AN INTERVIEW WITH B. E. S. J. BASTIAMPILLAI
ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Bertram Emil Saint Jean Bastiampillai is Dean, Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

He was born on August 26, 1930, in Anuradhapura.

He received his primary school education in Roman Catholic schools in Kurunegala, Puttalam and Jaffna, and his secondary school education in Roman Catholic high schools, St. Patrick’s College, Jaffna, and St. Joseph’s College, Trincomalee.

In 1957 he was awarded a B. A. in History from the University of Peradeniya, where he read English, Economics and History in his first year and later specialized in modern European history and that of post-colonial South and South East Asia.

For a short time a teacher at St. Patrick’s College, Jaffna, he taught British and European history and Indian and Sri Lankan history.

In January 1958 Bastiampillai joined the Sri Lanka Department of Agriculture and became the Administrative Officer in charge of the Trincomalee agricultural district.

In October 1958 he became an Assistant Lecturer at the University of Peradeniya, teaching the History of Peninsular India. He also taught tutorial classes in the History of Sri Lanka.

In September 1961 he went to the University of London, England, where he received a Master’s degree from King’s College in 1963. His thesis, later published, was "The Administration of Sir William Gregory, Governor of Ceylon, 1872-1877". He then returned to his position as Lecturer in History at the University of Peradeniya.

In 1965 he was transferred to the Arts Faculty at the University of Colombo and continued to stay on in Colombo.

In 1978 he was awarded a Ph. D. from the University of Peradeniya. His dissertation was on "P. A. Dyke, Government Agent of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka, 1829-1867".

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ROBINSON: Let's go into a little more detail on certain aspects of the current crisis in Sri Lanka that you've already mentioned. For example, what is the background of Tamil fears of economic deprivation, as you put it?

BASTIAMPILLAI: As the government of Sri Lanka replaced English with Sinhala as the language of administration in 1956, there were fewer and fewer job opportunities for Tamils. Even now the situation is the same. In fact, the number of Tamils in state service is severely depleted. The Tamils had depended heavily on the government and other public services, and they felt excluded. They were suddenly rendered "illiterate". Also, banks and credit institutions are more concentrated in Sinhalese areas and they cater more to a Sinhalese clientele. Expenditure on productive projects like the Mahaveli River irrigation and electric power generation project and public housing projects in the Southern region also got more liberally dispersed in Sinhalese areas. Pronouncedly so in Sinhalese areas since ethnic disturbances had queered the pitch for Tamils.

ROBINSON: You also referred to problems regarding the devolution of authority.

BASTIAMPILLAI: With authority devolved onto local units of government, the Tamils felt they could steer their own futures. But the exercise of creating District Development Councils after 1977 failed because the councils were left ineffectively devoid of funds. It was also absurd to nominate Sinhalese District Ministers hailing from distant Sinhalese districts to represent Tamil districts. This made district administration meaningless to Tamils. Furthermore, those authorities already holding power did not respond too warmly to the call for devolution. They didn't want to shed their authority or lose their decision-making power. Also the Executive Presidential system provides more for centralization than it does for deconcentration. The President's powers have not been modified. In the proposed set up, an objection, according to Tamils, is that the President will exercise controls, veto, dissolution, and even can decide to impose direct presidential rule.

ROBINSON: And, then, what is the problem with land settlements?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Tamil politicians and militants seem to object to state-sponsored,
state-assisted, state-organized settlement of Sinhalese people in large numbers in areas in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Tamils fear this settlement will change the ethnic demographic patterns. They fear being reduced into a minority in what they consider traditional Tamil areas, and they perceive a threat to their predominance from a different ethnic group. The Sinhalese, of course, say that pressure on land in the South West and the South is severe. This is only an argument to justify action. Pressure on land there is still not so great. The Sinhalese say that the movement of people has to be towards thinly populated frontier areas bordering concentrations of Tamil people in the North and East, where land is more available. This is not convincing to the Tamils, who feel that land can be found to accommodate Sinhalese elsewhere. Tamils feel that the Sinhalese government wants to colonize age-old Tamils areas and their borders.

ROBINSON: And what is the problem with state alienation of land?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Tamils allege that state alienation of Crown land and nationalized land favors the Sinhalese who come from distant areas. The Tamils feel that their people do not get state alienated land, although they live in closer proximity to such alienated lands. Again, their fear is of an inroad of Sinhalese into areas which the Tamils had for a long time considered their own living areas. There's one more issue here: Tamils in the hill country who are descended from Indian immigrant laborers are not favored with land grants.

ROBINSON: Because they are not citizens?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No. They were excluded in the 1930s from being beneficiaries of the Land Development Ordinance.

ROBINSON: Just what are the ethnic geographic entities in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: A good concentration of Sri Lankan Tamils live as ethnic entities in the North and East. In the Northern Jaffna Peninsula and even in areas southward to a good distance, virtually all the inhabitants have been Sri Lankan Tamils. This was so when Sri Lanka received political independence from England in 1948. Similarly, there are similar concentrations of Tamils in the East, especially in Batticaloa and Trincomalee. The hill country Tamils formed their own distinct entities within the plantation enclaves in the central hilly
regions. Of course, Tamils have dispersed into other parts of the island. In the West, especially in Colombo and its surrounding areas, they comprise a reasonably large number. As for the Sinhalese, they were usually in ethnic entities in the South, particularly the deep South, and in large pockets in the North West, the Center, and in many of the other geographic areas. Because of this sort of demographic pattern, it was possible for Sri Lankan Tamils to think of their territorial areas as distinctively theirs.

ROBINSON: Where are the Muslims in Sri Lanka located?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Muslims--sometimes they're called Moors here--are dispersed throughout Sri Lanka. They live amidst the Sinhalese and the Tamils in the South, the Central regions, the East and the North. They're concentrated in distinct groups in parts of the East and the South sometimes, and also in between. They are ubiquitous.

ROBINSON: Who are some of the leading Muslims in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There are many prominent Muslims among politicians and professionals and business people, of course, but let me just mention a few people in education. Professor Sultan Bawa, a former chemistry professor, is now chancellor of Eastern University. Professor Ismail is Professor of Parasitology here at the University of Colombo. His wife, Jezima Ismail, is the principal of Muslim Ladies College. A couple of other leading Muslim academics are Shafie Marikkar, an educator in state service, and Dr. A. M. M. Sahabdeen, a former philosophy scholar who is in business now after retiring.

ROBINSON: Speaking of business, Muslims seem to be prominent in the gem trade in Sri Lanka. Are they socially accepted?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, at present Muslims preponderate in the gem trade, especially those Muslims from Borewala, a coastal town. But the Gafoors and Markars have been businessmen in the gem trade for a long time. Yes, they are socially recognized.

ROBINSON: Do Sri Lankan Muslims also have a caste system?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No, they don't have a caste system.

ROBINSON: How do they usually get along with the Sinhalese and Tamils?

BASTIAMPILLAI: They get along very well with the Sinhalese and the Tamils, although there's an occurrence of strained relations on and off.
ROBINSON: Speaking of caste, I understand the caste system among Tamils is quite rigid.

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, caste among Tamils is strictly observed, irrespective of religious differences. That is, even Tamil Christians observe caste differentiations. They may be only a little more liberal in practices regarding eating together or mixing together socially.

ROBINSON: Are there many cross-caste marriages?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Cross-caste marriages are rare. The rigors of caste among Tamils have not been softened by education--or adversity. Even entry into Hindu temples had to be liberalized through legislation here about ten years ago that prohibited exclusive use of places of public worship.

ROBINSON: Are there differences among Sri Lankan Tamils and the so-called Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka in regard to caste?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There is no remarkable difference in the caste systems among the Sri Lankan Tamils or Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka. Among Tamils in India the Brahmins predominate in the caste hierarchy, but in Sri Lanka Brahmins are not much heard of. In Sri Lanka the Vellala caste--the farmer caste--is more prominent economically, socially and numerically.

ROBINSON: Are rich farmers and poor farmers in the same high caste?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, but today even those from nonfarmer groups have taken to agriculture as it is a profitable venture.

ROBINSON: Do Sri Lankan Tamils consider themselves higher than Indian Tamils?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, the Sri Lankan Tamils think that migrant Indian Tamils had come mainly from the lower caste groups of South India. This is unfair. Reprehensible.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about differences in caste between Sinhalese and Tamils in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Variations in caste observances do exist among Tamils and Sinhalese, but there is not much to comment on. Among Sinhalese the fisher caste is economically and socially significant. Members of this caste tend to compete as equals with those of the farmer caste, which is considered to be most superior generally both by Sinhalese and Tamils alike.
ROBINSON: I've heard the Sinhalese are less rigid in caste observances than Tamils.

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Sinhalese are more liberal in their outlook in regard to caste. But the Buddhist priesthood here still sticks to caste in relation to ordination and admission into the relatively more influential Mawatta and Asgiriya chapters. Buddhism is egalitarian. As a religion it does not give any legitimacy to caste among the Sinhalese. This perhaps contributes to the growth of a relatively more liberal outlook.

ROBINSON: What is the general affect of caste on the upward mobility of a person in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The numerical dominance of the farmer caste, the highest caste, helps keep members of the so-called lesser castes socially depressed regardless of their industry or success economically or academically.

ROBINSON: Would you say a little more about the policing problem you mentioned before?

BASTIAMPILLAI: In certain Tamil-inhabited areas, the people themselves have insisted on the policing power. The Tamils experienced the impotence of the police, the indifference of the police, and what many of the Tamils suspected was the partiality among the police whenever ethnic or communal conflicts arose. In recent times, too. In short, the Tamils lost confidence in the predominantly Sinhalese police force. They wanted their own security personnel. This demand grew stronger when some of the Tamils, on many recent occasions, perceived police apathy, distrust and even animus against them, toward the Tamils, whenever communal conflicts erupted. The number of Tamils in the police force or in the security force is very small. This also strengthens the militant Tamils to emphasize the need for a special provision being made for their security.

ROBINSON: Who do you mean by "militants"?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Those described as terrorists or separatists by the Sri Lankan government.

ROBINSON: Would you explain what you referred to as the equality of recognition?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes. One serious handicap that makes Tamils feel they have not been accorded equality of recognition is the use of Sinhala as the
official language and the advantages this conveys to Sinhalese and the disadvantages to Tamils. To aspire to be promoted to higher office, a knowledge of Sinhala is imperative. Certain high level jobs can only be held if you know Sinhala. The Tamils also complain of unequal treatment at administrative levels. The way they are treated, for example, when they apply for a passport. They are asked to bring all sorts of records to prove they are Sri Lankan citizens. Something never done if you have a Sinhalese name.

ROBINSON: But aren't there quite a few Tamils in high positions?
BASTIAMPILLAI: There are a few Tamils holding positions of responsibility. They are senior people in government. Appointees. They are of undoubted ability. Siva Pasupati, the Attorney General, for example. But the Tamil discontents have concluded that a single swallow does not make a summer. In recent times, recruitment of Tamils into good positions in the state sector has not been impressive. Worse still, with the communal conflict going on from time to time, the sense of insecurity Tamils feel in Sinhalese areas has also discouraged Tamils from seeking jobs. Tamils now feel unwelcome as feelings run high between the communities, particularly following violent ethnic incidents.

ROBINSON: Now would you say something in brief about the three Catholic priests you mentioned before who are prominent in social welfare activities in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Father Paul Caspersz is a local Sri Lankan Dutch Burgher. He has taken a keen interest in the welfare of the Tamils in the hill country around Kandy. As you must know, they're an exploited lot. Living in sordid conditions. Overworked. Underpaid. In recent years their situation has somewhat improved but much more needs to be done. Father Caspersz works among these people, trying to alleviate the condition of people who are often ignorant and illiterate.

Father Tissa Balasuriya is in charge of the Centre for Society and Religion in Colombo that I referred to. This Centre offers lectures and runs seminars and workshops dealing with affairs related to human rights and social injustice. They give special attention to dispelling misperceptions, prejudices and irrational fears. They try to build bridges of understanding, and they work for peace and harmony in the eth-
nic sphere.

Father Catalano is an Italian missionary. He used to work among the hill country Indian Tamil plantation workers, trying to relieve their misery in the aftermath of violence directed against them a few years ago, in 1977 and in 1981. Now he's especially interested in the uplift of the shanty dwellers you can see concentrated along the canal bank in South Colombo. He has a strong desire to contribute practically to the betterment of ethnic understanding and concord.

ROBINSON: Speaking of inter-communal violence, what happens to people displaced by it?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There are relocation camps. They're more or less refugee camps. Groups of people, both Sinhalese and Tamils, have fled their homes following attacks. Recently the Tamils have left in large numbers from their villages in North Sri Lanka following military offensives against terrorists. They're accommodated in these camps until they can be moved back to their original homes in security, or, if necessary, to safer areas. Relocation is a euphemism really.

These camp schemes have to be watched to see if they can work successfully.

ROBINSON: Do you have any estimates of how many people are now in relocation camps?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There are about 130,000 Tamils in camps in Tamil Nadu in South India. In Sri Lanka, inclusive of Sinhalese and Tamils, there may be around 10,000 or more. But the figures change from time to time.

ROBINSON: Is there much intra-communal violence? That is, Tamil militants vs. non-militants? Militants vs. competing militants?

BASTIAMPILLAI: In answer to your first question, no, this has not happened. In answer to your second question, yes, this has happened. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam have destroyed most of two or three rival groups, the Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Front, and other groups.

ROBINSON: What are the main differences among these organizations?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam stands for Tamil nationalism. It also speaks of one party socialism. The Tamil Eelam Lib-
eration Organization also sponsored Tamil nationalism but regarded its policies as socialist influenced. The Eelam People's Revolutionary Front says its policies are Marxist oriented. These latter two socialist oriented groups reach out not only to Tamils but also to others. They look for and claim they have support among Sinhalese radicals. They say their views are not narrow Tamil nationalism.

ROBINSON: What are the other groups and what do they want?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There's the People's Liberation Organization of Tamil Eelam. It also claims to reach out for Sinhalese support. In addition to winning the rights of the Tamils, it claims it is for a radical and socialist Sri Lanka. There's also a group called the "Three Stars". It is against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. It's a combination of Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization, the People's Liberation Organization, and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Front. This group emerged recently. There's also another umbrella organization called the Eelam National Democratic Liberation Front that has sprung up recently. It's against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, too. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, which receives support from the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students, is dominant. The internecine warfare is mainly against them. But, with failure, the other groups may fade away. Anyway, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam were the most active militantly.

ROBINSON: Is there a special reason for the superiority of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Tamil Eelam Liberation Organization and the Eelam People's Revolutionary Front were considered to be indulging in petty thievery, robberies, plundering, and general anti-social activities. In other words, they were not as well-disciplined and under control as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. According to many people, these accusations are by and large true. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam is better organized and better disciplined. One of them fasted to death over the demand for recognition as the dominant Tamil liberation group. Incidentally, the Eelam People's Revolutionary Front and the Eelam Revolutionary Organization of Students have also showed concern for the Tamils in the hill country of Sri Lanka.
ROBINSON: The whole picture is rather confusing.

BASTIAMPILLAI: I'm confused about it all myself.

ROBINSON: Perhaps we can come back to this subject later. But now I would like to ask you some questions about education in Sri Lanka, specifically, about the University of Colombo. Your university is comparatively new, isn't it?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The University of Colombo was founded in 1978 but there had been a University College since 1921 and a University of Ceylon in the same place since 1942. Both of these earlier institutions were of British origin. The New Universities Act of 1978 provided for the establishment of the University of Colombo to take their place. This is a state-funded, state-owned school.

ROBINSON: Why did the British establish University College?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Originally, with the development of English education here and the growth of a small rich class of Sri Lankans, people had to go abroad for education--to England, or India, or Europe. Around the turn of the century, the number of these receiving Western education increased, and demands were made for a university here. The British government established university College to prepare students here for degrees from London University. Later, during the period of the Second World War, they gave University College a university status. So, the University of Ceylon. Since then, of course, with Independence, the number of universities has proliferated. In and around Colombo alone, we have five universities, including the Open University. The University of Ceylon, the first university in Sri Lanka, was founded in Colombo to produce the elite professional and administrative class necessary to man positions in the higher administrative service, the engineering and medical and legal professions. Actually, medical education here has a long history. A medical school was founded as early as 1870.

ROBINSON: Have there been controversies over the founding of universities in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No, there has never been any opposition to the founding of any university. In fact, today the demand is for more universities in different areas. There have been disputes over the sites of universities,
though. In the early years, when the first university was to be set up, there was a sharp controversy as to whether it should be in Peradeniya or some miles away, again in the central region, in the Dumbara valley. We have a university in the North, in Jaffna; a university in the South, beyond Galle, in Ruhuna; the university in the central region at Peradeniya with a campus at Dumbara close to it; and also a university in the East. These are all state universities.

ROBINSON: Are there any private universities in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: A private medical school called North Colombo Medical College at Ragama, about eight miles from Colombo, is a private fee-levying institution. Students in state universities are protesting the creation of this private institution as it is causing an erosion of the principle of free education. There is also another institute preparing students for the degrees of an American college which is fee-levying. The students are against the creation of private institutions as they can become bastions of the economically and socially privileged.

ROBINSON: Who were some of the important persons connected with the establishment of the University of Ceylon in 1942?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Robert Marrs, an Englishman, made an important contribution as the first principal of University College. He was appointed by the Colonial Office in London. As the first Vice Chancellor of the University of Ceylon, Sir Ivor Jennings laid a very good foundation for the university's future.

ROBINSON: In A. V. Suraweera's academic novel *Atta Bindeyi Paya Burnlen*, Dr. Jennings is portrayed as a stern disciplinarian.

BASTIAMPILLAI: He insisted on propriety, decorum, standards. He never compromised on them.

ROBINSON: Who were some of the Sri Lankans involved in the founding of the University of Ceylon?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Among Sri Lankans themselves, Sir Ponnambalam Arunachalam was important, as was the eminent orientalist Ananda Coomaraswamy. Sir James Pieris, the Wijewardenes, and a few others.

ROBINSON: What was their rationale for a local university?

BASTIAMPILLAI: They saw the need to train people locally for the professions and for the bureaucratic elite. They themselves were a narrow angli-
cized elite.

ROBINSON: To get back to the University of Colombo, you are a state-funded school, but do you have any endowments?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There are hardly any endowments. Funding comes wholly from the state. The state universities receive their monies through grants made by the University Grants Commission, which is directly under the Minister of Higher Education, who is at present the President of Sri Lanka, Junius R. Jayawardene. The University Grants Commission is composed of seven distinguished scholars representing various disciplines. Its chairman is also the Secretary of the Ministry of Higher Education.

ROBINSON: How is your budget allocated?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The University Grants Commission decides how the budget for higher education is to be divided among departments. They prescribe norms by which funds are allocated according to disciplines. But now the university itself is being allowed to have a say in allocating funds, especially for the recruitment of new teachers. The university's budget is divided among the various departments of study taking into account the number of students in them. Usually Arts and Commerce receive little. More money is allocated per student head for Medicine and Engineering and Science.

ROBINSON: Are these three subjects the most popular among students in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: As courses of study go, the most popular is medicine. Then come courses in engineering. Then dentistry, veterinary science, agriculture, bio-science, and physical sciences. Law is also being selected more frequently by students now. Commerce and management too. Among the social sciences, economics is most popular, followed by sociology, geography, political science. History is not much chosen.

ROBINSON: What determines a student's choice of major subject?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The students choose their courses of study largely motivated by the availability of jobs. The salary. It's a job-oriented attitude.

ROBINSON: Do most of your graduates find jobs easily?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No. There is now unemployment, especially among graduates in the arts.
ROBINSON: How many faculties does the University of Colombo have?

BASTIAMPILLAI: We have five faculties: Arts, Education, Law, Medicine and Science. The University of Peradeniya has more faculties, such as Dental Surgery, but they don't have a Faculty of Law, which is available only in Colombo. Within a faculty, there are several departments. In this Faculty of Arts, I have departments of English, Commerce and Management, Geography, History and Political Science, Economics, Sociology, Sinhala, and a Demography Training and Research Unit. Each department has its own Head, who functions like a chairman.

ROBINSON: Do you have any institutes affiliated with the University of Colombo?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes. We have a post-graduate Institute of Medicine, an Institute of Indigenous Medicine (Ayurveda), and an Institute of Workers' Education. The last of these provides courses for blue-collar and white-collar employees. Recently a Bachelor's degree in Labor Education was introduced. Similar types of institutes are attached to other universities, for example, the post-graduate Institute of Agriculture.

ROBINSON: How many students and teachers do you have here?

BASTIAMPILLAI: At undergraduate level, 3,881 students in all faculties. We have 274 teachers, including professors, associate professors, senior lecturers, lecturers and assistant lecturers.

ROBINSON: How are students admitted to the University of Colombo?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Undergraduate admissions are based on examinations, as you know. But the way we allocate places needs a little explanation. 30% of the places are given on the basis of open competition and on an all-island merit basis. 65% of the places go on a district basis. That is, these places are divided and allocated according to geographical districts and their populations, and on a merit basis within each district. The other 5% of the places are reserved for educationally disadvantaged districts, but again the principle of merit is applied. Admission to higher degrees, of course, is open. By educationally disadvantaged areas, I mean, for example, Mannar, Amparai, Mulaitivu, and other areas lacking government schools and qualified teachers.

ROBINSON: Where do most of your students come from these days?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Today most of our students come from rural areas. They come
here particularly to follow courses in the arts and humanities. That's because the schools in rural areas are not adequately equipped to teach science. And they cannot get higher education at the B.A. level.

As far as social class is concerned, our students come from all levels of society—the poor, the lower middle, the middle, and the better off classes.

ROBINSON: Are there other requirements for admission? For instance, communal group?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Admission here is open to any student who passes the examination irrespective of religion, class, race, or gender. However, owing to the fact that the medium of instruction here is Sinhala, there is a natural restriction of admissions as a result. Similarly, the language of instruction at the University of Jaffna in the North is Tamil.

ROBINSON: Does your school have any courses in Tamil for Sinhala-speaking students?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No. Regarding language, the benefit of teaching only in local languages is being questioned these days, particularly because students are not conversant enough in English to read outside texts.

ROBINSON: Does this mean that some people want to use English as the language of instruction in all national universities in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes.

ROBINSON: Can students at the University of Colombo get scholarships?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Students are eligible to receive scholarships. A fair number of scholarships are given. Common ones provide about 300 to 400 rupees per student per month.

ROBINSON: Do you have dormitories for students?

BASTIAMPILLAI: In some universities there are hostels. At the University of Colombo we have very limited hostel accommodation. This is a severe handicap for students. Most of them are not assured of hostel accommodation. Many students are day students, of course.

ROBINSON: Does the university help students to find part-time employment?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No, there is no provision to help them find employment. It's indeed sad, but we don't allow students to work and study.

ROBINSON: Do many students drop out of school?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No, not many drop out after they enter university. Most persist.
Most invariably complete their courses of study.

ROBINSON: Do many students drop out before entering the university?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, in some disciplines like the physical and biological sciences.

ROBINSON: Do you have many foreign students here?
BASTIAMPILLAI: We have very few foreign students. Those few, men and women, come in to do research or field work. They are in the graduate courses, which are taught in English. Recently, children of diplomats have sought admission to undergraduate courses taught in English, but their numbers are very few. We have had Polish, Bulgarian and Bangladeshi students.

ROBINSON: How do the foreign students get along with your local students?
BASTIAMPILLAI: The local students have taken onto them well. They accept them cordially.

ROBINSON: Do you have many foreign teachers?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, we have foreign professors. They teach natural sciences sometimes. We have had a geographer. Recently, professors of international relations from the United States. We have also had American law professors. The British Council helps us to get British professors. We also get Canadians. They stay for short periods. An academic year. They are considered bona fide members of the faculty.

ROBINSON: Does your school use advanced technology in instruction?
BASTIAMPILLAI: The use of high tech equipment is now becoming popular in the natural sciences and medicine and in the social sciences. Computers, word processors, other teaching aids, are much sought after. But a lack of finances has been a restraint. A greater use of high tech equipment is not practicable. We are far behind in the use of such equipment when we compare ourselves with neighboring countries like Singapore, Malaysia, or even India and Pakistan closer by.

ROBINSON: You said before that because you're located in the Colombo metropolitan area, you--your university--organized extension courses that reach out to the community. Who in the community?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Most of these extension courses are run after the usual working hours, and they are taken by commercial elements, and journalists and professional folk. We cater to business executives who want to study management or international trade relations at graduate level.
Or to those in employment who want to learn more about development economics. Our courses in law are targeted at lawyers and judicial personnel. There are also courses for teachers in secondary education. As I said, we have courses for workers too.

ROBINSON: Has the University of Colombo made any particular innovation in university education in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I don't think we can claim to have made any very remarkable innovations. But we did start the extension courses. These courses are intended to meet the needs of development in this country. Courses in Economic Development, in business administration, in various aspects of law and science. In education, in the area of community development. In journalism

ROBINSON: Do you have any comment on teachers' salaries at your university?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The salaries of both administrators and teachers are comparable in the universities. Both are paid poorly. A professor's salary can be about the equivalent of $175 a month. A lecturer will get less than $100 a month. I may say that we in the university service may have the poorest salary scale in comparison with those in neighboring South Asian countries like India or Pakistan or Bangladesh.

ROBINSON: But you have teachers' unions here.

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, we have teachers' unions. The Federation of University Teachers' Unions and the Colombo University Teachers' Union. There are different unions in different universities. Medical teachers have their own unions. But, unfortunately, they're not so active. They don't act in a continuously active manner. Recently, the union took an active interest because of agitation for higher salaries. But as teachers we are generally poorly unionized. We have very little clout.

ROBINSON: What would you say is your university's largest problem?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The important problems that confront a university today in Sri Lanka are, first, student unrest within the campus, and second, the low salaries paid to teachers, which is driving them away from university jobs into other jobs and to foreign countries.

ROBINSON: What are the main causes of student unrest here?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There is some discontent with general conditions in the country.
Bleak employment prospects. There are campus problems, too--lack of hostel accommodations, no provision for participation in student affairs management or university management. The students sometimes express this unrest within the campus. They can organize within the campus. They have a place to meet and feel more secure.

ROBINSON: How do faculty members at your school get along with each other?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Within a faculty, the different staff members coming from different departments of study get along very well. There is some amount of inter-faculty cordiality. But it has been noticed that some faculties tend to look down on the Faculty of Arts because it has suffered as a result of the change in the language of instruction, from English to Sinhala. There's a tendency to consider the students in arts are not up to the mark. Some critics feel arts students cannot communicate in English and are not so well-informed.

ROBINSON: What is your response to this criticism?
BASTIAMPILLAI: It is unwarranted arrogance, a sense of exclusive elitism.

ROBINSON: How about the relation between administrators and teachers?
BASTIAMPILLAI: The administration holds the whip. The faculty members are often at their mercy. There's a fair amount of bureaucratic aggrandisement. As you know, the administration is very close to the decision-making authorities. Probably the dependence of the administration on the decision-making authorities has given them undue clout.

ROBINSON: For example?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Their salaries and terms of service compare very well with those of academics, and they have received improvements without agitation while teachers have had to agitate.

ROBINSON: And the relation between faculty and students?
BASTIAMPILLAI: The relationship between the faculty and the students is generally good. But owing to very large numbers of students in the social sciences and the humanities very few students get to know members of the faculty well enough. It's hard fact that there's a lack of interaction between students and faculty, particularly in the Faculty of Arts.

ROBINSON: What are you doing to deal with this problem in your faculty?
BASTIAMPILLAI: So many students and so few teachers can only cause frustra-
tion at one's impotence to do anything practical or meaningful.

ROBINSON: And what is the relation between the administration and the students?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The administration is often trained to think of students as those who are troublesome. I think the administration considers the students wanting in discipline. There is very little love lost between the students and the administrators.

ROBINSON: Are your students very active politically?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, students and students' associations are often connected to local and national politics in one way or another. They are active. Student organizations were for years composed on a political basis. Students support one political party or another. One ideology or another. Commonly, student organizations have been anti-establishment and left-oriented.

ROBINSON: How does the administration respond to these student associations?

BASTIAMPILLAI: In recent times, student organizations have been formally disregarded. In fact, the students consider this a sore point. They did not welcome an innovation that provided for Students' Relations Councils comprising staff and students. They prefer the less restricted students' organizations and societies. Now there is a move to abolish the Students' Relations Councils. This is a step in the right direction, I think. An attempt to correct an error.

ROBINSON: While you've been dealing with this subject of education, the image of the Vidyodaya Campus in 1975 as described in A. V. Suraweera's novel Atta Bindeyi Paya Burulen has been in my mind. Suraweera describes a university in turmoil. The president cannot make decisions. The staff are "puppets" more or less. Students are distracted by politics. There's a general lack of discipline. Some members of the faculty are involved in personal rivalries. Assuming Suraweera's picture is accurate, the campus situation does not seem to have changed much.

BASTIAMPILLAI: Dr. Suraweera's novel is a very sensitive study of academic society in Sri Lanka. It's a very realistic picture of the many inadequacies of university life in this country. What I find realistic is the
characterization. The characters are depicted true to life in a campus setting. The student agitation, the politics, the staff attitudes to problems, the dean and his way of dealing with people—all so vividly recognizable to those who are aware of the Sri Lanka university milieu.