padil Sol" (Nation, What Do You Say?), he writes sadly about the separation of Tamil and Sinhalese friends in the current crisis.

ROBINSON: This last topic leads to questions other than those
about literature. For one, how do you yourself view the inter-communal problems in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: We are a multi-racial society. That’s a fact. In these circumstances, it’s a good idea for all Sri Lankans to try to understand the psyche of the major communities in this island. Try to understand what their particular problems are. The majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalese. This community’s aspirations should be respected so long as they don’t lead to a “tyranny of the majority”. It’s also an ethical requisite that, however insignificant the minorities may be in terms of numbers, they should not be ignored or treated as aliens.

ROBINSON: How should the prevailing enmity be dealt with?

SIVAKUMARAN: Look, not all the Sinhalese are against the Tamils and not every Tamil is against the Sinhalese. Otherwise, how would you account for the magnanimity of so many Sinhalese during recent shameful happenings? How would you expect such harmonious working together of professionals, academics, artistes, writers, journalists? I’m glad to say that a Tamil, Ratnanathar Sivaguranathan, was twice elected the President of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association, for example. How do you account for romance, love and marriage of people from various communities here? Only a few of us, say 50,000 out of the total population of 15 million, indulge in ugly activities, both in the North and the South of the island.

ROBINSON: Some Sinhalese seem to be afraid of Tamils, socially speaking, that is.

SIVAKUMARAN: Only a very few Sinhalese think that the Tamils have been an obstacle to their progress in the fields of
education, business, and the professions. Even if that were the case, it would be sheer foolhardiness to attempt to annihilate an entire community. A few people have been wrongly convinced by rabid racists among us that, by destructive acts such as destroying property or burning libraries, they could replace the hard-working Tamils. If a few Tamils and some members of other minorities in the island have enjoyed prestigious positions earlier, we have also contributed our fair share to the country’s development.

ROBINSON: Some Tamils express fear of being physically attacked.

SIVAKUMARAN: In some areas, the army and the police assumed superiority in their behavior toward the Tamil people. This has created an understandable fear among Tamils that they may be the victims of terrorism. That in turn may have produced terrorists among the Tamil youth. What we have in this country is a mutual fear of terrorism. Terrorism of any kind must be condemned. We have no right to take another person’s life. Even if he is an enemy——imaginary or otherwise.

ROBINSON: Do you have a recommendation on this point?

SIVAKUMARAN: One immediate action should be to make it compulsory for the armed forces personnel posted to the North to be acquainted with the Tamil language.

ROBINSON: Isn’t this suggestion rather impractical?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, one may ask why should the Sinhalese armed forces learn Tamil when they are of the predominant race in this country. Fair enough. But the majority cannot win the hearts of the minorities if they cannot speak to them on their own wave lengths.
ROBINSON: In that case, why shouldn't the minority Tamils learn Sinhala? Or English?

SIVAKUMARAN: Tamils did learn Sinhala earlier, on their own accord, before it was thrust upon them. And the Tamils living outside the North and East by virtue of the fact that there is necessity to speak in Sinhala have learnt Sinhala. As for English, only about 8% of the entire population in Sri Lanka are familiar with the language. Tamil is spoken by nearly a quarter of the people. Sri Lankan Tamils, the Tamils of recent Indian origin, the majority of the Muslims and some sections of the Sinhalese and Burghers. It's an important language outside Sri Lanka, too. Anyway, for greater harmony and better understanding we need to know each other's languages here, at least in conversational or colloquial usage. The Tamil language is not far removed from Sinhala in idiomatic usage or even in vocabulary, you know. Just as there are many Sanskrit words or roots in Sinhala, there are many Tamil words of Sanskrit origin. A common ground is there or can be found. Similarly, there are some Tamil words in Sinhala and some Sinhala words in Tamil. Both languages have words in common of Portuguese, Dutch and English origin, too. It would not be very difficult for most of us to learn either Sinhala or Tamil—if we really want to learn.

ROBINSON: Any suggestions?

SIVAKUMARAN: The right atmosphere should be created.

ROBINSON: Who should create it?

SIVAKUMARAN: The politicians. They can set an example. They can learn these languages themselves. They can popularize them among the people they represent. If the politicians take
to this as a crusade, it is bound to be followed by the people at large. What the politicians can do is institutionalize this mission. The governments in power should formulate a substantial long term plan to carry out a project of translations.

ROBINSON: Please explain this proposal a little.

SIVAKUMARAN: A Bureau of Translations should be established. It should undertake a series of translations of both Sinhala and Tamil material into one another and also into English. If direct translations from Sinhala and Tamil into each other are not possible immediately on account of inadequate facilities and personnel, translations can be made first into English and then into Sinhala or Tamil.

ROBINSON: Are there enough qualified translators in Sri Lanka to take on such a big project?

SIVAKUMARAN: A necessary prerequisite is a scheme to train translators. Both at government and non-government levels, translators should be trained by competent persons.

ROBINSON: Yes, but what would they translate?

SIVAKUMARAN: Translators should begin with contemporary writing, creative and simple. The reason is that contemporary writing reflects contemporary living and current thinking. These translations can be a singularly useful and productive instrument of communication. What we need today is understanding here. To understand each other, we need to communicate with each other more and better.

ROBINSON: As far as understanding and communication are concerned, are you satisfied with the role of the press in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: The terrorists of all camps should sit down
together and thrash out their grievances, genuine and imaginary, without using violence. What we need for ethnic amity is large-heartedness to understand each other. As for the media, particularly the Sinhala press, they can be a little more discreet in this direction. There is too much stereotyping.

ROBINSON: Would you give an example of what you mean?

SIVAKUMARAN: Petty beliefs. False images. That the “Demala” (Tamil) is a dark person and a Dravidian. That the “Sinhalaya” is a fair-complexioned person and an Aryan. That the Sinhala is a “modaya” (a fool or an idiot), sluggish. That the Demala is selfish and calculating. These prejudices should not cloud our genuine understanding of each other despite our mutual shortcomings. We in the press should not always be harping on the negative side.

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