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〈資 料〉

An Interview with K. S. Sivakumaran on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Kailayar Sellanainar Sivakumaran, a literary journalist, is Deputy Features Editor of *The Island*, an English language daily newspaper published by Upali Newspapers Ltd. in Colombo, Sri Lanka.

A Tamil Hindu, he was born in Batticaloa, the capital town of the Eastern Province on October 1, 1936.

He had his early education from 1947 to 1953 in Batticaloa at St. Michael's College, then managed by North American Jesuits. He then attended St. Joseph's College, Colombo, until 1958.

Sivakumaran began his career as a journalist in 1960 working for a trade journal, *Industry*, now defunct.

From 1961 to 1969 he was a translator of Tamil for the Local Government Service Commission.

In 1966 he was selected as a relief announcer in Tamil for the commercial service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

In April 1969 he joined the S. L. B. C. in a permanent capacity as a Tamil translator in the News Division. He was later appointed as an assistant editor and subsequently held the post of a Duty Editor of the S. L. B. C.'s Tamil News until October 1979.

In 1974 Sivakumaran published his *Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka*.

In 1979 he joined the United States Information Service, Colombo, handling work in English as an assistant to the Information Officer.

In 1980 he obtained his Bachelor of Arts from the University of

Peradeniya, where, as an external candidate, he majored in English, Tamil, and Western Classical Culture.

In 1982 Sivakumaran published *Sivakumaran Kathaihal*, a collection of his short stories in Tamil previously published in newspapers.

His *Eelaththu Tamil Navagal* (1956–1981), a collection of his reviews in Tamil on Sri Lankan Tamil novels, will soon be published.*

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ROBINSON: You started to discuss Tamil poetry before, but you were interrupted. Let's go back to poetry. Besides Eelavanan and Eelaganes, who are some of the other poets writing in Tamil here that you'd like to mention?

SIVAKUMARAN: I'd like to mention more than sixty names, because both traditional poetry and free verse in Tamil are flourishing in this country. There's M. Balakrishnan who recently published a collection of 28 poems in Tamil. *Nisabthamai Thoongurathean*. In English, *Why Slumber in Silence?* The poems in this book are more logical or rational than emotional. That is, his tone is restrained. But they have flashes of fine imagery. His metaphors are somewhat innovative as far as Tamil poetry goes. "Poems without the music of conjugal love" for one. He needs to distinguish between poetry and poetic lines. He should be encouraged.

Another young man writing poetry in Tamil is Cheran. His father was also a poet, a romantic poet in the tradition of Shelley. He was an administrator in the Batticaloa district. He's dead now. As for

* This is the second part of an interview the first part of which was published in *Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Nagasaki University, Humanities*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (January 1988).

Cheran, he's a graduate in science, but writes about politics. He expresses his hurt feelings over some of the events of recent times in a shrill voice protesting against racism in the name of nationalism. I myself cannot equate violence with genuine expression of protest, but his poems are beautifully written. He handles touchy incidents as truly felt experience. He writes under the nom de plume of Kaviarasan. A collection of his poems was recently published by *Vayal* (Field), a poetry quarterly, under the title *Irاندavathu Sooriya Udayam*. The Second Sunrise. A second volume of his poems is called *Yaman*, God of Death. Some of his poems are to be translated into Sinhala. Michigan University's Journal of South Asian Literature (Vol. 22, No. 1) carries English versions of some of these poems and others by other local poets.

Incidentally, or not so incidentally, to introduce local Tamil poetry, local Tamil literary culture in general, I have to remind you the days of pure art are gone. Whether we like it or not, politics has become inseparable from the arts. Anyway, poetry here is a vehicle to express the feelings of a younger generation caught up in an age of anxiety and agony.

Then, a third young poet I'd like to mention is Vasudevan. He's still a university student. The University of Jaffna. A book of his poems, *Ennilvilum Nan*, The I Falling in Me, came out a couple of years ago. He says there's a "Strained sigh of a human being" in his poems, and I agree. He's a poet of positive thinking, though. A recurrent symbol in most of his poems in this book is a tree with roots. In one poem he says "Defeat is a visiting card sent by success" — instead of throwing it away, look at it, the visiting card, carefully for the secret address of success. I'd also like to refer to Sillayoor Selvarajan. He writes poetry under the name of Thanthontri

Kavirayar. That means self-originated poet. He hasn't brought out a collection of his poems yet, but he recently represented Sri Lanka as a Tamil poet at a recent poetry convention organized by Bharat Bhavan in Bhopal, India. It was a meeting of 50 poets from 42 Asian nations. They all read their own poems in their own languages and in English translation.

ROBINSON: Would you comment on some of the young women writing poetry in Tamil these days in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, there are a number of young women, and some not so young, who are writing fiction in Tamil, but there are only a few writing poetry in Tamil. As a matter of fact, it was only quite recently that a collection of some of their poems was published. By the Women's Study Circle in Nallur, in Jaffna. The introduction to this book is by Ms. M. Chitrleka, a member of the Department of Tamil at the University of Jaffna who herself has authored a book in Tamil on contemporary Sri Lankan Tamil literature. She's an ardent advocate of women's liberation.

ROBINSON: Poetry aside, what does Chitrleka say about the situation of women in Sri Lanka in general?

SIVAKUMARAN: In the introduction to this book, *Sollatha Seithikal* (Unspoken Messages), she mainly accuses Tamil literary critics, mostly men, of not viewing the writings by Tamil women writers from the point of view of these writers. As for women in general, she points out there's a growing awareness among women of their social position, their roles in society. That is, women are questioning how society in Sri Lanka treats them as sex objects, child bearers, and cheap laborers. They are rejecting the idea that their fate should be determined by the mere fact that they are females. They are beginning to reject the male dominance that leads to their oppression. They

reject a patriarchal set up that determines value in art and culture.

ROBINSON: Who are some of the women poets whose poems are included in *Unspoken Messages* and what kinds of poems are they?

SIVAKUMARAN: Most of these women are relatively newcomers as poets. A. Shankari, S. Sivaramani, Sammarga, Selvi, Ranga, Mazura A. Majeed, Avvai, Premi, Renuka Navaratnam — they're new to me. Two others whose work is included in *Sollatha* I know: Maithrayi and Urvasi. As for the poems themselves, take A. Shankari's. In one poem the narrator objects that men, including her husband, treat her as a sex object, or only as a sex object. The narrator of another poem complains that when she grew up to be a big girl she lost all the freedom she enjoyed as a little girl; she says her womanhood is like a stone or a rock. In a third poem — Shankari has five in this collection — the narrator says she wants to touch and kiss her lover but can't because of the gap in attitudes between men and women.

ROBINSON: Are most of the poems in this book similar in theme?

SIVAKUMARAN: S. Sivaramani's three are. They're in the first person, too. In one poem, she says that women have not yet got their freedom. In another one she advises her women friends to stop waiting for lovers and stop paying attention to beautifying themselves. One of Sanmarga's poems is about the precarious situation of Tamil women in Jaffna, where the male population is being decimated, and it also laments women's lack of freedom. One of her other poems is the lament of a mother crying over the brutal death of her son in the streets. Ranga's poem is paradoxical. The narrator, "She", has been raped by an armed services man, a Sinhalese, and the whole world condemns her for losing her chastity, but she excuses her rapist for having behaved that way as an extension of the oppression of women. What she cannot excuse is that a married man

with two children, a Tamil man, has also robbed her of her chastity. She waits hopefully for some man with courage to take her as his wife. Renuka Navaratnam speaks about platonic love but says she's waiting to be bought like a product in the market. Mazura A. Majeed's poems have implications of male sadism.

ROBINSON: Majeed is a Muslim, I suppose by her name. Are there any male Muslims writing poetry in Tamil?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. One is M. A. Nuhuman. He's a Tamil speaking Muslim from Kalmunai in the eastern region. He has an M. A. in Linguistics and is a lecturer in Tamil at the University of Jaffna. He's co-authored a book in Tamil on 20th century Sri Lanka Tamil literature. Actually, he's recognized more as a literary critic here than a poet, but he's been writing poetry for over twenty years. He's nearly 40 years old. He also edited *Kavignan* (The Poet), a short-lived Tamil literary magazine. He's published personal poems, as he calls them, and political poems. The personal ones are romantic. Romantic in that he sings of the fertile soil of the eastern region in contrast to the hard soil of the northern region, and he writes love poems. He was also influenced by Mahakavi, that is, T. Roodramurthy whose son Cheran I mentioned before, and also by Neelavan, a poet from the Amparai district.

ROBINSON: What does Nuhuman say in his political poems?

SIVAKUMARAN: He praises Ho Chi Minh. He praises the virtues of Mao Tse Tung. He sings of the essence of the Communist Manifesto. He describes the constant struggle for emancipation. These were fashionable themes in the 1970s. He describes the barbaric destruction of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981 by the Sri Lanka armed forces. A reader may suspect the sincerity of feeling flowing from these poems themselves — in my opinion, the transference of

sustained poetical feeling is not satisfactorily attained — but they indicate that Nuhuman, like other Sri Lankan poets writing in Tamil, is conscious of the human predicament, whether private or public. These political poems were published under the title *Mazai Nathal Varum* (Rainy Days Will Come). They were published in Tamil Nadu. Two other books of his have been published in Tamil Nadu, but I haven't read them yet. One is *Thiranaivu Katturaihal* (Critical Essays) and the other, *Marxiyamum Thranaivum* (Marxism and Literary Criticism).

Incidentally, we have one poet here who is a Sri Lankan who writes in Tamil but whose mother tongue is Gujerati. He belongs to the Memon business community here. There are about 500 Memon families living in Sri Lanka. His real name is Razack Larcana, but he writes under the name of Memon Kavi. He's only 28 years old and published three volumes of what he calls poetry. What I mean by that is that, in my opinion, his *vers libre* is not as rich as genuine poetry. By "genuine" I mean poetry that has a freshness in approach and treatment, that has insight with feeling, and an element of surprise, even bewilderment, in dealing with a human predicament or social experience. All the same, Memon Kavi is imaginative and image-conscious. He's published three books: *Yuga Ragangal* (Melodies of the Age), *Hiroshimavin Herokal*, about Hiroshima, and, lately, *Eyanthira Sooriyam* (Mechanical Sun). This last received a lot of attention from younger critics of local Tamil poetry, but the older, more seasoned and more mature ones did not give it the same attention.

ROBINSON: The quality of his poetry, or whatever you call it, aside, what are his main themes?

SIVAKUMARAN: Look, I'm not dismissing him as a writer without potentialities, because he shows remarkable concern for social problems.

That in itself is a functional aspect of any good literature, even though social consciousness alone is not sufficient for aesthetic satisfaction. Anyway, Memon Kavi is basically a humanist and internationalist. He finds, however, that everything is becoming mechanical; even nature is becoming mechanical. In such an atmosphere human beings become alienated, and he is sorrowful about that, and angry. One nice thing about *Eyanthira Sooriyan*, which was published in Madras, is a long poem called "The Saga of Colombo". Memon Kavi describes scenes in various parts of the city: a boy calling for passengers from a moving mini bus; a man begging; a few twilight women; a few white collar workers; a vegetable vendor; a woman bead seller; a guide. It's a sardonic piece. In free verse. Memon Kavi — he figures in this piece himself — is the poet of the city.

ROBINSON: Your mentioning the destruction of the Jaffna Public Library reminded me of Jegatheeswari Nagendran's poem in English "The Burning of the Jaffna Public Library, June 1981": "Charred beams / Books in cinders / The soul of a people became a burning brand." I understand thousands of irreplaceable old books and manuscripts were destroyed. I suppose this terrible theme is a common one in recent Tamil writing.

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, as a matter of fact, there was a verse play, *Veriyattu*, performed in Jaffna last year. In English, Rampage. It was written by R. Murugaiyan. It uses a lot of songs, so you could even call it an opera. It's a symbolic piece. The play depicts the destruction of the Jaffna Public Library in symbolic terms. Yes, this was a terrible act. It was an onslaught on the culture of Sri Lankan Tamils. It was an onslaught on the intellectual heritage of mankind. As for *Veriyattu*, I didn't see the stage performance, but I've read it, and it

doesn't communicate any intense emotion. On the stage it might have come out better. Anyway, it was a success in Jaffna.

ROBINSON: Is Murugaiyan a well-known playwright ?

SIVAKUMARAN: He did other poetic dramas in the 1970s when local Tamil theatre was showing some progress. One of his plays was called *Kaduliyam* (Rigorous Imprisonment). It's a play symbolically professing a Marxist approach to overthrow an oppressive regime.

Murugaiyan is an Assistant Registrar at the University of Jaffna. He's written about ten books. He once wrote a book in collaboration with Dr. Kanagasabapathi Kailasapathi to whom I referred before. The book was *Kavithai Nayam* (Poetry Appreciation). He has an M. A. in Science and another one in Arts. He writes poetry and criticism. He also writes in English sometimes. He's compiled a book called *Mallikai Kavithaikal*, poems by 51 poets published in the magazine *Mallikai* I mentioned before.

ROBINSON: When you mentioned Murugaiyan uses a lot of songs in his verse play *Rampage*, I thought of music. What kind of music, Tamil music, is there in Sri Lanka ?

SIVAKUMARAN: There are all kinds — religious music, folk songs, lullabies, dance music, traditional music and modern music. As a matter of fact, the Music Unit of the Tamil Service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation recently brought out an LP album of traditional Tamil music in Sri Lanka. Two discs. Produced by Navarajakulam Muthukumarasamy. Some of the people I referred to before assisted her in selecting the music. Professor Subramaniam Vithiananthan, Professor Karthigesu Sivathamby, Dr. E. Balasundaram. Others. The music in this album is divided into music for prayer and worship, work songs, life cycle songs, theatre songs, dance songs, and instrumental music.

ROBINSON: I think I understand the other divisions, but what are life cycle songs ?

SIVAKUMARAN: The life cycle songs include lullabies and children's songs, love songs, wedding songs, and funeral songs. For example, Sayanthadamma is a song sung by a mother while rocking her child on her lap. When the child responds to the song with a smile, the tempo is increased. Akkandi or Kathaipaddu is a song sung by children. An Akkandi bird lays eggs — pearl-like white eggs that children like to play with — and the children ask the bird a question. The bird's answer shows its motherly concern for its offspring. Thiruman Unjal are songs sung at Hindu weddings. A Hindu wedding is usually held in the bride's house. The couple sit on a decorated swing. Close relations of the couple sit around the swing and rock the couple. This kind of song is sung while the swing is being rocked to reflect the glorious future of the wedded couple.

ROBINSON: I suppose the theatre songs are from the folk play tradition you went into before.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. Songs from Then-modi, Vada-modi, Annavi traditions, and from Natthu Koothu Christian folk dramas. For example, from a Then-modi play called *Nondi Nadagam* (The Drama of the Lame Rascal) there's a song of the gullible trader (chettiar) and his beautiful wife who were duped by the loveable rascal. From an Annavi or Koddakaik Koothu folk play there's a song called Poothathamby Nadagam. A Portuguese official Anthirasai sings that he'll take revenge on the wife of Poothathamby for insulting him. From an Annavi play, *Arichandran*, a song tells how Arichandran, a crematorium guard, vows to be honest. He reprimands a woman trying to burn a body stealthily without paying the cemetery fees. He doesn't realize the woman is his wife and the dead child his son.

ROBINSON: You said there were some work songs in this album. What kind?

SIVAKUMARAN: There's a song sung by boatmen or fishermen about the travails of traveling over the surging waves and the pleasure of getting back to land. There's a harvest song. There's a pounding song, a song about love and intimacy. It's sung by women while they're pounding rice with mortar and pestle.

ROBINSON: You also referred to instrumental music. What kind of instruments?

SIVAKUMARAN: Nathaswaram. It's similar to a clarinet. It's from the South Indian or Carnatic music tradition. It's played on all auspicious and ceremonial occasions. Its sound symbolizes a sense of cultural fullness. It's accompanied by a thavil, a kind of drum. The song in this album is played at wedding ceremonies. Thavil players sometimes engage in a musical duel that climaxes an entire performance. This is known as the Thavil Kachcheri. There's also Udukku music in the album. An udukku is a drum shaped like an hour glass. It's held in one hand and beaten by the other. It's used in the Mariamman cult. Mariamman is another form of the Mother Goddess, Shakthi. There's also Paraimelam drum music. This is the traditional drum of the Tamils. It's now played only in certain temples and at funerals. Flutes and violins are also used in some of the music in the album.

ROBINSON: Is the traditional music of the Tamils in Sri Lanka still widely performed?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, of course. In folk dramas, for example, as I've already noted. To make a long story short, there are two old traditions of traditional Tamil music in Sri Lanka, and both are still alive. When I say old, I mean several hundred years old. One is called the

Great Tradition and was developed around big temples patronized by urban people. The other is called the Little Tradition and it was developed around small temples patronized by rural people. Incidentally, wedding songs and work songs and lullabies and funeral songs came out of the Little Tradition. Yes, even today this is a living cultural reality in the villages in and around Jaffna.

ROBINSON: Unfortunately you can't go into more detail, because this sounds like a fine album. But who is Navarajakulam Muthukumarasamy, who produced it?

SIVAKUMARAN: She herself is a talented musician. She graduated in music from the University of Madras. In the late 1950s she was awarded the Gold Medal as the best vocalist in the Jaffna District Music Competition. In 1960 she was awarded the Sivasithamparam Memorial Cup as the best singer in a competition sponsored by the Northern Province Teachers Association. She joined the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation in 1970. Now she's the music co-ordinator of the Tamil Service. She recently published a long newspaper article on Sri Lankan Tamil Music going into all this in some detail. Arunthathy Sri Ranganathan, also a controller of music at the S. L. B. C., is also experimenting in Oriental music, And she has an album she recorded in Nigeria with musicians from that country.

ROBINSON: Let's return to the topic of fiction, that is, short stories written in the Tamil language by Sri Lankan writers. You've referred to Tamil writers of the 1960s and 1970s, the early 1970s. Who are some short story writers of the later 1970s and early 1980s?

SIVAKUMARAN: There are more than 200 Tamil short story writers in Sri Lanka, and more and more publications are coming out of Jaffna these days, so we can consider only a few. Take K. Balasundaram, for one. A recent collection of his was published in Jaffna under the ti-

tle *Anniya Virunthalli* (An Alien Guest). Out of the ten stories eight were written in the early 1970s and seven of those were previously published in *Sirithiran*, a Jaffna humor monthly. *Sirithiran* is a coined word meaning one who laughs. The eighth came out in *Rosapoo*, a Jaffna annual. *Rosapoo* means rose. The latest stories were published recently in *Amirthagangai*, still another Jaffna publication. In English, nectar-giving river. Balasundaram is the principal of Union College, a high school in Tellipalai. He writes plays also, notably radio plays. His special talent lies in the effective use of Jaffna Tamil dialects in dialogue. He has an earthy sense of humor and a satirical way of expressing the foibles of people in the villages of the northern peninsula.

ROBINSON: What are some of the stories in *An Alien Guest* about?

SIVAKUMARAN: Most of them are about social and / or economic problems peculiar to Sri Lankan Tamil society. For example, one story, "Muddaip Poriyalum Mulan Kaiyum" (Fried Egg and the Elbow), implicitly criticizes the unfairness in the standardization of admission to universities. Another story, "School Plus Mini Bus Time Tables", describes the anxiety of Tamil parents sending their children to school in an atmosphere of ethnic tension. Another one, "Moontru Parappum Mukkal Kuliyum" (Three Perches and Three-Fourths of a Grave), deals with the shortage of land in the north and the jealousy and competition arising from it. I think you know a perch is a measurement of the size of a piece of land. Some of the other stories in *Anniya Virunthalli* are about the marriage problems prevailing in Jaffna Tamil society — parents perform different poses to get a respectably employed bridegroom, for their daughter; fast aging women wait for white collar bridegrooms; brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law cunningly postpone the marriages of younger siblings

who are employed in order to exploit them financially. Professor Vithiananthan wrote the foreword to this collection and says these latter stories reflect the society of Jaffna as it was but Jaffna today is different. Young women there are more liberated than the stories suggest.

You may be interested in Yoga Balachandran, another Sri Lankan Tamil woman's lib writer. She writes in Tamil and English. She's a broadcaster and a stage actress. She's travelled a lot and has a global approach, particularly on subjects like the position of women in contemporary society. She stands out as a bold and stimulating personality. She recently published a collection of twelve of her short stories, six previously published in local weeklies and monthlies. Realistic stories. Balachandran's view is that the writer has an ethical obligation to portray society as it is. She's unlike many women writers who turn out slippy-sloppy tear jerkers.

ROBINSON: What are the stories in this collection about ?

SIVAKUMARAN: They're essentially psychological stories but they're based on social realities here. The characters are Tamils, Sinhalese, Hindus, Christians, professional persons, middle class people, rural folk, cosmopolitans. Balachandran takes up subjects that were once taboo — test tube babies, vasectomy, male inferiority complexes. As for the last, in one story a woman finds employment opportunities and the result is that her male partner suffers mental tortures.

In other stories, an educated woman dutifully serves her husband but wants to escape from him to live the rest of her life as she wishes; a married woman regrets she hasn't lived a more meaningful life; a woman paralyzed in bed suggests that her loving husband have an extramarital relationship; a woman kills her husband to annihilate a parasite who has betrayed her and her children. Those are some of

the themes of these stories. You could say the publication of this book, *Yugamalar*, is a happening in the local Tamil literary scene. True, Balachandran's craft needs a little more care, but she presents a fresh point of view in a reasonably well-shaped form. What's refreshing in this collection is that the traditional values in respect of the status of Tamil women in Sri Lanka are challenged in the context of a changing society.

ROBINSON: Are there many stories around dealing with the educational problems of Sri Lankan Tamils these days ?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. In a collection published in Palayankottai in South India a few years ago called *Krishnan Thootu*, a writer named Santhan includes a story about a young Tamil public servant, Devan, who must sit for the Sinhala Proficiency Examination. You know about the Sinhala Only Bill of 1956. Devan represents the sensitive average Tamil youth, except that his girl friend, Lilanie, is a Sinhalese. Her parents approve of their relationship and they invite him to their place for lunch on Lilanie's birthday, the day of the examination. Devan has prepared for this examination thoroughly. He gets private tuition from a Sinhala teacher who preaches to him, erroneously, that the Tamil language is an off-shoot of Sanskrit and that the Sinhala language is better than Tamil. Similarly, the head of his section, a Sinhalese, speaks almost on the same lines as Devan's tutor.

Devan likes the Sinhala language, particularly because it is the native tongue of his sweetheart, but he hates what he considers the cultural imperialism that calls one language superior to another, and he wonders if he should sit for the Sinhala Proficiency Exam. He decides to do so. He writes his answers well. Then he cancels his own answer sheet to protest that, though he's a Tamil and a member of a

minority in Sri Lanka, his self respect should not be subjected to ridicule. During the examination, the invigilator — you say “monitor” — reads the candidates’ answer sheets over their shoulders and smiles sarcastically at the “funny” answers produced by the candidates, whose mother tongue is not Sinhala. Devan’s anger is not against the Sinhala language nor against Sinhalese people or their culture but against those who parochially imagine for themselves a kind of superiority and in the name of the Official Language Policy impose cultural dominance over others.

ROBINSON: Are all of Santhan’s stories in this book similar to this ethnic conflict one in theme?

SIVAKUMARAN: A couple are. The title story, for example, also deals with the language problem here. And Santhan earlier published a novel about the failure of love between a Tamil boy and a Sinhala girl because of racial prejudices. But another story in this collection is quite different, even unusual in its humor. A newly married young man wants to make sure of his ability to have children. He goes to a government clinic to take a test. He’s also tensed up, so he finds it difficult to produce a specimen of his sperm. But, through a little opening in the window of the toilet, he sees an ordinary-looking fully-uniformed nurse — she’s visible only in parts — and he mentally disrobes her, and he is able to produce a specimen. He feels sad for the innocent nurse who helps him in his imagination. The title Krishnan Thoothu, by the way, refers to a message taken by Lord Krishna in the Mahabarata.

ROBINSON: Can you comment on humor in modern short stories in Tamil in Sri Lanka?

SIVAKUMARAN: There are many kinds of humor in Tamil short stories, of course. In a book of his, *Sasi Bharathi Kathaigal*, a journalist, Sasi

Bharathi S. Sabaratnam, has what you could call a short short humorous story. It's only seven paragraphs long, and each paragraph is only one sentence.

ROBINSON: Good. Then you can tell the whole thing.

SIVAKUMARAN: During an excavation, some specimens of old bones were found. The bones, decayed and unidentifiable, are studied. They belong to the human species. An order is issued to determine the historical age to which the bones belong. It's learned they are thousands and thousands of years old. Soon a proclamation is issued. It is: Find out the ethnic group.

ROBINSON: We almost always come back to the ethnic problems in Sri Lanka, don't we?

SIVAKUMARAN: It's very important here; you know. Crucial. It reminds me of a short story by Mullaimani. That's the pen name of V. Subramaniam. It's in a collection titled *Arasikal Aluvathillai* (The Queens Do Not Cry) published a few years ago. Iranganie, a young Sinhala woman, is studying Tamil at the University of Peradeniya. A Muslim student and a Tamil student woo her. She's a very sociable and open-minded teen-ager. She's cast away the parochial thinking of people as Sinhalese or Tamils or Muslims or Burghers. She holds such a broad view because she and her family have had a traumatic experience regarding "race". Having been nurtured in the Tamil north, Iranganie and her family have assimilated what could be called traits of Tamil culture. Chauvinists and hooligans mis-identify these Sinhalese as Tamils, and, in riots, her brother is killed. This incident has led her to think about the grave problem of race relations here and to take up a stance of broader nationalism. Mullaimani is a lecturer at Kopay Women's Training College. He also writes poetry and plays. He's also interested in history and religion.

ROBINSON: Has he written any stories with religious themes?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes. In the same book there's one story that you can call religious. In the broadest sense. "Kaththu Irukka Vendum". A Brahmin boy has been growing his hair in the priestly style called *konde*. He cuts off all his hair and presents it to Angelina, a Christian girl whom he loves. Yes, it's reminiscent of O. Henry, but the idea here is that not only on racial grounds but also on religious grounds narrow ways of thinking should give way to larger concepts of humane love, understanding and sacrifice.

ROBINSON: Humane love. There seem to be many Tamil writers handling this theme in short stories about people of different cultural backgrounds.

SIVAKUMARAN: Not only in short stories, of course. Vidhya — that's the pen name of Kamala Thambirajah — has a novel, *Unakahave Valkiraen* (I Love You and You Alone), that's a romance on the theme of undying love with a similar theme. Ayub, a Pakistani student, visits Sri Lanka to spend a school holiday with one of his sisters who lives in Kandy. Ayub attends a Tamil drama competition at the Peradeniya campus. He's fascinated by the moving portrayal of Anarkali by a young student actress named Nimmi. Now he's a Pakistani and a Muslim and she's a Tamil and a Hindu, but the attachment between them grows into deep love and sacrifice. This is a highly personalized novel, and it has the unique quality of evoking genuine sympathy with the characters instead of sentimentalizing their situation. In many ways the novel reveals the experience of the novelist herself. Like her character Nimmi, she herself also won the best actress award in a drama competition at Peradeniya. She's also acted in the locally produced Tamil film *Ponmani*, Beads of Gold.

ROBINSON: Let's turn to movies later and get back to novels later, and

continue with short stories now. You've mentioned that Sasi Bharathi S. Sabaratnam is a journalist. Are there any Tamil women journalists here who also write short stories?

SIVAKUMARAN: Annaledchumy Rajadurai. Sometimes she's called Lakshmi. She's published two novels. She recently had a collection of eleven short stories entitled *Neruppu Velicham* (The Flame) published in Madras. The stories are true to contemporary life. Her main characters are women. The point of view is invariably that of a woman in a male-dominated social set up. The locales are usually Colombo and Jaffna. Let me refer to the themes very briefly: The experience of Tamil housemaids in the Middle East and in West Asia. The lucrative trade of drug trafficking while searching for jobs in continental cities. The deceit of unscrupulous job agents. Spoiled youths finding an easy way to earn money by pickpocketing or robbing. The irresponsible behavior of selfish husbands and sons. Undisciplined students. Foolishly conservative parents. As you are aware by now, these are common themes these days. Anyway, Annaledchumy Rajadurai portrays characters from all layers of society, and this collection is rather representative.

ROBINSON: Is there any Tamil short story writer who deals exclusively with what many people here call the social underclass?

SIVAKUMARAN: Maybe not exclusively. But Muthurasaratham's *Silanthi Vayal* (Den of Spiders) is a good introduction to the world of the downtrodden, a world that the average middle and upper class metropolitans ignore. The stories in *Den of Spiders* deal with the problems of very poor families. They have no regular means of earning a living. Ice cream vendor. *Kadalai* man. Composer. Rice mill worker. Unemployed but artistically endowed alcoholic. A depressed class woman who does household chores in middle class homes. The

main subjects that the author treats are sex vices, broken hearts, social imbalances. Muthurasaratnam pays more attention to content than to form, but the collection is worth reading for its observations of the hum-drum life of lower middle class and proletarian people.

ROBINSON: You mentioned a story about a Brahmin boy. Are there many Brahmins writing short fiction in Sri Lanka ?

SIVAKUMARAN: There are some. N. Somakanthan is one. He's from the priestly class by birth, but he's a progressive writer. He's been writing for a long time, but his stories were gathered into a book only recently. *Aahuthi*. The title refers to offerings at religious ceremonies. The title story is the best. It describes the dilemma of a Hindu priest when he encounters the irreligious attitude and action of an unscrupulous trustee of a Hindu temple. Another story, "Vidiyal", is also about a Hindu priest. When the trustee of the temple almost ejects the priest from the priesthood, the priest takes up farming. This trustee is an opportunistic politician. To secure votes in an election he asks the priest to open the doors of the temple to people of the depressed class. When he fails to get elected, he tells the priest to close the doors of the temple again. The priest protests by walking out of the temple and takes up ploughing the fields.

ROBINSON: You mentioned music awards and acting awards. Are there organizations that give prizes to Tamil short story writers in Sri Lanka ?

SIVAKUMARAN: Some but not many. Mostly local. On the national level, the Department of the Registrar of Copyright and Patents is one. It recently awarded Rs 5000 to a collection of Tamil short stories it judged the best. The writer is P. Sivanadasarma. He's written five other books in Tamil. He writes under the name of Kopay Sivam. He's won several prizes in local literary contests. He works as a

draughtsman in the Irrigation Department. He's in his early 30s. The name of this collection is *Niyayamana Porattangal*. Justifiable Struggles, in English. The title story, for instance, is the story of a Brahmin grandmother. She challenges the hypocrisy of her own people who castigate a family in their own circle for marrying outside their caste. Similarly, a story titled "Oru Marana Urvalam Purappada Pohirathu" (A Funeral Procession Is About to Begin) shows up orthodoxy in funeral rites as meaningless when those insisting on such formalities will not help to get the daughter of a Brahmin man married because he had married out of his caste and they had disowned him. People with false pride like this are a dying breed in today's bitter realities.

May I add that the first Sri Lankan writing in Tamil to win a prize by a government organization — the same one — was Puloyoor K. Sathasivam. He's an assistant medical practitioner. He also won Rs 5000 for a collection of short stories. That was a few years ago. In a competition that was the brain child of Lalith Athlathmudali, the Minister of Trade and Shipping, which the Department of Copyright is under. The title of Sathasivam's book was *Ore Adimayin Vilangu Aruhirathu* (A Slave's Chain Is Broken). Sathasivam has published another collection of short stories — and two novels, which also won prizes. As far as *A Slave's Chain* is concerned, the stories are mainly realistic. The first story is about the generation gap. It's in the form of a monologue by a wife who cannot conceive a baby. She foresees that if a child was born to her he would ultimately disown his parents, anyway. So she takes her own life. Another poignant story is about the precarious life of a pensioner in Wellawatta.

ROBINSON: A friend of mine lives in Wellawatta. Godfrey Lorenz An-

dree. He used to be a jazz critic on the radio in Sri Lanka. He sometimes writes newspaper articles about the Burghers in Sri Lanka.

SIVAKUMARAN: In the story, the pensioner bears the burden of living with limited income. He has two sons, both unemployed. He also lives in a tense atmosphere and is under great stress. He has a heart attack. The story ends as his wife rushes him to the hospital in a taxi. In her hand she has their last Rs 100.

ROBINSON: Almost all the stories you've referred to so far are gloomy in one way or another.

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, but gloomy or not, if you read them all, you'd get a very good impression of the actualities of life for the Tamil people in Sri Lanka these days, when common or accepted human relationships are getting eroded as attitudes harden. Anyway, the realities are gloomy, and many of these stories I'm telling you about may not be wholly satisfying as creative pieces but they are social documents in a way.

Take the stories in *Uyirpuhal* (Coming to Life). They express what the writers themselves feel about the situation in Jaffna. They represent the mood of the people of Jaffna. The writers of these stories — they're 12 in all — are teachers or civil servants mostly. One is a banker. Another is an assistant medical practitioner. They're all from the Vadamardihiy region in Jaffna. They were all born in the 1940s and 1950s. They do not belong to a generation who had a shared cultural tradition with the rest of the communities here. At the same time they do not belong to that band of young firebrands who turn to militancy at the slightest provocation. Like most social realists they tell it like it is, or at least the way they see it is, and they hope that they can change the thinking of people for the better. The

caste problem here, for example. There's a story by S. Yogarasa — his pen name is Karunai Yogan — that focuses on the class stance of some people who exploit a grave situation. A person collecting funds for the rehabilitation of Tamil refugees declines to release the funds for an emergency relief operation because those affected are only low caste people. This story shows the hypocrisy that sometimes hide behinds the shield of ethnic consciousness. Caste-ism still prevails in Jaffna while Jaffna is bleeding for the sake of a Tamil nationhood. Another caste story in this book is by Kana Maheswaran. A high caste man has the audacity to prevent a lower caste tom-tom beater from beating his *parai melam* at the funeral of his own son.

Some of these stories portray the northern battle front through the eyes of ordinary people who have not taken part in armed militancy or terrorism. A person returns to Sri Lanka from Nigeria in a story by Nellai K. Peran. He finds his way home in Jaffna through circuitous routes amidst hardship and risk. When he reaches home, he finds his family trying to avoid being killed by an aerial bombing by the government air force. He tears up his passport in protest and determines to resist further onslaughts like this one. Raja Sri Kanthan's story describes how the common people manage interrogations and attacks by members of the government's armed forces who suspect them all of being terrorists, which they aren't. The last story, by K. Sinnarajan, is about a young man who loses his family members in attacks by the armed forces. He turns to militancy himself. He is killed.

To go back to Tamil short stories dealing in caste themes, Kavaloor Jeganathan came out with *Yuga Prasavam* a few years ago. Birth of an Age. It was published in Maurus. His stories often link

the caste problem in Jaffna with the class problem in general. One character exploits caste differences for his own advancement in business. A co-op manager poses as a good man in society but is actually a swindler. Another *mudalali* — that means businessman, you know — feels sorry not at the death of one of his employees but at the fact that the death affects seasonal sales negatively. Speaking of prizes, Jeganathan won several for his short stories. It's believed he was killed in India. He died young.

But, yet, I must say in fairness that a reader sometimes can get exhausted reading these kinds of themes over and over again.