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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: Is the fact that the University of Colombo is in the center of the city a plus or a minus?

BASTIAMPILLAI: As a university based in the commercial metropolis of Sri Lanka we can interact with the outside world. Our extension courses such as those dealing with
business administration or journalism bring outsiders in. These courses are after working hours and on the weekends so help several visiting faculty members from the outside world to participate in the academic life of the campus. We are also able to draw upon learned and distinguished visitors to the country, as we are close to the capital, to come and visit our university and deliver occasional lectures. We are also in close location to foreign legations and foreign offices, and this also brings a certain amount of interaction with outsiders.

ROBINSON: Just what do you do as Dean of the Faculty of Arts?

BASTIAMPILLAI: As Dean I attend to vouchers for overtime payment, for visiting lecturers payment, for examination payment. I attend series of meetings, some of them mainly in an ex officio capacity. These are examples of the type of routine work I must do. Most of my work as Dean is related to routine and mundane matters. There is too much of bureaucratic work. Since the work of Dean demands daily attendance in the office, I am desk bound and confined to the office during the whole working day.

ROBINSON: How is being Dean conducive to scholarship?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There is very little chance to visit the archives or libraries or do the necessary reference and reading for research. So, as far as scholarship is concerned, one’s own academic activity cannot be adequately or satisfactorily done. There is very little chance to give any academic leadership, either. Some innovation can be proposed, but one’s initiative is dampened because of too much bureaucratic impedimenta. There is very little advantage as Dean, except that you are probably respected somewhat, and also you are paid an allowance.

ROBINSON: How did you get to be Dean anyway?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I am in my second term as Dean. I was elected by the members of the Faculty — Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Associate Professors, Professors.

ROBINSON: Is your faculty mixed?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Well, there are people of different religions in the faculty, if that’s what you mean. And, of course, a good number of women are in the faculty. The relationship between the faculty members of the different ethnic groups is cordial.

ROBINSON: May I ask a couple of personal questions? Many Tamil surnames end in pillai. How is Bastiampillai translated into English?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Bastiam is, I believe, a corruption of the name Sebastian. Literally, pillai means a child. It also has a caste connotation. In Tamil Nadu, in South India, for example, it is assigned to those who belong to the cultivators’ caste, which is high in the caste hierarchy.
ROBINSON: How significant is caste among Tamils in Sri Lankan society today?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The caste system prevails to a pronounced extent among the Tamils. It is very significant when it comes to marriage. Education or a transfer of wealth and better distribution of economic resources have done little to weaken this adherence to the caste system. It is found quite sharply among the educated Tamils as well as among the less educated ones.

ROBINSON: How about caste among the Sinhalese?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Sinhalese also have a caste system, but there has been relatively more noticeable progress towards liberal thinking among them.

ROBINSON: As an historian, what is your personal opinion about caste?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The caste system is a deterrent to social progress in Sri Lanka, social harmony, and convivial relationships. In fact, it is as bad as the dowry system, which in spite of education and other forms of advance yet remains as an integral part of the practices among the Tamil and the Sinhalese communities, perhaps to a milder extent among the Sinhalese.

ROBINSON: Your early schooling was in Roman Catholic schools. Are you a Catholic?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I'm a practicing Catholic but not very devout. I adhere to the usual prescribed religious practices largely because of having been taught in Roman Catholic schools and because of an unquestioning religious background at home. Anyway, I am a convinced Catholic and have no qualms and can think of no good reason to give up Catholicism.

ROBINSON: Basil Fernando, a poet and lawyer, who used to be a member of the De La Salle Christian Brothers for about ten years, has said that he considers Christianity in Sri Lanka corrupt because it was and is silent in the face of colonialism and social injustice. Any comment?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The generalization that Christianity is corrupt here is far too sweeping and unfair. So is the reason he gives for such a conclusion. His comment is pervaded by a sense of disappointment and disillusion. Of course, I admit that Christianity here has not been as active and alive to social problems as it has been lately in Latin America or in the Philippines. However, in recent times, there are a number of Catholic priests and organizations that have shown a sensitive concern to important contemporary problems and a concern for the deprived. And the Catholic church has stuck its neck out.

ROBINSON: Fernando allows for exceptions too, of course. Can you name a couple of these priests you have referred to?
BASTIAMPILLAI: Father Tissa Balsuriya, Father Paul Caspersz and Father Catalano come to mind, but it may not be fair to single out any, and I’m only referring to those I’m familiar with.

ROBINSON: Of these three I’m familiar with only Father Casperz as one of the founders of the Movement for Inter-racial Justice and Equality. What Catholic organizations are you referring to? Fernando mentioned the Christian Workers Fellowship as doing good work.

BASTIAMPILLAI: There are organizations like the Centre for Society and Religion, in Colombo, and a movement among the Catholics of Kandy called Satyodaya. They have shown an active concern with contemporary problems. There are Catholic groups that are interested in bringing about an amelioration of the ethnic conflict. There has been concern among Catholic groups too in dealing with social distress, and some have endeavored to work towards social concord among the different ethnic communities, by particularly working among the immigrant Indian plantation workers. Let me say this: the Church as a whole is positively and constructively concerned in trying to lessen the unhappiness caused by the present crisis, and, apart from a few rare exceptions, they are also trying to exhort people to be less emotional and more rational in their attitudes towards the present crisis. Priests and religious workers even participate in government convened conferences and try to suggest ways and means of solving the ethnic hostility. Their contribution is indeed a sizeable one. But we also find a few — very few — rabid people in the Catholic Church too.

ROBINSON: To go back, your Master’s thesis was on Sir William Gregory. Would you mind saying something about him?

BASTIAMPILLAI: William Gregory was a liberal Governor who showed a paternalistic and benevolent concern for the local peasantry and people. He took an active interest in reviving irrigation works, for he knew water was essential for cultivation, which was the livelihood of most of the Sri Lankans then. He was also concerned with the construction of a new port in Colombo which he thought would be safer than the older port of Galle in Southern Ceylon. Moreover, Colombo was closer to the coffee estates and could be easily reached by the plantations which could use the port to export their products and import their requirements. Gregory also showed an interest in reviving oriental studies and built the Colombo Museum to house the archaeological treasures of ancient Sri Lanka. His interest in disestablishing the established Anglican Church of the ruling British was a radical measure in his time. He was also anxious to expand the health services and other facilities for the Indian immigrant plantation labor force.
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ROBINSON: How did you choose Gregory as a research subject?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I chose to study Gregory's career on the advice of a senior teacher, the late W. J. F. La Brooy, and also because I myself was enamored by Gregory's interest in reviving a dying out dry zone peasantry around the area in Anuradhapura, where I was born.

ROBINSON: Then would you mind saying something about Government Agent Dyke, the subject of your doctoral dissertation?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Percival Acland Dyke took to the civil service as a career at a very young age after having been a midshipman. He worked in a far flung outlying province of Sri Lanka from about 1829 to 1867, a very long period indeed. He enjoyed authority and respect, being a martinet. He died in harness. Dyke was known as the "Rajah of the North". He refused even to accept higher promotions because he felt that he was the most suitable "chosen" person to govern this northern province of Sri Lanka. He worked with a sense of mission and intense dedication. So much so that he even cut short a holiday in London and returned to his province, which he felt was home and where he was the unquestioned proconsul. He liked to be at a distance where, as the "man on the spot", he could take decisions himself with independence and authority.

ROBINSON: Again, why did you choose this research topic?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I chose this topic after again consulting with some of my senior teachers, and because this type of study had not been done earlier. It was an unresearched virgin field of study. And I was somewhat familiar with the area. Moreover, the old northern province contained Anuradhapura within it then, and thus was an added attraction.

ROBINSON: To get back to you, was it significant for you to have been born in Anuradhapura, the center of Buddhist cultural life in Sri Lanka for so many years?

BASTIAMPILLAI: No significance. In the 1930s, when we lived there because of my father's job, Anuradhapura was poorly populated. It was neglected. Malarial.

ROBINSON: What were the reasons for that neglect?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Anuradhapura had been neglected for a long time. It had been abandoned following invasions from India in the 10th and 11th centuries which caused a sense of insecurity to the inhabitants. Moreover, when people moved further away, irrigation reservoirs and canals were neglected. Jungle overtook the land, and malaria made it an unhealthy place to live. It remained in such a neglected state because later on, with a growth of trade and people moving more towards the southwest areas,
there was depopulation. Anuradhapura was, however, a pilgrimage center for Buddhists. The sacred Bo-tree was there. And during festivals commemorating the introduction of Buddhism into the island, a large number of pilgrims congregated. With the collapse of the indigenous Sri Lankan kingdoms and the coming of the Westerners, the Portuguese in 1505, the Dutch in 1658, and in 1796 the British, there was no interest in maintaining Anuradhapura as a Buddhist center. But Anuradhapura had some strategic importance. It was centrally located on the route to Trincomalee in the East, to Kandy in the Center, and to Colombo in the South West.

ROBINSON: Were there many Tamils living in Anuradhapura?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Records show that, as it was on the road that the Northern Tamils had to take to go to the East or to the Central or South West areas, there were Tamil traders and inhabitants living in Anuradhapura, although in small numbers. Even in the not too distant past there were Tamil lawyers and other professionals and businessmen in Anuradhapura. And not too long ago the Chairman of the Local Government Council of the area was a Tamil.

ROBINSON: Incidentally, what kind of work did your father do?

BASTIAMPILLAI: My father worked as a clerk in the public service. When he died he was Head Clerk of the Public Works Department in Trincomalee. His office was in charge of road and building construction. His own work involved accounting, correspondence, maintenance of files, and supervision of other office personnel.

ROBINSON: Did your father have much influence on your choice of a career?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I lost my father when I was only ten years old, and if he influenced me it was in interesting me in reading literature. My oldest brother, however, did influence me much.

ROBINSON: What kind of literature did your father interest you in?

BASTIAMPILLAI: My father had a collection of works of Shakespeare, Dickens, Thackeray, Bernard Shaw... I started reading some of these. And he used to get books regularly every month as he had subscribed to an organization that used to send out a book a month to its subscribers. These books were literary works, drama and fiction. In English. I remember my father used to read a lot, but apart from that I cannot recall any of his other interests, though I faintly remember that he was interested in bringing up poultry and cattle. He also acquired quality furniture made by craftsmen. All of that was sold long years ago.

ROBINSON: Did your mother influence you much in your choice of a career?

BASTIAMPILLAI: My mother's influence was not very great, mainly since I left school
a little after I was sixteen years old, owing to want of money for a large family at home
to be fed and educated. I sought clerical employment in Colombo. So before I was
seventeen I was employed in a temporary clerical capacity in the Food and Postal
Departments. I continued working as a clerk until I was influenced by a few friends,
and by their example, and entered the university. I read for my university entrance ex-
all as a private candidate while working in state service at the postal savings bank.

ROBINSON: Did you have to send money home to help your mother and your brothers
and sisters?

BASTIAMPILLAI: When I started working at seventeen, I did not have to send money
home regularly. Most of my family had gone to Jaffna after the death of my father. My
eldest brother had also found employment in Colombo and he used to send money
home regularly. Two of my elder sisters got married. As I started to say before, if I
have to ascribe credit to anyone for encouraging me and for giving me financial
assistance to help me in my education, I have to thank my eldest brother, whose death
was a great loss of someone like a trusted and dependable friend to me. He was also of
assistance to the others in the family. A paternal uncle of mine, who is now dead, was
also supportive during my university life.

ROBINSON: In 1958 you worked for the Agricultural Department for a few months and
then later that same year you became an assistant lecturer at Peradeniya. Isn't that
usual?

BASTIAMPILLAI: It is not unusual in Sri Lanka, whose administrative set up was deriv-
ed from the British. The tendency was to use generalists to tend to administration
even in technical departments.

ROBINSON: What did you do in the Agricultural Department? Where did you work?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I worked in the sugar plantations of the Department of Agriculture
at Kantalai, in the East; it's 26 miles inland from Trincomalee, a natural harbor, one of
the better known ports of Sri Lanka. Today Kantalai is predominantly occupied by Sri
Lankan colonials, although at one time there had been a number of Tamil residents.
My work was administrative. My main function was related to administration and
financial management, principally at a large sugar plantation that was then in its in-
fant stages. My work related mostly to personnel management of labor; attending to
financial accounting in regard to wages, traveling claims, and so on, and this took
most of my time. This administrative training has been of great help to me in my work
as Dean. I became familiar with office management.

ROBINSON: Have you written anything about agriculture in Sri Lanka?
BASTIAMPILLAI: In The Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies, in 1964, I published an article called "From Coffee to Tea in Ceylon, The vicissitudes of a Colony's Plantation Economy". It deals with plantation agriculture.

ROBINSON: Would you mind saying something about those "vicissitudes"?

BASTIAMPILLAI: In the years after 1870 coffee had an Indian summer in Sri Lanka. Crops were grown on new lands. Prices appeared to rise. But a blight had affected coffee, which was stricken with leaf disease. Protective tariffs were removed. Coffee from Brazil and the West Indies offered strong competition. Along with a feeling of buoyancy there was also a sense of an impending collapse of coffee, and this happened. To replace coffee, planters desperately experimented with new products. Cinchona, which offered a base for a remedy for malaria, was tried, but it did not last. Then experiments were made in growing cocoa and tea. Tea was experimentally grown in 1867. It flourished, and by the turn of the decade, clearly tea was replacing coffee. Tea came to be and is synonymous with Ceylon.

ROBINSON: Have you written anything else on plantation agriculture?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I've done several related pieces on Tamil plantation agricultural workers. For example, "The Indian Tamils of the Plantation Areas: Some Explanations for Their Survival as a Distinct Entity in Ceylon". That was published in 1979, in The Proceedings of the 4th International Conference—Seminar of Tamil Studies. The conference took place at Madurai.

ROBINSON: What did you say in that report?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Indian Tamil laborers of the plantation areas who migrated into Sri Lanka had a particularly bad time in the 19th century. Many of them died on their way to the plantations, falling prey to diseases like cholera, or dying out of starvation and the weariness of the trek. Their conditions of work were very exacting. Their wages were poor. And they had no tenure of service. They were debt serfs. There was nothing in the way of welfare benefits, and they were a depressed and oppressed lot. However, with the progress of time some benefits were afforded them, albeit reluctantly, owing to the agitation of humanitarian groups, both in London and outside. Yet, in spite of this alleviation of their conditions, they remain a rather pathetic group owing to the laissez faire attitude of the state and the planters.

ROBINSON: Have you written other kinds of things about Indian Tamils in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: I have contributed an article to a book which is being published by the University of Maryland: Tradition and Transformation: Essays on Migration and the Indian Diaspora. The title of the article is "Indians In Sri Lanka: Alien and
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Unwelcome". I have published other articles and read papers on the same subject of the Indian workers. For example, at the Second International Conference on Indian Ocean Studies at the University of Western Australian in Perth, I contributed a paper called "The Indian Diaspora in Some Indian Ocean Countries with Special Reference to Sri Lanka".

ROBINSON: What did you say in your article in Tradition and Transformation?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Indians in Sri Lanka were treated as alien and unwelcome. They were housed in an area surrounded by the indigenous Kandyan Sinhalese, who were different from them in language, religion and social behavior. The Indians were kept enclosed in barrack-like accommodation in estate enclaves. They were captive workers. And they could not participate in rural community life. They were officially denied an opportunity to participate in village community matters and were not allowed to receive land grants from the government. This made them remain a foreign group among the indigenous Sinhalese, who never really liked their presence because it was felt that they were depriving them of economic benefits and also receiving benefits which the Sinhalese did not receive.

ROBINSON: During the Second World war, wasn't there some kind of revolutionary activity among the Indian plantation workers here?

BASTIAMPILLAI: There was left-wing inspired agitation in the plantation areas. The British Government reacted very strongly. This was a time of war, and the British felt that any dissent was subversion and treason. The British came down heavily on left-wing organizations like the Sri Lanka Sama Samaja Party, which is a Trotskyite party, and even tried to keep the leaders of this party incarcerated under emergency regulations. However, the party was able to outwit the British governor most of the time, and a good number of their leaders escaped from prison and went to India. I wrote about all this in "The Left, The Indian Laborer, and the Imperial Authorities" in the University of Colombo Review.

ROBINSON: What is the relationship here between Sri Lankan Tamils and Indian Tamils?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The Ceylon Tamils and the Indian Tamils remain quite discrete and separate. These two communities have been apart partly because of the geographical distances that separate them. The Ceylon Tamils are mostly in the North and East, while the Indian Tamils are in the Central highlands mostly, although some are found generally in the coastal cosmopolitan city of Colombo. There has been very little mixing between these two groups of Tamils. Unfortunately, Sri Lankan Tamils tended to
regard the Indian Tamil immigrants somewhat inferior socially, which is wrong. Of course, in recent times, among the leadership of the two groups, while both leaderships have a lot of grievances, some of them common, they feel however that most grievances are distinct, and are to an extent, so while there is some feeling of agreement, the leaderships operate separately. There is no strong interest or objective quite evident to indicate that they could get together in the near future.

ROBINSON: Who are some of the important Tamil leaders in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Savumiamoorthy Thondaman holds a dual position as a leader of a trade union, the Ceylon Workers Congress, and as the Minister of Rural Industrial Development in the Cabinet. He continues to be a member of the C. W. C. and is therefore not a member of the ruling United National Party. This ambivalent position sometimes creates embarrassments, for he has to talk as a trade union leader while also being responsible as a member of the government at the same time, particularly in respect of strikes and trade union action. Apart from Thondaman, just now there are no independently placed important Tamil politicians in Parliament. However, there is Kanapathipillai William Devanayagam, who represents a constituency from the East and who is Home Affairs Minister. He has been a long time member of the governing United National Party. In addition there is Chelliah Rajadurai, who is the Minister of Regional Development. But he had at one time been a member of the Federal Party for a long time. Devanayagam and Rajadurai are committed to support the government, and, probably because of this obligation, seldom speak on matters relating to terrorism and other kindred subjects except to support the government. It is difficult to estimate the present following of either of these two just now. There are disturbed conditions in the East which preclude any proper survey of opinion. In the case of Thondaman, he still continues to enjoy the support of a considerable number of Indian plantation laborers whom the Ceylon Workers Congress represents. All Tamil leaders who belong to the Tamil United Liberation Front are virtually silent except for occasional protests made in India, where many of them now live. Their protests in the press are usually allegations of violence by the Sri Lankan army in the Tamil North or East. Two members of the T. U. L. F. live in Colombo, but generally they do not speak out much. However, one of them, Dr. Neelan Tiruchelvam does clarify the attitude of their party towards the ethnic problem in interviews on and off. In addition, there is Kumar Ponnambalam, the leader of the Tamil Congress, and he also participates in discussions and seminars explaining his views on the ethnic question. The Tamil Congress is a party mainly of the Northern Tamils. It is more or less waning in
influence. Ponnambalam is a lawyer. He’s the son of a former Tamil leader, G. G. Pon-
nambalam. By and large one can say that in general the Tamils are devoid of an ar-
ticulate or active leadership at the moment.

ROBINSON: What has been the customary relationship between the Sinhalese and
Tamils in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: As a general rule, the Sinhalese and the Tamils get along very well
with each other. When tensions arise and, rarely, riots erupt, then hoodlums and the
bad elements of both societies become a nuisance. In recent times, however, there has
been a growing mutual distrust and dislike among these two communities. Yet there is
still a large group, both among the Sinhalese and the Tamils, who mix with one
another and are very tolerant and understand each other and get along well. Unfor-
tunately, politicians raise political issues with a communal or racial bias to win
popularity and mob appeal. Then the good relationships and the usual calm get soured
and vitiated too. Just now the times are not too good, although there is hope of an out-
come of peace coming out of present conferences. Everything depends on the
presence of a political will to solve the differences between the ethnic groups.

ROBINSON: How do you explain the current crisis in Sri Lanka?

BASTIAMPILLAI: The present ethnic crisis cannot be explained in simple terms.
Negligence by successive governments has made the problem grow to be complicated
and complex. There is language. There is religion. Then there is distrust between the
two main ethnic groups.

ROBINSON: Would you describe the language problem?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Sinhalese children do not learn Tamil, and Tamil children do not
learn Sinhala. There are, of course, very rare exceptions of parents encouraging
children to learn the language of the other group. This development took place after
the Sinhala Only Act was passed in 1956 during the period when S. W. R. D. Ban-
daranaike was Prime Minister. The Tamils considered this Act as an imposition and
resented the measure. They also felt that with Sinhala being made the official
language and compulsory for various jobs they were being relegated to a second place.
Therefore, they protested by not learning Sinhala. However, before this period, there
were schools in the North such as Jaffna College and St. Patrick’s College where
Sinhala was voluntarily taught. Similarly, in a leading Sinhalese Buddhist School,
Ananda College, Colombo, Tamil was taught under a distinguished principal, P. de S.
Kularatne. Certainly, there would be more interaction and intercommunication, more
friendship and understanding, if the members of each community knew the other com-
munity's language. At present, many are unable to have a dialogue, and misunderstandings result.

ROBINSON: Is there any economic basis for the current crisis?

BASTIAMPILLAI: Yes, it is more an economic—based problem. Controversial questions have all cropped up: land settlement, land alienation, maintenance of ethnic geographical entities. Questions of security and policing powers. Questions of equality of recognition. The issues are political but stem from a sense of fear that economic deprivation is overtaking the Tamil community. Sharing of political power, devolution of adequate authority, the desire to manage one's own political and civic matters, and a claim to an equal place in the sun to be assured constitutionally—all these have now become more vital and salient than language or religion or for that matter even education, which was once a contentious issue. In fact, the earliest provocative issues were education and employment. Now, however, the situation is more complex and complicated.