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<td>引用</td>
<td>経営と経済, 68(1), pp.93-110; 1988</td>
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<td>1988-06</td>
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An Interview with Jegatheeswari Nagendran on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka*

Le Roy Robinson

Jegatheeswari Nagendran 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) and in Ghose’s anthologies, *Ocarina* and *Friendship Bridge*. In 1984 some of her poems appeared in *Creative Writing in Sri Lanka*, a new journal.

Jegatheeswari Nagendran is also “a self-taught” painter 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.

* This is the second part of an interview the first part of which appeared in *Keiei to Keizai* (October 1985).
ROBINSON: We have looked at part of your long poem in admiration of the painter George Keyt, the grand old man of modern Sri Lankan painters. Would you like to comment briefly on other painters in Sri Lanka?

NAGENDRAN: You mentioned visiting the studio of Harry Pieris where you saw some of Keyt’s paintings. Pieris was among the 43 Group, among the founders. He’s another grand old man in artistic circles here. He is mainly a portrait painter. His landscapes are imitations of Monet, Cezanne and Corot. Unconscious imitations, I should say. There’s nothing wrong in imitating the great old masters consciously or unconsciously. There is nothing new under the sun! Even the airplane and remote-controlled missiles and laser weapons figure in Hindu mythology in the Mahabharata and Ramayana. I once did my own “Pointillistic Deity” painting exhibited in 1980 after seeing the paintings of Seurat.

Richard Gabriel, also one of the old 43 Group, paints vibrant and virile animals — bulls, buffaloes — and also men taming them.

I’ve already mentioned Donald Ramanayeka, the former Curator of our National Gallery. Also one of the 43 Group, he is a famous landscape painter. Long ago he told me that he was a dedicated disciple of the renowned Russian painter, Sofronoff.

ROBINSON: If I may say so, the National Gallery seems to be in a condition of neglect.

NAGENDRAN: Ramanayeka was not to be blamed for the National Gallery’s deterioration. And he restored the ancient crumbling paintings of the 19th century that are of historical value. There is political interference. Intrigues by stooges and favorites in cultural and artistic circles. Political appointments. The usual skulduggery.
Enough to disillusion any self-respecting artist, so he left. To continue, Tilake Abeyssinghe paints human figures, nudes and compositions, and is also a very skillful sculptor. Stanley Kirinde's art is lyrical, pretty. His nudes in the river, ponds, carrying waterpots, among trees, remind me of Gaughin's work. G. Sarath is a gifted poor young man from a remote village who has emerged as an individualistic symbolist who does Sri Lankan-type triptych and diptych paintings to convey religious and mythical themes in impressionistic style. Sarath Surasena is another painter and sculptor. He does lots of stage decor for Sinhala dramas.

ROBINSON: Would you mind describing the Khajuraho temples in Central India that you mentioned before?

NAGENDRAN: These are Hindu temples carved and sculpted out of sandstone in Madhya Pradesh. They are dedicated to Siva and Vishnu, the chief Hindu deities. Eighty five temples were built there by Hindu kings in the period 950 to 1050 A. D. But only twenty remain intact now. The rest are in ruins. Erotic figures are richly carved on the outside and inside walls up to the tall gopurams, steeples, myriad nudes entwined and embracing in a hundred different attitudes and positions.

ROBINSON: Sounds like the Kama Sutra.

NAGENDRAN: If you are surprised that there are erotic sculptures in ancient Hindu temples, you should know that Hinduism is not just a religion. It is a kind of cosmic phenomenon embracing everything in the universe. Sacred and profane love. Austerity. Asceticism. Human desires and affections. Hatred and vengeance. Good and evil. All are given a place in the vast arena of Hinduism.

Hinduism is like the process of evolution. It is not an organization like Islam or Christianity. It welcomes and accepts the wicked
and the pure in heart to find solace within the tolerance and infinite variety of living beings, of dogmas and rituals. Hinduism caters to every type of individual. In India there are more than a hundred Hindu sects. Imagine a stadium with millions of tiers. The lowest rungs are for the ignorant, crude, illiterate ones who have to learn from experience and go on climbing to the very top. Hindu philosophy springs from the Vedas of the ancient mystics who dwelt on the Himalayas many thousands of years ago. So, still better, imagine a high mountain where Vedanta, the fountainhead of pure Hindu philosophy of which Buddhism is an offshoot, is on the highest peak, Mount Kailas. The common crowd of sensual pleasure seekers remain far below on the foothills and in the plains. There is no heaven or hell in Hinduism. We suffer the consequences of our own actions in this birth and in future reincarnations.

ROBINSON: Is there any particularly important Hindu temple in Sri Lanka?

NAGENDRAN: The most ancient Hindu shrine is in Southern Sri Lanka. The Temple of the Tamil god Kartikeya, also known as Katirkaman, Skantha Kumaran, son of mighty Siva, creator and destroyer. Kartikeya is worshipped by Hindus and Buddhists and others too. In the face of human betrayal, to millions of self-sacrificing devotees, the god still remains the conqueror of evil, human wickedness. This shrine in the forest in the southern jungle has now been taken over by the State. Unter the Sinhalised name of Kataragama.

ROBINSON: What are some of the other famous Hindu temples in Sri Lanka?

NAGENDRAN: To name only a few, Tiruketheeswaran, Koneswaran, Nallur, Tirukovil, Muneeswaran, Sellasannathi. Sellasannathi, in Point Pedro, in the North, dates from the third century B. C. There
are many ruined temples all around the coast of Sri Lanka — the Portuguese were ruthless destroyers of Hindu and Buddhist temples. In the Northern Peninsula many old sacred shrines can be found, Dhurga Devi in Tellipalai, Sivan Temple on the coast of Keerimalai — that means Mongoose Hill — near Kankesanturai, a harbor town. Koneswaran is on a tall rock in Trincomalee; it's another ancient Hindu shrine destroyed by the Portuguese and later restored. Nallur Temple was built by one of the Tamil kings from South India nearly 1,000 years ago; it was also destroyed by the Portuguese, then rebuilt, then damaged by the Army in 1981.

ROBINSON: “Mongoose Hill” reminds me your poem “The Year of Wrath” includes many Tamil place names. Would you translate these names into English?

NAGENDRAN: These Tamil place names are all a thousand years old or more. Jaffna or Yaalpaanam is Land of the Bard and the Harp. Historic seaports with ancient temples named in “Wrath” are: Kankesanturai, Port of Kankesa, a Hindu god; Karainagar, City on the Coast; Valvettiturai, Velvet Harbor — this was a smuggler’s paradise from time immemorial, gold, velvet, spices; Mannar is Sandy Lake or River; Mullaitivu, Island of shrubs. As the poem says, all these places are now becoming like Lebanon. Trincomalee is tri-coned hill. Batticaloa is Muddy Marsh. Kalkudah Bay is Rocky Bay or Cove; Kal is stone or rock, Kudah is bay or inlet or cove. Passekudah, Mossy Bay; it has soft sand, white and washed clean by the waves; robed in seaweed. Mantivu is Island of Deer. There is a leper colony there founded by British missionaries. Many years ago my husband and I visited there. We went by boat with bishops and nuns. Kalmunai, Rocky Point, is twenty five miles south of Batticaloa. We lived there between 1955 and 1961.
"The Year of Wrath" was about the destruction of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981. It was rebuilt with public funds (we all contributed). Then it was bombed and destroyed again. Many leading colleges more than a hundred years old are in danger of being destroyed. Cultural genocide. The largest and most important teaching hospital in the North was recently damaged by aerial bombing.

ROBINSON: I know you have strong interests in ancient Indian culture and history, and I wonder if you know anything about Ayurvedic medicine, herbal medicine, which is often mentioned to me in Sri Lanka.

NAGENDRAN: As a matter of fact, I am very much interested in Ayurveda. I am fairly knowledgeable about Ayurveda. No boast, only a fact. My maternal great grandfather was an Ayurvedic physician. I am doing my own research into ancient medicine and surgery. It's a vast and fascinating field of study.


NAGENDRAN: The people of Sri Lanka, Sinhalese and Tamils, have always used Ayurvedic medicine and treatment. Only when they are desperate do they go to Western doctors. There are now fifty state-owned Ayurvedic hospitals in Sri Lanka.

Ayurveda was brought here by sages and practitioners 2500 years ago, but it is still a living science, the art of prolonging life. There is a centuries old College of Ayurveda here. There is a Minister for Ayurveda, W. G. Loku Bandara, who is M. P. for Haputale. There are many practicing successful famous Ayurvedic physicians, both male and female, here. Dr. G. W. Godakumbura and Dr. Seela Fernando, to name two. Educated scholarly Hindu and Buddhist priests are well-versed in Ayurveda.
ROBINSON: To practice Ayurveda must one have a special license?
NAGENDRAN: Yes, but there are loopholes! And many quacks fatten on gullible villagers. But genuine ones do it for a nominal fee.

ROBINSON: Can you say something about the economics of Ayurveda in Sri Lanka?
NAGENDRAN: Although there are private herbariums, the State controls most of the medicinal herb gardens and plantations. In ancient times the priests and monks had their own medicinal herb gardens in the temple precincts, and this is true in most villages even now. Payment was made in kind and in costly gifts by the affluent in earlier times. The poor were tended by genuine priestly doctors and physician–monks. Now the set-up is on a well-organized commercial scale. There are now about fifty Ayurvedic hospitals. They are definitely cheaper than private western medical hospitals in Sri Lanka. Many learned old Buddhist priests give herbal oil and pattu (poultice) treatment for nominal rates, even in Colombo.

ROBINSON: How do you translate Ayurveda? How did it get started? How does it work?
NAGENDRAN: Ayur is life and Veda is wisdom, so the wisdom of life. The basis of Ayurveda is the discipline of balanced healthy diet and moderation in food and drink. Plus cleanliness. Ayurveda teaches methods of preserving and maintaining one's health to a ripe old age. Prevention of disease is one of the first ideals. Healing is done with herbal tonics, lotions, and concoctions of more than a thousand varieties.

ROBINSON: You said you were doing research into Ayurveda. What is its history?
NAGENDRAN: The sage of Ayurveda was Atreya. He lived in India around 1500 B. C. He began the whole procedure. I am doing
research in the teachings of Charaka and Susruta, teachings developed sometime between 1000 B.C and 300 B.C. In the treatise written by Charaka, a Physician, more than 500 herbs are mentioned. Charaka used snake root to treat snake bite and hypertension and mental disorders.

Susruta was a Hindu surgeon of around 600 B.C. Using soma, an herbal alcoholic drink to relieve the pain of surgery, he performed amputations and lobotomies and plastic surgery. In those ancient days, ears and noses and fingers were cut off as punishment. Susruta used to replace them with astonishing skill. Amazing, isn't it? But true.

ROBINSON: We cannot discuss 500 herbs, but why don't you give us at least a few details about which ones are used for which purposes in Sri Lanka? For example, many foreign tourists here come down with intestinal disturbances. What do you recommend for them?

NAGENDRAN: In cases of diarrhea or dysentery, Woodfordia Floribunda (Myla flower) is used as an herbal tea. Also for flatulence. There are many herbs used in Sri Lanka for stomach ailments. Mint (*Pudina* in Tamil) is ground into a paste and eaten as a preventive and curative treatment for flatulence and dyspepsia. One teaspoon each of cumin seed, dill seed, and fennel seed and garlic boiled in one cup of water may be taken for diarrhea.

ROBINSON: What do you use for serious illnesses?

NAGENDRAN: For skin diseases, the bark of Michelrea, Champaka is used as a tincture. To cure chest and heart ailments, we use coriander and ginger and bee's honey, boiled with water to form a syrup tonic. It's used for indigestion and fever too.

As a remedy for all kinds of worm infestation in children and adults, the tree Erythrina Indica, which is held sacred by Hindus
and is used in weddings and religious ceremonies, provides leaves that are crushed to produce a green juice that is mixed with bee’s honey. This tree is known as *Erabadu* in Sinhala and as *Mull-Murukku* in Tamil. It grows all over Sri Lanka. It bears brilliant vermillion flowers, after the leaves fall.

In the case of mild wounds, Neem, Margosa bark, is boiled and the water is used as an antiseptic solution for wounds as well as after childbirth. Other herbal oils are used effectively in dislocations, fractures, arthritis. The Margosa is a beautiful ornamental tree with slim serrated leaves, tiny white flowers, and inch-long oval green fruit. A bitter-tasting oil extracted from the seeds is used extensively in Ayurvedic medicine for throat and stomach infections and for skin diseases. I’ve grown one in my garden. The aroma of the leaves is said to purify the air. Every Jaffna home has at least one Neem tree, one mango tree, and a banana grove in the compound.

For influenza, fresh or dried Adathoda Vasica flowers are boiled and poured as tea, with sugar candy. Also with bee’s honey.

For catarrh in children, Avuda leaves, Rutagraceolens, are crushed and mixed with gingelly (sesame), oil, and applied on the head and chest. This herb grows in our hill country. It is also known as a cure for certain mental disorders, muscular cramps, and varicose veins. It is a potent herb and is taken in very small amounts after being boiled or infused as tea. It’s also given as a remedy for rheumatism, high blood pressure, and sciatica.

ROBINSON: Was your husband interested in Ayurvedic medicine?
NAGENDRAN: My husband was not interested in Ayurveda. He was a Western-oriented medical man.

ROBINSON: Would you like to say something about your husband?
NAGENDRAN: My husband came from a sturdy long-lived family. He
was born in 1915. His mother lived to 92. His brother, a lawyer, is 80. My husband was 70. He was ill but never sickly or bedridden. He had gone to work as usual — he was doing light medical work at Glass House Medical and Diagnostic Laboratories. He died suddenly. Silently and peacefully in his sleep. He was the sun of my existence, with whom I had spent the better part of my life. How certain Death can be, never losing its way, late or early, always there when least expected. As I told you earlier, my husband and I had a long and happy marriage. The void is unimaginable because of our friendship, affection, and companionship. My children console me. I have two very young grandsons.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about your husband’s career in medicine?

NAGENDRAN: When we married in 1947, he was a brilliant and very handsome young doctor. In 1936 while studying at Ceylon Medical College he had been awarded the Myloplulle Silver Medal for Materia Medica. In 1938 he was awarded the Matthew Gold Medal for Forensic Medicine. But he never specialized. My husband was a man of integrity. He was terribly saddened by all the miserable happenings in his beloved Motherland. Now his ashes are scattered over the island home he never wished to leave. “Sri Lanka is good enough for me — I shall live and die in my own home,” he used to say. It happened exactly as he wished.

ROBINSON: Perhaps this is not the place to say so, but I have read a poem of yours published in the Sunday Times a few years ago about husbands. It was a humorous poem, mostly in rhyming couplets.

NAGENDRAN: You mean “Familiarity”:

Who is the husband true to type
Who never at his wife doth gripe?
With taunting smile and mocking stare
He'll criticize her knobs of hair!
And if she wears old jeans and shirt,
He'll say: "What happened to your skirt?"…

ROBINSON: Along these lines, I get the impression that for middle class women the general situation in Sri Lanka is promising.

NAGENDRAN: Yes, except for alcoholic sadistic husbands, the middle class women in Sri Lanka have nothing to complain about. They are generally educated and independent now. Compared to women in some parts of India, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Iran, Iraq and most Arab countries, the women of Sri Lanka have many rights and privileges. But rich playboys from all communities who are bored with their wives sometimes indulge in "wine, women and song" for excitement sometimes snowballing into sadism.

Among the low income groups the husbands sometimes escape from drab underpaid jobs into a world of drink, a gradual Descent into Avernos. A hell on earth for the unfortunate wives and mothers. But, even working class women are being assisted by various government projects like village industries, house building, cottage crafts, village re-awakening. The women’s Seva Vanitha movement is in the forefront of these activities.

Sri Lanka can proudly boast of all her women diplomats, medical doctors, surgeons, scientists, lawyers, and professors and teachers. There are women in the police and security forces, too, which are mainly male-dominated. Of course, many women are quite content to play second fiddle to their husbands as long as they, the husbands, are kind and considerate. The wives are home-loving and hard-working.

ROBINSON: That reminds me of a letter you wrote some time back to
Kartika in the *Sunday Times*. (Who is Kartika, by the way?) You said you knew some housewives in Jaffna and Colombo who work at home from five a. m. to ten p. m. without any thought of pay, pensions, fringe benefits, free periods, or even vacations. But they are happy, you say.

NAGENDRAN: Kartika was the pseudonym of R. Sivanayagam, a former *Sunday Times* journalist who later became editor of the Jaffna-based *Saturday Review* now being edited by his friend and colleague Gamini Navaratne.

Yes, I gave an account of a hardworking housewife in a village not far from Jaffna. She is an educated, middle-class woman, the mother of four children all attending school. Her husband is a government worker. Her aged parents live with the family in the ancestral home. She has no servants. The days of family retainers are gone. She is up at five a. m. She makes breakfast — tea, coffee, scrambled eggs, *pittu* or *roti*, and, most important, onions and chillie sambol — or her husband would throw a tantrum. After that, she milks the cow. She feeds the cow and the goats and dozens of hens and chickens. She tends the vegetable garden. She’s fully occupied. She has neither time nor inclination for gossip or bargain hunting. She does not speak of her selfless sacrifice.

ROBINSON: And that reminds me of Basil Fernando’s poem “Remembering Mother”: the mother, from a working class background, a washerwoman, did not speak of her selfless sacrifice, either.

NAGENDRAN: Speaking of Basil Fernando, the views he has expressed to you are abrasive and honest, thought-provoking, unlike those of the majority here. There are so many others like him, I know, among the Sinhalese, Tamils, Burghers, English, Muslims, who cannot influence the self-seekers and opportunists who have ruined
and pillaged our helpless Motherland. Our people are manacled by our fear of harassment. Basil Fernando is one of the real people of Sri Lanka — the literate mass of intelligentsia — be they Sinhala or Tamil. That's not important. Not the hot-house blooms of ambitious, affected hangers-on who flourish in Colombo by entertaining all kinds of foreign visitors ranging from ambassadors to journalists and dilettantes in their homes and hotels. I do not respect such wire-pullers.

ROBINSON: To go back, you have spoken about women content to play second fiddle to husbands who are kind and considerate. What if a husband is neither? You mentioned alcoholic and sadistic husbands, in fact.

NAGENDRAN: No woman with fair intelligence, education and spirit would or should tolerate cruelty, mental or physical, or disloyalty, or drunken bouts, infidelity, irresponsibility in family affairs. In all these matters, Sri Lankan women can appeal to special courts. But the adverse publicity and social stigma deter many who do not possess initiative and guts, and, of course, money.

ROBINSON: Are there many divorces among middle class couples?

NAGENDRAN: There are quite a few divorces now among the younger generation. Tension, financial problems, extra-marital affairs are the chief causes. Also mental illness.

ROBINSON: Aside from the courts, are there governmental agencies that help women in distress?

NAGENDRAN: I've already mentioned the Seva Vanitha Movement. It provides training for various types of employment to underprivileged women. In deserving cases, it provides loans. It pinpoints problems of women without homes or husbands. Widows and orphans, destitute and disabled women, are now given various benefits and
they are encouraged to earn their own living.

ROBINSON: And non-governmental women's organizations?

NAGENDRAN: There is the Lanka Mahila Samithi, the Ceylon Women's Union. It's dominated by Sinhalese now but was in fact founded by a Canadian woman medical doctor married to a Tamil doctor of philosophy. This organization is helping to eradicate poverty in remote villages. Rural women nearly all over the island, except the troubled places, are given training in cottage crafts: matweaving, basket-making, coir fibre rug-making, lace crochet work, textile weaving, pottery, dress making, agriculture. Some women are being trained as masons and they assist in house building.

There's the Saiva Mangayar Kalagam, the Hindu Women's Association. It provides free education for orphans and girls from poor families. General education in English and Tamil Religious education. Cultural education in Tamil music and dance. It's the longest surviving women's association here, with an uninterrupted record of service since 1904. My mother, like most Tamil women here, was a life member. Mary Irwin founded it too, along with a girl's school?

ROBINSON: Mary Irwin?

NAGENDRAN: The woman doctor from Canada that I mentioned. From Ontario. She married S. C. K. Rutnam. They had met in New York. He taught her Tamil. She offered her medical services to the people of Jaffna, Rutnam's home town. That was in colonial times. Mary Rutnam was the pioneer of the Ceylon Women's Union. She came to Sri Lanka in 1896 as a gynecologist at the American Mission Hospital at Manipay, where my brothers and sisters and I were born. Much later, of course! In the 1920s and 1930s. She published books on health and hygiene and manuals on home craft. In Tamil, Sinhala,
and English. She wanted to help women to become better wives and mothers. Her impact on rural women was tremendous. Once she had to work in place of the ailing British doctor at Lady Havelock Hospital here in Colombo, and all of the Muslim women flocked to her. *Purdah* was very strictly observed then. When the British doctor did not return, Dr. Mary Rutnam applied for the post. But the government rejected her for a permanent post because her medical degree was Canadian not British! So she became a private practitioner. Her fame spread all over the island. She soon became a national figure in those bad old British colonial days. She was a genuine missionary angel. The Tamil women of Colombo loved Mary Rutnam and respected her so much that they formed their own association with her help, the Saiva Mangayar Kalagam. After that, she was a leading figure, the leading figure, in many famous women’s organizations. In 1904 the Ceylon Women's Union, to improve the status of women. The Sinhala branch began at Moratuwa in 1905. She started the Mothers Union in 1910. In 1912 she helped organize Trinity College's Social Service League. In 1914, the Ceylon Social Service League. She helped to establish the Mallika Home for Destitute Women and Children in 1920. The Women's International Club was founded by her in 1922 and is still flourishing. In 1924 she organized the first Social Workers’ Conference in Ceylon. In 1927, the Women's Franchise Union. Most of these women’s organizations are still in existence. In short, Dr. Mary Rutnam, who was a wife and mother, roused our women here from political apathy. She was the first private citizen in Asia to be awarded the Ramon Magsaysay Award. She said: “Do not neglect rural women. They will be the leaders of the future.”

ROBINSON: Are there other prominent women in social service you would
like to mention?

NAGENDRAN: Mrs. Laurel Casinader was one. She died recently in England. She was a Tamil woman from Colombo. She belonged to a wealthy family. Most Colombo women from wealthy families prefer to lead lives of luxury and dalliance and being members of prestigious associations. Mrs. Casinader was different. She was a dedicated social worker from the early 1940s. She was one of the first women — I’m almost sure she was the first — to graduate from Ceylon University in the 1930s. She had a degree in economics. She worked hard to improve the status of Ceylonese women. She became president of the Sri Lanka Women’s Association in the U.K. When she was living in Sri Lanka, she was very active in the All Ceylon Women’s Conference. She also held office as vice president of the International Alliance of Women in 1982. She put Sri Lanka on the world map, through her international contacts. She was one of the first Sri Lankan women to become well-known outside Sri Lanka, in the West, as a delegate to women’s conferences abroad.

ROBINSON: Changing the subject again, you’ve already said something about male journalists in Sri Lanka, but what about women journalists?

NAGENDRAN: Most of the women in journalism in Sri Lanka do not impress me at all, being the usual journalistic types. There is really nothing outstanding or genuinely emotionally moving or wittily analytical in their style or content.

ROBINSON: What about the Tamil woman, story writer and journalist, Rita Sebastian?

NAGENDRAN: Rita Sebastian — she’s a Roman Catholic, by the way — gained fame on the *Times* as the only female editor in Sri Lanka. But the *Times* closed down. Now she is working with the
Lake House Group of newspapers. She’s intelligent and sensitive. An average writer of English prose. She has published a collection of predictable insipid, bland, wistful short stories. She’s quite sensible. And tame, with an eye on the censor. One story of hers gripped my attention, though: about a Tamil girl and a Sinhala boy — innocent, unsophisticated, torn apart by vicious hatred on both sides.

Another male journalist I’d like to mention is K.S. Sivakumar. He’s fluent in Tamil and Sinhala and English. He perseveres in efforts to bridge the gap between Sinhala and Tamil cultures. He often reviews and translates the works of Tamil writers in the Sunday Island. With diplomatic finesse.

ROBINSON: I think you wanted to say more about the Saturday Review in Jaffna.

NAGENDRAN: Yes, I’d like to. For I’ve made the happy discovery that since its former editor Sivanayagam went to Madras, after having appointed his friend Gamini Navaratne, a Sinhalese gentleman of the highest integrity, as editor of the Review, as I mentioned, more and more of the Sinhala intelligentsia are now reading the Review, which was dubbed “racist” when Sivanayagam, a Tamil, was editor. The Saturday Review gives facts, not opinions. Trenchant analysis of Sri Lankan politics. Outspoken letters that are not published elsewhere in Sri Lanka. More and more people are buying the journal because it gives accurate details of events in the North not to be found in other newspapers. Gamini Navaratne, the editor in chief, gets international support. He continues to appeal to the generosity of donors all over the world. By the way, he started the Saturday Review Refugee Relief Fund to assist all the homeless victims of terrorism and “crossfire.”

Along these lines, may I say this? We Sri Lankans are a hybrid
mixed people who have our ancient roots in India. The ancestors of all Sri Lankans originally lived in Southern India, mainly Kerala, Tamil Nadu, the Coromandel Coast. (Shades of Chera, Pandyan and Chola kingdoms!) This is a well-known historical and geographical fact. But now it's time we are Sri Lankans first, not divide ourselves into Sinhalese, Tamil, and Muslim, Burgher, what have you, which is causing us many problems.