AN INTERVIEW WITH JEGATHEESWARI NAGENDRAN
ON ASPECTS OF CULTURE IN SRI LANKA

Le Roy Robinson
Jegatheeewari Jagendran calls herself "a free creative writer in love with words, imagery, ideas".

From 1977 through 1979 she regularly wrote poems and articles for R. L. Michael's The Independent as well as for other English-language newspapers in Sri Lanka.

Four times since 1977, Nagendran's poems have appeared in International Poetry Anthology (U. K.).

In 1978, Moana, the New Zealand International Review of Arts, published two of her poems on "Indian Ocean Themes".

In 1980, Nagendran's poem "Yala Coast Lagoon--Bird Sanctuary" won an Honor Award in the eighth All Nations Poetry Contest sponsored by the Triton College of Arts and Sciences (Chicago, Illinois) and was published in the Passage series.

Nagendran's poetry has also appeared in Amal Ghose's International Album of Poetry published by the Tagore Institute of Creative Writing (Madras).

In 1984, some of her poems appeared in Creative Writing in Sri Lanka, a new journal.

Jegatheeewari Nagendran is also "a self-taught artist", who paints mostly nature scenes. Several times in the past ten years, paintings of hers have been exhibited in annual exhibitions at the Sri Lanka National Art Gallery.

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ROBINSON: To begin with, would you mind telling us what your first name means?

NAGENDRAN: "Eeswar" means goddess and "Jagam" means universe, so "goddess of the universe".

ROBINSON: I'm glad to know a goddess.

NAGENDRAN: My last name, my husband's, means "God King of
Cobras”--"Indra" is God King and "Naga" is cobra.

Almost all Hindus, by the way, get their names from Siva and his consort Sakti, who have more than a thousand names since Vedic times. "Siva" means creator and "Sakti" means power.

ROBINSON: Would you mind saying something about your personal history, your background?

NAGENDRAN: No, I do not mind at all.

I was born into a semi-feudal family of orthodox Hindus in Manipay, a small town now, in the heartland of the Jaffna Peninsula. Until recently land-owning merchants and farmers had lived there in peace and prosperity ever since British rule.

American Christian missionaries arrived in that area two hundred years ago and they educated many Hindu families and converted many of them to Christianity by building hospitals and schools and by sending some of their children abroad for higher studies, giving them a great deal of financial assistance.

ROBINSON: How did that affect your family?

NAGENDRAN: Well, my father's elder brother became a Christian. He became the headmaster of a mission school in his native village, Navalay, five or six miles from the capital city, Jaffna.

We--I and all my 6 brothers and sisters; there were nine of us!--we grew up in a fairly cultured environment, both Tamil and English, so we have an international outlook, as opposed to parochial views. Traditions are good only up to a point.

We were all educated in Colombo, where my par-
ents were established.

ROBINSON: Will you say something about your education?

NAGENDRAN: I did well in the Senior Public Examination for all-Island schools--First Division and Distinctions in English, World History, and Literature, the Classics. And I was preparing for the University Entrance Exam.

Then, my mother, who was young, died at 38. I was 17 years old.

ROBINSON: Did that interrupt your formal education?

NAGENDRAN: About one year after my mother died, my father, who was aging, gave me in marriage to a rising young medical doctor, a relation on my mother's side. He was 13 years older than me.

ROBINSON: Am I being too personal? What happened then?

NAGENDRAN: My husband and I lived in various districts of Sri Lanka where my husband served as government medical officer, and we knew most of the people.

I have published poems on these places--wooded hills, the Eastern seacoast, so tranquil and studded with sleepy fishing villages and farms.

We never dreamed of the horrors to come.

Our marriage was happy, with the normal quota of quarrels.

ROBINSON: The normal quota of children, too?

NAGENDRAN: Six children. One following another. They filled our lives with joy and discomfort, supreme happiness and small sacrifices. Four sons, two lovely daughters. Four are abroad, two are here with us.

ROBINSON: Are you children in the arts, too?

ROBINSON: Raising six children and taking care of a husband, when did you have time to write and paint?

NAGENDRAN: I didn’t. I had to wait almost 25 years. I submerged my ego in order to be fully involved in the long struggles of my husband and my children to establish themselves.

Only then did I think of painting and writing on my own, although I used to dream of doing it.

ROBINSON: How did you begin?

NAGENDRAN: I began by writing for newspapers. Little poems. Articles. On human rights and injustice to women and children.

ROBINSON: Did your family encourage you?

NAGENDRAN: My family never encouraged me. Nor did my husband. It was a patriarchy, you know.

Only in recent years have Jaffna women proved their liberation from the strangling yoke of male supremacy.

ROBINSON: Is the situation much better for women today than it was when you were young?

NAGENDRAN: Even today, male possessiveness, envy and arrogance combine to prevent a wife and mother from living a cultural life of her own. Unless she is very wealthy—and thick-skinned enough to withstand taunts and innuendos.

ROBINSON: To get to literature in Sri Lanka, are there any Tamil women writers, say, dealing with this kind of material?

NAGENDRAN: Yes, of course, there are. Fine ones.

Mrs. Kamala Thambiraja has recently published a
new novel about a Jaffna lady doctor from a feudal family who works in Colombo and then goes to the U. K. There are three educated professional men in her life, though she loves only one.

ROBINSON: What is the title of this novel?

NAGENDRAN: "I Am an Orphan". It is a psychological novel of integrity and misunderstanding, the sufferings of the doctor's young brother, who finally despises his sister, whose life ends in tragedy.

ROBINSON: Is there any other Tamil woman writer that you like?

NAGENDRAN: In my opinion, the most refreshing young Tamil writer in Sri Lanka today is Mrs. Kohila Mahendran. She writes sensitive short stories, sincere and topical.

For example, one of her stories is about the tragedy of a young married woman with two children. Her husband is murdered, burnt alive in his car, she and her children are left homeless when their home is burnt down by an anti-Tamil mob.

There were nearly 2,000 such incidents all over Sri Lanka during that week of burning hatred in July 1983.

Another one of Mahendran's stories is about a racketeering Middle East Job Agent who is outwitted by a humble housemaid who exposes his fraudulent practice of obtaining money on false pretenses.

ROBINSON: I personally have noticed that this particular practice is quite common in Sri Lanka.

Aside from that, are there other Tamil fiction writers dealing with similarly topical themes?
NAGENDRAN: There are many as yet unknown, not well known, Sri Lankan Tamils writing authentic stories out of their harrowing experiences and the brutal treatment of their families and friends—the mental trauma of innocent children who saw their parents and brothers murdered in the summer of 1983 and after.

Thousands upon thousands of poor villagers and once rich merchants are now refugees in the north and east. Reduced to beggary.

ROBINSON: Have you written any poetry that deals with particular contemporary situations?

NAGENDRAN: Yes, I have. One of my poems—very specific—is entitled "The Burning of the Jaffna Public Library, June 1981". 95,000 rare books were lost in that arson.

ROBINSON: Please.

NAGENDRAN: Brute force and Barbarism
Death Valley and Vandalism
Charred beams
Books in cinders
The soul of a people became a burning brand.
The father’s lifeblood ebbed away
When he saw his children in flames.
You decent men of learning
You’ve seen books burning
The land is filling
With Rivers of blood.
The beast of hatred is unleashed
and roams unchecked—
The vultures hover above blood-blackened towns and villages.
Rare books irreplaceable
ROBINSON: Thank you.

Would you like to comment on contemporary Sinhala fiction?

NAGENDRAN: Yes, I would.

In startling contrast to the kind of stories I've just described, there is the 1984 prize-winning Sinhala novel, a trilogy, based on fictional personal memoirs of the heroine who marries a young doctor when his first wife, who is her elder sister, dies.

ROBINSON: What are the titles of these three parts?

NAGENDRAN: "From Sky to Earth" is the first. "On Perilous Seas" the second. And "Still Waters".

I should say that I cannot read Sinhala and so depend on English translations.

ROBINSON: Even so, why do you use the expression "in startling contrast"?

NAGENDRAN: I find this novel rather trite. The reactions, in the mind of a middle-class, sheltered wife, mother of two children, to the predictable idiosyncracies of her typical Sri Lankan doctor husband.

ROBINSON: Your personal experience as the wife of a doctor may make you a keener reader of this novel than its average reader.

Anyway, what do you mean by "trite"?

NAGENDRAN: The novel is full of tiresome cliches... "like Pa-
tience on a monument”, “freedom of the male”, “contradictory creatures”, “I could no longer venture the hazard of voyaging on perilous seas”.

ROBINSON: That is specific enough.

NAGENDRAN: It is rather early Victorian, I think. And there are some inane conversations between the pious heroine and an English friend of her husband. The Englishman actually asks her, “Have you had any extra-marital experience?” She says, “NO!” Then he asks, “Have you ever desired it?” She hesitates, then says, “NO!”

This is supposed to be daring in our society of humbugs and panderers.

The heroine enjoys wallowing in self-pity and neurotic musings on female martyrdom.

Her unhappy revelations remind me of parts of The Gossamer Years, that Japanese autobiography of the 10th century--tinged with self-pity and jealousy and universally recognizable feminine emotions typical of Sri Lankan bourgeoisie.

I should know. I too am one of them.

ROBINSON: Attitudes toward self-pity may be more accepting of that feeling in Japan.

But you may continue along these lines, if you feel like it.

NAGENDRAN: Frankly, I find most Sri Lankan writers in English and Tamil (as I've just said, I read Sinhala writing in English translation), I find them bookish and boring. Where is the vitality and wit of a robust culture?

Warily and cautiously they write out their interminable emotional dissections. They avoid the butchery and the
burning that is taking place. They are evasive. Pretence. Not to mention pretentiousness. Ever escalating piety. The blatant distortion of historical facts.

ROBINSON: Please, continue.

NAGENDRAN: In my opinion, as I've said, most modern Tamil literature is rather boring here. Writers emphasize bourgeois values. The writing is often repetitious—sexual problems, frustrations. There is a lot of self-pity. To repeat, a lot of piety.

Shall I continue?

ROBINSON: Go ahead.

NAGENDRAN: Frankly, most Sri Lankan literature and art, Tamil and Sinhala, are mainly derived from Indian and European culture.

I might be crucified for saying this, but I find nothing original in the majority of modern Sri Lankan writings. It is a medley of Indian (North and South), plus East and West, I suppose, with borrowings from Russia, China, America, and nowadays from Japan, and, of course, Britain.

ROBINSON: In these terrible times in Sri Lanka, what in general is the present state of Tamil culture here?

NAGENDRAN: I fear that Tamil culture in Sri Lanka faces many obstacles now.

I admire the brave souls who still persevere and publish to a sadly dwindling number of readers.

In the dark caves of my ancestors I listen to sad voices, murmurs of despair.

Tamil culture is dying here.

Artists, dancers, musicians, writers—all except a handful—have fled to other countries. Australia, India, Canada—
ROBINSON: One of my Tamil writer friends, S. I. Francis, had to run away to Canada.

NAGENDRAN: --Malaysia. The U. K. The U. S. A.

One good thing is that these people have formed cultural associations abroad.

ROBINSON: What about writers' associations in Sri Lanka?

NAGENDRAN: In Colombo, anyway, the writers all know one another, but I hardly associate with most of them.

ROBINSON: Which writers do you associate with?

NAGENDRAN: I know Mrs. Punyakante Wijenaike and Mrs. Anne Ranansinghe, and James Goonewardene and Rajiva Wijesinghe. I know them very well. And there are Professors Ashley Halpe and H. A. I. Goonetileke.

ROBINSON: I met Dr. Halpe one time at Harry Pieris's studio and I have subscribed to Navasilu. I've read stories by Mrs. Wijenaike and by Goonewardene and by Mrs. Ranasinghe, and also some of her poems.

And I have just read your poem, "Remembering Tambimuttu". In New Ceylon Writing 5. Yasmine Gooneratne is doing a fine job there. As a young man I used to read Tambimuttu's Poetry London. As your poem says, "each year he published / struggling poets, / unknown, obscure". Until a few years ago, though, I did not know he was a Sri Lankan Tamil. I still remember photographs of what your poem calls "his lion-maned, /fine-boned head, /exquisite silvered skull". Your poem also calls him "a romantic rebel".

May I say that you yourself seem to be a romantic rebel?

By the way, I should have asked you this earlier.
Do you write more in Tamil or more in English?

NAGENDRAN: I have always found it easier to write in the alien tongue, English, my foster mother.

ROBINSON: Then, do you do much translation of Tamil literature--that is, into English?

NAGENDRAN: I have done many translations of Tamil poems, including ancient ones.

ROBINSON: How about an example?

NAGENDRAN: Here is a poem by an anonymous Tamil poetess in the Aka Nanooru, from the 2nd century A.D. "Aka Nanooru" means "Personal Poems". The title of this particular poem is "To My Husband".

Like the mango tree you sheltered me...
I was the seed enclosed in the rich flesh of your love.
Cherished and protected, I took root and bloomed.
When I shivered in the long North Wind,
You gave me warmth, bright as the Sun God.
Now you neglect me,
Spending your time in the harlot's house.
I await your return,
Like a woman with her waterpot beside the dried-up well
Waiting for rain.
The cobra whispers with his mate...
The stars remain incandescent and constant in space...
The vultures gather and hover in the distance...
Then I shall die unmourned.

ROBINSON: Would you briefly describe Aka Nanooru?

NAGENDRAN: Aka Nanooru contains 400 personal poems. They deal mostly with Love and allied themes--Parting, Joy, Yearning, Reunion, Jealousy.

There is also the Pura Nanooru. It has 400 poems,
too, but on heroic and national themes.

"Aka" means "Inner", so "personal", and "Pura" means "Outer".

ROBINSON: Have you translated other Tamil poems by women or about women?

NAGENDRAN: Yes, of course.

For example, here is a different kind of poem from Puraporulvenpamalai--

ROBINSON: Excuse me, but would you translate that long name?

NAGENDRAN: The name means Garland of Poetry on Heroic Themes. It is from about 1000 A.D. This is Tamil Heroic Poetry that celebrates the courage of ancient Tamil warriors.

In this poem, a proud woman of ancient lineage speaks.

My father fought valiantly
and over him now stands a Hero-stone
My husband unflinchingly stood
and sustained many sword wounds
in blood-stained battle
until he fell
fighting to the end.
My brothers bravely attacked the enemy
at the front line
till they were cut down.
Now my only son,
who fought like a lion cub,
lies in a pool of blood,
pierced by daggers,
fallen like a porcupine.

ROBINSON: What are some of the main themes in old Tamil writing in Sri Lanka?

Traditional Tamil literature has many important themes. Austerity. Chastity. Love. Courage. Celebration. Desolation. Harmony. Patience. There are themes dealing with the distress of women, martial reknown, banquets for bards, refusal of proud clans to give their maidens to upstart rulers.

ROBINSON: Since you are a painter as well as a poet, how about commenting in general about the visual arts in Sri Lanka?

NAGENDRAN: Most of the contemporary painting and sculpture of the human form instantly bring to mind Southern Indian temples, Jain culture, and Khajuraho's erotic sculptured temples in Central India. Also, the famous frescoes of Ajanta and Ellora. And the Elephanta caves of Western India.

Up to a hundred years ago—even up to forty years ago—we had French and British imitators in Sri Lanka. Now we have stereotyped temple paintings and infantile "avant garde" drawings.

ROBINSON: Have you written about the visual arts in Sri Lanka?

NAGENDRAN: Yes, I have.

Do you know George Keyt?

ROBINSON: I have seen some of his paintings at the studio of Harry Pieris.

NAGENDRAN: Harry Pieris is another grand old man in local art circles. He and Donald Ramanayeka, who is now the Curator
of the National Art Gallery, encouraged me to paint for exhibitions.

Well, George Keyt was 84 recently, and for Keyt's 80th birthday I wrote a poem called "Keyt: Retrospective Art Exhibition".

Master painter, poet, scholar...
Lover of life and people
of this holy isle,
meeting place and
ash-he p of many cultures, many races.
Fair Kandyan brides in lambent light;
Tamil women glowing dark as night.
Priest-kings, gods, acolytes,
Sages, courtesans and farmers,
Fisher-folk and musicians.
Serene monks in contemplation.
Frescoes full of rounded forms...
Beauty sacred and profane
with splendid nudes recumbent-
Innocent, bright, opulent.
We pause--and breathe in tranquil air,
seeing the aura of the Lord himself:
Compassionate Buddha
tending some neglected monk,
a sage deserted by his fellow men.
Now we stand enchanted in a maze
of dancers male and female...
Sinuous limbs and supple torsos
Weaving, swirling in a haze,
As Veenas echo sadness
and the vibrant fleeting happiness in life.
The figures move and merge
in pulsing music
and pure melody...
Is it the dancer or the dance
Imprisoned in ethereal trance?

ROBINSON: Forgive me for interrupting you, but...
NAGENDRAN: I understand.
ROBINSON: Since you have also done a lot of writing for English-language newspapers in Sri Lanka, how about also saying something about journalism or journalists here?
NAGENDRAN: All right.
Have you ever heard of C. Velupillai?
ROBINSON: Yes, but only by name.
NAGENDRAN: He was a famous Sri Lankan Tamil journalist. He was an authentic poet, too. He died recently. He was from the hills of Nuwara Eliya.
ROBINSON: I've been there. What kind of themes did Velupillai write about?
NAGENDRAN: He wrote mostly about the lives of tea-pluckers and estate workers—the Tamils all over the hill country. Their sufferings. The injustice done to them. He was one of them who rose through education.
ROBINSON: You used to write frequently for The Independent, I understand. R. L. Michael's paper.
NAGENDRAN: Yes, from 1977, when The Independent began, until 1980, when it stopped. My articles and poems were published there every week.
ROBINSON: What kind of articles did you write for The Independent?
NAGENDRAN: To answer that broadly, let me just tell you only a few of the titles (I wrote over 100 articles), and they will
give you an idea of the themes I dealt with.

"Shakespeare and Ceylon English" was one. Another one on language--language and politics--was "Trilingualism: High Road to Unity".

Other political articles were "Tamils", "Meritocracy or Mediocrity", "Who Guards the Guardians of the Law?", "Exposure to Barbarism"...

ROBINSON: Thank you. Let me ask you another question. What happened to R. L. Michael after The Independent stopped publication?

NAGENDRAN: Michael had been editor of the Daily Mirror before he started The Independent. As you know, the Mirror was also shut down recently by the Sri Lankan government.

In his youth, Michael was a bold, outspoken journalist. He began publishing The Independent as a crusading newspaper.

At the beginning of 1980 he was advised to close The Independent down. As you know, censorship is very strict here.

ROBINSON: What is Michael doing now?

NAGENDRAN: He has grown more mellow. He is no longer a firebrand. He writes harmless homilies and bland reports on current affairs. He uses the name "Spectator" and writes in state-owned newspapers.

ROBINSON: Who do you consider the most important journalist in Sri Lanka these days?

NAGENDRAN: In my opinion, Mervyn de Silva, editor of Lanka Guardian is the outstanding Sri Lankan journalist today. He's witty and impartial and incisive. He writes with authority on
ROBINSON: I used to read the Guardian. I still see some of his pieces from time to time in Far East Economic Review.

NAGENDRAN: He uses the penname "Kautilya" here. Every Sunday Island carries his caustic observations.

ROBINSON: Are there other local journalists that you want to mention briefly?

NAGENDRAN: S. P. Amarasingam is the founder and editor of the Lanka Tribune. He is known internationally. He is a Tamil from Jaffna. He is a lawyer. A scholar. A liberal. He has edited the Tribune for more than twenty-five years. May I add that he has published many of my poems?

Another fine sincere writer is Lucien Rajakarunanayake, who is without bias or prejudice.

Many of the other Sri Lankan journalists, with a few exceptions, do not impress me at all. Their styles of writing are second- or third-hand. They do a lot of mutual backslapping.

ROBINSON: I would like to ask you at least one more question. Many Sri Lankan writers are now living abroad. Have you ever thought of doing that?

NAGENDRAN: Yes, I have.

A few years ago, Amal Ghose, the Director of the Tagore Institute of Creative Writing in Madras, offered me a job as a proofreader there. He publishes many books. I had pointed out many printer's errors in one.

Ghose came to Colombo to see us, but my husband told him it was out of the question for me to go to Madras.
ROBINSON: How did you feel about that?

NAGENDRAN: If I had taken the job, I would have met international writers and even published my own poetry with my own original illustrations.

Ghose also wanted me to go along with some Indian writers to a 1981 conference in San Francisco.

I suppose I never had the guts to go on my own.

Years of obedience to father, brothers, husband, in the Hindu environment--Duty, Bhagavad Gita, and all that--conquered all else.

Do you know the Tamil proverb "Kanavany Kan-kanda Theivam"?

ROBINSON: You'd better translate it for me.

NAGENDRAN: "Husband is the visible god".

ROBINSON: Proverbs and sayings usually balance each other out.

NAGENDRAN: In this case, there is another Tamil proverb that is complementary: "The Hindu Mother is on a pedestal. She is sacred".

ROBINSON: Is there a final comment that you would like to make?

NAGENDRAN: Thank you, there is.

I would like to say something about what one of my poems calls "The Year of Wrath" in this country.

Politicians and priests here are inciting barbarous tribal warfare.

Sri Lankan is burning in blood lust.

Parts of the country are becoming like Lebanon.

In my poem I say that the north and eastern are-
as of Sri Lanka are "Now trampled, shattered, / By a colossal political beast-- / Its golden hide lined with money".

All of this hatred is expressed in the name of God, who, in any tongue, is the compassionate One, the caring One, and it is sanctioned by high priests, as my poem says, "seething with obscene desire for power and blood-stained glory".

ROBINSON: It's too bad that foreigners are learning about Sri Lanka in this way.

NAGENDRAN: In Europe recently my husband and I discovered that Sri Lanka has achieved a notoriety she never had in the good/bad old colonial days! In Britain we met many professionals and decent middle-class Sri Lankan Tamils whose homes and property were destroyed in the holocaust of 1983. They cannot ever return to their Motherland. They eke out an existence as best as they can...simply trying to survive. The Tamils of Sri Lanka are establishing themselves as exiles just as Indians, Chinese and East Europeans did long ago. History repeating itself ad nauseam.

ROBINSON: I hope you had some pleasant experiences in Europe.

NAGENDRAN: Yes, of course, we did. But let me say that having seen most of Europe's cultural monuments and palaces including the opulent, ostentatious vulgarity of Versailles, I wonder what it portrays?

Gold and silver plundered, from the Incas of Peru, from Mexico. Diamonds mined by African slaves. Venice gleaming with glass and marble quarried by Byzantine slaves...