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<th>項目</th>
<th>内容</th>
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<tr>
<td>タイトル</td>
<td>AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE RANASINGHE ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA</td>
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<td>著者</td>
<td>Robinson, Le Roy</td>
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AN INTERVIEW WITH ANNE RANASINGHE
ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson

Anne Ranasinghe is a journalist, short story and radio play writer, and poet. Some of her work has been translated into several languages — Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch and Serbo-Croat; one book of her poems has been translated into German, her native language. She has won prizes for poems, short stories, a radio play and essays.

She was born Anneliese Katz in Essen, Germany, in 1925. She had her basic education in Essen, then entered the Jawne Gymnasium in Cologne in 1936. Caught up in Hitler's persecution of the Jews, her parents sent her to England in 1939. Her parents were deported to the ghetto in Lodz, Poland, in 1941, and were murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

She completed her high school education at Parkstone Girls' Grammar School in Dorset, England. When she graduated, World War II was at its height, so as war service she started nursing. She trained at Charing Cross Hospital and Kings College, Moorfields Eye Hospital, the Chelsea Hospital for Women, and the Burden Neurological Research Institute in Bristol.

In 1949 Anne Ranasinghe married Dr. Don Abraham Ranasinghe, who was pursuing post-graduate studies in England. He later became Professor and Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the Medical Faculty of the University of Colombo. On retirement he was honored as Professor Emeritus. In 1979 he was appointed Chancellor of the University of Colombo and in 1980 was awarded the degree of Doctor of Science Honoris Causa. He died in March 1981.

Anne Ranasinghe, who joined her husband in Sri Lanka in 1951, became a citizen of Sri Lanka in 1956. She is the mother of seven children, three by her husband's previous marriage and four by theirs.

She began her writing career in the late 1960s after obtaining a Diploma in Journalism at the Colombo Polytechnic.

For the last 15 years she has been working as Executive Secretary of the Amnesty International South Asia Publications Service in Colombo.

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ROBINSON: You came to Sri Lanka over thirty years ago. At that time did you know
much about the country then called Ceylon?

RANASINGHE: I'm ashamed to admit that apart from the barest geographical facts I was totally unencumbered by knowledge of any kind regarding the society into which I had married.

ROBINSON: Can you still remember your first impressions of Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Oh, Yes! I arrived by ship. Those days one did not travel by airplane with the ease and nonchalance we do now. And I had my four months' old son with me. Ananda had howled almost all the way from Southampton to Colombo. When the Ship's engine died down, a long three weeks' journey was over. In the early morning brilliance the shoreline of Colombo about half a mile away looked like the backdrop to a play — the buildings stood tall and white against a clear blue sky. My husband came to meet us. He had not seen the baby yet. He'd returned to Sri Lanka before us — to work and to prepare a home for all of us. Our family was already quite substantial — he had three children by his first marriage, and at that time they were 9, 11 and 13 years old. When we left the ship we started driving to my new home and what struck me most was the silence. It must have been partially that the town had not fully woken up. Partially a lack of ship's engine noises, maybe. Somehow Colombo appeared very peaceful. Unhurried. Almost slow motion as its saronged and sari-ed people geared themselves towards another sunny, hot and rather dusty day. And apart from the silence I was hit — that is the only word I can think of — by the strong colors everywhere. England is a country of gentle shadings. Here there were no half-tones. The cloudless blue sky. The rich golden sun. The riotous luxuriance of flowers. especially the bougainvilleae. The clothes people were wearing. The people themselves, with their warm-tinted skins and thick shining black hair, sparkling black eyes and white teeth, extra white against the dark faces.

ROBINSON: You seem to have been rather nonchalant — to use your own word — thirty years ago or so.

RANASINGHE: Say 38 years ago. Yes. I was in my early 20s. I had survived two major catastrophes. First, Hitler's persecution from which I escaped in the nick of time, the only member of my family to survive. And no sooner had I begun to settle down in England than the Second World War broke out. At the height of the bombing, during the time of the "Doodlebugs" — the pilotless missiles and the terrifying rockets — I was nursing in London. Perhaps this
explains the casualness with which I embarked on what was after all another major upheaval in my life. I had been faced with the very real problem of survival for so long, a mere journey to the East was not going to upset my equilibrium. Looking back now, with the wisdom of hindsight, the main reason for my complacency was much simpler. It was my truly remarkable ignorance.

ROBINSON: But now you are not ignorant.

RANASINGHE: Yet, in a sense my journey has continued. A seemingly endless voyage of discovery. The longer I live here, the more I realize that there will always be certain aspects of life here that I can perceive but not wholly comprehend. I’m amazed at the self-assured cockiness with which some foreign visitors analyze Sri Lanka’s most pressing and complicated problems. And this often after spending just a few days in the country. Then probably write a lengthy book on them. And, of course, we have problems. There’s the ethnic problem. And the population problem. The language problem. The problem of school and university education. The economic problem, and tied up with that the problem of health and nutrition. The employment problem, and the problem of old age which will grow more acute. You name it, we have it. And the island has only limited resources. It’s small. It measures 270 miles in length and only 140 miles across at its widest point. When I arrived in 1951 the total population amounted to only about eight million people. In the 38 years of my stay it has doubled.

ROBINSON: I thought there was a family planning policy here.

RANASINGHE: Yes, but a firm planning policy is clearly of vital importance. Now its application is patchy. Not for lack of effort, but because of the varied responses from the diverse ethnic and religious groups here. Incidentally, my husband was President of the local Family Planning Association for 18 years. And, because of the appalling ignorance of the basic facts of life among young people resulting in an increasing number of pregnancies among university students in the 1960s and 1970s, I was asked to write a book of simple explanation. My nursing, midwifery and journalistic background were supposed to be the right ingredients! The result was Love, Sex and Parenthood. It was sponsored by the International Planned Parenthood Federation. It sold much better than my poems or short stories!

ROBINSON: But despite all these problems you remain here.
RANASINGHE: I grew to love this country very much. True, at first I missed the excitement of the changing seasons, but the variations of climate and scenery from the coastal lowlands to the central hilly core compensated to some extent. I was also fascinated by the fierceness of the monsoon. It had quite a different quality in those early days of my stay here from its gentility now. We made good use of holidays to travel with our children. And this too, I think, helped to strengthen my feelings as I put down tentative roots.

ROBINSON: Some of your poems express your love of the natural beauty of Sri Lanka very well even if they aren't best sellers. Like "Hot Season", for example.

The first part.

Sunset comes quickly
With a final flaming
Of petals, a cooling
Of grass. — Crows
Swoop silently, high
Between rooftops and trees
While the light goes
From window and sky.
Across the still garden
Fall blue shadows — darkness
Slips down tree trunks, and
Day's heat dissolves
In mist, curling
Round palm tree and mango.
The mango tree is
Both fragrant with blossoms
And clustered
With small hard fruit.

You said you put down tentative roots, but how long did it take you to feel at home, so to speak?

RANASINGHE: A long time. It was a slow process. Almost unnoticed. Hardly reflected upon until now. The times have changed so drastically. Those journeys seem to belong to a different age. One could venture anywhere in the island then without fear or difficulty. North, east, south — wherever. My husband, who had started his medical career serving in a number of places outside Colom-
ROBINSON: You say your husband served in various hospitals around the island. Did you yourself move around with him?

RANASINGHE: Well, by the time I appeared on the scene my husband was a Lecturer in the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the University of Colombo Medical School. He had obtained his post graduate qualifications in England, and when the post of Professor fell vacant he applied for it and was successful. This meant that he worked as Consultant at the Colombo General Hospital and at the De Soysa Lying-In Home as well as teaching at the medical school. The practical teaching was done in the wards and theatres of the General Hospital and the Lying-In Home. It was an excellent system. Superbly organized. As for that, the Medical School was the pride and joy of its staff and students. It produced some first class doctors, physicians, surgeons — and, of course, obstetricians and gynecologists! Teaching was based on the British system. For post graduate studies candidates went to England, Edinburgh or Dublin. There was a marvellous academic atmosphere. Encouragement for excellence. All this was shattered by the creation of the infamous private medical school. But that's another story. And a very tragic one at that. I'm just glad that my husband, who was quite maniacal about the tradition of his medical school, did not live to see its decline and ultimate fall.

ROBINSON: You mentioned the ethnic problem here. Was it obvious to you then?

RANASINGHE: At that time people lived all quite happily together. Sinhalese and Burghers, Ceylon Tamils and Indian Tamils, Muslims and Malays, and a few Chinese and Parsees and Europeans. They observed their own customs, their own religious practices. They were, I guess, up to a point inward turning towards their own communities, but they lived in peace. People were friendly and warm. Their hospitality was proverbial. And boundless. They
had humor and dignity. They were heirs to a great culture, you know. It seemed that with reasonable luck and awareness, with time forging new links from a common background and common nationality, Sri Lanka could offer its citizens a future of hope, prosperity and progress. And then everything began to go wrong.

ROBINSON: Before you said you were ignorant, totally ignorant, of Sri Lanka when you first came here. Can you be more specific?

RANASINGHE: Well, for a beginning, as far as “aspects of culture” is concerned, I had no idea of the historical background of my husband’s people. As both Professor A. V. Suraweera and Nalini de Lanerolle have told you, the Sinhalese are an ancient people. They consider themselves a race. Their recorded history dates from the arrival of Vijaya, an Indian princeling who — this is according to legend — arrived on the northern shore in the middle of the 6th century B.C. Only traces of the primitive civilization which existed here before Vijaya’s arrival have been found, but the Mahavamsa, written in Pali by a succession of priests, records the subsequent history of the island in detail. From the time of Vijaya’s invasion through the reigns of 165 kings for some 2500 years. I’m probably repeating what others have told you, but... In the third century B.C. King Asoka, the Emperor of India, sent his son Mahinda to Ceylon to spread the message of the Buddha. He converted the reigning king, Devanampiyatissa. Subsequently the people adopted Buddhism as their faith. It has been the main religion of the island ever since.

ROBINSON: Yes, Dr. Suraweera and Mrs. De Lanerolle, and Malika Jayasinghe, whose husband is also a doctor, have told me about this history. But how much stock do you yourself put in these myths?

RANASINGHE: Well, certain facts are known. The Aryan colonizers settled in the island in the 6th century after migrating from their homeland in Northern India. As to the historical value of the Mahavamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon, Wilhelm Geiger cites various authorities and advocates great caution in the introduction to his translation. But he stresses that it is highly important for the ecclesiastical history of Ceylon. Another historian, V. A. Smith, rejects the chronology prior to B. C. 160 in toto as being of doubtful authority and false in its principal propositions. But Smith himself later modified his point of view somewhat saying the stories in the Mahavamsa demanded cautious criticism as other records of popular and ecclesiastical tradition did. This
seems fair enough. The warning to handle documents critically surely applies to all ancient historical documents. As Rhys Davids puts it, the Chronicles may not contain pure history but they represent the traditions of their time, so they permit us to draw retrospective conclusions as to earlier periods.

ROBINSON: You say the people adopted Buddhism as their faith. Did they do it freely, or was it imposed upon them?

RANASINGHE: I wonder whether anyone can answer that question. Again we have a few positive facts. Mahenda was a near relative of King Asoka. The *Mahavamsa* calls him his son. Other references refer to him as a younger brother. Mahendra is considered to have been the man who spread the Buddhist doctrine in the island. But, according to Geiger, relations between continental India and Ceylon existed long before Mahenda and there were earlier efforts to transplant Buddhism to Ceylon. So perhaps by the time Mahenda arrived here the population had already been exposed to Buddhist teaching for some time. Buddhism is a free and gentle doctrine, so, if they saw their king accepting it, there was no reason why they should not also follow suit. As far as I can see, there would have been no hardship involved.

ROBINSON: How did all this legendary history affect you personally?

RANASINGHE: My husband was a Buddhist. So were his three children by his previous marriage. We decided early on that it would be desirable not to divide the family. I agreed that our children too would be instructed in the Buddhist philosophy. But with the proviso that if they so wished they could make any changes in their lives later.

ROBINSON: In practice how did that agreement work out?

RANASINGHE: All four of my children studied Buddhism as a subject in school. But my husband felt that school education was not sufficiently comprehensive. So they also visited a particularly erudite Bhikku who supplemented this teaching. He also gave them insights which it would not have been possible for them to gain in school where the numbers of students were too large for personal contact.

ROBINSON: Was there any possibility of giving your children a grounding in Judaism?

RANASINGHE: Only the very basic explanations that I was able to provide. And there was no context to make it meaningful. Until the Israeli Legation opened here in 1961 or so.
ROBINSON: Were there no other Jews at all in Sri Lanka as there have been in India?
RANASINGHE: It's a strange story. Ceylon was known to the Biblical world. Sir Emerson Tennent thought that the town of Tarshish mentioned in the Bible referred to what is present day Galle on the South coast. And in the time of King Solomon there seems to have been some trade in precious stones, elephants and spices. But that may be pure conjecture. There's very little documentation. H. G. Reissner says that Ibn Kordadhbeh, provincial postmaster and later director of police in the Eastern Caliphanate during the second half of the ninth century, talks about "routes of the Jewish merchants" in his "Book of the Roads and the Kingdoms". Anyway it appears that the original Jewish traders arrived in Ceylon from the Malabar Coast of India.

ROBINSON: How many were there?
RANASINGHE: Abu Zeid al Hasan of Siraf, also of the ninth century, says there were many and the king permitted the free exercise of every religion. In 1154 Edrisi talked of the king having 16 viziers, among them four Jews. In approximately 1170 Benjamin of Tudela spoke of 3000 Jews. But Reissner thinks it's unlikely the medieval community of Jews in Ceylon ever exceeded a few hundred at the most.

ROBINSON: What happened to those Jews in Ceylon?
RANASINGHE: Trade declined. The Crusades from the late 11th to the 13th century and the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols in 1258 ruined established trade routes. Then the final victory of the Ming over the Mongol dynasty closed China to foreign trade for nearly 300 years. Jewish settlements dependent on trade also declined. When the Portuguese landed in Ceylon in the beginning of the 16th century, they found no Jews. And apparently none came here in the time of the Portuguese occupation. During the 19th and 20th centuries, after the British colonized Ceylon, a few European Jews ventured here. For instance, the Worms brothers established a coffee estate here in 1841. More than a thousand acres in Pusselawe, just above Kandy. They called it "Rothschild".

ROBINSON: You suggested that the establishment of an Israeli legation here made Judaism more meaningful to your children.
RANASINGHE: Yes. For me it was fantastic to re-establish contact with what are, after all, my own people, and with my own heritage. As for the children, they were exposed to Jewish ritual for the first time. They enjoyed the wonderful
warmth of this new Jewish “community”. Of course, the composition fluctuated as visitors and temporary residents came and went. Occasionally, rarely, there was a minyan, the traditional quorum of adult men required to hold a prayer meeting. The children participated in the celebration of various festivals. With great elan, I might add. And they seemed to have no difficulty in accepting those aspects of both Judaism and Buddhism that were relevant to them. Several of the Israeli children were of the same age group as ours, and some firm friendships were forged.

I must say it was a real tragedy for all of us when the Israeli Legation was closed down in 1967 immediately after the election. Its closure had been a part of Mrs. Bandaranaike’s Election Manifesto. Itzhak Navon was Charge d’Affaires at the time. He and his wife Mira had become very much a part of the local scene. Not only for us, but in general. Mira was a most talented painter, as Donald Ramanayeka has told you. She studied first under Mudaliyar A. C. G. S. Amarasekera and then under Ramanayeka. She produced some magnificent paintings. After they were posted in Bangkok and in Singapore, where I met them again.

I was very much affected by their departure, and I wrote a poem, “Arrival and Departure”, which I dedicated to Itzhak. This poem became a sort of “password” — when the Navons had friends visiting Sri Lanka and had no time to let us know they gave them a copy of the poem. So I knew immediately they were genuine. I’ll give you a copy too.

ROBINSON: Coming back to your children, your own children, how did you choose their names?

RANASINGHE: My eldest son was called Ananda — my husband’s choice. Ananda was a disciple of the Lord Buddha. We added John. You see, as the children had a double heritage of East and West, we thought we should give them each a name from both backgrounds, so that they would be able to use whichever they wished in whatever context. So my daughter became Shanti Avivah Susan. Shanti means peace. Avivah is Hebrew for springtime. And we added Susan to remember a small niece of mine who had died. I’d promised her father that if I ever had a daughter I would give her this name. The next son was called David Nihal, and the youngest Renuka Sharon. The names David and Sharon have the double virtue of being both Western and biblical.

ROBINSON: Where are all your children now?
RANASINGHE: My two living step children live here, in Sri Lanka. My own four are scattered over three continents. One married a Catholic, one a Protestant and one a Buddhist. The fourth is not married yet. She's been drawn very positively into the Jewish community of the town where she lives at present. She feels quite at home there.

ROBINSON: Have any kind of conflicts resulted from these inter-religious marriages?

RANASINGHE: None of my children has experienced conflicts with their new families on religious grounds. Maybe the credit for that goes to the unproprietary nature of Buddhist philosophy. It doesn't demand unquestioning loyalty but encourages a spirit of inquiry, and without creating feelings of guilt allows the individual to realize his or her particular spiritual needs.

ROBINSON: I've already asked you a similar question, but, in your case, how did you become accustomed to your new way of living in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: I'll use the journey metaphor again. My personal odyssey was a very slow awakening to the need for learning to understand my new environment. I think it was probably the presence of my step children that helped me to acclimatize. My first view of Ceylonese mores and customs was through their eyes. They had been cared for by an elderly, very religious and traditionally inclined aunt. Then I arrived on the scene. The children were young and straightforward — and extremely critical. My being European — white, that is — added to their interest, but it certainly didn't save me. I was subjected to constant scrutiny. My ideas were examined. We found that frequently our viewpoints not only differed but were diametrically opposed. For instance, where I tried to encourage independence not only in movement and action but also in thought, I was confronted with the power of tradition. Where I pleaded for simplicity in life-style and dress, the fashion of the day dictated convention and fussiness. Let's express it in practical terms: I favored cotton simply sewn for easy washing and ironing. But haute couture among the peer groups demanded satins and silk, frills and ribbons and bows. And not infrequently I found small conspiracies of hilarity between the servants and children.

ROBINSON: What were they hilarious about?

RANASINGHE: Language. Language was a problem at first. My ignorance of Sinhala created some comical situations. German was my mother tongue, but I'd almost completely forgotten it. I hardly used it during my years in England.
I'd been taught French and Latin. And I'd learned Hebrew for seven years prior to my leaving Germany. My English was competent. But all this gave me no clue to Sinhala, the language we used in our house. Hilarity, yes. But it also led to misunderstandings — either where I'd misinterpreted or had even offended through my ignorance.

**ROBINSON:** Did your "cultural shock" lead to any serious problems in the raising of your children?

**RANASINGHE:** Well, as you can guess, I had certain ideas about bringing up children, ideas to a large extent based on my own strict childhood in Germany. There it was a case of children being seen and not heard — no question of a child answering back to an adult. One ate what one was given and one ate all of it. Sweets and chocolates were rationed to special days. Children's manners were under constant scrutiny. Absolute punctuality was expected at mealtimes. Bedtime was sancrosanct, on the dot. One obeyed unquestioningly. That was in my time in Germany.

In England I saw much milder ways of bringing up children. As a thirteen year old I was fascinated by the fact that I was actually consulted before decisions were made. The friendly relations between teachers and students were a revelation to me. But even in England certain disciplines were enforced. There were set hours for work and play, eating and sleeping.

With this background, I was immediately struck by the general air of permissiveness with which small children were handled in Ceylon. Adults would do everything in their power to accommodate a child's least request. Temper tantrums were placated, but there was seldom any real sternness or punishment. According to one of my Sinhalese relatives, it is a sin to make a child cry. If a child committed a misdemeanor in the presence of the father and mother, the father would generally ignore it, if possible. The mother would try to quiet the child at any cost. And this permissiveness would extend to every aspect of the child's life. Take feeding, for instance. Babies were breast fed until they were comparatively old. Even after weaning, if the child demanded the breast, it was readily proffered. In any case, according to tradition, no solid food was given a child until after its first birthday, when it was fed its first meal of rice, usually by the mother in the presence of friends and relatives. And there was no regularity enforced in respect of meals. I am now, of course, talking about the pre-school child, who is not bound by the
hours of his or her lessons. A child would eat if and when it felt so inclined. If he or she didn't wish to sit at table, it was by no means an uncommon sight to see the mother or ayah walk behind the child with a cup or plate in her hand, trying to push in the odd mouthful when the child was too absorbed in play to notice. Hours of sleep were also flexible. No question of a set bed time. Often a small child would be allowed to run around or join adult activities till it virtually dropped off to sleep. In short, it was as if adults wished on no account to incur the child's displeasure by enforcing any kind of discipline, regularity or obedience.

ROBINSON: How do you evaluate this way of bringing up children now after so many years of experience with it?

RANASINGHE: I guess it makes for greater peace and relaxation in the home. But in the long run both children and parents pay for this excessive permissiveness.

ROBINSON: How do you mean they pay?

RANASINGHE: The parents, by lack of control, and the child by a loss of guidelines. Children thrive when they know exactly where they stand, what is allowed or not. They may not like it, they may not agree, but it gives their life a firm structure. They realize their parents care. Care sufficiently. Of course, the onus is on parents not to make unreasonable rules and to explain the need for whatever the restriction.

There's also the question of over-protectiveness. Small children here are rarely given an opportunity to experiment and explore. Each move is supervised. A fall is a major disaster. Of course, it's true all sorts of hazards could endanger a small child, especially in villages where animals can be a danger. But the practice has certainly been transferred into the towns.

And I sometimes wonder whether this over-protection in early childhood has a bearing on the lack of drive and initiative one often finds in older children here. While the child is young both the father and mother give him a great deal of affection, physical closeness, attention, petting. So, I would say, Sri Lankan children exhibit far less aggressiveness than their European or American counterparts.

Of course, as children grow older here life becomes more "organized" for them. The father begins to hold himself more aloof. From this slightly remote position as head of the family he commands respect. The mother is much closer to the children, especially to her daughters, but she too tries to
enforce the restraints that traditionally are imposed on growing girls. But there is never the heavy, demanding type of relationship between parents and children that I experienced in Germany.

ROBINSON: How did this way of bringing up children have an effect on your own life, or your children’s?

RANASINGHE: I began to realize that at some point I’d have to make a choice: either cave in and conform, or handle my children’s upbringing in the way I felt would equip them best for their lives. The possibility existed that sooner or later they might journey to the West. It seemed sensible to incorporate some Western values.

ROBINSON: How did your husband feel about this?

RANASINGHE: These were exceedingly busy years for my husband, and the management of home and family were more and more left to me. You see, in addition to all his hospital and university work my husband also became Warden of the two Medical Student Hostels. They had been allowed to run to seed. My husband saw a great challenge in this. He overhauled the system. He renovated. Streamlined the financial aspect. Got the students themselves to handle the finances and management. He solicited gifts, such as mirrors for each room, from various sources. As a result of all this the hostels began to prosper and the demand for accommodation increased massively. My husband was also a sort of father figure for the students. Stern and demanding where work was concerned, but very fair and understanding on the personal level. So he found himself quite frequently involved in their personal problems. All this took a lot of time. So he left the upbringing of the children more and more to me.

ROBINSON: Then, was your system of bringing up children successful?

RANASINGHE: Yes and no. While my children were growing up they complained sometimes that their independence and the greater freedom they enjoyed emphasized the difference which their mixed parentage created in any case. This was especially so where the daughters were concerned.

ROBINSON: Only your own, or your step daughters as well?

RANASINGHE: All of them. Now let me tell you a story, and you can draw your own conclusions. When I arrived on the scene, my elder step daughter Rohini was 13 years old. She had been so carefully sheltered she had never been out alone. Not even to visit the local post office. An ayah had accompanied her and her
younger sister everywhere and ostensibly protected the young girls from possible masculine attention. When Rohini finished school — she had taken her university entrance exam and had got into the University of Peradeniya to study history — she wanted very much to spend the holiday before going up to the university to visit Israel. My cousin was a founder of Kibbutz Mishmar Haemek. Rohini’s own grandmother was horrified: “This is what happens when a strange white woman takes over”. When I promised faithfully that Rohini would return in time to enter university, she ultimately relented. So Rohini set out on what at that time was a fairly complicated journey. We could not give her much money. Exchange control was very strict. The first thing that happened was her plane arrived late in Teheran. She missed her connection and had to spend two days there alone. She arrived late in Israel, and the people who had come to the airport to meet her had gone back to the kibbutz thinking she wasn’t coming. So Rohini had to find her way alone by bus — a four-hour trip. The bus driver put her down at the right place with her two suitcases. In the middle of nowhere. Fortunately some of the kibbutz members working in the fields with their tractors realized she was the missing visitor. They hauled her with her suitcases on to the tractor, and she made a triumphant entry into Mishmar Haemek. She had the most marvellous time. And I had the greatest difficulty in getting her back. She finally arrived at midnight the day before she had to go up to Peradeniya to start her university career.

ROBINSON: It’s a good story. How about another one closer to “aspects of culture in Sri Lanka”?

RANASINGHE: Alright. The younger sister also had her problems. There were so many children for us to drop off and pick up — at school and swimming and dancing and tennis and rugger and so on — I suggested she should use a bicycle to ride to the university. The distance was short, only about a mile, and the area was residential. She did this. But this created an uproar. A girl on a bike! At first the air was let out of the tire. Then out of both. When this didn’t deter her, the next day she found her bike hanging high up on a tree. Then when this didn’t stop her from bicycling to school either, they left her alone. And, miracle of miracles, sooner or later many of them too began to ride bikes to school.

Anyway, to give you my conclusion, our “system” couldn’t have been so
bad. Out of seven children, three girls were Head Girls of their respective schools. And one a Buddhist girl in a Convent school! The fourth girl was Head Prefect of a Christian mission school. Of the three boys, one was Head Boy of his junior school and Senior Prefect of the upper school, and another also Senior Prefect. I'm not trying to boast. Just to show that clearly certain desirable characteristics had been inculcated which created suitability for leadership and accepting responsibility.

There's a story by Sholem Aleichem. A totally uneducated East European Jewish immigrant to the Bronx in New York has seven children. She devotes all her time, energy and meager savings to educate them and send them to university to have what she had missed out on. I identified with that woman. When my youngest daughter entered medical college I heaved a sigh of relief. From that point on it was up to the children themselves, not to me, to make the best of their lives. Or so I thought at the time!

Still on bringing up children, am I correct that in Sri Lanka boys are given more privileges than girls in the Sinhala family?

ROBINSON:  Still on bringing up children, am I correct that in Sri Lanka boys are given more privileges than girls in the Sinhala family?

RANASINGHE: Yes. Oh, yes. Until quite recently, and in some instances even now, it was customary for sisters to serve their brothers hand and foot. In time this bred a considerable sense of superiority in the male. In Europe one is used to things the other way round — it's the boy who is supposed to help the girl. In the true tradition of chivalry. It took me time to understand this topsy-turvy world, and I had no intention of accepting it. In our house chores had to be shared. I must admit there was the occasional battle! Everybody "did their own thing". In other words, no one "served" anyone else — except, of course, if they helped each other by mutual consent. And then, as the boys grow older they have so much more freedom than girls. Freedom to go out, meet their friends. To become independent from supervision.

ROBINSON:  So then the older boys, the young men, are not so very different from their Western counterparts?

RANASINGHE: Taking all into account, I would say that it was — and is, especially now — that the child who grows up in Sri Lanka is tremendously handicapped in comparison with young Americans or Europeans.

In education too. Even before we were plunged into the present disastrous situation where schools and universities were — are — often closed. Where those who are about to sit for examinations are literally stuck.
And those who should follow cannot move up. There is a backlog at schools. And even the school leaving examinations, the graduation examinations, are postponed time and time again. It is a situation to plunge any youngster exposed to this for a year or two or more, to plunge him first into despair, and then into rebellion.

ROBINSON: So you are saying that the Sinhalese educational system somehow fails young people too.

RANASINGHE: I'm saying that our society here has never really geared itself to our young people, to give them the multiplicity of experiences and opportunities that are available elsewhere. I mean opportunities to try themselves, to stretch and reach out both physically and intellectually. In all directions. To be exposed to the great artistic heritage of mankind. To learn without pressure for the sake of learning. And through this to lead fuller, more satisfying and in the end more productive lives. But no, we're geared to an old-fashioned unenterprising system of force-fed education manipulated by each new government without much knowledge or competence. And usually without taking the welfare of the students into consideration. A tragedy of immeasurable dimensions.

ROBINSON: You seem to be rather pessimistic about the political situation in Sri Lanka.

RANASINGHE: Say political-cultural situation. This was the most difficult part of my move from West to East. The isolation from cultural life as you take it for granted in the West. My lack — almost everybody's lack — of regular exposure to a varied, lively, critical and analytical press. Radio that is topical and free, stimulating, provocative. Television offering the best of drama, political discussion, education, music, art. And all uncensored. Leaving the viewer to form her own opinion without having certain attitudes forced upon her. Lack of live theatre, live music, live discussion.

ROBINSON: But I've been told there is a lot of activity in Sinhala and Tamil theatre, and you yourself have written a poem "Children's Orchestra".

It is not
that your execution is so precise
or that your harmonies
rhythm
and other orchestral skills
are perfect.
Yet listening to your music
with the evening sun carving
light and shadow
on your faces
I am moved
because
you interpret for us
an emotion
we did not know you understood.

RANASINGHE: Yes. There's a great deal of Sinhala drama expressing political protest, often with much skill and inventiveness. Tamil drama I cannot judge at all. I neither speak nor understand Tamil. I have to rely on Tamil critics who review in English. How much of either will still have relevance in say five or ten years time, let alone fifty or 100, only the future will tell. Most Sinhala and Tamil plays try to interpret the present. So there is a certain sameness. Worthwhile locally written English drama is practically non-existent. Nowadays the English amateur groups who performed regularly have more or less broken up for lack of actors. Going back to Sinhala theatre, there is Ediriweera Sarachchandra who re-created Sinhala drama in the Nadagama style and also on the Japanese Noh tradition. He uses the same bare stage, no background scenery, uses chorus and orchestra, verse and prose dialogue...but others have told you about all this. I enjoyed his Maname very much. I saw one of the first performances. My husband explained everything in a running commentary, and I was delighted with the play. But to be quite honest, on an on-going basis I need more solid theatre fare to which I can relate and which has relevance. But that I guess is where cultural expectations come in...

ROBINSON: How would you assess the cultural climate for an artist, for any artist, in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Not taking into consideration for the moment the totally abnormal conditions under which we are living now. But even under normal circumstances, I think there is a dual problem here. There is a lack of stimulation. The result, perhaps, of a lack of diversity. Let me try to explain. The country is small. There are a number of different communities. Everybody knows
everybody else. If you have a talent, a basic surge of creative impulse, once you have expressed this — and of course the process can take years — but once this creative spurt has exhausted itself, unless the artist exposes himself or herself to either a new environment or new experiences there’s nothing to fill the void. It’s good to recognize this. And if one is serious about one’s art one must have the courage either to go in search of adventure or change one’s life style. One cannot create except from what is inside oneself, you know, one’s inner resources, and these are built up through living and learning and digesting. And must constantly be replenished. Otherwise the spring will dry up.

As for music, we have a symphony orchestra that caters to the Western music addict and gives three performances a year. It is put together from local amateur talent. There is no payment to the musicians. Everything is a labor of love. Rehearsals are after work. Usually a soloist, if possible a foreign visitor, participates, and that adds both variety and a touch of professionalism. But in a program of three or four pieces you get one that is really well rehearsed and played. As the evening progresses the others decline in quality. The problem is also that we have no air-conditioned hall for the use of the symphony orchestra. That is a real handicap and hardship. Occasionally, foreign chamber orchestras perform in one or the other of the luxury hotels. But those events are rather exclusive and quite expensive.

And, yes, there was a children’s orchestra when my children were in school. But my poem deals more with the emotional involvement of a mother watching her son playing the oboe with great feeling and some skill and suddenly realizing that although he is a young adolescent who is still being treated as a child he is much more mature than we as parents thought.

ROBINSON: To change the subject, do you write only in English or also in Sinhala? Or German?

RANASINGHE: I write mainly in English. Recently a very little in my re-learned German. Unfortunately, not at all in Sinhala. I have been translated into Sinhala, though. I can speak Sinhala, but I can’t write it or read it. I regret this very much. It’s clearly impossible to judge what is going on in the literature of a country unless one can read it. That, I think, is another problem here, even for people who are bilingual, or possibly trilingual. There is no cross fertilization at all between the three languages mainly spoken in this country. And
there is a barrier between the writers, to some extent and perhaps unknowingly fostered by the government. You know, Sinhala writers have all sorts of festivals and prize givings which are exclusively for them. They have great poetry gatherings. I'm not saying that either Tamil or English poets or writers could contribute, but they should at least be invited. All artists should be treated as one group. Whatever problems of a linguistic nature arise can always be tackled. One could use simultaneous translation. On a national level there should be no linguistic discrimination among artists, even if one group vastly outnumbers the others. Contests should include all groups. Due allowances and adjustments should be made. If this integration of the various groups of writers were done in a really sensitive and careful way there could be enormous benefits, not just to the writers but to the country as a whole. The three main groups would learn what each is doing. They could perhaps learn from each other. There could be a transfusion of ideas and ideals. A sort of unity in diversity which could perhaps percolate down to the readers and the schools, showing the way to other kinds of unity. Frankly, I find this artificial barrier almost offensive. It perpetuates a mistake that was made politically and which has had the most far reaching negative consequences for the country. Language is of the utmost importance. And writers because they after all use language as their tool should and could be encouraged to rebuild what has been destroyed here.

ROBINSON: How is your own writing evaluated by the English reading public in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: I've had a most sympathetic, indeed nurturing, English reading audience. They've spurred me on, giving me the same attention, almost, they would give to writing in their own language.

ROBINSON: But haven't you been expressing rather strong opinions about the local culture if not directly its literary aspects?

RANASINGHE: Yes; But on the whole I've been very careful. Almost too careful. I never venture out of the role of the foreign guest who is allowed to write with total abandon on topics that pertain to her own past which she is deemed competent to judge because she knows what she is writing about. And in a sense that's true. There is a gut feeling that comes with the gift of mother tongue and motherland/fatherland. A gut feeling that is irreplaceable. But maybe I've been over sensitive in my wish not to offend. I've steered away quite
deliberately from a real open engagement in local issues except insofar as they overlapped with my own experience. Until now it has not been too difficult to remain, from the literary point of view, outside. My work for Amnesty International almost created this imperative.

ROBINSON: But take your short story "Desire". A young Sri Lankan fisherman murders a foreign woman tourist. Isn't that a kind of negative criticism?

RANASINGHE: Do you know, I think that story has been misunderstood. Which must be my fault. I'm to blame for perhaps losing sight of my objective while writing it. I enjoyed writing it. I was quite carried away in the process. But, yes, I have had letters from people who felt strongly that I should not write in that vein as it might deter tourists from coming here.

In actual fact, the story was meant to expose the ignorance of the foreign visitor, especially the American or European, who expects a totally alien world to conform to her expected patterns, in the case of this story. And she has to pay the price, because it doesn't. I have tried to recapture some of my own amazements and misconceptions. There is no kind of censoriousness against the fisherman — although he kills he reacts to the stupidity of the two women tourists out of the constraints of his own harsh circumstances. The scenery in the story is 100% authentic. The setting's Marble Bay, Trincomalee. We spent fantastic holidays there. But each time we visited this lonely long-curving beach with its transparent sea and hinterland of jungle, wild animals — and mystery — I had a very strong feeling of apprehension, even fear. Perhaps an encapsulation of an overall uneasiness with a still new and as yet unassimilated life.