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

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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.

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

(This is the fourth part of an interview the first part of which was published in Tonan Ajia Kenkyu Nenpo, December 1986, the second in Annual Review of Economics, February 1988, and the third in Keiei to keizai, September 1988.)

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ROBINSON: What is the name of the national anthem of Sri Lanka?
BASTIAMPILLAI: *Namo Namo Matha*. *Namo* is a form of salutation like *Hail*. *Matha* refers to Motherland.

ROBINSON: Who wrote the music and who wrote the lyrics?
BASTIAMPILLAI: The late Ananda Samarakoon composed both the music and the words. The original is in Sinhala. It’s sung in Sinhala — even by non-Sinhalese, if they sing it. It’s not martial music. It’s rather sentimental and appealing.

ROBINSON: Does “if they sing it” mean that some people refuse to sing the national anthem?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, as a protest in areas like the North and East of Sri Lanka.

ROBINSON: Is there an English translation of *Namo Namo Matha*?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, of course. It can be translated: Mother Sri Lanka!

*We salute you, our Mother, Sri Lanka.*

*O Lanka of exceeding loveliness, full of beauty,*

*Land of Victory, full of wealth and grain, of fruit and flower,*

*Life giving Mother, who showers us with all goods, happiness and joy,*

*Receive our devotions and our worship.*

*We salute you, O Mother.*

*You are all knowledge to us.*

*You alone are our Truth.*

*You are our Strength.*

*You are the faith in our hearts.*

*You are our Light, you are our other soul.*

*You are our Life, you are our Freedom.*

*Since we are the children of one Mother*

*Let us go together without delay*

*Shedding all differences and spreading our love.*

*We salute you, our Mother, Sri Lanka.*

ROBINSON: “Shedding all differences” suggests that Ananda Samarakoon was conscious of “differences” that stood in the way of unity. Any comment?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Ethnic rifts and cleavages here started by the end of the 19th century and were quite clear by the early 20th century.

ROBINSON: Is there a Tamil translation of *Namo Namo Matha*?
BASTIAMPILLAI: I haven’t heard of any Tamil translation of the anthem, but, of course,
it can be translated.

ROBINSON: Who was Ananda Samarakoon?

BASTIAMPILLAI: He was a music teacher.

ROBINSON: Are there any other anthems popular in Sri Lanka besides the national anthem? Like Munidasa Cumaratunga’s, for example.

BASTIAMPILLAI: I don’t know much about Munidasa’s anthem, but it’s said to be influenced by nationalistic fervor and strong patriotic sentiment. Other writers, like Dr. Mahagama Sekera and the late Reverend S. Mahinda, have also written nationalistic or patriotic poems that can be sung. The Reverend S. Mahinda was a Tibetan, by the way; he made Sri Lanka his home. He wrote much in Sinhala, especially for children. Dr. Sekera was a doyen of local composers. He was an Inspector of Schools and involved in aesthetic studies.

ROBINSON: Has any literary critic commented on the language of Namo Namo Matha?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There has been no specialist study or analysis of the language of Samarakoon’s anthem that I know of. But I hear it was influenced by Tagorean sentiment and Indian ideas of love for the motherland. It’s common in Asia to use the feminine form in referring to one’s country as Motherland. This is so in Tamil, too. I have not heard of the use here of the father form in connection with one’s country.

ROBINSON: When was Namo Namo Matha selected as your national anthem?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Around 1948, of course, when we got our independence from Great Britain.

ROBINSON: Were there other possible choices?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, there were alternative suggestions, but they were not taken so seriously, and the selection of Namo Namo Matha was acclaimed as suitable by most of the people.

ROBINSON: Who made the final selection of the anthem?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The selection was made by a committee appointed by the Minister of Home Affairs, and approval was given by the Ministry of Home Affairs and other related state authorities.

ROBINSON: When is the national anthem played?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Most often at the commencement of official functions. It’s used just before commencement of events of national importance.
ROBINSON: Are there any complaints from any Sri Lankans about *Namo Namo Matha*?

BASTIAMPILLAI: As far as I'm aware, there have been no serious complaints in regard to this anthem. There has been no particular reason for anyone to get upset about it. It generally tries to exhort the emotions of all the people here. It's strongly Tagorean in tune, meaning and language.

ROBINSON: No complaints from Tamils?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Tamil minority have not made an issue of this anthem. The Tamils in the North and East, however, have been generally indifferent to it.

ROBINSON: At official occasions, is *Namo Namo Matha* sung even in the North and East?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No. Not now. Because virtually the North and East do what they wish to. The writ of the state of Sri Lanka is not so effective there.

ROBINSON: Is there a flag code in Sri Lanka? And when is the flag flown?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Lion Flag is put up on the anniversary of the day of Independence and on official ceremonial occasions as, for instance, when Parliament opens its sessions and when there are distinguished foreign visitors and on other national holidays. There is a code on the use of the flag, of course. It was drawn up by the Ministry of Home Affairs and enjoined to be followed. But the flag has often been displayed in a rather haphazard manner. For example, on all sorts of structures such as wayside stalls without any heed to half-mast or full-mast as it may befit an occasion. Moreover, flags produced commercially are not of a uniform pattern. Flags fly at all times, morning, noon and night, in the same way, and to my knowledge no penalty has been imposed for such display. I suspect the code itself calls for review.

ROBINSON: Do all the political parties in Sri Lanka have their own "national" flags?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The various political parties do not have national flags as such, but they use flags of their party colors with their party symbols.

ROBINSON: Do these parties have their own anthems? Does the L. T. T. E. have its own national Eelam anthem?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Some parties have party anthems. For instance, the Sama Samaja Party. I'm not aware of any national anthem prepared by the L. T. T. E.

ROBINSON: Now before I ask you any questions about the national flag of Sri
Lanka, let me try to describe it. It has three main parts. There's a yellow border. And a vertical yellow space separates the two other parts. The part on the left is divided into two vertical bars side by side, one green and one orange. The part on the right is about two and a half times larger than the part on the left. On a red background it has a caricature of a yellow lion holding a yellow scimitar in its uplifted right paw. At each corner there's a yellow leaf with its sharp edge pointing at the lion.

Please explain the meaning of this flag.

**BASTIAMPILLAI:** This flag is usually called the Lion Flag. I think you know that the yellow lion with the sword refers to the Sinhalese majority in Sri Lanka. The lion is stylized here, I would say, rather than caricaturized. Particularly because it has been chosen from a symbolic point of view: nobleness. The sword is to indicate courage and fairness, we've been told. The yellow edge that runs as a border around it may have been selected because yellow is a color generally hallowed by Buddhists in Sri Lanka. The green vertical stripe indicates the Muslim minority. The saffron vertical stripe indicates the Tamil minority. Each of these stripes is of equal size and each is in the proportion of one to seven of the entire flag. The red may be taken as the color of the Sinhalese majority. The four leaves in the corners are bo-leaves. Ficus Religiosa. The Bo is a tree under which Lord Buddha attained Nirvana, Enlightenment, and it's hallowed by Buddhists. The national flag was an adaptation of an older version of a lion flag, with a few modifications made by the government in power then.

**ROBINSON:** Didn't the American Theosophist Colonel Olcott design a national flag for Ceylon?

**BASTIAMPILLAI:** I'm aware of a Buddhist flag said to have been designed by Henry Steele Olcott. Some say in association with another Sinhalese person. In 1882. It consists of the five colors seem in the halo of the Buddha — blue, yellow, red, white and buff. This flag of five colors is referred to in the *Mahavamsa*.

**ROBINSON:** Is there some connection between the lion in the flag and the lions at the entrance to Sigiriya?

**BASTIAMPILLAI:** I don't think that the lion image has any relationship to the lions at Sigiriya Fortress. The pasant royal lion with a sword in its right forepaw and bo leaves appeared in the flag of the last King of Kandy and Sri Lanka,
Sri Wickrama Rajasinha. Our national flag is based largely on that flag.

ROBINSON: And how was this flag selected as Sri Lanka’s national flag?

BASTIAMPIILLAI: It was selected soon after Independence by a committee of our Parliament. The parliamentarians on this committee were representative of the different ethnic communities here.

ROBINSON: Were there alternative possibilities?

BASTIAMPIILLAI: Yes. There were many alternatives. Sometimes it was emotional rather than rational thinking that took place in the committee. I don't know the details of the alternative forms of the national flags that were suggested. The references are probably buried in the records. A flag that does not indicate discrete nationalities, has no religious overtones or such overt racial symbolism as the *sinha* — lion — may have been chosen but might not have appealed to the Sinhala Buddhist majority. For instance, the *bo* leaves appeal to the Buddhists, and they satisfy the sense of manifest destiny that is believed in.

ROBINSON: Then are there any complaints about the national flag?

BASTIAMPIILLAI: There were complaints in the past. The selection was to have been made on January 27, 1948, by the committee I just mentioned. Sinhalese and Tamil members and one Malay Muslim member prepared their final report in February 1950 after several meetings. The Lion Flag was adopted in 1951. One Tamil Senator, S. Nadesan, dissented. There are still some people who are not happy about this flag.

ROBINSON: Would you please explain this?

BASTIAMPIILLAI: The flag has been interpreted now for sometime as one that tends to emphasize differences rather than unity. The word *sinha* itself, from which Sinhalese derives, means lion. Therefore, by some the Lion Flag is interpreted to represent only the Sinhalese. By those who disagree with the choice, the lion with the sword has created a sense of dissatisfaction as it's interpreted to mean militancy. Also the stripes to indicate minorities are interpreted to signify their lesser positions in relation to the majority. So the flag remains contentious.

ROBINSON: What was Nadesan's dissent?

BASTIAMPIILLAI: Senator Nadesan did not like distinctions of communities to be reflected in the format of the flag. Particularly when the sections indicating the Muslims and the Tamils were to be so obvious in the form of
narrow stripes of different colors, which tended to show the minorities as insignificant in the body politic. He probably wanted a commonly acceptable flag with stress on equality of all communities irrespective of race, language, religion. He had prepared another, alternative flag.

ROBINSON: What was Senator Nadesan's background?

BASTIAMPILLAI: He was a very successful lawyer. A valiant defender of human rights. He appeared in a case when a newspaper was proscribed, for example, and also in cases when political activists were penalized. He was an eminent citizen. His son is a successful lawyer and was interested in public affairs, too, but he's now out of the island.

ROBINSON: Has there ever been flag burning in Sri Lanka, as in the U. S. A. during the Vietnam War, by those opposed to the present political powers-that-be?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Attempts to put up the Lion Flag on official occasions have been resisted by the Northern militants, or they have been foiled later by pulling the flag down. Moreover, the militants have endeavored to put up their flag and declare “Eelam”, although so far unsuccessfully.

ROBINSON: Did the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam select a tiger as their symbol in opposition to the lion? Incidentally, have there ever been lions in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The tiger has been chosen as the symbol of the L. T. T. E. because it was a symbol of one of the South Indian dynastic kingdoms, the Cholas, an imperial royal house. No, there were no lions in Sri Lanka. Nor tigers, either.

ROBINSON: Isn't it odd that the L. T. T. E. uses an imperial royal house symbol? Is this choice related to their political ambitions?

BASTIAMPILLAI: It is odd, indeed. This symbol was chosen, perhaps, to express aggression, rebellion, and alienation and without much thought of the imperial factors. The Cholas themselves had from time to time liberated themselves from other dynasties. They were also imperialistic, unfortunately.

ROBINSON: Although the Chola raids into Sri Lanka — Ceylon — took place hundreds of years ago, some Sinhalese still seem fearful of similar invasions these days. Doesn't the L. T. T. E. tiger image unnecessarily disturb these people?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, the Chola invasions are part of an old story. Kings of Sri Lanka even made invasions into India. Now, unfortunately, Chola raids and Chola occupation of Sri Lanka in the 10th and 11th centuries are identified by chauvinists with perceived inroads by Tamils into their preserves. Yes, the Tiger emblem has certainly disturbed many Sinhalese inasmuch as the L: T. T. E. chose it because of its past significance.

ROBINSON: Then what is the Tamil response in general to the Sinhalese emphasis on ancient Sinhalese kings, for example, Dutugemunu? Do Tamils have any attachment to this aspect of culture in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Conflicts between kings of the past are recalled today in a different light. Dutugemunu fought a king who had been accepted and whose rule was eulogised as just and good. But now Dutugemunu is being invoked as one who liberated the Sinhalese after defeating an usurping Tamil ruler. The memory of the past is blown up and used to create difference and distinction. Tragically. Today is interpreted from yesterday, and this is misleading.

ROBINSON: In public schools — and private ones — is the “same” history taught in Tamil and Sinhala Schools?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Interpretations differ. Even facts are colored. Reggie Siriwardena, a former editor of a leading newspaper, once made a study of Sinhala school texts. He found much that is tendentious, misleading and erroneous. History is rewritten at times, emotion and sentiment rather than fact.