



Title	An Interview with K.S. Sivakumaran on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka
Author(s)	Robinson, LeRoy
Citation	経営と経済, 69(4), pp.293-314; 1990
Issue Date	1990-03
URL	http://hdl.handle.net/10069/28427
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This document is downloaded at: 2018-10-18T03:33:55Z

〈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 Sivaskumaran 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 Thamil Navagal* (1956–1981), a collection of his reviews in Tamil on Sri Lankan Tamil novels, was recently published.*

ROBINSON: Let's go back, briefly at least, to poetry. As you know, I've had the pleasure of meeting Heather Loyola, a Sri Lankan Tamil woman who writes poetry in English. Is there any other local Tamil writing poetry in English?

SIVAKUMARAN: Of course. You know Jegatheeswari Nagendran writes poetry in English. So does C. V. Velupillai, who's also done fiction in English, like S. I. Francis and Rajah Proctor who do short stories. You've met Francis, of course. Anyway, take John Regis. He has an unusual name for a Sri Lankan. He's a Christian from Kerala who settled down here. He's a journalist writing for *Virakesari*. He used to write a column on local affairs; he's planning to put out a collection of some of his interviews with local politicians. A few years ago he published *The Magic of Life*, a collection of fifteen of his English verses. Most of them were illustrated by sketches. Most of the verses, unfortunately, read like mere narratives of events or incidents. The poetic sensibility is lacking — you know, feeling,

* This is the fifth 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), the second in Keiei to keizai Vol. 68, No.4 (March 1989), the third in Keiei to Keizai, Vol.69, No.2 (September 1989), and the fourth in Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Humanities, Vol.30, No.2 (January 1990).

thought, freshness, evocativeness. But at least Regis is not pretentious. He speaks directly. “The Blast of a Closed System” is quite explicit that a closed society such as that in the U.S.S.R. cannot stand the pressure of the communication explosion. The system has to crack. Another verse seems to me to be inspired by a poem of Subramania Bharathi, the Indian poet I mentioned earlier. “Eththanai Koadi Inbam Padaithai Iraiva”. Regis’s title is “Magic of the Morning”. The theme is the need of the hour is not a revolution, not a change in structure, but a change of heart to build a better world. You asked me the Tamil word for peace before, and one of the striking poems in this collection is a peace poem called “The Enlightenment”. Regis says the architects of acceleration dream of a new civilization, the Mahaveli civilization. The Mahaveli is our longest river. A diversion scheme was accelerated in 1977. A massive multi-purpose scheme — irrigation, electricity. It was accelerated with large amounts of foreign aid most of it from Great Britain. There’s human settlement along irrigable land. Villages evolve. So a new civilization arises. The future belongs to those who dare and act. Distrust is a venom that poisons the flowers of peace. The crying need of the hour is understanding on all sides. Peace and justice go hand in hand...nor can we have peace by force. Let peace dawn on my country and the world over. This is very prosy, but Regis does have a few good lines. “Truth flashed in effulgent splendor. Life is a dewdrop on a blade of grass.” Of course, this too was inspired by another Tamil poem.

ROBINSON: Again, then, how about another Sri Lankan Muslim who writes poetry in Tamil?

SIVAKUMARAN: Anbu Mohideen. *Mathulam Muththukal*. It also was published a few years ago. Mohideen is from the Ampara district.

The book was published in Kandy, though, in Galahinna, by Thamil Manram, which is headed by S. M. Haniffa, the attorney who used to be a journalist who I referred to before. The theme of most of the poems — there are 29 — is human relationship born out of compassion. The expression of feeling is spontaneous. The images are plausible. Mohideen's art is in his simplicity. Let me translate some of the lines I found refreshing. Like an unsaleable product on the street. No buyers. Women who have no dowry to give in marriage are compared to products that have no buyers. Like an object in an unlocked house. And especially this one: Fake poets, why have you come in rain, jumping over fences? The insensitive aren't going to rise in anger by your songs to win over the world. Your coming isn't going to relieve the hardships of the pain-infested friends of ours. I'd say these poems are representative of the Tamil-speaking Muslim community's experience of everyday life in the Eastern part of the country.

ROBINSON: Then how about a few other Sri Lankan Tamil men poets who write in Tamil?

SIVAKUMARAN: Let's see. I've already told you a little about M. Balakrishnan's *Nisabthamai Thoonguvathen* (Why Slumber in Silence?), but I might translate a few of his lines, too, to give you a better idea of his sensibility. In one poem, "Sitas in a Land without Rama", he has some metaphors that are somewhat innovative in Tamil. Poems unadorned with flowers on the head. Poems without the music of conjugal love. Peahens without plumes of money. In another verse called "I'm Walking Back", he says his body "tunes itself to receive the heatwave of a dancing girl."

And did I tell you about A. Yesurasa's poetry? I mentioned he was the editor of the Jaffna literary magazine "Alai" (The Wave). There's a collection of almost 50 of his poems called *Ariyap*

Padathavarkal Ninaivaha (In Memory of the Unknown). This is how Yesurasa describes Ruwanvelisaya. Coning whitish curve filling the space. Curling helmet feeling gently the sky. Ruwanvelisaya is a Buddhist shrine, A dagaba. It was built by an ancient Sinhala king. It's a large white dome-like structure. Testimony to the engineering capability of the ancients. In another poem, Yesurasa addresses the Kerala poet Sangam Puzai, who ended his life because of unrequited love. He says even though he lost in love *he* would live beyond death in resurrection. A few other poems speak of the uncertainties faced by the youth in Jaffna in recent times. Recently poetry has become a convenient vehicle to express the feeling of the younger Tamil generation caught up in an unprecedented age of anxiety and agony.

Not only in the North. In A. Santhan's short story "Aaraikal" there's a good description of fear and anxiety among the Tamil people living in Colombo shortly after the communal troubles of 1977. I'm going to go into detail so you can learn a lot about certain "aspects" of our culture from this story. Krishana is a public servant. Newly married, he and his wife live in Colombo. In an annex. The landlord is also a Tamil. One day Krishana and his wife have a lovers' quarrel. On the way to his office he kicks up a row with the landlady. In the bus he meets a Tamil conductor, Siva, an old friend from the same village. Siva speaks Sinhala very fluently. And even when he knows some of the passengers are Tamils he speaks with them in Sinhala. This makes Krishana curious. He asks Siva why he does this. Siva replies fear prevents him from speaking Tamil even to a fellow Tamil. It is best to avoid trouble. Krishana gets off the bus and meets Baddurdeen, a Muslim boutique keeper. Baddurdeen also speaks Sinhala and Tamil fluently. He greets Krishana in Tamil in a loud voice. Krishana wonders how it is that Baddurdeen can be so

fearless when he and Siva fear being noticed as Tamils. In his office a majority of Krishana's colleagues speak with him in Sinhala. They are all friendly with him. He's popular. He's the trade union leader in the office. On trade union business he goes to the head office. He meets some other Tamil public officers there. They are nice to him. One of them has not spoken to Krishana before because he thinks Krishana belongs to a different caste. When they learn that both of them belong to the same caste they have tea together. While he is waiting to meet the Head, Krishana spends the time reading a foreign English magazine. That's how the story ends. Santhan is trying to show the breakdown in personal communication here and its social causes.

"English magazine". That reminds me of "Channels". It's a new quarterly here. Published by the English Writers Cooperative of Sri Lanka. Anne Ranasinghe is on the Editorial Board, along with Rajiv Wijesinha, and Maureen Seneviratne, who edited its first issue. Besides Anne Ranasinghe, you know some of the other writers represented: Basil Fernando, Kamala Wijeratne, Jean Arasanayagam. What strikes me is that the contributors are among the important writers in the country. They use the English language. They've inherited a tradition of cross cultures. They're a little different from the writers here whose background is exclusively Sinhala or Tamil. Some of them, of course, have cross married, so to speak, married across ethnic lines, and this gives them a kind of cosmopolitanism. Many of them are women. Of course, all of them write within a Sri Lankan context.

Talking again about the problem of inter-communal communication here, Tamils write mostly about Tamils and Sinhalese mostly about Sinhalese. Not only about them, but also for them. In

my opinion, if it's to be truly Sri Lankan writing, writers from one cultural background ought to write about the cultures of other communities. We ought to learn more about each other here, to begin with.

Did you know that some people have accused me of writing mostly about Tamil writers? But the strange thing here is that non-Tamils don't seem to know much about their fellow community. That's one reason I tell the "outside" world about what's happening on the local Tamil scene, the cultural scene. And I always welcome observations on Tamil cultural activities in my columns from non-Tamil speaking people.

And let me finish this point of discussion by also referring to "Anarvana". That's a Sinhala quarterly published by the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas. A recent issue had an interesting article by Gunasena Vithane, a Moscow wing Communist writer, on the duty of Sri Lanka's writers to write on behalf of ethnic unity here. Anthony Jeeva contributed a piece on the contribution of hill country writers to Lankan literature.

Now, to be quite fair, I should add that "Mavata", a Sinhala literary magazine recently dedicated a whole issue — it's 46th — to Tamil literature in Sri Lanka. It was edited by Piyal Somaratne, a film and literary critic, S. Wijesuriya, a teacher interested in politics and the arts, and Arthur P. Weerasena, a translator. This kind of issue is rather rare for Sinhala literary journals. I must say, as I've said to you already, Tamil magazines like "Mallikai" and "Alai" are in the forefront when it comes to introducing Sinhala literature to their Tamil readers. Anyway, "Mavata" (Highway) translated into Sinhala an article of mine dealing with local Tamil novels and novelists.

Now to get back to the question about poetry. Let me tell you a little about S. Sivasegaram. He used to be in the Faculty of Engineering at the University of Peradeniya. He's a specialist in mechanical engineering. He's published two anthologies of his poems. *Nathikarayil Moongil* (Bamboo by the River Bank) and *Seppanidda Padimangal* (Polished Images). He's also published his Tamil translations of Mao Tse Tung's poems and admits that his own poetry is politically motivated. I'll just give an idea of a few of his themes. The irony of an F. A. O. conference — the delegates enjoy the lunch and the dinner, but after the conference the poor consume the left-overs. The ultimate failure of counter-revolutionaries all over the world. The liberation of Trincomalee from racists of all types. The indifference of a middle class individual with no time to spare for people in dire need. A puzzle that the all-mighty computer cannot answer. From all this you may assume Sivasegaram's a very cerebral poet. Actually, he's a sensitive writer. He's clever with words. His poems are rich in imagery. He may even be one of our major Tamil poets in Sri Lanka?

Another poet I'd like to call your attention to is Kurinchi Thennavan. He's been writing poetry in Tamil for over 30 years but his poems were published in book form only recently. Some of them were in the *Vilippu* anthology I've already commented on. The book is called *Kurinchi Thennavan Kavithaikal*. Unusually, it's been translated into Sinhala and English. Thennavan himself is unusual among the writers of this country in that he did not have much formal education at all. Yet his familiarity with poetic language is surprisingly good. So is his ability to express ideas in a compact manner. Most of his poems — their tone is often pathetic — are descriptions of the actual hardships of the plantation workers in the hill country.

Sometimes there's a kind of satire, biting satire. I've translated one of his short poems:

Those who didn't care for me

Till yesterday

Cry dead and soul

Today.

Such a fund of affection

After my being deceased!

Or is it for the Provident Fund?

The Provident Fund is a government institution. It's a savings scheme for non-government employees. They collect at retirement.

ROBINSON: Then let's go back — again! — to Tamil novels written in Sri Lanka. Are there others that you'd like to refer to? Then we'll go into short stories again too. And some of your interviews with local people engaged in cultural activities.

SIVAKUMARAN: How about love stories? *Meedhatha Veenai* (The Un-fiddled Veena). It's an impressive first novel. By A. T. Nithiyanthan. Its theme of adolescent love is almost idyllic. Six young men and women — teenagers — in a northern village try to change the thinking of the village elders through the example of their own love and marriage. They're not altogether successful. One has to go a long way to change conservative thinking in Jaffna. Despite some beneficial material changes, there are areas in Jaffna society where the basic orientation towards an egalitarian society is still lacking. A lot of our Tamil writers deal with this problem.

There's Arul Subramaniam's *Nan Kedamadden* (I Won't Get Spoiled). A girl of 18 from a lower middle class family in Trincomalee is drawn into a pre-marital relationship with a boy younger than her. The boy seduces her. He's her cousin, the son of her aunt,

her mother's sister. The girl gets pregnant. The boy stops visiting her. She tells her mother of her plight. Her conservative parents are stunned. The father of the girl approaches a doctor friend, but he refuses to perform an abortion. The girl is given pineapple acid to kill the foetus. Then the boy's mother is told. To make amends for her son's sins, she arranges a marriage for the girl with another man, an orphan who works in a mill. The couple live together happily. Then they happen to see "Arangetram". A Tamil film in which the heroine takes to prostitution to support her family. The young wife is upset by this film because of her guilt complex. She confesses to her husband — she loves him deeply — about her affair with her cousin. He is shocked. At first he finds it hard to deal with. It takes them both a long time to wholly reconcile, which they do only after the young husband loses one of his legs in an accident in the mill. Almost like the young man in Sulaima Samee's *Mana Chumaikal* story I mentioned before. Anyway, in *Nan Kedamadden* Subramaniam shows his skill in the handling of subjects usually taboo in Tamil literature at the time. He's from Trincomalee. He was a clerk in a government department. He's gone abroad.

"Arangetram" literally means coming on the stage for the first time, the maiden effort, a debut. Here it metaphorically means deflowering. In the film the heroine is a Brahman who takes up prostitution to maintain a big family. K. Balachandra wrote the story and directed the film. He's a slightly off beat film maker from Tamilnadu.

There's another Tamil novel dealing with love between cousins. Gnanarathan's *Oomai Ullangal* (The Silent Hearts). Unrequited love is the main theme. Even unexpressed love. Between two first cousins. Family responsibilities keep them apart. He has two

sisters to marry off. So he needs a dowry, which his cousin, whom he loves, cannot provide. So to solve their financial problems, the boy marries a rich girl. She looks down on his people. She does not associate with her husband's relatives. The marriage breaks down. Later, though, she gives up her class consciousness. She leaves her parents and rejoins her husband. Meanwhile, the young woman cousin seeks employment to support her family. She has two younger sisters too. Re-employment, because she had worked in a cooperative store but had had to give up her job because a fellow employee made advances to her.

ROBINSON: One thing that interests me is that among all the novels you've mentioned there hasn't been one that could be called an historical novel. Like, for example, A. V. Suraweera's one in Sinhala about the construction of Sigiriya in the 5th century. Or Colin de Silva's in English, *The Winds of Sinhala*, also set in ancient Ceylon.

SIVAKUMARAN: Oh, of course, we have them. I'll give you one example. V. A. Rasaratnam's *Krouncha Paravaigal*. Now I can't vouch for its accuracy, but it's a readable historical romance. Actually, it's the first time that a Sri Lankan Tamil has interpreted the ancient history of Sri Lanka from a Marxian point of view. The novel's set in the period around 240 B. C. A little earlier. The background is the reign of Suratissa, a Sinhala king, and the ascendancy of Sena and Guttake, Tamil kings. Rasaratnam's protagonist — he's fictional, of course; his name is Bandula — thinks and acts as an anti-royalist would do now. He challenges the establishment by organizing a youth movement to force Suratissa to give up his religious mission — during this time more attention was given to building vihares and dagabas than to developing agriculture — and to devote himself to agriculture and the welfare of the people. Rasaratnam sym-

pathizes with his Bandula, but the novel ends with the failure of the youth movement and the tragic end of Bandula and his aristocratic lover, Prabha. The last sentence of the novel translates into English something like "The red blood of the youth who dreamed of independent villages turned the island of Ceylon into a riot of red." Rasaratnam is a retired school principal. He writes short stories and articles, too. His famous shortstory "Boat" was one of the earliest Tamil stories to portray the east coast, Moothur, way of life in realistic terms. Krouncha Paravaigal refers to an ancient eagle-like bird.

ROBINSON: Santhan's story about a civil servant brought to mind this question. In your work as a cultural journalist do you ever have to deal with public officials?

SIVAKUMARAN: Occasionally. Not so long ago I did an interview for The Island with P. P. Devaraj. He's the Minister of State for Hindu Religious Culture and Tamil Affairs.

ROBINSON: What did you speak about with him? What is his background?

SIVAKUMARAN: Background first? Devaraj had his secondary education at St. Sylvester's College. In Kandy. He graduated from the University of London. In the early 1950s he was active in the trade union movement here. In the C. W. C. — the Ceylon Workers Congress. When S. Thonadaman and A. Asiz, the Congress leaders, went their own ways, their separate ways, Devaraj divorced himself from active trade union work. He devoted himself to his own business activities. In the 70s, though, he rejoined the C. W. C. He did some research concerning the development of the plantation sector. Now he represents the C. W. C. on the National List. He did not have to contest an election. But as far as the Tamil speaking people of Sri Lanka are concerned he has a key post. He seems to have a progressive

outlook, anyway. Thondaman is the present head of the C. W. C. Aziz — he's a Sri Lankan citizen of Pakistani origin — is head of the Democratic Workers Congress, which is more left of center.

As for what we spoke about, I asked him right off if he feels comfortable in Parliament as a National List member without much direct contact with constituents. He said he welcomed the chance to participate in parliamentary debates. They limited his time, but as a Minister he's able to do something. He said he wants to contribute intellectually to the body politic. He's worked in political movements and with C. W. C. and in intellectual associations social groups in different communities here, so he feels he has a broad outlook. He doesn't have any difficulties in interacting with people with different political beliefs, he says, He added his Sinhalese associates feel comfortable with him.

ROBINSON: Can you describe the Ministry for Hindu Religious Culture and Tamil Affairs?

SIVAKUMARAN: The Ministry has two segments. Hindu Religious Culture promotes Hinduism and related cultural affairs. For example, the Ministry has sponsored a seminar on "The Social Dimensions of the Hindu Ethos" — the Hindu concept of nature, living in harmony with nature, keeping the environment clean. The Ministry is participating in the Environmental Authority's campaign of tree planting by focusing on trees sacred to Hindus and the flowers used in *poojas*.

Tamil Affairs promotes Tamil literary activity, music, dancing, painting, and so on — all the aspects of Tamil culture in Sri Lanka that we've already gone into. Minister Devaraj pointed out that the Hindu view of the fine arts is basically integrated with the Hindu religion. The Ministry is also trying to organize workshops and per-

formances of Tamil folk arts to give a boost to folk drama and folk music.

Devaraj is also interested in the implementation of Tamil as an official language here. For that he's getting advice from eminent legal and political science groups among the Tamils. He'll prepare a comprehensive report for the Ministry of Public Administration and the commissioner of Official Languages. The government is planning to set up a special department to look into matters relating to the implementation of Tamil as an official language. Devaraj emphasized that the Tamils themselves must become more aware of the nature of the process of implementation. The Tamils themselves do not know in great detail what the government has planned to do. In other words, lack of public information. Tamil is an official language but there is a lack of staff, like clerks and typists, who can work in Tamil in government offices.

ROBINSON: Is there any cooperation between Devaraj's Ministry and those relating to Sinhalese cultural activities?

SIVAKUMARAN: He mentioned the possibility of cooperating in the making of translations. Sinhala into Tamil. Tamil into Sinhala. He's already been allocated funds for that and he and his people in the Ministry are looking around for books to be translated. The Ministry is also preparing a bibliography of books written in Tamil by Sri Lankans.

ROBINSON: In relation to literature here, you've spoken about the serious problems of the Tamil workers in the plantation sector. Did you speak with Devaraj about that?

SIVAKUMARAN: Yes, I asked him if he had anything to say about the specific cultural problems of the hill country Tamils. He pointed out that in the hill country certain facilities are hard to come by. Educa-

tion is often poor, for example. Even in town areas in the hill country there aren't enough teachers. Except in Kandy. He seemed annoyed by what he called the invasion of video and film into the plantation areas. People like to see these films rather than indigenous folkarts live. Traditional folk culture is being slighted. So he's trying to activate folk culture in the area. Giving encouragement to Carnatic musicians, for instance.

ROBINSON: Here's a question I wanted to ask you much earlier. You said that Ratnanathar Sivagurunathan, also a Tamil, was the President of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists Association. I wanted to ask you about his background.

SIVAKUMARAN: Well, Sivagurunathan is editor of "Thinkaran" and "Thinkaran Vara Manjari". He started out at "Thinkaran" as a sub-editor. He interviewed such famous people as Nehru, Macmillan, Chou En Lai, and King Mahendra. He became news editor, then chief editor. That was about 1961. He also edits the Lake House Tamil daily and weekly. Sivagurunathan's also an attorney at law. At Law College he's a visiting lecturer. He graduated in Arts from the University of Peradeniya in the early 1950s. For the last ten years or so he's been the chairman of the Dance Panel of the Cultural Council of Sri Lanka. One of the reasons he was elected as President of the Journalists Association is that he is tri-lingual — in Tamil, Sinhala and English. The Association itself includes print, radio and TV journalists, from all fronts, right, left and center, and languages, Sinhala, Tamil, English.

I'm glad you asked this question. I'd like to stress that Sivagurunathan's election is a happy augury. I hope it shows that parochialism is gradually fading way from the national scene, at least to some extent.

On the complicated language problem here — again — I think you know some Sinhalese intellectuals cannot read Sinhala or even speak it, and there are some Tamils who don't know Tamil very well either.

I'm reminded of A. J. Aloysius Jeyaraj Canagaratna. Among Tamil-speaking authors, he's known as A. J. He graduated from the University of Peradeniya in the 50s too. He was an English major. He was fluent in English but not very fluent in Tamil. Now he's a leading Tamil writer, a literary critic. He once wrote a book called *Mattu* (Grinder) — it's an instrument used to extract butter from curd — that was dedicated to the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 that many people have told you about. Ironically dedicated. It was the Sinhala Only Act, you see, that made Canagaratna begin to write in Tamil. Ironic in that he felt this Act caused immense injustice to the Tamil-speaking citizens of Sri Lanka but at the same time it helped them indirectly by creating a Tamil consciousness in them — and him. He began to work hard and became competent in Tamil, and now he even translates from English to Tamil, and vice versa. He's in the English Department of the University of Jaffna now. He used to work for the Daily News. Then he was the editor of "Cooperator", an official publication of a cooperative federation. He's in his late 50s. One of his two brothers is also a university teacher and the other, a former journalist, is now a managing director of a firm in Colombo.

ROBINSON: Are there any other prominent Tamil journalists in Sri Lanka you'd like to tell us about?

SIVAKUMARAN: I know you're interested in the professional versatility that many Lankans display, so I'll introduce you to Mohammed Mana Mackeen. He sometimes uses the pen-name EM—Three. He's a Muslim. He works as a stenographer for the Ceylon Electricity

Board. He used to work for the former Radio Ceylon. He also used to be a guest producer at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. He's been a free lance journalist in Tamil for more than 25 years. He's still in his 50s. Mackeen himself says he owes a lot to R. Sivagurunathan. He used to write a daily column on political and cultural affairs in *Thinkaran* — Sivagurunathan is the editor — and now he edits a feature page called "Light Reading". He's contributed to literature here, and theatre, and broadcasting, and even musical entertainment. That's versatility. Also, in the 1960s, Mackeen was on the Islamic Fine Arts Panel of the Arts Council and, in the '70s, on the Tamil Dance Panel. He's written a lot about film for regional Tamil newspapers here such as "Eelanadu" and "Cheithi". He's covered the Sri Lankan film scene for Madras publications like "Devi" and "Cinema Express".

As for his contribution to the local literary scene, in the late '50s he won the second prize in an island-wide short story contest sponsored by "Kalaichelvi", a Jaffna literary magazine that's now defunct. The title of the story was "Revolution". In the mid-1960s the first anthology of Muslim short stories came out. *Muslim Kathai Malarkal*. And his story "Rahummathumma" was included. The title could be the name of any Muslim woman. Now, theatre. Tamil theatre. He's been involved in it for over 20 years. He was once awarded a plaque of honor by Chelliah Rajadurai for his theatre service. He was the first to present a Sinhala play in Tamil. Dayananda Gunawardena's *Ibbikata* (Tortoise Shell). He's the first theatre man from the local Muslim community to direct a play in both Sinhala and Tamil. A message play about the need for better housing. *Thottathu Rani* (Queen of the Garden). That was in the mid-1979s, and it was selected as a festival play by the Tamil Drama Panel. Chelliah Ra-

jadurai is a former minister of Tamil Cultural Affairs.

As for music, Mackeen likes to organize popular music shows. He enjoys being a master of ceremonies! In the 70s he did *Hare Krishna Hare Rama*. He introduced a number of popular entertainers of the 70s. We talked about radio scripts before. Well, Mackeen has written radio dramas, too. As a teenager he himself took part in many radio programs. And he's still young at heart!

ROBINSON: Then let's do short stories in Tamil once more. A couple of Sri Lankan Muslim short story writers, say, then a couple of Sri Lankan Tamils?

SIVAKUMARAN: Let's summarize the themes in *Pirarthanai* (Prayers) by M. I. M. Muzzammil, a fairly new writer, a Muslim who writes in Tamil. Like many of the writers I've been telling you about, Muzammil, wants his stories to contribute to social change. He stresses ethical values. He questions the dowry system. He questions the tradition of early marriage for women. He's down on false pride and jealousy and pseudo-love. The stories are written in a simple style. They're all set in a provincial milieu.

So are most of the stories in Maruthur A. Majeed's *Panneer Vasam Beesukirathu* (The Scent Throws Its Fragrance All Around). The milieu is similar — the Muslim villages in the Eastern province. Their life style. The central theme is infidelity.

As for short stories in Tamil by Sri Lankan Tamils, two more collections of what you could call hill country stories come to mind. One is N. S. M. Ramiah's *Oru Koodaik Kolunthu* (A Basket of Budding Tea Leaves). Ramiah began his career in the late 50s when a conscious effort was made here to evolve Tamil writing based on Sri Lankan life. Ramiah tried to depict plantation life of that era. He's a realist. Most of his characters are old people with old values. For in-

stance, an old woman, having borne six children, and living in dire poverty, and now disgusted with children, works as a baby sitter for the children of estate workers. Ironic. In another story an old man does home gardening to get enough money to buy a petromax lamp for the family on whose earnings he lives. His garden gets washed away in a rain storm. Chekovian. Selfishness and deceit figure in other stories. In a couple of others, some Hindu rituals provide Ramiah's pretext to depict the conformist life of most Tamil people here.

Then there's *Thotta Kaddinlae* (In the Jungle of the Estates). There are nine stories by three writers. Three stories each. Malaranpan. Matale Somu. And Matale Vadivelan. My overall impression is that all three of them write with firm conviction and with an awareness of the realities of estate life. Let me explain one thing. "Thotta Kaadu" and "Thotta Kaddan" are derogatory terms in Tamil applied to the estate people of the hill country. The title is rather daring.

"Parvathi", Malaranpan's first story, describes the dilemma of Parvathi, a married estate woman with two children who tries to avoid being molested by the superintendent of the estate. She has to succumb to the power that is. Otherwise, her husband would lose his job. This story has a familiar theme. Unfortunately, the reality it depicts is commonplace here. In his second story, "Dharmikam" (Virtuosity), Malaranpan shows how an old estate woman and a Sinhala kangany, a line foreman, help people in adversity regardless of their ethnic connections. During an inter-communal disturbance a mob tries to attack Tamil laborer families in a line. The Sinhala kangany defends them. The old Tamil woman goes out to help deliver the new baby of the leader of the mob, who is a Sinhalese. This situation may

seem contrived, but such incidents have actually occurred in real life here. "Uravukal" (Relationship) shows that even the relationships among members of the same family, any family, rest on money dealings. Two married sons of a widow try to squeeze as much money as they can out of their mother. They pretend to look after her, but once they have their way they drive her away. After she dies, they fight each other over their inheritance.

Now, Matale Somu. Let me remind you that Tamil writers here often identify themselves according to their hometowns. Somu is from Matale. So is Vadivelan. Incidentally, *Thotta Kaddinlae* is published by the Matale Tamil Writers Union. Somu's first story is "He Is Not Just Another". It's about the attempt of a young man to educate his family in a very backward estate. In "Dogs Do Not Become Men" Somu shows that dogs do not show distinctions, unlike human beings who are caste and class conscious. "The Fellow from the Lines" describes distinctions between two old friends who become conscious of their class differences. These are also common themes in local Tamil fiction, as I think you are becoming aware of.

Then Vadivelan's "The New Year Is Not News". An old woman gives a gift to her grandchildren to help them celebrate the new year. The second story's about the employment of very old people to fell trees to continue existing. The last story concerns the life and death of an old couple who, after giving body and soul for the betterment of others, are left helpless to die miserable. As you can see, the estates are like a jungle! You should really get out there and see them for yourself.

Then, Thalayasingam. *Puthu Yugam Pirakirathu*. (A New Age Is Being Born). There are eleven stories. "Veelchi" (The Fall) describes a young man who tries to emerge from the depraved tastes

of our time but fails, and becomes one of the philistines himself. This is like Atman's fall, brought about by modern conditions. "Thedal" (The Quest) is allegorical. A coward faces himself for the first time and realizes he hasn't lived well at all. In "Iraltham" (Blood), a young man brought up in Jaffna Tamil culture desires to face the truth in all its nakedness. In the title story, a left-winger whose wife tells him "Your progress has killed our God" blames God for a personal calamity. What Thalayasingam wants to say is the means is as important as the end. "Kottai" (The Fortress) is symbolic. New ideals clash with old values. Difficulties encountered in establishing new ideas. The ultimate failure of individuals striking out against the hardcore of society. In "Koilhal" Thalayasingam speaks about the ideal that will transcend death. "Koilhal" means temples. "Sabathcum" (The Promise) says sex is an obstacle to attaining the ultimate purpose of life, but "Tholuhad" (Worship) treats sex as a symbol of divine creation. In other stories sex is treated as a natural part of life that ought to be enjoyed without inhibitions. On the other hand, Thalayasingam considers over-indulgence in sex brings mainly V. D. In "Veli" (Space) he tries to show the failure of an age of reason — over-indulgence in reason shunning every other human feeling could bring about a world-wide catastrophe. The hero of "Veli" is Vedantic, so he's calm. Remaining calm is the best way to protest, Thalayasingam says. Until he died recently he had been toying with the idea of spiritual reformation.

Finally M. Kanagarasan. He's a fairly well known writer here. Poetry, fiction, drama, criticism — he does them all. Also he's translated short stories from Sinhala to Tamil. He's one of the most important Tamil short story writers in Sri Lanka. Absolute mastery of form. A deep concern for the people. His *Bagavanin Pathangalil*

(At the Footsteps of the Lord) is worthy of praise. The title story pictures a few quick episodes of a chain of events in the heart of Colombo. A teenage girl living in an upstairs flat looks at a bo-tree through her window. Under the tree a statue of Lord Buddha is enshrined. A poor little girl near the tree has a piece of bread in her hand. A crow snatches the bread out of her hand. The child's mother beats her. That was the only food they had for the day. Then the child's father beats the mother in turn. The teenage girl comes downstairs with a ten rupee bill to give to the poor family. On her way, a passerby steals the bill out of her hand. The girl is stunned and goes back to her room. She sees another scene. A father and child come to the bo tree to offer flowers to the Buddha. The poor girl who was just beaten watches them. They watch her. They put a few cents in the till and pay their tributes to the Buddha but they ignore the need of the poor child. The teenager upstairs can only cry.