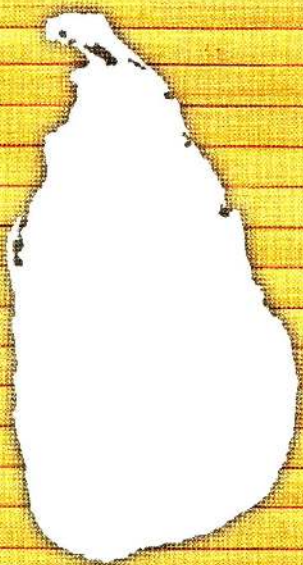


Sri Lankan Tamil Literature and Culture

A Purview through Reviews and Interviews



K.S. Sivakumaran

Kumaran Book House



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K.S. Sivakumaran
BA (Pera.), MA (Madras)



Kumaran Book House

Colombo – Chennai

Sri Lankan Tamil Literature and Culture

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If there are errors or omissions, the author would be pleased to hear and to make the appropriate correction in future reprints.

This two part book is dedicated to
my parents the late
Thangaththiraviam (Nee Candavanam) Sellanainar,
Kailayar Sellanainar
and
the late younger brothers
S.Thirukumaran and S.Gnanakumar

Preface

The purpose of publishing this new edition (which combines two previous publications published in 1974 and 1982 respectively) is primarily because the copies of the original books concerned are not available at present.

Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka (1974), and *Le Roy Robinson in Conversation with K S Sivakumaran on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka* (1982) are the books now combined into one book now.

The availability of these books has become essential in view of their importance as source books to understand especially the Lankan Tamil Cultural Scene in the context of Sri Lankan Culture. These were well received by readers and academics as they gave information and critical comments on some aspects of Lankan Culture especially on Lankan Tamil Literature in the later part of the 20th century.

New readers will find these two books together in one book to form a better idea of the past Lankan Cultural Scene.

The present book now titled *Sri Lankan Tamil Literature and Culture* does not modify anything and therefore remains as found in the earlier two books. The present book is in two parts: *Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka* and *Aspects of Tamil Culture in Sri Lanka*.

It is hoped a sequel to this with more information on the contemporary writing after the 1980s covering the culture and literary works of the Tamil-speaking population of Sri Lanka will be published shortly.

The writer thanks profusely the publisher, Kumaran Book House for kindly undertaking to print and publish this book. Mr G Kumaran showed enthusiasm in getting the book in right shape.

My thanks are also due to the late Prof.K.Kailasapathy, Mervyn de Silva, Ajith Samaranaike, a former Managing Editor of Upali Newspapers Ltd. and two others of the newspapers group of The

Island, where the writer was editing a Culture page for the paper. They were Edmund Ranasinghe and Gamini Weerakoon.

Their testimonies introduce the writer to the present reading public. Readers are requested to remember that the book is not a complete and comprehensive work since the writer is commenting only on what he has read and observed during his early years and expressed in writing.

Since Indian Tamil literature is different from Lankan Tamil literature, readers will find this best source material for further research on Lankan Tamil Literature and Culture.

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June 12, 2017

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Ilankayarkone



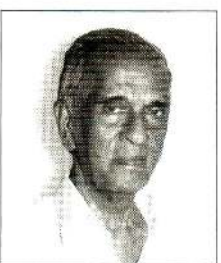
C.V. Vellupillai



K. Ganesh



K. Kailasapathy



S. Ganesalingan



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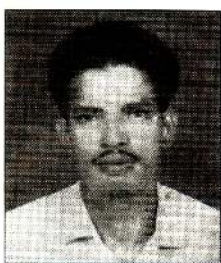
K. Deniel



Mahakavi



S. Ponnuthurai



Neelavanan

Part I



Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka

Introduction

One of the exciting stories waiting to be written is the evolution of an indigenous Tamil Literature in Sri Lanka – the creative and critical activities of the writers – who made this growth possible. Such a history will be a record of tribulation and triumph, and I feel it is time that someone attempted writing it. Most of the Tamil writers who have contributed to this development and advancement were, and are, fully engrossed in their work and problems that they have very little time for either introspection or elaborate documentation.

Under the circumstances the history of Ceylon Tamil Literature has hitherto largely been neglected. It is true that, in recent years, a few University teachers have evinced some interest in the subject, especially in the history of 19th century Tamil Literature. Some recent studies have endeavoured to probe into the provenance of the Modern Movement. But the main body of *Contemporary Tamil Writings in Sri Lanka* remains to be critically evaluated. Here is a rich field awaiting explorers.

One of my most pleasant memories of the years I spent on the editorial staff of *Thinakaran* (1957-1961) was my close association with Tamil writers, many of whom played a prominent part in the Movement for an indigenous Tamil Literature in this country. The young Writers who initiated this movement and responded to it in the mid fifties, could hardly have imagined that it would have grown to such proportions and that its participants would compel recognition for themselves in India and else where. No greater tribute could be paid to its basic soundness than that it has withstood several vicissitudes and established itself in the consciousness of the Tamil literature.

I first came to know K.S. Sivakumaran as a young contributor to the *Thinakaran*. He was then bubbling with ideas and full of enthusiasm. I myself was then fresh from the University and remember having many a discussion with him on literary issues. It is also quite possible that I had imperceptibly persuaded him to concentrate on literary criticism rather than ‘creative’ writing in which he was bent

upon at that time. Looking back over the years I am gratified to see that the little encouragement I might have given him has been of some benefit to him.

Perhaps, the best contribution of Sivakumaran has been his indefatigable effort to introduce and elucidate contemporary Tamil works to non Tamil readers, especially the English reading public. I consider it a great service rendered by him. In that sense he has greatly helped to bridge the gap between writers working in different languages. Indeed, he has done a tremendous lot to propagate the aims and achievements of the modern Ceylon Tamil writers. The scheme of the book is basically thematic but it is also roughly chronological in the sense it delineates the origins and development of a quarter century of our literature. Naturally there is a certain amount of overlapping in the different sections. But such overlaps supplement one another in fully treating the main theme of the book. The author has not merely described the Tamil Literary scene, but has, at times tried to understand and expound some of the underlying factors that shaped its features. He has, I believe, succeeded to a great extent in clarifying the broad principles that influenced the mainstream of our recent literary effusion. But he does not forget that his primary aim is to introduce Tamil writings as clearly and objectively as possible.

Sivakumaran is a prolific writer. Inevitably such voluminous and at times hurried writing tends to be uneven. The present selection at best serves only as a cross section of his varied writings. But I am happy to see that some of his important pieces have found a place in the present volume. Both as a translator and interpreter of Tamil literature, Sivakumaran has played a significant role. I wish him greater successes in the coming years and hope to see many more selections of his writings in print.

K. Kailasapathy

President, Jaffna Campus
University of Sri Lanka

Thirunelvely

Jaffna

01.10.1974

Foreword

Disraeli's dictum about 'Two Nations' needs amendment here. We are three nations, culturally specking. If there is little communication between the exclusively Sinhala-Speaking and the Tamil-Speaking the English educated tend to be a community apart. With the post – 1956 winds of change, the more enlightened sections, of the English educated, it is true, have attempted a conscious, sometimes painful adjustment. Nonetheless the largely linguist's barriers to communication remain. While the danger of mutual isolation to basic considerations of national well-being such as unity is too obvious to require reiteration, few among the English-educated, who are also fluent in either Sinhala or Tamil, have realized that this cultural situation offers them a challenging opportunity. They could act as productive links, as agents of communication.

Mr.K.S. Sivakumaran has seen this opportunity and, with commendable enterprises, done something positive to meet its challenge. He is a student of Tamil Literature and a keen observer of the Tamil cultural scene. For nearly twenty years now he has been writing in English on Tamil literary and cultural events and issues for the leading English language News Papers in this country – *Ceylon Daily News*, *Sunday Times* and *Ceylon Observer*. He has also contributed articles to more serious periodicals like *Community* and *New Ceylon Writing*.

He has not stopped there. While performing the useful function of introducing to the English press (and therefore, to English speaking Sinhalese) matters of interest on the Tamil Cultural scene, he has translated into Tamil the literary – critical work of Ceylonese critics published in the English – language press.

Mr. Sivakumaran who works for the S.L.B.C. is not only deeply devoted to Tamil culture but to those broader moral and artistic values which form the necessary foundation of all serious criticism.

Mervyn De Silva

Editor-in-Chief

The Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd.

Acknowledgements

The articles and reviews contained here were originally published in national newspapers and Journals. They appear here with only slight modifications- updating and adding more facts. I do not pretend, however, that this is an exhaustive survey of the contemporary Tamil literary scene. As far as the reviews go they are a personal choice; but major outputs have been commented on. If a few novels, collections of short stories, anthologies of poems and critical works have not been mentioned here it is because they were either not very important or that they could not be reviewed before the publication of this book. I have not discussed those writers who began writing about the beginning of this decade, if their writing were not available in book form. Having been a participant in the contemporary literary scene, I wrote these articles and reviews with first hand knowledge; but I have also relied on papers and books of the senior writers, who had critically analyzed our literary heritage. Their analysis appear to be correct for me. I have had the benefit of discussions with Dr. K. Kailasapathy and Dr.K. Sivathamby, who besides elucidating some of the problems, have at all times given me much encouragement when I wrote these articles and reviews. The pieces on 'Literary Trends' and 'Publications' included in this book were based on an article written by Dr. Sivathamby.

I am indebted to Mr. Mervyn de Silva (Editor in Chief, Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Limited) a versatile journalist of international repute for publishing most of the articles collected in this book (Since 1970) in the *Ceylon Daily News* and also for the encouraging foreword he has given me. My thanks are also due to Mr.S. Muthiah, formerly Features Editor, *Sunday Times of Ceylon*, Mr.C.R. Hensman, who edited *Community*, and Mrs. Yasmine Gooneratne who edits *New Ceylon Writing* for Publishing some of the articles in this book. A

few reviews included in this book were broadcast over the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation in the Arts Magazine Programme compiled and presented by Mr. Vernon Abeysekera, Mr. Reggie Siriwardane, Mr. G.K. Hathottuwegama, and presently by Mrs. Marion Abeysuria. My thanks are due to the Director General of Broadcasting, Mr. Ridgeway Tilekaratne in this respect. I cannot fail to pay a special tribute to Dr. K. Kailasapathy, President, Jaffna Campus, University of Sri Lanka for his introduction. He had been my mentor and guide for a long time and continues to advise me on many matters.

At this instance, I must not forget my father Mr. K. Sellanainar without whose encouragement and understanding, I would not have entered the literary field.

K.S. Sivakumaran

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Sri Lanka
06-10-1974

Sri Lankan Tamil Literary History

I. Ceylonese Attempts at Novel Writing

The Ceylonese did not depend on South Indian writings for their reading matters in Tamil even as early as the eighteen–nineties. This fact is brought out in a little Tamil book by Silayoor Selvarajan called *The Growth of the Tamil Novel in Ceylon* detailing the history of Tamil novels by Ceylonese writers from earliest times till 1962. As the scope of the book did not allow the author to critically evaluate the novels, he merely gives marginal comments in passing.

It all began in 1891, when S. Innacittamby of Trincomalee adapted into Tamil a Portuguese Novella called *Orzon and Valentine*. This book was the first Tamil novel of Ceylon.* Written almost eighty years ago this is also the second novel ever written in Tamil. *Pradapa Mudaliyar* written by S. Vedanayagam Pillai of South India in 1879 is considered the first attempt at novel writing in Tamil. But modern critics do not reckon the early attempts as novels proper, *Kamalambal* (1893) by Rajam Iyer of South India ranks as the first novel in the accepted sense.

Trincomalee also produced the second novelist as far as Ceylon Tamil Novelists were concerned. He was T. Saravanamuttu Pillai who wrote *Mohanangi* in 1895. Sri Lanka had to wait till 1924 for the appearance of the first woman novelist in Tamil, S. Sellammal. Her novel was called *Rasadurai*.

* Recently Mr.S.M. Kamaldeen has brought out an interesting fact to indicate that the first novel by a Ceylonese was *Asenbae Sarithiram* by Siddique Lebbe published in 1888.

Till Rev. Bro. Mary wrote his *Punithaseeli*, most novels written in Tamil in Ceylon were either adaptations or translations. He brought in the Ceylonese idiom with Jaffnese flavour. The year 1929 saw the publication of *Saraswathi* by the second woman novelist S. Rasa Ammal. Notable novels during the thirties were *Aranganayaki* (1934) an adaptation of Sir Walter Scott's *Kenilworth* and *Malai Velayil* a translation from Turgenev by S. Vythilingam.

Till the latter part of the nineteen thirties a spate of didactic novels were written. The contemporary social problems came to be treated only with M.A. Selvarathanam's novels. He wrote a number of novels on progressive themes, while H. Nalliah wrote on communal unity among Ceylonese (*Somawathi* – 1940).

During the fifties popular novelists came to the limelight. Most of their novels were historical, detective or romantic. Late Professor K. Kanapathipillai adapted European stories injecting local dialects. The Indian Tamil dialect spoken in the Up Country was given expression in S.M. Peer Mohamed's novels. K. Ganesh translated Mulk Raj Anand's novel *Untouchable* into Tamil.

But it was after 1956 that serious novels came to be written in Tamil by Ceylonese. Contemporary social themes were analytically treated by V.A. Rasaratnam, S. Ganeshalingan, Ilankeran, Nandi, Benedict Palan, C.V. Velupillai, S. Ponnuthurai, Yalpanam Devan and others.

Silayoor Selvarajan's book is very handy for a student to learn about our own attempts in the field of fiction. There is also an appendix giving the list of novels. The author has written on this subject in English in *Community – Ceylonese Writing – I*.

The author himself is a poet, talented broadcaster and a versatile journalist who deserves praise in bringing out this timely book.

II. From the Donoughmore Era to the End of the Sixties

The Advisory Panel on Tamil Literature of the Cultural Council of Sri Lanka released a publication which gives a comprehensive survey of Ceylonese attempts on poetry, short story and literary criticism, right from the Donoughmore era up to the end of the sixties. One would have wished the inclusion of Novel and Drama in its scope.

There are also interesting articles on the role of the cultural council, Ceylonese Muslim poets and the chronological growth of the Navalar movement. *Thoothu* (Sandeshaya) literature, the impact and continuity of ancient literature on modern literature, the growth and problems of Ceylonese magazine production in Tamil, besides poems and relevant quotations on Ceylonese idiom. This is a very useful publication to the student of Ceylonese Tamil Literature.

Writing on the growth of the short story K. Kailasapathy (Ambalattan) says that the Tamil short story both in Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu has lost its literary quality during the past few years as more people are writing novels under the influence of political, social and economic changes. Discussing the pioneers in the field the writer says that Ilankayarkone (The late N. Sivagnanasunderam) was greatly influenced by Western Literature. The other pioneers S. Vythilingam, S. Sivapathasundram, and Sambanthan depicted rural Sri Lanka in romantic tradition as much as Ilankayarkon did but were not deeply affected by Western Literature. These Writers enriched the Tamil prose style with their vivid imagery and imagination. They were essentially formalists who were interested in universal themes rather than indigenous characteristics. They did not see any direct relationship between literature and life. They acclaimed the short story as an integral part of an art form only. Their approach and attitude to the short story was lyrical.

The next generation of writers functioned as a 'Group' as opposed to being mere aesthetes. Their writings were published in a short-lived journal called *Marumalarchi* (The Renaissance). Its promoters were Navatkuliyoor Nadarajan (K.S. Nadarajah), T.S. Varatharajan (Varathar), S. Panchadsara Sarma and A.S. Murugananthan. But this

journal as every other little magazine failed to reach broad sections of the reading public. However, it produced some fine short story writers like A.S. Muruganathan, A.N. Kandasamy, Rajanayakan, Chokkan, V.A. Rasaratnam and Thalayadi Sabaratnam.

With Sri Lanka gaining Independence in 1948, racial and political problems became important. Two solutions were suggested for these problems. Communal oriented solutions based on race, language and past glories were put forward in national garb. The other solution was based on socialist principles. The progressive ideology attracted many young writers. The fifties saw the emergence of some of the finest short story writers in Tamil S. Ponnuthurai, Piththan, K. Daniel, Dominic Jeeva, S. Ganeshalingan, N.K. Raghunathan, M.S.M. Ramiah, Neervai Ponnian, Silayoor Selvarajan, Kavaloor Rasadurai and K.S. Ariyanayagam were some of them. These writers depicted the lives of the ordinary people living in their respective areas with human understanding and sympathy. In the same period many writers wrote love stories in the styles of the South Indian magazine.

The changes in 1956 led to the closer examination of social problems in perspective. It was during this period that the conflict between pundits and moderns took a sharp turn. Purists had to give way to inevitable change. The use of spoken idiom at last found a place in creative writing. Illangayarkone, Kanaga Senthinathan, V.A. Rasaratnam, Varathar and Chokkan who belonged to the earlier generation adapted themselves to the changes and wrote equally well in the modern idiom.

As Tamil was the medium of instruction even in the University as from 1960, more and more people started writing short stories. Unfortunately these younger writers modelled their short stories on the South Indian Magazine stories that flooded the market. In a way Ceylonese individuality began to be shaken up but only for a moment.

Because the mother tongue educated youth had certain limitations as far as global knowledge was concerned and because he had to depend on South Indian magazines for his understanding of this

knowledge, he churned out mediocre, romantic, escapist pieces as the average South Indian writer does. Nevertheless the Peradeniya Campus produced a few short story writers who were not totally “art for arts” sake people.

Among them late S. Kathirgamanathan, S. Yoganathan, Chempian Selvan, Nandhi, Sengai Azhliyan, Thuruvan, Kunthavai, Muthu Sivagnanam, Kohila, Angayan, Imayavan, Saranathan, M.Ponnampalam and Vamadevan were promising.

Besides them Benedict Balan, George Sandrasegaran, Abdus Samathu, Maruthoor Koththan and Saral Nadan also wrote from outside the University. But the quality of the short story in Tamil at present is not up to standard contends Dr. Kailasapathy. It is too early to judge the new writers who have come into the field during the past three or four years.

This publication also includes an article on the history of criticism in Sri Lanka written by Dr.K. Kailasapathy.

The pioneers in Tamil short story writing were also the leading lights in Tamil Literary criticism in Sri Lanka. People like S. Sivapathasunderam, S. Vythilingham and Ilangayrkone wrote on literature and criticism. Late Professor K. Kanapathipillai, late A.N. Kandasamy and K. Ganesh were also interested in writing about the purpose and social function of literature.

Modern literary criticism as a conscious effort began only after 1956, although the earlier efforts were commentaries and appreciations.

The neo-commentators and belles – letters writers were followed by the modern critics. Premjee , K. Kailasapathy. K. Sivathamby, Murugaiyan, A.J. Canagaratna, M. Sameem, Late M. Thalayasingham, Sillayoor Selvarajan, Kavaloor Rasadurai, Kanaga – Senthinathan and Eelathu Somu began to write seriously on contemporary literature[†]. M.S.M. Kamaldeen, J.M.M. Abdulkadar, A.M.A. Azeez are three

[†] Dr. Kailasapathy also mentions the names of Chempian Selvan, K.S. Sivakumaran, M. Ponnampalam, Shanmugam Sivalingan, V. Kandavanam and S.M.J. Faisdeen as critics involved in assessing modern and contemporary writings.

critics on Muslim contribution. Late M. Ramalingam, Mownaguru, M. Satgunam were and are interested in evaluating folk literature.

Writing on modern poetry, Murugaiyan singles out Ceylonese poets as shades better than their counterparts in Tamilnadu. Commenting on the late Somasundara Pulavar he says that the poet was essentially a traditionalist.

Murugaiyan also speaks about Navatkuliyoor Nadarajan (Dr.K.S.Nadaraja) and Navaliyoor Nadarasan (S. Nadarasa) and concludes that late A.N. Kandasamy who belonged to the same generation wrote with social consciousness. The next generation of poets was greatly influenced by local racial feelings at the beginning and later graduated themselves with more saner thinking. Neelavanan (Sinnadurai) and Thanthonrie Kavirayar (Sillayoor Selvarajan) are two other important poets. The new wave of poets include M.A. Nuhman, Shanmugam Sivalingan, Mownaguru, Subadran, R. Sivanandan and M. Ponnambalam.

III. *Oru Sila Vithi Ceivom* – Norms for Poetry

How to reconcile modernity with the conventional poetic tradition is a major question for the Tamil poets today. Conventionalism suffers stagnancy, true, but there is also New Poetry pseudo in character. A heavy burden of long standing tradition versus nihilistic New Poetry and the problems cropping of tradition and superficial admiration of the modernity are really symptoms of decadence. Why this state of decadence?

Poetry criticism is almost a neglected field in Tamil decries the voice of a poet, who is also a critic and what he says is true. This decadence is due to lack of competent critics to assess poetry in the contemporary sense. Even if we have academics and fine literary critics here, they have not so far taken poetry criticism seriously. So the critic in Murugaiyan has shown that poetry criticism is not elusive after all if certain fundamentals are observed.

He has laid down certain norms that can be followed both by poets and critics in writing and assessing poetry. These are described

in his book called *Oru Sila Vithi Ceivom* which is both a critique and a pace-setter for the avant-garde.

The first chapter is a sort of running commentary on modern poetry in Tamil practised in Sri Lanka and Tamilnadu. His measured comments on Somasundara Pulavar, Navat Kuliyoor Nadarasan, Navaliyoor Nadarasan and Mahakavi are to be noted. The new generation of poets who shone after 1956 (People like Neelavanan, Kasi Anandan, Rajabharati, Thanthontri Kavirayar and Murugaiyan) used poetry as a powerful weapon for socio-political movements.

The use of the language of the common speech, the selection of unconventional poetic themes and the innate desire for experimentation marked them as different from their counterparts in Tamilnadu.

The parallel literary scene in South India was characterized by three factors : the concept of Dravidianism, Musicality of rhythm and New Poetry (Verse Libre). Names like film lyricist Kannadasan, Suradha, Mudiarasan, Karunanidhi, Pitchai Moorthy, Vaideesveran, Gnanakoothan, Kambadasan and others are associated with South Indian Tamil poetry.

Murugaiyan analyses the question of simplicity, content, rhyme and other aspects in modern poetry in the rest of the chapters. For fear of digression I shall describe here only his comments on New Poetry. The author defines:

The harmonious blend of ideas, the structural pattern of imagination and fancy and the rhythmic quality are some of the characteristics of a good poem. When these and other elements find a balance of norms, what may be called a good poem evolves. The Tamil New Poetry totally ignores rhythm. As a result the equilibrium is lost and the whole thing falls like a pack of cards.

The New poetry ignores metre too, but metre is not something that cannot be mastered. Murugaiyan goes on to explain the metre in Tamil poetry as lucidly as possible and scientifically too, drawing illustrations from Tamil Poetry of different periods. The fundamental weakness of new poetry in Tamil is its complex rhyme. This discordant note coupled with their content make new poetry in Tamil a farce

says the author. The alien or strange themes in them discourage many to appreciate them.

Borrowed emotional experiences from alien social setups remain a fanciful exercise in Tamil Poetry. They lack the power to make and impact on the majority of the Tamil speaking people. Hence new poetry in Tamil is not a healthy outcome of a poetic tradition, laments the poet – critic.

When the west itself has revalued and devalued poets like Eliot, Pound and others, our imitators here still regret that the Tamil readers have not yet understood the masters of the West. According to Murugaiyan these new poets welcome hypocritical works as great. Defeatism and pessimism mark the essence of New Poetry in Tamil.

Murugaiyan compares the new poets to the character from the novel *Inside Mr. Enderby*. They are bathroom poets says the author. There are few other new poets who wrote on positive values but completely cut off from involvement. These are romantic dreams for a revolution. Fancy and dream, romantic poetry that is, should not be confused with true poetry warns another.

Awareness for positive development should be the first guideline says the author. The illusion that a bygone virtue alone is desirable should be dismissed. History of mankind is not a tragedy of demise. It is a story of positive values. The romantic agony and the melancholic pessimism should no more envelop the brooding poets, rules out the writer.

Rhyme and metre are only servants of the content. Techniques are there for art and not technique alone is art. Economy of words and images drawn from immediacy perceptible to the senses and which are intelligible to the readers is another factor that the poets should take into consideration, and finally clarity and not obscurity should be the keynote in modern poetry, points out Murugaiyan.

I have only introduced this book here, but the author says a great deal about poetry in general and Tamil poetry in particular, quite seriously. Aspects or elements of poetry are fully treated in this

book. Murugaiyan usually writes in an academic style, but here his style is compact and direct.

IV. Literary Trends 1956-1970

Pre-independence Literary attempts in Tamil by Ceylonese did not press for a Ceylonese identity as a part of a whole body of Tamil Literature. The lives of Tamil speaking Ceylonese were depicted as the continuity of Tamil heritage derived chiefly from the tradition of South Indian Literature.

The advancement seen in Ceylonese Tamil Literature after 1948 is an important landmark in the whole body of Tamil literature. The Pre- independence Tamil Literary movement was mainly interested in the advancement of the Tamil Language and religion.

Contemporary history of Tamil literature can be traced from 1948. Between 1948 and 1970 much has taken place. This period can be subdivided into three phases: 1948-1955, 1956-1965, 1966-1970 in line with the change of Government in a way. The story of the Tamil literary movement in Sri Lanka is the story of the strength gained by the progressive writers of this country.

The progressive literary movement in Tamil which began to function in full force during 1956-1963 was the primary force in determining what Ceylonese literature was. Under the flag of Ceylonese literature this movement brought into its fray all the Ceylonese Tamil writers. As the nature and scope of this movement shaped itself the national identity and realism in literature were emphasized.

Just as much as the progressive movement has its political base the anti- progressive movement too was politically oriented. By 1955, even the progressive writers began to isolate themselves for political reasons but their differences were not on fundamentals. Only the approaches were different. However, the literary scene became static. Socio-Political stimulant was required for literary development. Between 1965 and 1970, the progressive movement came to a standstill because of political changes. This break was temporary.

After the political and social changes of 1956 the literary activities point to a national consciousness. Knowledge of the Tamil literary publication in Sri Lanka will indicate the extent of *Ceylonese* in local Tamil writing. With the new political consciousness social awakening and economic changes, those speaking the Tamil Language in Sri Lanka started writing on those lines. People living in the Northern, Eastern, Central, North Western and Southern Provinces became the subject of literary works. This tendency was not seen earlier. This was an important event in the Island's Political and Literary histories. Higher education in mother tongue helped the Ceylonese in many fields to progress further in the post 1956 period. But this did not continue by 1965 as a result of a state of stagnancy. The desire to preserve the pre-1956 status quo was greatly felt during this period.

Due to conglomeration of many individual talents and farsightedness, the progressive movement began to flourish by 1955. Nevertheless those holding divergent views on national development functioned in unison because of common literary identity. Those pundits who possessed certificates for their erudity in the Tamil language and those philistines who did not possess such certificates got together and spoke of Ceylonism in Literature. The latter did not have any special awareness for Tamil Literature and yet they had creative ability and sensibility in them.

In the process progressive ideas, (which were bent of effecting changes) and concepts grown out of the influence of practical living clashed. This is an external manifestation of the social conflict that takes place at the grass root level. The idea for new social order is usually in conflict with the prevalent views on society. The invincible changes however are a different matter. As a result the reactionaries started opposing the changes and were very vehement in expressing them. This was the situation before 1970.

V. Publications 1956-1970

Despite heavy competition from South India and poor readership of Ceylonese books in Tamil in Sri Lanka, creative writing in Tamil has progressed very well here. It is encouraging to note that between 1948 and 1970 a total of seventy one novels, fifty seven collections of short stories, ninety eight anthologies of poetry and forty nine plays were published in Tamil by Ceylonese.

The quality of book production compares well with that of South India but the Tamilnadu's system of distribution is hard to beat.

Except for one publishing house, the others were not interested in publishing creative writing. About one thousand copies only were printed in each work and not all copies were sold out. Many writers had to bear the cost themselves. They even had a hand in the sale and distribution of their own books.

One reason for the poor sale of Ceylonese Tamil fiction is that these books are not tied up with the nation's educational system. Only a very few books by Ceylonese have been recommended as Tamil texts in higher forms and not a single Ceylonese fiction had been prescribed as a Tamil text. Even the libraries did not display Ceylonese books. Another reason why Ceylonese Tamil fiction is not widely read is because of its lack of popular appeal. The literary quality in these works discourages those readers nurtured in the South Indian tradition of escapist reading matter.

Books printed and published in South India were less expensive and reached a wider market. A total of fifteen Tamil novels were printed in India and out of these seven were written by one novelist. Only eight novelists published more than one novel and only five short story writers brought out more than one collection whereas between 1948 and 1955 only one collection of short stories was published during 1956-1965 as many as forty collections were brought out. Nearly seventeen poets have published more than one anthology. During 1955 - 1970 as many as forty three anthologies of poetry were published. Only two were printed in India. A majority of the plays published were historical, only a few plays can be said to be social.

Six dramas have been also published but only one one-act play saw the colour of the print. About nine folk plays were published during 1948-1966 on the initiative of Dr.S. Vithiananthan with the help of the Arts Council.

VI. Indian Magazines and Local Journals

One reason why there is an overwhelming fascination for Indian *Pop* Magazines in Tamil among Ceylonese is that these journals, as any other popular variety appeal to the cheap escapist nature in man. Many of the South Indian writers make up their stories rather than create them. Their art in well-made products are so deft and compelling that the reader enjoys them for their sheer flow of patterns. This is not to say that they are fine craftsmen of story telling. Serious short storywriters as usual are not well known, but the popular writers are household names.

Kumudam, *Anandavikadan*, *Kalki*, *Bommaï*, *Pesum Padam*, *Kalaimagal* and *Dinamani Kathir* are more avidly read by the middle class families in Tamil homes in Ceylon, than the locally produced journals. These South Indian magazines have captured a wide market in Ceylon. These journals call themselves “Magazines for the entire family” and in actual fact they primarily cater to the women-folk at home. Two of these are full-fledged film magazines. But most of them exploit the film scene.

Popular, as they are they have one thing in common. They are attractively produced with three colour cover and profuse illustrations. Serialized stories on escapist themes (historical romances, unrealistic upper-middle-class love stories), snippets, articles on and by film stars and publications, a few articles on religious events and various other interesting pieces fill the pages of these plush magazines. The editorials are invariably on South Indian Politics.

It is true that literary magazines like *Manithan*, *Thamarai*, *Depam*, *Gnanaratham*, *Kanaiyali*, *Yean*, *Kasadathapara* and *Semmalar* do come from Tamilnadu and earlier there were *Sarasvathi*, *Ezhuthu*

and *Nadai*; but a majority of the Tamil readers in Ceylon have not heard of these magazines at all.

I am not saying that little magazines as these can have a wide market. But at least they could be popularized if the influx of these so-called family magazines could be kept at a minimal level.

One may ask why on earth there should be a limitation on the flooding in of popular journals, when a majority of the people really love them. Love for journals that dissipate the taste, dull the thinking power, mould an escapist character divorced from contemporary realities, is as damaging as a cultural onslaught on a people whose social, political, economic and even linguistic (different dialects) differences are much marked. It is for this reason, in the national interest that the Tamil people in Ceylon should not be allowed to live in the dream world as it were of South India.

Fortunately the Tamil magazines produced locally are to a great extent devoid of these South Indian *delicacies*. But the tragedy is that nobody reads them except the writers, who write to these magazines. Middle class Tamil homes in Ceylon will subscribe to even three or more South Indian weeklies than buy the locally produced monthlies.

Earlier in Sri Lanka there were *Tenaruvi*, *Katpakam*, *Eelachudar*, *Anjali*, *Malar*, *Viveki*, *Maragatham* and other journals devoted to contemporary literature.

Now names of Lanka's rivers figure prominently in Local Tamil Journalism, *MaVeli* (Mahaveli), edited by C.V. Velupillai and *Kalani* (Kelani) published from Kilinochchi are two magazines which speak of national integration. Besides these two there are *Anu*, *Poorani*, *Kumaran*, *Thamil Amutham*, *Sirithiran*, *Mallikai* and *Thayakam* all semi serious and literary and *Kalagam*, *Geetha*, *Kathambam* and *Manikam* in the pulp teenage fashion. So we find a variety of Tamil magazines to cater to the needy, yet Tamilnadu journals like *Kumudam*, *Dinamani Kathir*, *Ananda Vikatan*, and *Kalki* hold sway in Tamil speaking homes. State assistance to local magazine production is essential to popularize our own talents. State subsidy, provision of

newsprint, government advertisements are some ways to encourage local magazine production – Sinhala, Tamil or English.

A rewarding attempt would be to publish limited varieties of magazines, each specialising in a particular field. By such a method, more people can be induced to buy magazines which are of special interest to the reader. One magazine can be devoted to short stories, another to criticism of the arts yet another to novels and so on. There can be academically bent journals for students in higher forms. As a matter of fact, a periodical called *Chinthanai* was published in this vein. Attempts are made to revive this journal. *Valarmathi* is now published to cater to the students.

Without adequate finance, no such noble ventures can materialize. It is here that the industrialists should come forward voluntarily to patronise these magazines. Can this be done?

VII. A Southern Attempt

Down the Southern beat, twelve miles east of Matara lies Dickwella. Right in the centre of this village is an area of one hundred and fifty acres live a Muslim Community of nearly three thousand five hundred people. They call their dwelling area Yonahapura. They live like Muslims, as in any other area and also serve a useful purpose in assimilating and interpreting their immediate environ which is the Ruhunu Sinhala Culture, to the others. These interpretations come in the Tamil language by way of translations and original writings in modern idiom. Those in the North and East are able to know and feel and even react to the Southern way of life through such writings. Because these Muslim youths are bilingual (Sinhala and Tamil) the Tamil reader benefits immensely. So we find pockets of literary activities in places like Dickwella.

Dickwella Writers' Association has brought out their second publication "Poo" (flower in Tamil). We find quite a few interesting articles in this issue.

Muslim contribution to Sinhala Literature by M.H.M. Shums, *The Origin of Dickwella* by N.Hamsa Muthammedu, *Ceylonse Muslims*

in the field of Trade: by M.A. Inayathulah, and *Short Stories* by S.I.M. Hamza, Dickwella Kamal and poems by P.M. Abdul Sattar, Yonahapura Hamza and Vallai Cheelan, literary gossip by M.J.M. Anwar Khan and quotes from local Tamil writers are quite noteworthy and useful reading.

VIII. Hill Country Writings

C.V. Velupillai a hill country Ceylonese is one writer who has contributed substantially to the literary awakening among Tamil writers of that region.

Velupillai, true, writes in English (Born To Labour 1970) but most of his writings have been translated into Tamil as well. He writes for the last thirty five years and yet he says that he is not a poet, nor a writer: "The subject I have chosen made me what I am". He is modest and the younger group of writers respect him.

The hill country Ceylonese writers in Tamil often complain that their counterparts living in other parts of the island do not acknowledge their literary merit. It is not that the critics do not want to consider the literary talents of the Up-country Tamils, but it is just that adequate books are not available for them to evaluate. Nor has there been an attempt made to trace the nascent literary development of the Ceylonese of recent Indian Origin living particularly in the hill country. The Tamil intelligentsia in Ceylon is opposed to South Indian infiltration of ideas through cheap "pop" Magazines. But it is by no means anti-Indian. In fact it welcomes saner and intellectual writings of the Indians. In the same way the Ceylon Tamil writers are not particularly against Tamils of Indian origin in Ceylon, so long as they are rooted in Sri Lanka. ‡ For the past half a century Ceylonese from the hill country have been writing in Tamil. Journals like *Loka Upakari*, *Amirtha Gunabodini*,

‡ This is based on a talk delivered by Mr.C.V.Velupillai. But during the last five or six years, young people hailing from the hill country have shown tremendous progress in their thinking and creativity and a good many of them have had no formal education. Among the graduates, particular mention should be made of Vamadevan, Mariathas and M.Nithiyyananthan. Benedict Balan, although from Jaffna, has written an excellent novel on estate life called Chonthakaran.

Anantha Bodini, Mahavikade Thutan, Navakasakthi, Modern Review and *Indian Review* were some of the Indian Journals which were read by the Ceylonese, particularly those living in the up-country. In fact late C. Subramaniam, R. Ramiah and Vettivel wrote to some of these South Indian Journals. From Matale there was Abdul Kadif who wrote poetry in the early period. Modelling their verses on South Indian poems people like Periampillai, S.S. Nathan, Jabar, Kanthasamy and Emden A. Wijeratne wrote on Adam's Peak and the races at Nuwara Eliya, Radella and Peradeniya. C.V. Velupillai and K. Ganesh were inspired by Tagore and Sorajinidevi and they wrote very frequently. By 1934 the Tamil daily *Veerakesari* came to be published. A. Sithamparanatha Pavalar wrote the life history of Lord Buddha under the title "*Baudha Dhayana*". K. Ganesh translated one of Mulk Raj Anand's novels and C.V. Velupillai wrote in English a verse drama called *Pathmajani*. The forties saw the spread of learning and this induced many to write. C.V. Velupillai, P. Krishnasamy, Thiruchenthuran, Raffael, M.S. M. Ramiah, Thiagarajan, Panneerselvam, Thelivathai Joseph, Thamil Oviaan and others wrote a number of stories depicting the life in the tea gardens. *Theyilai Thottathilae, Valvottore Valvu* and *Valipokkan* all by Velupillai were published during this period. K. Ganesh wrote fine poems in English which credited the appreciation from the Japanese Monarchy. T.M. Peer Mohamed, Abbas, N.S. Nathan, late Periasamy were some others who merited attention. After 1957 progressive themes were handled by these writers. They now turned their attention on the social conditions of the people living in the Estate. Thennavan Kumaran, Rama Subramaniam, M. Sivalingam, Sikkana Raj, Mallikai Kumar, Eela Kumar, Isak, C.S. Kanthie, Karmegam, Ra. Sivalingam, K. Ramachandran, S. Visvaratnam and Saral Nadan are some of these writers. *Kurinjipoo, Kurinji Malar, Thuvanam, Thayakam, Malainattu Chirukathaikal*, and *Born to Labour* are some of the collections that have been published recently.

Reviews

I. Novels

1. The First Four Novels of S. Ganeshalingan

I will not be exaggerating when I say that Ceylonese Tamil writers like S. Ganeshalingan write realistic social novels, better than their counterparts in South India. Local writers write with a sense of realism. They are also aware of the root causes of social problems. They analyse them in a way that is acceptable to all. Their novels provide intellectual reading-fare.

Ganeshalingan has so far written six novels and brought out three collections. His anthologies of short stories are: *Nallavan* (The Good Man) *Ore Inam* (The Same Class) and *Sangamam* (The Merging). His five novels are better than his short stories, because they are more readable, apart from the seriousness of their content.

He first wrote *Neenda Payanam* (The Long Journey) followed by *Sadangu* (The Customs), *Sevvanam* (The Crimson Sky), *Tharaiyum Tharakaiyum* (The Earth and the Star), *Por Kolam* (The War Dress) and *Manum Makkalum* (The Soil and the People). Ganeshalingan is associated with *Kumaran*, a monthly in the left-wing tradition.

Neenda Payanam is a novel about the gradual changes that take place in a small village in Jaffna. The changes are mainly social and political. The social changes are in relation to the awakening of the so called low caste people in their village. The depressed class people, so called, tear down the barricades of man-imposed social values which are rooted in religious beliefs and eventually they become strong enough to gain representation in their own local authorities, viz,

Village Council. In their long journey towards social and political emancipation the depressed class people have had to strive for three long years. It is their struggle that is described in this novel.

This is a novel on the problem of caste. The caste problem cannot be said to have been totally eradicated. It exists in some form or other in all grades of society. The irony is that even among the so called low caste people, a kind of superiority of one caste or another exists as depicted in the novel, for instance. There is sincerity in the novel. The author's main concern is to depict and record with compassion the sordid life led by this particular class of people. That way he has succeeded in his attempt. It is realistic in tone, narrative in style, and authentic in description. The author's keen power of observation of humdrum events in the lives of a group of people in the down-trodden class in society is well brought out.

The story begins when a Sembattu Pallar caste boy is beaten up by Vellalar caste youths in a temple festival for having slept in the temple premises allocated to the Vellalar or high caste. In the meantime the hero's love interest is also described. He has three women associating with him. One of them belongs to a high caste, another of his own caste and the third also of the same caste as he is, but a shade lower than his, called Sembattu Pallar. By making his hero marry the latter girl, the author wants to stress the fact that reformation of society takes place first in his own home. In describing the love sequences, the author's lyrical description is beautiful and poetic. Even in other places the limpid and simple style of the author contributes to the readability of the novel. Employment of polished colloquial language adds colour to the narrative. There is no worked-up sentimentalism in the novel. Every incident seems plausible enough. But I must add that some incidents seem to have been rather long drawn, as for instance, the private lives of certain characters in the novel, which are not of major importance.

From the point of view of readability the novel is interesting. Even commonplace incidents assume significance in the novel. From the

point of view of sincerity of purpose, the author must be congratulated for having come forward to treat boldly this subject.

Ganeshalingan has depicted well fully certain major aspects of life and living of the untouchables. If this novel, *Neenda Payanam* can be translated into Sinhala or English it will enable non-Tamil readers to learn and know about the lives of this particular Pallar community among the Tamils in Ceylon. The novel has all the potentialities to be filmed as a lyrical cinema like the *Gamperaliya*.

Sadangu in Tamil means ceremonies or rituals and in this particular context it means marriage ceremonies. This second novel of Ganeshalingan copiously records all possible ceremonies, customs and observations associated with an average Jaffna, Hindu, Rural wedding. So to one who is not familiar with all these, this book will also serve as a reference book.

Among many other things, the novelist laughs at the foolhardiness of certain conservative people, who only look to the grandiloquence of custom and ceremonies but ignore the susceptibilities and compatibilities of the marriage partners before arranging marriages for them. In other words the writer scoffs at the parents who refuse to see a different generation emerging. According to him, the parents strive hard to thrust their own concepts of life, rooted in a feudal set up, thereby doing a lot of damage not only to their off-spring but also to themselves.

In the words of the novelist, the human emotions or inward life of partners are never considered and only the outward marriage observations are given importance among upper classes in a feudal society although such a feudal society is crumbling. The emotional conflicts of others caught in its whirlpool remain still complex. Man's day to day life is written in the conventional form with a small difference. It has a potted political history of Ceylon in its narration from 1956 onwards.

Dr.K. Sivathamby has written a fairly lengthy foreword to this novel, highlighting its sociological significance.

Dr. Sivathamby underlines the fact that the caste system is the axis of the Indian feudal society. He says that the caste system evolved out of Vedic Aryan classifications of caste and the then existing Tribal groups. He goes on to say that the Ceylonese feudal set up is quite different from the Indian one and that even in Ceylon the set up among the Tamils also varies from place to place, as for instance between Jaffna and Batticaloa. Illustrating further he says that though the four divisions of caste have been accepted as the influence of Hinduism, the Brahmins are of no economic importance and on the contrary the peasants or farmers as land-owners are important. As agriculture had been the primary economy and as the farmers were mainly Hindus and as there was an unrelented contact between South India and Jaffna, the society was based on the caste system. There are castes in Jaffna which are not to be found in South India. Why the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British could not totally change the Jaffna Society was because of the sorry system of caste practised there. Dr. Sivathamby writes more. He gives valuable information regarding the social patterns of the Jaffna Tamils analysed from a Marxist viewpoint.

In short this novel is a comment on the changing social values of a progressive society. But whether the political situations have a motivating impact on the characters is not clearly drawn by the novelist and further the characters in this novel are not truly representative of a feudal society that the novelist speaks of. To my mind they are representatives of a middle class society. But this is a matter of opinion. Ganeshalingan's canvas though limited in its breadth - yet is deep enough with a psychological dimension. This book not merely tells a grave story in a realistic manner, but it also makes people approach contemporary mal-adjustment in an intelligible and righteous way.

This novel is yet another example to show that Ceylonese Tamil writers are on the right track as opposed to their innumerable counterparts in South India, a majority of whom churn out chunks of mass escapist literature.

Sevvanam translated as *The Crimson Sky* is the third novel written by Ganeshalingan. This is a socio-political novel with a contemporary setting. It may even be described as a contemporary historical novel as Dr.K. Kailasapathy says in his foreword. The novel does not come to a definite end and this is a notable thing I observed. It centers on an upper-middle class businessman who shot up to accumulating wealth suddenly by forces of political and social changes. His foil is a university educated Trade Unionist who prefers to associate himself with the proletariat. There is also a female secretary attached to a Press, and the extravagant wife of the businessman providing feminine interest in the story.

The novelist suggests a Marxist solution to eradicate all evils in society. As a readable book the novel is very absorbing and stimulating. Bourgeois morals, sex, love, wealth, affluence, politics, society - in fact every influential factor that makes up life and living are unobtrusively touched by the author. There are certain failings in the novel, as for instance, in character delineation and absence of experimentation in structure. But then the form is determined by the content. At best levels an artist's perceptive mind is at work in this book. The narrative skill of the author is as usual abundantly manifest throughout the novel.

The Fourth novel by Ganeshalingan is called (*The Earth and the Star*) - *Tharaiyum Tarakaiyum*. Ganeshalingan selects particular phases in local contemporary history as the background scenes for his novels. In the novel under review, the ugly scenes of 1958 form the backdrop. But it remains only as background scene because the novel is about something else. One can even call this an explanatory novel explaining the theory that love, sex and married life do not exist in an idealistic sense, and that happiness in married life is largely a byword for affluence. Apart from the main theme, the novel also condemns the attitude of the lower middle class or working class families on trying to ape the ways and manners of the richer classes. This novel realistically portrays life among the lower middle class Jaffna Tamil families living in Colombo for purpose of employment. From another level the novel also analyses the psychology of women against that of

men in relation to matters like sex and love. The hero has experiences with three women. The main character is drawn in an effective way. In the beginning of the novel he is an unemployed village youth in Colombo, lost in love with a rich girl in his native place. As the story develops he finds employment in the Government Service as a temporary clerk. The novel shows his rise to the middle class status and his attempt to keep in line with the rest of the bourgeois life and his difficulty in facing problems confronting him because of his artificial status. The middle class man in a society of classes, the Tamil clerical servant class three and the attendant economic problems. These are the basic elements in the novel that the novelist takes for dissection and analysis. His conclusions may seem radical in a liberal set up but it is the bold point of view of the writer and the interesting manner in which he has written the story that deserves praise. I will describe Ganeshalingan's novel "The Earth and the Star" as a minor classic in Tamil.

2. First Novel by Ilankeeran in Book Form

Thentralum Puyalum is the first novel by Ilankeeran that had a Ceylonese setting. His earlier novels were set abroad. This novel was the first of a series of realistic portrayals of contemporary Tamil and Muslim societies in Sri Lanka begun by Ilankeeran after 1956. Later novels such as *Ingirunthu Enge*, *Kalam Marukirathu* and *Avalukku Oru Velai Vendum* have been serialised in newspapers and they have not appeared in book form yet. *Neethyae Nee Kerl* is his second novel in book form.

Ilankeeran is the non-de-plume of Zubair, a Jaffna Muslim who has at different periods lived in South India and Malaysia. He published for a short time a literary magazine, called *Maragatham*, which died a natural death, due to inadequate financial support. Ilankeeran who is presently editing *Janavegam*, is one of the finest political analysts in the Tamil Language. He had earlier edited *Tholilalie*, another political weekly.

Ilankeeran - novelist and journalist - is himself a synthesis of both the old and the new. He is the product of the class struggle and a living force of what may be called progressivism. As a Marxist writer and a member of the proletarian social stratum, Ilankeeran has identified himself as a progressive writer. Some such prior knowledge of this novelist's deepest convictions is necessary to enable readers to approach his work with understanding. Whatever his political beliefs may be, Ilankeeran is far above his contemporaries in South India as a novelist, both in his ideas and in his artistic interpretations of them. He cannot be dismissed, as many others can, as a mere magazine story writer, catering to housewives and to adolescent tastes. He has shown a steady advance in his development as a mature writer parallel to the improvement and progress of the Tamil novel as a literary form.

Thentralum Puyalum (The Breeze and the Storm) reveals the attitudes of a Ceylon Tamil writer of ability to certain problems in contemporary society. It may not be a major novel, but it records the acute observations of a serious and progressive thinker.

The message of the novel is imparted through the words and actions of the characters involved. The plot, as a love story, has its interest, but the writer's ideas, his philosophy of life carry the greatest weight. The resulting stiffness and inadequate characterisation causes the novel to fall short of being an outstanding piece of artistic, creative work. The story centers on a lower middle class family in Jaffna, which is torn apart by conflicting values. Balu, the son, falls in love with a rich and beautiful girl in Colombo, where he is searching for employment. She assures him of her faithfulness and the passionate relationship that develops results in the girl, Manon's pregnancy. Her parents, on hearing of this take steps to bring about an abortion and marry her hastily to a cousin possessed of the status, education and wealth that makes him a suitable husband for their daughter. This unexpected betrayal sours Balu's attitude to life, and fallen a victim to both mental and physical disease, he dies. The novel tries to show that the failure of this love is caused by class distinctions, and the differences they create in the mentality of the two opposing classes -

the rich and the poor, “high society” and the middle classes. The love affair of Balu and Manon, skillfully handled by the author, begins like a gentle breeze and ends in a storm.

Another story runs parallel to this - the love of Balu’s sister, Thangam, for a neighbour of low caste, Poopathi. In spite of severe opposition, the attachment deepens between them, giving them the strength to make sacrifices for Balu, and ultimately the courage to venture on marriage. The contrast between the two relationships is emphasised in the novel through Natarajan, a young friend of Balu and Poopathi, who is the mouthpiece for the novelist’s progressive ideas. Natarajan is pictured as a mature young man and his comments on events as they take place draw their standard from the ideals of common humanity and the self respect of the individual.

Colombo life is seen as opulent and false. In his search for employment, Balu encounters corruption and insincerity. He writes to Poopathi - “A bribe is the pre-requisite for a job, either in the Government or in the Mercantile sector. The so called “Great ones” in Colombo who promised to find me a job have hearts as thin as custard, although their posts and bungalows are big....” Commenting on the alien culture and sophistication that have infiltrated the behaviour and attitudes of Tamils in “high society”, the novelist makes his attack through Natarajan: “The great ones in our Tamil society have their names in Tamil, but their minds are Anglicised. Their dress, style, and manners are Americanised. No wonder the Tamil atmosphere cannot be sensed in their homes. Their children won’t call them Amma and Aiyah - mother and father - in sweet Tamil. It is amusing to hear them speaking at meetings and at public places as the saviours of Tamil culture and civilisation are really flourishing? They are in the homes, minds, and lives of the poor Tamils. Certainly not in the bungalows of eminent folk” Sometimes, unfortunately, an excellent satire becomes shrill propaganda: “The hard earned money won by the toil of labourers and workers is spent on cosmetics imported from the West. This foul capitalist society produces only a superficial, beauty conscious class that overwhelms the country in a useless flood. The world’s capitalist

countries rob our island of its national wealth” - these are Natarajan’s thoughts when on a fine day, he and Poopathy sit in Victoria Park and watch an affluent social class taking its ease.

But social classes are, however, viewed with a critical eye. Balu’s discomfort at Colombo’s easy manners, and the true reason for it are made clear when he visits Manon’s home as a tutor, and is entertained by her with a freedom that would have been impossible to think of in Jaffna. “Balu was hungry, but he did not eat too much at her house: the false pride of the middle classes prevented him from doing so. When he tells Natarajan of Manon’s beauty, pride, status, wealth and ability his friend retorts.

“You have now left a summer place for a place of winter. You may be glad of it. But be careful the cold might be intense enough to freeze you to death.” As Balu becomes more and more fascinated by Manon, he is influenced by her to an extent that brings the novelist’s comment - As Balu moved in high society his mentality began to acquire a new shape. It is environment that shapes our ideas and our behaviour, Naratajan is pessimistic about the future of the Balu - Manon relationship.

“Love may succeed against caste barriers, but it is difficult to go against differences of status. People like us - the Middle Class - are obsessed with caste feeling; people like Manon’s parents are obsessed by status consciousness. There is no doubt, however, that it is in the people like us that Ilankeeran finds positive hope for the future. Only those of us in the Middle Class give importance to love, morals, shame, and good behaviour, the great ones do not care for these. They have different meanings for such terms in their dictionaries. They are not worried about all these things. They are interested only in seeing that nothing obstructs their comfort. In the struggle of the poor, the meaning of life is established. There are so many people like us. Their lives are not pleasant or comfortable like the Galle Face Promenade. The storm that blows over you blows over them also. But they are not disheartened. They spend their lives in battle. They fight for food, clothing and shelter. It is the battle for these three that is the history

of mankind. And again, many think of life as a mirror, not a river. If swum with confidence, the coast appears. Love can come and go, but life remains.....”

Within this general examination of social conflict, particular evils are pinpointed. The difficulties placed in the way of intelligent and sincere young people by the barriers of caste are examined in the Thangam - Poopathi relationship, between a low caste person like Poopathi and a high caste girl like Thangam it is only love that is possible. But they cannot take their love inside the place of marriage ... The wall named “Caste” has not yet crumbled. Poopathi knew well that this love might not, succeed. He expressed the conflict of his emotions to Thangam who replied, “I can forget you only if the moon in the sky comes down to play on the earth. The dowry system is condemned by Naratajan to Balu. It is not only you Balu, many people are distracted by the dowry. Moneyed people do not worry. They have everything that is necessary. The dowry system is one of the many curses in our society. The so called great ones of our community, have they taken any steps to destroy this horrible system, and to free the lamenting lasses from the barricades of adulthood? The dowry is a murderous system, for it breaks the lives of maids.” The debate is carried from words to the action of the novel.

When Balu returns to Jaffana, his father upbraids him, and tells him of Thangam’s intimacy with Poopathi. Balu reflects on his sister’s situation and his own, on the one hand the barrier of caste, on the other the barrier of status and wealth. He does not even consider however, whether there exists real compatibility of temperament between Manon and himself. Thangam, on the other hand, never thinks about the feasibility of her marriage to Poopathi, and he is in his turn, unable to forget her, although he is fully aware of the social implications of a marriage with her. Society around them regards them with contempt, and when Poopathi is assaulted by a thug who bears him a personal grudge, the neighbourhood in general think him suitably punished for his illicit love for a high caste girl. Though Thangam is moved to near despair by this event, Poopathi reacts to

the experience with courage and without self-pity. In a letter to Balu, he writes “Man has developed in knowledge and culture. The fact that I was attacked that day shows how little our Tamil community has developed. “Laugh and the world laughs with you, cry and cry alone”, it said. That day I laughed when I was beaten. No one wept or laughed with me though I laughed aloud I wept within myself. I do not expect the world to weep with me.”

In his search for positives to place against the evils in society, the author finds part of his answer in personal relationship. As confidence in parental wisdom and authority crumbles it is affection between sincere and whole personalities that must replace it” “There is no relationship between age and knowledge” says Natarajan. Our parents’ age does not necessarily imply that they are wise or correct in their actions. It is against the laws of human justice and civilization to allow the spread of divisions of caste, kind, and community Parents look to caste, kind, and religion when arranging marriages for their children. But the philosophy of conjugal love does not rest on these. It rests on the physical and mental development of the partners, their familiarity with domestic matters, compatibility, their love for each other and capacity to live harmoniously together. But in the last resort, if love fails also then the fighter must look within him for strength to alter the shape of society so that it will allow the freedom and self respect of every man; “Though he is of low caste, Poopathi is a noble man, Balu. He is prepared to sacrifice his love in your interest, though it might ruin his life You do not have the same heart Poopathi’s is not like yours. If he had married Thangam, the caste and dowry systems would have received a great blow, for the marriage would announce the progressive world that is developing. Their love and marriage would be a challenge to society as it is and indicate the pattern of coming changes Love is only an important aspect of life and not life itself. One could go on living after failing in love, and accomplish many things

Only in novels and epics do you find women who sacrifice wealth and comfort for love. In everyday life, seldom can you find one. Even

if she shares his miseries and turbulent life with her husband, she will not remain happy and satisfied. She will only deceive herself, and gradually life will become a pretence, hiding disgust. It is foolish to expect those used to comfortable living to live miserable lives for love.

Our society is split into many divisions the thoughts ideas, justice, culture and morals of upper class society are different from ours. Those who say that love has the power to weld the likes and dislikes of these conflicting classes into one, are mere romantics not realists. If their theory is correct, all the poor will begin to love the rich. It is absurd to be angry with love, and meaningless to speak ill of it. The love of people of similar status succeeds while that of others fails. The society of our time with its class distinctions, should radically change and only in a classless society could one sing the song of freedom”

The novel ends with the marriage of Thangam and Poopaathi and the death of her conservative father, from shock. Balu dies too, and Natarajan promises to look after his widowed mother. Progressive ideology thus triumphs at the close. Ilankeeran's style gives his ideas easy and forceful expression. *Thentralum Puyalum* has many faults as a piece of literary craftsmanship, but its virtue is its great sincerity.

3. A Note on K. Daniel's *Panchamar*

K. Daniel has brought out two collections of short stories and a novel. Although he has serialized a novel in a magazine earlier, his prize winning *Panchamar* is his first novel in book form. This book is more than a contemporary historical fiction. It is a documented piece describing the history of the representative Jaffna people in the first part of this decade: the oppressed in the Jaffna community rise up in arms to challenge the feudal set up. The happenings behind the cajan fences in Jaffna are described to us, and we living in other part of Sri Lanka can now see for ourselves what is actually wrong with the Tamil Community.

4. A Novel from the Wannai

A very readable first novel in Tamil on some aspects of a hamlet in the Wannai has come our way. It is fiction, but the surroundings of Thanneer Murippu are so authentically captured, that one could even take it as a case study for sociology, but unfortunately the writer A. Balamanoharan pays little attention to the social or economic aspects of the theme of the novel. He is rather preoccupied with his characters, (Particularly the heroine Pathanjali), moulded in an idealistic framework than the social aspect of the novelist's idealism of a perfect world, without urban associations, and prevents her from emerging as a truly 20th century character.

This is not to say, that the novel is bad in itself. We have to consider two factors, before passing judgment: One, this is the first novel of this young writer. Two, it is an offbeat novel in local Tamil writing, because the location and events in the story are new to the urban Tamil reader. We must congratulate the author, for not being ashamed (as most new writers influenced by teenage magazines from Tamil Nadu would be, for they write about upper middle class city types) to write about the simple life of jungle dwellers. So, in his first novel itself, the writer had plunged into the description of a world that is hardly known to the sophisticated amongst us.

The episode where the heroine gets entangled in adultery is highlighted in the novel; the novelist's effort for the most part, is spent on clearing her, from any possible moral onslaught by an urban society. In fact he is trying to compare her with that bird (*Nilakili*) which does not fly well above ground level. According to Balamanoharan, Pathanjali should have continued to live like that bird without trying to fly. New knowledge through magazines had been responsible for her guilt complex, says the novelist. He resolves her problem, however by ending the novel on a positive note for her; the child born to her in adultery resembles her husband – so there is no problem.

Nilakaili lacks polish although it is readable. This is partly due to the writer's limited vision. Balamanoharan seems to be obsessed with the idea of an ideal pure world where modernity has no place. This

is very clear in the novel. Nostalgic yearnings for the past, is a kind of idealism and not progressive in the light of modern happenings right round the world, where youth plays an important part. Nilakili is actually a halfway house between South Indian way of sentimental writing – Ahilan, Parthasarathy, Varatharasan – and local sentimental writing. Sentiment in itself is not a bad thing, but it should be genuine and should be in its right place. But these are shortcomings, which the author can easily overcome soon. Instead of being moved by the behaviour of the characters he himself has created, Balamanoharan can benefit, if he sees the motivation of his characters in a social background. After all, is it not true that social setups account for the peculiarities of Social relationships? This novel has received an award for 1973.

5. Five Novels

What is known as the novella or Novelette has become a convenient genre for most writers in Tamil here as the short story proves to be a much demanding art form than the novel. It requires meticulous craftsmanship to write a neat good short story as it has got to be a depiction of a single experience or incident; and as such the short story has its limitations. Its canvas is not broad enough to accommodate the complexity of modern life in it. So in Tamil too, novellas have gained currency. S. Yoganathan has written five such novellas. These are now collected together in a book form. Ten years ago while being a student in the University, he brought out a collection of short stories. Yoganathan is now a Divisional Revenue Officer.

Oli Namakku Vendum (We need light) is the theme running through in Yoganathan's five novellas, although there is not a single story by that title. What the actual titles translate into English are: *Twenty Years and Three Desires*, *A Word called Comradeship*, *Janaki*, *That Day should Come* and *Thiruchittampalam*. These were written between 1963 and 1972. *A Word called Comradeship* is being translated in word languages under the UNESCO scheme. *Twenty Years and Three Desires* is to be published in Sinhala very soon.

The sixties brought into the fore a host of Tamil medium graduates who excelled in the field of writing. Some of them were very prominent: Late S. Kathirgamanathan, S. Yoganathan, A. Kailasanathan, K. Gunarasa, A. Rajagopal, A. Shanmugathas, K.Navasothy and Muthu Sivaganam. But not all writers were alive to contemporary or were they capable of comprehending their immediate environment and society. Most singled out varsity life as a separate experience and indulged in cynical or pessimistic harbourings . Undergraduates like Yoganathan and Kathirgamanathan however saw Varsity life as something similar to the larger life outside. The conflicts within the campus were actually conflicts in society itself. Yoganathan understood this and brought in typical characters in his writings to prove his point.

Discouraging self-centeredness as part of the individualistic trend and emphasizing the need for collective struggle to bring in social justice ; need for educational reforms to suit the changing society, the urgency to mould conservative behaviour – these are the underlying themes in Yoganathan’s novellas. *Janaki*, a Brahmin Girl throws away conservatism aside to adapt herself to earn a living not only for herself but her widowed mother as well. The vociferous brother of hers had already thrown away his rituals, to become a cleaner in a lorry. Janaki had to learn what life was by joining a Nurses’ Training School where her mentor was a girl from the depressed class. If conservatism and hypocrisy are attacked in this story in *Twenty Years and Three Desires*, the writer is bringing in through a dialogue between different temperamental people in the campus a consciousness for social reality; the characters are all typical varsity characters. Dammica (Daughter of Middle Class peasant) Sumanadasa (Son of an old woman who earns a living by working in a building site) Dharmapala (A son of a farmer) and Sivakumar (Son of a petty shop keeper) represent different social strata, race, temperament and ideas. Self-centeredness and insular thinking meet tragic ending particularly when broader and united effort is required to bring good to the under privileged. This is obvious in the novella. But, here is the writer’s analytical realism as Raymond Williams would have meant it and not mere photographic

realism. The solidarity theme is recurring in the other story called *A Word Called Comradeship*. As said earlier the need for more realistic educational policy (this has come now) is called for in the fourth novella, *That Day should Come*. The last novelette *Thiruchittampalam* is again calling for positive attitude towards life and discourages self pity. Yoganathan's book is well timed. It carries a foreword by Dr. K. Kailasapathy. A prize for 1973 literary award had been given for this collection.

6. The Indian Connection

A short novel *Veedu Yarukku* by Kavaloor Rasathurai throws much light on the comical situation of the Tamils living in the metropolis. It is comical at the surface but a pointer on the calculative business-like mind of the average Tamil, be he Indian or Ceylonese. It is common knowledge that a very high percentage of the Tamil speaking Ceylonese and Indians (both Nationals and others) live outside the North and East of Sri Lanka.

A Jaffna family shares a house with an Indian family, owned by a Sinhala Mudalali somewhere in Colombo. A father, a married son whose family is in Jaffna and a spinster daughter represent the local population while the TRP holders comprise a father, mother and a bachelor son. For fear of impending threat to leave the country forcibly, the Indian family hastens into a hideout on a day when the Immigration Department boys make a surprise visit at their dwelling. Exploiting this awkward moment the Jaffna-born Tamil brethren try to grab the situation to their own end, all in the grand national way. Alas, the Sinhala Mudalali, real business mind that he is, holds supreme to the utter frustration of the master minded Dravidian Tamil speaking clans. At the bottom of it, it is a class warfare than anti-Tamil or Anti-Indian. That is the storyline, but it matters less. The novel in its essence is an expose of the fast functioning Pettah and Panchikawatte trade.

The Indian connection as one may call it – an unfavourable cinematic cliché – is dramatized through the protagonist, the Nadar

of the infamous Pettah domain. The clumsiness of the typical Jaffna household is also told in style. Also pointed out is the vanity of the capital accumulating Sinhala landlord. It is true that these people are only representatives and not universal but there is no malice and a fine sense of humour pervades right along the description. It is a fine story of a Tamil seeing his own people in funny situations. Rasathurai makes his comments on the Tamil speaking Ceylonese through a Sinhala politician, a member of the CMC. "When we refer to the Tamils we first think of the Thosai. I know that the *Thosai Kade* culture is not your culture. Kurakkan Pittu, Odial Pittu, Payasam, Paniharam and other delicacies cannot be found in Colombo. If, you people can run hotels like the Chinese hotels and serve Jaffna food, how nice it would be? If you run a Kool Kade alone, you can reap profits. Your writer Alagu Subramaniam declares that the Kool is the most delicious food in the world in one of his short stories. Without doing such a thing you have pawned your economy, culture and literature to the South Indians and feel fully satisfied with that: You Jaffna Tamils living in Colombo are a worse lot. Your individuality, culture, eating habits etc have been pawned to them. We have heard of the Mudalali exploiting the labourer, the imperialists exploiting the under-developed countries. But have you heard of any country exploiting another county in the name of language and culture? The TRP Nadars never brought wealth from their county. They earned this exploitation and deceived the people of this country. Like religion, conscience is also a myth. Conscience is only an archstone to uplift the religion. The subconscious mind is actually the voice of fear and not that of god". The Sinhala politician upbraids the Jaffna son when the latter called on him complaining about the Nadar. Some positive side of the Indian Nadars is also seen. The Sinhala landlords prefer to rent out their houses to people like Santhana Nadar, for they would give the key money and advances and also pay their rents on due dates.

The author in the process of storytelling has also added a few truisms, which do not stand out or deter the smooth reading of the novel. As for instance, ethics and codes are generally in contrivance

with human nature. Despite moral preaching by the sages and great men the world is disintegrating in the field of human conduct. These values are really man's ideals. The burden of life smothers them. Orderly life or a life lived in good conduct is actually a luxury. If the human race could be compared to a flowing river, then the Tamil race is not dynamic”.

Kavaloor Rasathurai's *Veedu Yarukku* is interesting reading fare; it is also a clinical revelation of the unscrupulous business world dominated by the Indian connection. A dramatic version of this novel was also staged in Colombo.

7. Inter-Racial Love and Marriage

Arul Subramaniam's *Avarkalukku Vayathu Vanthu Viddathu* (They have come of age) is a splendidly written novel by a new writer. It gives excellent reading fare as a novel showing the gradual development of characters and their relationship with each other, besides it is also a progressive piece of writing on the theme of national integration.

A Tamil youth, Ariyan from Trincomalee, conditioned by the local political climate there comes to Colombo only to realize that the Sinhala people are not bad as all that. He develops an attachment – both physical and platonic – towards Monica at whose house he is boarded. He marries the girl eventually, but is in a dilemma as to whether he should break the news to his parents whom he dares to disobey. It is this struggle between conviction and commitment and the attachment and obligations to his parents that worries him. He is not irrational as to take hasty decisions. It is his slow process of both keeping his wife and winning over his conservative, hard-core parents to his side that the novel describes. I will not be doing justice to the novel by merely telling what the novel is about. Readers themselves should read it to see in what a grand manner he has written this realistic social piece. Trincomalee has produced an outstanding writer and his first novel is a major contribution to Tamil fiction.

As Dr. K. Sivathamby has written in his foreword, this book too should be translated into Sinhala for the benefit of the majority

of the readers, specially to show that not all the Tamil people are cast in the same mould. Those who scorn at our local Tamil writers that their writing are merely propagandist, will have to sit back and review their thoughts, as people like Arul Subramaniam are writing in such a way that structure and theme are inseparable in their creative writings. Arul Subramaniam has the naive, unspoilt freshness in his work and this helps him to write his stories without any inhibitions. His is a realistic tone. As a contemporary writer he sees the inner realism rather than the obvious.

II. Short Stories

1. Velli Pathasaram

'*Ilankayarkone*' was one of the earliest innovators of Tamil short story writing in Ceylon. The author, hidden by this pseudonym was the late N. Sivagnanasundram, a Divisional Revenue Officer. His short stories were published in reputed journals like *Manikodi*, *Sooravali*, *Sakthi*, *Saraswathi* and *Kalaimagal* of South India. Ilankayarkone was essentially a formalist and some of his pieces like *Under the shade of the Thalai Tree* and *The Cousin*, were beautifully written expositions of humanism. Humanism that was violent but gentle in its expression was the characteristic note in his writing. The collection Velliapathasaram consists of fifteen stories. *Anula Maria Madalena*, *Menaka*, *Thai*, *Yalpadi* and *Sigiriya* are stories that have nothing to do with the contemporary society of the Tamils in Ceylon. *Thalainilalilae* (*Under the shade of the thalai Tree*) impresses because of the structure it has assumed in giving poetical expression to the author's sentiment towards the main character - a little girl of twelve. *Machchal* (*The Cousin*) is a narration written in the first person about a youngster and gives an account of his family history in relation to his twenty years old cousin. The title story, *Velliapathasaram* (*The Silver Anklet*) describes the romantic attachment of newly married couple. This story seems to have fascinated many readers as seen from the appraisal written

about it by some. *Manithakurangu (The Human ape)* deals with the humanism and open-heartedness of an ugly man who happens to marry a very beautiful and lascivious woman. *Nadodi (The Wanderer)* is a satire on the Tamil pundits who rest on their past laurels and are enraged whenever any avant garde experimentation is undertaken by their contemporaries. The progressive ideas of the writer is reflected in the story. Well written with lively colloquial dialogue, *Anathai (The Orphan)* is a satire on sophisticated women who have the licence even to give birth before marriages and to discard the child.

2. Eelathu Parisuk Kathaigal

This is a collection of nine short stories, and they were at one time or another awarded prizes in competitions conducted both by local and foreign journals. Not all the prize winning stories are included in this collection and this is representative of one section or school of writers only.

Pakkuvam (Puberty) by A. Muttulingam is in my opinion the best story in this anthology. It is not only written in a compact and coherent form, but also deals with a delicate and new theme. The story is simple - the attainment of maturity of a young but unattractive girl immediately after her younger sister had preceded her in this biological change of life. Because of an inferiority complex and because of the attractiveness and popularity of her younger sister, this girl has been developing a mood of depression. But a man comes to her rescue in comforting her psychologically - he describes her as a pretty girl and requests her to be attentive about her appearance. The medical probability of this quick transition in her mental and physical growth is left to be questioned and yet the writer deserves praise for his suggestive undertones which make the story artistically convincing. This story was written in 1960 and it still holds its place as one of the outstanding stories written by a Ceylon Tamil writer.

Thiru Senthoooran's *Urimai enge?* (where is the Right?) vividly describes the failure of an estate labourer to obtain Citizenship Rights by registration. The colloquial dialogue employed and neat and realistic

characterization make this story a convincing one. A new comer to writing, Thiru Senthoooran shows promise.

Malaiyum Maduvum by Sahidevi Kandiah, though written in a sentimental strain, depicts the inconsistencies in the attitudes of people of different social status although they may be physically and intellectually attracted to one another.

I do not know how the film *Susan Slade*, impressed the writer of *Ithaya Kumural* (The Turbulence of the Heart) but the story is similar to the film. A mother and a daughter conceive and give birth at the same time. The mother's child dies at childbirth. The daughter's child becomes the mother's child as the daughter has no legal husband. The daughter cannot claim rights as mother for her own son for he goes as her brother. This precarious situation is described by the young writer Chempian Chelvan, using the flashback technique, based on the 1958 mis-adventure in the name of communal riots.

Nandawathi written by Navam sardonically condemns racial hatred as those who hold dear to one may also be afflicted by this disease. Anuranachalam – Bhikkhu turned Tamil teacher – kills his girl Nandawathi, accidentally – (She had once saved his life) thinking that he was taking the life of somebody else. Although this story describes certain improbabilities in magazine story fashion, the underlying message is of some value.

Theedi Vantha Kangal (The Eyes that Came in Search for Me) by Uthayanan, also describes the sacrifice of a Sinhalese girl for the love she had for a blind Tamil Man. She becomes a victim of the riots because she had loved a Tamil Man. Here too the incidents are in magazine story fashion.

Marumanam (Re- Marriage) is also a typical magazine story with all its sentimentality and melodrama of love and the marriage of two people of different castes, while *Unmaikkaha Ujir* (Life for the truth) by Muttu Sivagnanam is reportage of another incident during the riots and emergency. *Nattukku Iruvar* (Two for the State) by Chengai Aaliyan is a piece of propaganda writing with a motivation

of a political ideology. There is hardly any element or aspects of short story writing in this.

All in all, this volume indicates where a few of Ceylon's Tamil writers stood in short story writing way back in the early sixties.

3. Pottik Kathaikal

There are nine prize winning stories in this collection. The story that was awarded the first prize, *Poo* (Flower) by M.A. Rahuman is an exercise in filmic style trying to record the subjective mood of a character in the monologue technique. The structural pattern of the story is convincingly organic and it ends in a symbolic analogy. It questioningly challenges the propriety of a married woman's interest in another man though her marriage was the result of a love affair. Rahuman's story is remarkable and one expects the same excellence to show in all his future writings.

Unarchikkappal (Beyond Emotion) by Chempian Chelvan, lacks the sustained unity or coherence of the single idea he wishes to put forward, although it ravingly collaborates the egoistic hatred of a son for his father and the submissiveness of the ego in him at the end when his father dies. The writer's style is forceful and metaphorical. *Anna* (Brother) by Sithampara Pathini describes the angelic attitude of two people – a tutor and a woman student – towards love. The story is a straight forward one though the technical device is hackneyed. *Indo-China Bai Bai* by Manimekalai is written in O' Henry fashion and ridicules the follies of extreme nationalism, while R. Balakrishnan's *Velvi* (Malediction) touchingly describes the patriotic and nationalistic feelings of Kepettipola. Inapposits images and free use of synonyms betray a laborious style; this is particularly so in the earlier part of the story. *Vehuli* (Naivete) by Maruthamunai Majeed is also melodrama. The main character is a prototype of one of Jeyakandan's story. (He is one of the outstanding short story writers from South India) The fervent desire of an innocent odd job – man for a girl who is unapproachable is described here. *Neerodai* (Stream) by S. Paramasamy is an essay on alien inspired nostalgia and the rootlessness of indigenous people on

their own soil and intrinsic culture. The idea is a reflective one but the atmosphere and tone of the story is rather vulgar and crude and it is artlessly handled. *Uruthi* (Firmness) by Gopathi is an anecdote of the firmness of a man in respect of his opposition to a re-marriage encouraged by his mother while *Yarukku Perumai?* (For whom is the honour?) by Suseelan is a narrative of a young man's noble act in a precarious situation.

This collection is symbolic of the trends in writing that prevailed among the younger group of writers in the 1960s.

4. Yoganathan Kahtaikal

Though by conviction Yoganathan is a Socialist Realist, he is more a subjective writer. Probing the minds of characters rather than reporting objectively the transitional conditions of his society. But he is not a Utopian writer failing to gather material for his stories from real life. Yoganathan shows a genuine willingness to experiment in form of style. This is what is evident in *Yoganathan Kathaikal*. In this collection there are seven stories. Many of these defy the conventional formula patterned structure of a short story.

In this story, *The Artist*, Yoganathan indicates the character traits of pseudo artists who refuse to see and understand the sordid aspects of life around them. *Cholakam* (The Dry season in the North) vividly describes the poverty and gloom in the lives of a fisher family in Jaffna. Another story describes the reactions of a pregnant teacher towards her pupil in lyrical prose. Here again the symbols are appropriate and aesthetic. The interior monologue technique is successfully tried out in the story which pictures the last phases of *Ambapali's* (The courtesan's) life and her eventual devotion to the Buddha. Colours and the rhythms are excellent exercises in picturing in words the rapid streams of thoughts of the characters who are romantically involved.

Yoganathan's lyrical style shows his mastery of words. There are however instances where due to over enthusiasm perhaps his words remain mere rhythm – fillers.

La Sa Ramamirtham and Mowni are two South Indian writers whose style is akin to Joyee and Kafka respectively; Yoganathan's stories show a close affinity to the writings of the Indians as far as the technique and morbidity content are concerned.

5. Thoni

Thoni (Boat) is collection of short stories that won a Sahitya Mandalaya Prize for Tamil fiction. Its author V.A. Rasaratnam is a realistic story teller and has a special knack for descriptive writing with a sense of poetical diction. Harmonious blending of form and content in the sense the New Critics profess, is evident in most of his stories. A few stories in this volume can be considered outstanding, if one takes into consideration the period in which they came to be written. The fifteen stories in this collection were written in 1951 and 1954.

Besides the characteristic rural flavour in his stories, the writer has qualities like precision, economy and subtlety in his prose style. He is not a photographic realist but an artist with a true sense of penetration who carefully records both external and internal traits of character and environment. The essential strength of his stories is his characterization. He has been inspired by Anton Chekov. More than physical description emphasis on plots and action, his stories concentrate on character-development. By saying this, I do not stress that his collection is an altogether successful harvest, for there are a good many stories which are commonplace in treatment and content, but yet the overall impression is satisfying.

6. Vee

Vee is a one letter word in Tamil and may be translated as a pregnant flower. The author, S. Ponnuthurai, has also published two novels – *Thee* (Fire) and *Sadangu* (Rites) He is often described by Tamil Literary critics as a good contemporary Tamil prose stylist in Ceylon. But he is not merely a stylist. He is a talented writer too. Although sex has been his favourite theme and is often preoccupied with it, this collection is a better representation of his other interests as a short story writer.

His stories are something to be reckoned with. He is a serious writer. I do not propose to make an exhaustive survey of his stories. I confine myself to a few passing comments on the stories in this collection.

Ther (The Chariot) spans the entire old age of a happy – go – lucky man in nostalgic flavour. It is symbolic and depicts the life pattern of an average Jaffna man in his own surroundings. I regard this story the best in the collection. *The Arrow* may be described as a historical story depicting the re-awakening of sex in Somadevi. This is the author's fancy. Depicting the chastity of a devoted wife, is *The Fence*. *Eera* is the Tamil title of a story portraying the mental process of a widow – a Muslim – immediately after the funeral of her husband. The Muslim dialect is beautifully brought out in this story. A story written in the Batticaloa dialect is *The Price*. Here again the undercurrent of thought of a chaste woman who sues her husband for a divorce is vividly captured. *The Black Spot* is a story with an anti-climax. The remaining stories are different in tempo and philosophical in tone. There is a story for each of the four religious beliefs: Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Islam. As a whole they are noteworthy because his approach is daring and bold.

7. Naan Sahamattaen

All literature is a statement of life as critic Mervyn de Silva calls it, late Kathirgamanathan's story *Vietnam: the holy pronouncements of your own angels* (In Tamil: *Vietnam Unathu Devathaikalalin Deva Vaku*) is such a human statement. It is a statement expressed through the character, a patriotic Vietnamese girl condemning the American presence in Saigon and the continuity of the Vietnamese tradition of resentment to any form of imperialism, Japanese, French or American.

If nationalism begets internationalism, then a clear example is the attitude of writers, who emerge from the narrow confines of nationalism, when that nationalism has served its purpose of creating patriotism, Kathirgamanathan had this attitude when he wrote the story mentioned. That was the last story he ever wrote, for he died at the age of thirty. A posthumous collection of three short stories and

one translation has been released. Kathirgamanathan was a major talent among the first group of Tamil medium graduates, many of whom took to writing and he was one of the important short story writers in Tamil. One of his short stories selected by the Sri Lanka Sahitya Mandalaya to be published by the UNESCO in forty two languages, and this story called, *A Village Boy goes to School*, is included in the collection under review. Kathirgamanathan was awarded the Sahitya Mandalaya prize for his earlier collection of short stories called *Kottum Pani* (the Falling Dew) Kathirgamanathan worked as a journalist in a Tamil evening daily and latterly as a CAS officer in the public service.

A Village Boy goes to School is an autobiographical piece as the author himself admitted. Although tending to be naturalistic in his description of the village Karaveddy, the author had written a fine realistic piece on feudal village school set up and the inner struggle of an emerging progressive youngster against a malicious caste concerned teacher symbolizing the decay of the old order. The comment is implicit and the portrayal moving.

The third story in this collection depicts in sympathy the plight and determination of a servant girl to liberate the curbing imposed by the mistress of the house. More than a mere protest story it deals in subtle manner the psychological workings in the minds of the servant girl. The translation from English of the Urdu story by Krishan Chand relates the Bengal famine of 1942. *I cannot Die* by the famous Indian writer is considered by many as one of the finest novellas in world literature. The translation by Kathirgamanathan is neat. Like all progressive writers, Kathirgamanathan too had an ideology, but he was not overwhelmed by it. He had the innate feeling for the form and a fine sense of subtlety. He experimented in style and structure, although the short story for him was a genre with limitations. He had all the potentialities in him to blossom into one of our major novelists, but death robbed him away from us. It is a sad story.

8. Puthuyugam Pirakirathu

The late M. Thalayasingam had been toying with the idea of spiritual reformation for some time, His book *Por Parai* (The War Drum) – describes his point of view. As a forerunner to this book, Thalaysingam brought out a collection of short stories called *Puthu Yugam Pirakirathu* (A New Age is being Born) Whatever the author's philosophy is, one can enjoy reading his observations of the society in which he lived. There are eleven stories in this collection. The theme in most stories is sex but it is treated as a symbol and also as a natural part of life that has to be enjoyed without inhibitions.

His story *Veelchi* (The Fall) in a way introduces the content of the rest of the stories in this collection. It describes the helplessness of an angry young man (not the western type) against odds that circumvent his daily routine. The man in the story attempts to emerge from the sullen and depraved tastes of his time but he fails to do so . His attempt actually results in a showdown – he becomes one among the philistines. It is not only a fall of an intellectual to the level of a philistine, but it is also the fall of *Atman* brought about by modern conditions.

In the title story a left winger (whom his wife accuses as “your progress has killed our god”) puts the blame on God for a personal calamity. What the author is trying to show here is that just as much the end is important, the means too should be important.

The story *Thedal* (The Quest) is an allegory. The later realization of a coward who faces himself for the first time. He searched within himself but only to realize that he had not lived at all. *Kottai* (The Fortress) is a symbolic piece of writing – clash of new ideas with old values, difficulties encountered in establishing new ideas, the ultimate failure of individuals striking against the hardcore of society.

A story called *Irattham*, (Blood) depicts the resentment of a young man brought up in Jaffna culture. The desire to face the truth with all its nakedness is what he wants to do. In *Kovilhal* (temples) he speaks about the ideal that will transcend death. *Pirathiar* (The Outsider) is a story of an outsider seen inside out. In *Tholubai* (Worship) sexual

intercourse is treated as a symbol to illustrate divine creation. In *Sabatham* (The vow) he treats sex as an obstacle to attain the ultimate purpose of life.

Veli (Space) is just the opposite of what Veelchi says. Here man is merging with the Supreme. The author has tried to show the failure of an age of reason and institutionalism.

According to Thalayasingam over indulgence in sex brings only V.D. but over indulgence in reason alone, shunning every other human feeling, brings about only a worldwide catastrophe. The hero in “*Veli*” is Vedantic so he remains calm. Remaining calm is the best way of showing protest and revolt and it is also a reunion with Brahman, believed Thalayasingam.

9. Man Vasana and Kadal

S. Velupillai (Su. Vae) and K. Sokkalingam (Sokkan) share between them the prize for short stories. The former’s *Man vasana* (The Fragrance of the Soil) and the latter’s *Kadal* (The Sea) are good examples of short stories in the conventional style – meaning their content is not daring or in the round and their technique is in the classical form: Cautious and didactic themes which would give contentment to teachers particularly (those educated only in the mother tongue) of the earlier generation. I am not suggesting that Su Vae and Sokkan are not modern; but because they are modern in this decade of phenomenal social changes all over the world, their writings leave me unresponsive. But a strong point they hold is that they write well (Not classical prose) with attention paid to unities of the short story.

10. Kuralum Kathaiyum

Books for the Juveniles in Tamil are terribly in short supply in our country and books available are not totally suitable for the young people and it cannot be said that the books written cater to different age groups.

In recent times however, two books – one called *Oadiponavan* by K.Navasothy and the other entitled *Kuralum Kathaiyum* by N. Mahesan

have demanded attention. Both have moral overtones and both are meant for children between ten and twelve years. The first is a short fiction and the other is a collection of stories using the *Thirukural* as its source. In other words a few couplets from the famous classic is interpreted by way of stories.

Love without selfishness, sweet words, duties of a father and the son's duty in turn, hospitality and remembrance of one's past good deeds in the midst of that one's later bad deeds are the themes in the latter collection. The intention of the writer is laudable and he succeeds in imparting morality to the young without much ado.

11. *Kadavularum Manitharum*

Bhavani has for her themes the romantic and sexual strings that vibrate the hearts of young couples, and lovers to be. A striking note however is her sincere effort to put in plain words, the undertones and hidden aspiration that often ripple and bubble around in the sub-conscious mind. She does not hesitate to portray such phantasmagoric explorations of the mind. The situation as well as the characterization in the stories, creates an impression that the writer is indifferent to the prevailing social set up and barriers.

She attracts the attention of the readers by startling them with highly shocking depiction of characters, who attempt to defy the conventional social beliefs and morals of the Tamils. In this sense, Bhavani's collection of short stories *Kadavularum Manitharum* is a stirring and provocative attempt at creative writing by a Ceylon Tamil Woman.

There are fourteen stories in this collection. A story called, *Anbin Vilai* tells the love and marriage of a brother and a sister to each other, not knowing that they were of the same blood and skin. When they came to know that there had been a sinful mistake, the wife takes her own life leaving the daughter with the husband's brother. The daughter finds her place in society highly challenging, but the lover of the daughter comes to her rescue after hurdling several obstacles. *Mannipura* is another provocative story which deals with the sexual

relationship between two lovers on the eve of the marriage of the girl to another man. *Sariya Thappa* is a story of a married woman who hated her husband and child. She fell in love with a friend of her husband. She undergoes an emotional struggle whether to elope with her lover or stay with the child and husband. Set in the same strain but incorporating a more convincing theme is the story called *Katpu*. An ugly woman, who happened to travel with a beautiful married woman and another male passenger develops hatred towards the attractive woman. The male passenger develops not knowing that the latter is married, begins to make advances to the married lady and fails. The ugly woman then realizes that her ugliness has protected her from unscrupulous passengers like the one who travelled with the two women.

There is a realistic setting in the story called *Vidivai Noaki*. The rest of the stories are melodramatic presentation of hackneyed themes. However objective the contents of her stories may be, one cannot dismiss the fact that there is unity in the form.

12. Pathukai

Dominic Jeeva edits *Mallikai*, a literary monthly. This collection by him consists of eleven stories. He has also brought out two of the collections *Thannerum Kannerum* and *Salayain Thirupam*. His themes are the problems of downtrodden and proletarian society. Caste differences, social discrimination, capitalism, literary escapism, bourgeois sophistication are all condemned severely by him. But the stories also have more altruistic and humanitarian themes. Depicting transitional social conditions with what may be described as photographic realism will not have any permanent value unless the depiction has a more profound and underlying universalistic appeal. That Dominic Jeeva has. He has established through his new collection that he is an efficient craftsman too.

The main features of this collection may be listed as follows: depiction of benevolent or philanthropical values; portraiture of characters, who are ordinary and who belong to the lowliest of the

low; description of rationalistic surroundings, Jaffna consciousness of a truly Ceylonese Tamil culture as different from that of South India; employment of ordinary language – colloquial – to give a true colour to the realistic picture that is depicted; use of colourful and forceful figurative language; adoption of an easy and lucid style; philosophizing subtlety of themes; compact and coherent structure.

The story entitled *Kahitha Kadu* (Jungle of Papers) impressed me most. This story is a satire on pseudo – intellectuals, but the author does not clearly present his intentions, in fact giving both sides of intellectualism – the tragic and the sublime. *Kaivandi* (Push Cart) tells a story of a union of two families (brother's and sister's) who had been segregated on account of pseudo – superiority claimed by the in – laws. This union is made possible by the interference of a latrine coolly. The title story *Pathukai* (Shoes) tells of an incident in the life of a cobbler and the author should be congratulated for his characterization of the cobbler. *Vaikarisi* (Last Acts of Cremation) is yet another study in human relationships and the plausible and psychological treatment given it makes it a convincing piece of writing. *Kurali Viththai* (Black Magic) ends in somewhat magazine story fashion but it is enlivened by the beauty of colloquial speech and description of characters. The same is true of *Vandi Chavari* (Cart Race). The remaining stories are commonplace. One story entitled *Manathathuvam* (Psychology) is written in an epistolary manner and describes the love affair of two middle class characters. *Papachalukai* (Concession to a Sin) is another story depicting caste differences. *Nagarathin Nilal* (Shadow of the City) tells readers about the tragic life a rickshawalla leads. *Mirugathanam* (Animosity) shows a picture of humanistic and inhuman love between a stray dog and a dead boy. The last story *Thalakavadi* (Rhythmic Vehicle) may not be described as short story in the true sense of the term. It is more satirical reportage of the experience a bus conductor undergoes on his daily route.

In the last analysis *Pathukai* is a successful anthology.

13. Daniel Kathaikal

Like Dominic Jeeva, Daniel too is a member of the working class. He has shown his cleverness as a successful craftsman in a few of his stories. In the collection under review plausibility in the treatment of psychology, where it occurs, is lacking in stories like *Maanam* (Shame). In *Thanneer* (Water) for instance, he apparently oversimplifies issues and presents a biased picture of characters and situations. *Asai* (The Recalling) is written in the first person singular. It describes certain major incidents in the later life of a hermaphrodite, in relation to his place in society as a man lacking manliness. The writer tries to show that such unfortunate persons could only serve as pimps. This character also gives an account of the pathetic experience a young prostitute undergoes in a brothel and the writer attempts to create a sympathetic plea for her, by his characterization. All this sounds sentimental.

Uravum Vilayvum, (Contact and Consequence) is modelled on a story called Ponnagam, written by the late Puthumai Piththan, (generally recognized as one of the best short story writers in Tamil). But Daniel's story is better in its treatment. In Puthumai Piththan's story, a poor young wife sells her body in the dark to a passerby for a few annas to buy medicine for her dying husband. In Daniel's story, the married woman pretends to flirt with a fellow passenger in a train and steals a sum of nearly hundred rupees but she takes her own life, when she finds that her husband had died of his ailment in the train itself. In both the stories, the motives are to save their husbands at the expense of losing their chastity. False modesty or sex does not play their part in these stories. *Maanam* (Shame) is written in a manner to shock readers. A depressed class woman, almost nude, remove her only rag in public to help a high caste woman, who had accidentally fallen into the well in her compound; and in doing so, she herself slips in and falls into the well, while the other woman reaches the top. The writer is underlining his interpretation that the high caste woman does not have the heart to disrobe herself to save her rescuer, because she is concerned about shame and prestige. This is a one sided

depiction of character. *Valli* and *Marana Nilal* (Shadow of Death) too attract the attention of the reader while the rest are commonplace.

Daniel's first collection of short stories is not altogether unconvincing. A changeover to the study of human problems in universalistic vision, not necessarily proletarian might be welcomed. Daniel shows many promises. But he has to free himself from a lopsided notion of sex in our society. He has subsequently brought out a collection called *Ulagankal Vellapaduhinrana* (The Worlds are being Won over).

14. Yuga Piravesam

Pulolyoor K. Sathasivam writes to point out the inner realism of social patterns. He wants to bring realism in content by analyzing the true factors for a social conflict. So his stories are directed in this sphere. He achieves his purpose with remarkable ease in form. There are eleven stories in a collection called *Yuga Piravesam* (Entry into a Yuga).

Marital relationship and other relationships are synonymous with economic relationships. Also the relationships between working class people and the affluent lot are not always a happy meeting ground – they often lead to frustration, yet feeling for fellow beings can transcend class or social distinctions. These may seem contradictory but they are truisms as revealed by the author.

Then there is the subtle support for family planning. The inevitability of changes is suggested in another story. Ignorance and superstition prevailing in the estates lead to the discriminative treatment of the plantation workers laments the writer. Maturity in conjugal relationship, optimism in tackling problems and decided course of action to wipe out social ills are reflected in the stories.

There is a kind of classical approach in writing these stories – the structure is identified with the theme to give an aesthetic flavour to the basic relationships among all sorts of people. This merit carries the writer to a leading place among our Tamil short story writers. Young Sathasivam works as an assistant medical practitioner in the hill country. He may be described as one of the best talents to flower in the seventies. His stories have won acclaim in South India too.

III Poetry

1. Eli Koodu

They called it poetry - new poetry. Whatever its name it is a new form of expression and the aged old Tamil cannot be an exception to the moving designs of the times. Fluidity is the essence of tradition, and the inevitability has to come even in Tamil poetry. So the new poetry or free verse with a purpose to pin-point paradoxes in social life. The quick quips serve to register deeply in the minds of the reader.

Dickwella Kamal is one of the new jet-sets, who arrange words in that order to bring about images in flashes. The images themselves are self explanatory and serve as social comments. The thirty two quips he has written to various journals on these lines are compiled into one little collection *Elikoodu* (The Rat Cage). The immediacy and contemporaneity in them outwit any caustic critical observation in formalistic terms. Erudite critics, who shunned this kind of attempt, will have to now rethink about new poetry, if collections like Kamal's continue to make a frontal attack on them. What's in a form? If necessary content itself becomes new form. Subsequently, new collections called, *Porikal* (compiled by Anbu Jawaharsha), *Aruvadai* (Poonahar Mariathas), *Polikal* (N.Logendralingam) and *Sinhala Theevukor Palam Amaipoam* (A release of the South Indian periodical *Yen*, including Ceylonese new poets) have been brought out. Most of the local journals give priority to this kind of poetic attempt now. More than two hundred new writers have come to be known through this new poetry. As Murugaiyan has said earlier, serious poetry criticism is necessary to put them on the right track.

2. Ho Chi Minh Kavithaikal Ho Chi Minh's prison notes have been translated into Tamil for the first time. A Ceylonese poet and a pioneer progressive writer in our country, K. Ganesh has beautifully rendered the poems written by the great Vietnamese, when the latter was in prison in South China in 1922-43. Written originally in Chinese and translated into English by Eileen Palmer these prison poems have now reached the Tamil reader. Rated high even by the

Chinese literary critics, these poems are exquisite even in translation. Ideas and emotions are inseparable in Ho's poems.

According to facts gathered from an article written by Dr. Kailasapathy, a quarter century ago, M. Izmat Pasha had translated into Tamil the notes of Julius Fucick, the Czech who was murdered by the Nazis in 1942 for his patriotism and communistic beliefs. This book too is in the same vein as Ho's prison notes. Even Oscar Wilde's prison notes had been translated into Tamil. In Sri Lanka, the late A.N. Kandasamy had done some useful translations. K. Ganesh and H.M.P. Mohideen are others in the field. K. Ganesh is presently interested in introducing South East Asian writings in Tamil. We understand that he is currently working, translating Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Hungarian and Sinhala writing.

Ho Chi Minh's story and the Vietnamese history are recorded in the introduction to the book. Ganesh is an unassuming writer who is respected by the young and old for his sincere and honest views on the arts. In this book, the Vietnamese culture as found in Ho Chi Minh has been introduced into Tamil and that has now enriched Tamil culture. So Ganesh has served as a bridge to merge these cultures.

3. Akkini Pookal

Love of humanity, the urge to see a new world emerging and determination to wipe out social injustices through collective efforts seem to be the characteristic traits of the young poet Eelavanan, whose collection of new poems (new in the sense contemporary) has just been released. His skill of selectivity, his choice of words, his aesthetic sense and his social commitment are remarkable. The poet's willingness to associate himself with new thoughts and ideas are a significant observation one could make in reading his poems. He discards worn-out ineffective ideas and beliefs. He desires literature should be created for those who struggle with fire in their abdomen. He also holds new ideas on literature and the like. He wants spiritualism to be related to practical life.

Eelavanan also attacks the ‘beauty’, poets (Meaning mere aesthetes) who fail to note the needs of the time. He wants songs to be sung for those people who burn like flowers in a furnace of flames. The fire flowers (*Akkini Pookal*) he refers to are those under privileged, suppressed, exploited lot. He says it’s enough that we remained like rolled up ‘olas’ after labouring and tiring ourselves, let us form ourselves into a front to see social justice is done. The poet hates war. He condemns the mass scale genocide in the name of war in global war spots like the M.E. and Vietnam. Some of his poetic usages are original: the tears that polish the floor, lightning flashes in the eye, the soft breasted lass walked on the brims of the paddy fields like the dancing decorations in a chariot, moving gently in the breeze. His feeling for the working class is demonstrated in his poem about the plight of the plantation workers. The poet dreams of a socialist world where everyone will not live for himself but for everybody else, who in turn could put their heads up and walk with self respect. So he wants preparation made in this direction. Eelavanan’s collection is a significant contribution to the latest creative writings by the younger generation.

4. **Veendum Veliyum**

“Mahakavi has already been correctly recognized as a major force that directed the more important trends in Ceylonese Tamil writing”. This opinion by yet another poet and critic Murugaiyan cannot be dismissed as mere sentiment because even younger poets like Nuhman and Shanmugam Sivalingan accept that the late Mahakavi (Rudramoorthy was his real name) was a great poet. According to them, this poet was a realist and an innovator. An innovator? – Yes, as far as experimentation in structure was concerned, Mahakavi had a fine sense of form. But looking purely from an objective point of view, I see in Mahakavi the traits of a Romanticist. He was not a romantic in the Western 19th Century tradition, but he had this characteristic as for as idealism goes. Perhaps one would remember Robert Frost of

our own times – that kind of good – neighbourliness and mending the walls, without commitments.

Radramoorthy died while holding a post in the CAS. The following works by him have been published so far. Two collections of poetry (*Valli* and *Veedum Veliyum*) One collection of limericks (*Kurumpa*) one poetic drama (*Kodai*) and two short epics (*Kaamaniyal Kathai* and *Oru Satharana Manithanin Charithiram*).

Veedum Veliyum is a slim volume of twenty five poems by the poet. The first part consists of purely personal lyrics and the other half is devoted to the outside world. Love, sex, prostitution and romances attract attention of the poet in his personal poems, and we have no quarrel there. In this section we find poems on “Second Marriage – re-marriage of a Tamil widow – This theme could have been novel two decades ago, but with Women’s Lib and all that, it carries less weight now. “Ahalikai” is the only narrative poem included in this section ; this again is mythological and facilitates fancy and imagination for a romanticist. This poem makes the reader pause a little because of its variant interpretation. Poems written between 1954 and 1964 find a place here.

We now come to the second section. It is here that the poet’s desire to resign to mere observation and his hesitancy to plunge into firmer comment becomes obvious. Although the poems in this section are of a later period (1955-1969) the poet refuses to be cerebral. A few poems however please us for their detachment – if detachment is a kind of poetic virtue. The “Lizard” for instance is a beautiful picture of innocence facing cruelty for the first time. A child’s bewilderment at watching a lizard swallowing an insect is pictured in the same kind of wonderment and detachment. A thin layer of social consciousness can be deciphered in the poem *Neerulavan* (The Sea Farmer) A fisherman in debt rejoice at his catch, but returns home disappointed, as the earnings go to settle his debts. *Veesatheer* is a poem that calls for humility even when one gives alms. *Thiruddu* describes the juxtaposition in experience of a miser who refuses to give a cent to a beggar. He had to eventually fall victim to pick pocketing while

on his way home in the bus. In yet another poem called *Nermai*, the poet speaks of dishonesty as a virtue for the poorer classes in a word of injustice. Also included is the much quoted poem, *Pulli Alavil Oru Poochi* (An Insect in the Size of a Dot). The up-holders of Mahakavi praise this poem because the poet sympathises with the insect he killed accidentally and pleads guilty of the crime! Humanism! Well there are other poems I liked as poetry for sheer pleasure and readers of this collection may choose theirs: if only poetry for pleasure had been motivated by some kind of social consciousness Mahakavi's *Veedum Veliyum* would have earned the reputation of a mirror that reflects clear images of life. It must be emphasized however that Mahakavi is still, a better poet than most of the other poets across the Palk Strait.

5. Kurumpa

Kurumpa is a collection of limericks by Mahakavi. Short and compact quips on social behaviour with a mixture of connotations that border towards lewdness in its content. S.Ponnuthurai has written a lengthy appreciative note on these Limericks.

6. Kanikkai

Kanikkai (Offering) is a book of poems by T. Ramalingam. The theme of most poems is sex. The poetic feeling is genuine in that the poet is describing the social behaviours and stigmas of a static hypocritical society of Jaffna. Also included in this book is a critical essay by M. Thalaiyasingam.

IV. Criticism

1. A Note on Kailasapathy's Book on Tamil Novels

Dr.K. Kailasapathy's Tamil Novel consists of six studied essays on what may be described by a student of English literature as the most fundamental aspects of the art of fiction. In the first essay he distinguishes between Epic and Novel in relation to other world literature. The second essay is on Prose and Novel, while the third is

on Novel and Individualism. English original and Tamil adaptation is the subject of the next essay. The fifth essay discusses the Decline of the Short story and Growth of the Novel, while the last is on Realism and Naturalism. Although primarily meant for the student, this book is an asset to anybody to appreciate modern Tamil Literature in contemporary universal consciousness.

Dr. K. Kailasapathy is a well-known Tamil intellectual in Sri Lanka. He is a leading critic and a university teacher. He was responsible for the conscious development of the idea of Ceylonese Tamil literature soon after the 1956 awakening. He was the editor of the *Thinakaran* before joining the University. He is now the first President of the Jaffna campus of the University of Sri Lanka. Author of many books in Tamil and one in English (*The Heroic Poetry*), he obtained his doctorate from Birmingham University. His Tamil Books include, *Comparative Literature*, *The Tamil Novel*, *Studies in ancient Tamil Literature*, *The Top and the Bottom*, *Two Great Poets* and *Poetry Appreciation with Murugaiyan*.

Each of his Books is a forerunner in its field and highly acclaimed in both academic and literary circles. In a way all these books are episodic histories of Tamil literature rewritten in modern terms.

2. A Note on Sivathamby's Book on Short Story

The Origin and Growth of the Short story by Dr. K. Sivathamby, traces the development of the short story from historical and social angles. Remarkably analyzed, this book is a comprehensive survey and the best of its kind now available in Tamil. The critic takes only those writers who are of importance in the process of development. His comments are based on the attitude of short story writers towards art and society. Although the critic records the process of development in its historical perspective, he indirectly welcomes those writers who use literature not only as a mirror of life but also as a guiding force for social upliftment.

Dr. Sivathamby is one of our leading critics, drama is his special field. He is the head of the Dravidian Studies at the Vidyodaya

Campus of the University of Sri Lanka. Along with H.M.P. Mohideen, Ilankeeran, Premjee Gnanasundaram. K. Ganesh and Kailasapathy, Dr. Sivathamby had remained a very important Theoretician of The Ceylon Progressive Writers Association.

3. Iru Maha Kavikal

Rabindranath Tagore and Subramania Bharathi were two great Indian poets of their time and their influence on modern poets in various Indian languages continues to pervade even now. Both were scions of their time when national feelings were running high in colonial India. Strangely enough, they had almost paradoxical views on life and politics, yet there were common grounds on which they held identical views. Their parallels and diametrically opposite lines are graphically analysed by Dr.K.Kailasapathy in his book *Iru Maha Kavikal*. This book is used in many South Indian Universities and Calcutta University has also recently included this book as a text in its Tamil Department.

Dr. Kailasapathy says: It is true that sufficient is known of Tagore but Tamil poet Subramania Bharathi's achievement as a national front liner in politics and literature is not fully explained to the non-Tamil speaking readers.

Both Tagore and Bharathi ridiculed the idea of Maya (Illusion) which is professed in Hindu Thought. The physical world we see is nothing but the joyous dance of the Almighty, believed Tagore. Bharathi said that what we see is Sakthi and that it is eternal. It is true, however, that the poets believed in Vedanta. They believed that life is for living and not for renunciation as promulgated in the Vedanta thoughts. They did not go beyond this philosophical outlook. Their attitude towards the Indian National Movement was based on Vedanta. They were the products of their time, although Tagore was much older than Bharathi.

They both believed that equality could be brought about on the lines of Vedantic thoughts. The idealistic views of equality enshrined in Vedanta and also the voice of the Saiva and Vaishnava Saints for

special unity found favour with Tagore and Bharathi. The differences between the two were also very sharp as for instance Tagore was an individualist while Bharathi believed that the society that produced him was far greater than his own self. Bharathi was essentially a politically oriented poet. His national songs published in 1903 were case in point. Although Tagore did not lose touch with politics till his death, he considered literature as his spiritual idealism. While holding a foot on the literary world, Tagore wandered on the edges of the political world. Bharathi on the other hand took shelter under the shades of the literary world quite accidentally while his feet were firmly rooted in the political world. Since Bharathi gave importance to the society that produced him he began to adapt himself to the realities of the world. Tagore quite conversely wrote for most part Bhakthi and screen songs. He believed that the “Jeevana Devtha” (Which held a Phenomenal hold on him) was responsible for the happenings in the world. Tagore dreamt that a world of love and compassion could be created with rationality.

Bharathi converted his patriotism as divine love. At the same time he concluded that patriotism alone would not give the swiftness and depth that were needed for national consciousness. To do this he compared his country to his mother and patriotism to maternal love. He proclaimed that praise for heroism was much needed than divine poojas. Both poets laid the foundation for Indian national resurgence. The rise of nationalism shook India all over. This development was commonly felt by both Tagore and Bharathi. Yet Tagore created for himself a secluded world of art literature, and religion. He reacted unfavorably to the popular mass movements. Bharathi on the other hand become part of the movement and this helped him to use his conventional poetic themes reach the people. Bharathi’s experimentation on poetic forms alone was another achievement.

Dr. Kailasapathi’s initial comparative studies of these two poets have prompted others to proceed further.

4. Ilakkiyamum Thiranaivum

I have a feeling that outmoded methods of teaching Tamil Literature in schools have dulled the sensibilities and critical acumen of many

students. I say this because in conversation with many teachers, I have often found them considering literature as something remote and inviolable and meant only to be admired and not critically evaluated. This attitude is a residue of the medieval commentarial tradition. In many instances the teachers do not seem to know the purpose and function of teaching literature and are clearly ignorant of the critical standards as understood today.

In these circumstances a basic book dealing with these matters is much wanted today and to fulfil this requirement Dr. K. Kailasapathy's book on *Literature and Criticism* has come on our way. I am sure the book will serve a very useful purpose to students and teachers alike in the understanding and teaching of literature in higher forms. This book will be also useful as a handbook to young writers.

This is the first time a book in Tamil has been written in specific terms, where the nature of literature is explained in relation to various literary movements and theories. Modelled on books in English on the subject, the author has included three papers he read at a seminar held on the new syllabus for Tamil in Teacher Training Colleges. The first essay is on Language and Literature while the second speaks of literary principle and the third explains the critical concepts. Dr. Kailasapathy speaks mainly about four approaches of literary criticism – the organic, the sociological, the psychological and the formalistic. He recommends the formalistic approach propagated by the New Critics as most suitable as far as classroom work is concerned, but is quick to indicate his preference for the sociological approach among the theories adumbrated. What strikes me as the most notable aspect of the book is its bold and original attempt to evaluate critically the literary theories emanating from the West, especially from the Anglo-Saxon world, and to harmonise them with parallel concepts in Tamil. In doing so he has skillfully shown how social economic and even political factors have a bearing on literary concepts. To facilitate his arguments Dr. Kailasapathy draws freely from the history of Tamil Literature. Another welcome feature of the book is the treatment of the problem of style in a chapter. The average teacher of Tamil literature

habitually thinks of style in terms of “Poetic diction”. The author has, very briefly at least, drawn attention to the importance of style in the analysis of prose. A number of passages from both early and modern writers are included in the appendix by way of exercises. These have been carefully chosen. All interested in literature and criticism, should read his book for a better understanding of the subject.

V. MISCELLANEOUS

1. **Por Parai**

Late Thalayasingam was also interested in literary criticism and has written a number of pieces on contemporary Ceylonese Tamil Literary trends. He called them “Notes in Haste” But in 1970 we saw a different Thalayasingam. His book called *Por Parai* (The War Drum) was the newest of its kind in Tamil. Perhaps Colin Wilson’s *The Outsider* and *Beyond the Outsider* had inspired Thalayasingam to write this book in Tamil. It is meant to serve the same purpose as the distant thunder announcing the approach of the rain. It gives a glimpse of what mankind could achieve, if its own activities are directed along the proper channels – proper that is according to the author. Thalayasingam writes a long preface explaining the interest experienced in different parts of the world. He identifies this unrest as the labour pains of the birth of a new way of life, a new era in fact. Every page of these books is packed tight with history, insight and a deep knowledge of ancient and modern writings. In addition there are a few short stories and poems included in the book to express his point of view. He gives the most sublime interpretations to mythologies and carries one to the realm of our thought or consciousness, beyond the experience of ordinary man. Thalayasingam rapidly traces the history of communism as we see it today. How Karl Marx was greatly attracted by Hegel’s Philosophy and turned it upside down, asserting that capitalism, vested interests and antiquated religious beliefs were the causes of all social evils, and if they were uprooted there would be social justice and freedom.

He seems to say that the whole human race has come to a stage where everything has to converge on a particular point, a particular philosophy and a way of life. This cannot be purely material communism, he says. He would like to evolve something further without losing the Marxists content. This has to be a spiritual movement that is highly scientific. To him this is symbolized by a synthesis of Marxism and the tenets of Sarvodaya. In other words Thalayasingham wants to re-establish social reforms on a spiritual basis, but there are so many who feel that a number of attempts in this direction have been failures. In a sense such attempts remind one of the existentialists endeavour to integrate their philosophy to Marxism or what has been done in India by Sri Armabindo bringing about a synthesis of materialistic spiritual world outlook which he called: "Integral Yoga." But perhaps what happens is that with the lapse of time, the grip of the reformer seems to slacken and mankind slip; back to basic needs. The whole world had been covered by the noblest of religions for centuries and yet one finds the need everywhere for further progress. It seems that progress occurs in cycles. But that is another vast subject, Thalayasingam, devoting his talents to abstract thinking, with feet firmly planted on the ground, deserves praise for his individual approach to establish his own convictions. His book was awarded a Sahitya Academy Prize for 1970.

2. Yogaswami

In this decade of scientific attempt to give meaning to yogic mantrams and oriental mysticism, it is not totally irrelevant to make a study of contemporary ascetics in the living legends of this country till recently. He lived for nearly ninety two years in Jaffna and attained Samadhi in 1964. A. Ambihaipahan (well known in religious and educational circles) has attempted to give a brief biography of this ascetic in his book *Yogaswami*.

Disconnected though in sequence the book gives a broad picture of the personality and achievements of the sage. It is a painstaking effort but the result is very useful to a student of sociology in Tamil.

There are hardly any biographies of Ceylonese in Tamil. In this respect this is a useful book - what I liked most in this book is the author's attempt to establish the fact that even in our own land here were mystics who drew the respect and awe of many. The author finds a parallel in Yogaswami's emergence, with the religious revival in the 19th Century. The visit of Swami Vivekananda to Sri Lanka in 1897 and the religious and social changes that were taking place in the country form the background to the life of Yoga Swami, for instance prohibition campaign, the birth of the Hindu youth association the contact with Swami Vipulanatha and other activities are related to the life of Yoga Swami. Although Yoga Swami died in 1964 the younger generation does not seem to know in detail the part played by him in the country's social and religious awakening. Ascetic though he was, he played a prominent part in politics and social activities.

An important aspect of the Hindu Tradition is that however much one might have progressed in spiritual life, the initiation by a Guru is a necessity. The greatest sages and intellectual giants all had their gurus. To the Youth of the present generation this would seem mysterious particularly when these gurus are simple illiterates and sometimes only fit to be in the lunatic asylum. Yoga Swami's guru was Chellapah Swamy, an acknowledged lunatic. Both their names appear in the short list of renowned Tamil teachers of Hindu religion published in the Tamil Almanac (Panchangam). Yoga Swami's teachings and activities resembled that of Zen Buddhism. Though a Christian, Yoga Swami practically abandoned all formal religions and followed the path of great sages transcending all forms and names - He was a true ascetic at heart and followed the middle path. He was an outright advaidist and taught monism but encouraged dualistic worship as a stepping state to that abstract philosophy. In this he followed Thayumanavar of the 17th century. Like Mascarin Gosala (who was a contemporary of Buddha and Mahavira) Yoga Swami was a fatalist and he impressed upon this complete surrender to God or to unalterable natural law of evolution. Gosala who was also known as Makkali Gosala never

overcame the feeling of an overwhelming inevitability behind the appalling historical transformation.

Yoga Swami's admirers and followers could be counted in hundreds including foreigners like the German Swamy and Lord Soulbury's son. The book includes a selection of sayings by the Yogi. The author of this book, S. Ambihaipahan deserves the gratitude of all Hindus in this country. Valuable information of this great man would have been lost to posterity if not for his noble work in publishing this book.

3. India Thathuvagnanam

K.Lakshmanan's book on Indian Philosophy is a compendium of the component parts of the Indian Philosophy right from the very beginning. It is an exhaustive, authentic and compact book. Certain aspects of Indian Philosophy, Materialism, Jainism, Buddhism, Vedantha, Saivism – these are some of the main heads under which the author elucidates and elaborates the major aspects of philosophy. The author does not at all times deal with his subjects chronologically but as far as possible he maintains the balance between the ages of different trends. He also compares certain aspects of Indian Philosophy with Western Philosophy. Basically his approach is descriptive rather than historical. The author refers to Indian Philosophy as pre-historic, conclusive, spiritualistic, fundamental and practicable. Although the author had maintained "Conclusiveness" as one of the characteristics of Indian Philosophy, at the end of the book he is skeptical about the conclusiveness of theories in Indian Philosophy itself.

Islam, Jainism and Buddhism constitute the heterodox tradition. The other systems are Orthodox. The main streams of Indian philosophy, though rooted in the Vedas and Upanishads, were rationalized by man with his power of thinking and accumulation of experience. The author in his compendium presents unbiased accounts of different fields of Indian Philosophy – Presenting cases for and against each of them in a non-committal manner, except in one place where he has openly stressed his convictions. In the opinion of the author, Dr.S. Radhakrishnan oversimplifies the basic differences between

Buddhism and Vedanta, because intellectuals of Dr. Radhakrishnan's calibre often look at things in universalistic vision and always seek unity amidst diversity, but in actual fact the author believes that the differences between the realms of philosophy are far greater than that. Except for this exceptional deviation, the author maintains a uniquely balanced style of interpretation. The epilogue is a fine essay on the need of knowing about philosophy which also summarizes the whole book in simple terms. A long list of supplementary readings which includes twenty three works in English by such eminent authorities like Radhakrishnan, Bertram Russell and others are also appended. Equivalent terminology in Tamil to current philosophical usage and an index are also included.

4. Pandai Thamilar Valvum Valipadum

Dr. Kailasapathy's work reveals him to be an original thinker, whose intellectual pursuits are not mere part time exercises, but guide lines for the emerging Tamil intelligentsia. He writes with a historical sense, and his subjects are analytically treated, his general contention being that it is the economic background of a society that determines the shape of literature, art, philosophy, religion, language and the like. He is also, it would seem, interested in fulfilling the need of students to understand the relationship between social life and the study of the arts, of literature, of ethics and of religion.

There are eight essays in this book, taking the subject up to the end of the Chola period. In his commentary on the Tamil literature of the Pallava Period, Dr. Kailasapathy suggests that the literature in question was a product of the conflict between an economically sound mercantile class that practised Jainism, and the land-owning agrarian class which believed in Saivism. His view challenges the established views of Saivism, a sect of Hinduism that revolves upon the pivot of Bhakthi or piety, which exempts one from all consequences of the past karma and opens the gates of Heaven. Dr. Kailasapathy's suggestion that Saivism can be seen as a by-product of the class struggle is something to reflect upon.

In his essay on Dharma and Politics, the twin epics *Silapadikaram* and *Manimehalai* are cited as works that depicted the Social evils that prevailed at the time and indicated ways in which they could be overcome. The author suggests that the attempts of the poets at social reform failed because they based their ideas on the theory of Karma and of renunciation, while the actual disease was one of social inequality and injustice. The Bhakthi cult paved the way for the establishment of the Chola period, during which devotion without question was the order of the day and the King the representative of the Divine. There developed the master - slave relationships, and the feudal system.

According to Dr. Kailaspathy the heroic poets were the mouthpieces of the ruling classes. Dramatizing and glorifying war, suggesting that there was heroism and beauty in its horror, they were propagandists for the Kings, and were prompted by material reasons as well as aesthetic ideals. Hero worship provided the opportunity for laying the foundation of a strong monarchy. The ignorance and sentimentality of the common people were contributory factors – all these things being fundamental to the social change that was to follow.

Tracing the beginning of Soul – consciousness in man, the author suggests that it has led man by degrees to the concept of God – consciousness. Embracing rituals and magic, the latter has led at last to the worship of the Mother Goddess as the source of all fulfilments. In one of his essays Dr. Kailaspathy traces the original worship of the Mother – Goddess, Murugan, and the final emergence as the nameless He – God of the Indus Valley Civilization, now known as Siva. The He-God of Indus Valley has assimilated in the first instance, the local Mother Goddess (Kotravai) as his consort, and Murugan (the local hero of tribal clans) as his son.

To the serious student of history, Dr. Kailaspathy's book is searching review of the past with a purpose; yet it is practical because it confines itself to the dialectical materialistic concept of history and sees all things in this light. To the student of Tamil literature his work offers a masterly introduction of certain fundamental principles of evaluation. I have found it an admirably written essay in literary criticism on a social and philosophical subject.

Major Trends in Contemporary Writing in Tamil in Sri Lanka

Contemporary Sri Lankan writing is a vast subject which cannot be possibly condensed in the brief space available to me.

I shall therefore cover only the period after independence up to the end of the seventies. In short, it will be a brief introduction to the major trends in contemporary writing in Tamil in Sri Lanka.

My approach to the subject will not be like that of an academic or researcher, but would rather be from the point of view of a literary columnist.

What I shall attempt to do is to touch on some of the major literary trends in relation to the historical process of Tamil writing in Sri Lanka. I wish to state plainly at the outset that I am not going to describe the content and structure of creative writing nor discuss individual writers and their works, except in passing.

The opinions expressed here are mainly based on what some of the academics and authorities have already written about. My own views on writers and their writing would be minimal.

Perhaps it may sound surprising that the Tamil Language spoken by nearly 65 million people all over the world is also used in the nine provinces in this country. Nearly a quarter of the total population speaks the Tamil Language.

You may ask how?

Let me explain:

The Tamilians, who live in almost all parts of the country, and the Moors, who also live in almost all parts of the island, comprise nearly twenty five percent of the total population. They all speak the Tamil Language. There are writers in Tamil hailing from places like

Dickwella in the Deep South and Kurunegala in the North West, Padiyatalawa in the border of the Uva Province with the E.P. and from all corners of the island. This is astonishing.

There are more writers in Tamil in the western province than those in the north or east. There are eight dailies and eight Sunday editions of Tamil news papers which publish their writings. Besides, there are a few 'Little Magazines' and other journals to cater to these writers and their readers. They are from both sexes and belong to various ages. They write with a Sri Lankan consciousness and depict the lives of the people living in this country.

When we speak of contemporary writing, we have in mind the writing of people belonging to the Tamil and Muslim communities. Hindus, Christians and Muslims are writers in Tamil.

Another legitimate question is: if it is Tamil writing, what characteristics does it have to call it a Sri Lankan Tamil Writing?

Most Sri Lankans do not know that the type of Tamil writing practised in Sri Lanka is different from what is written in Tamilnadu. Perhaps before Independence there could have been hardly any distinction in the types of writing produced in Tamilnadu and Sri Lanka. But with 1956 in particular, what was then known as 'Ceylonism' came to be emphasized in local writing in Tamil.

Let us focus on Prof. K. Kailasapathy, who was one of the pioneers of the movement to bring in a Sri Lankan identity, was also the editor of the *Thinakaran*.

He used his paper to inculcate the Sri Lankan consciousness and published a variety of writing by Sri Lankan writers in his paper.

Prof.K. Kailasapathy in his book *On Art and Literature* published posthumously writes thus:

"The movement in literature evolves a national tradition resulting from political independence that breeds self-consciousness of autonomy and a conviction that there exists a definable ethos in which the writers live and work."

This Ceylonese accent in literature is in stark contrast to the Tamil literature up to the early fifties when it was considered to be

part and parcel of the mainstream of Tamil literature, by which was meant the literature of South India.

“Within the last few decades there has been a conscious movement towards ‘Ceylonism, in Tamil Literature.’”

Kailasapathy continues:

“The point is that the changes we see in literature in our times are so varied and complex, making it difficult to discuss them in straight forward terms.”

“The idea of Ceylonism in literature is of course related to nationalism. It is a commonplace in political history that nationalism is a phenomenon which at a certain stage in a country’s history gives it a sense of unity and coherence besides the militant self-consciousness that it imparts to the people of that country.”

“At the same time it is equally well-known that nationalism has an inherent tendency to circumscribe one because of its exclusiveness and insistence of its difference from the rest of the world.”

Well, we now know that there is a kind of writing produced in this country, which has certain Sri Lankan characteristics.

The next point is: whether we have had any problems in evolving a Lankan consciousness and depicting contemporary life in new modes of writing.

On page 21 of the book we referred to, namely *On Art and Literature* the late scholar has this to say.

“Both in South India and Sri Lanka post- independence problems created the conditions for the emergence of a band of writers who came from the traditionally oppressed sections of Tamil society, which is the lower castes. Many of them were attracted by Marxism and communist organizations which provided them with a world view and also the confidence to struggle against exploitation and articulate their thoughts and feelings firmly.”

Kailasapathy also states:

“that as might be expected, their level of literary education was somewhat low. But they adhered in new experiences and visions into fiction, poetry and drama using hitherto unheard of dialects, idioms and expressions. They were indifferent to ‘correct’ Tamil itself as taught by School teachers; pure Tamil was of no concern to them, they in fact openly despised it and ridiculed its proponents. To them linguistic restrictions or restraints were akin to social and political oppression and all such barriers had to be broken down.”

Among these so-called non-conformists, Kailasapathy identifies a few. What follows is his estimation with which I do not totally agree. However for whatever it is worth, let us quote from him.

“K. Daniel, S. Ganeshalingan, S. Yoganathan and Benedict Balan have utilized the day-to-day spoken language of ordinary people in their works.”

What is interesting and certainly pertinent is the fact that many of these writers have come from the lower strata of society – something remarkable in the context of limited social mobility. To put in simple sociological terms they are from the depressed castes, who are still in many ways socially untouchables. Traditionally they have had no access to learning and were considered culturally backward” Kailasapathy continues:

“Daniel and Dominic Jeeva, who are outstanding fiction writers, never had any formal education. To them writing itself had been a continuing process of self-education. Concerned with protest an experimentation, the existing process of exploration and growth, they solved their impulse, through writing. Naturally they brought with them and idiom or idioms that were fresh, robust, plain and simple but capable of infusing a new life into our language.”

Writing further, Kailasapathy elucidated and explains thus:

“These writers, who have emerged from the depressed castes, have over the years, tended to assume a leftist-Marxist orientation.

This disposition towards Marxism is not necessarily intellectual or ideological.”

“The communists have always been in the forefront of the struggles for the emancipation of the oppressed caste and consequently political activists among outcastes have developed a sense of loyalty to the communist party that often manifests itself in the writer’s leaning towards it. Some writers have virtually been fostered by the party. However, the relationship between the writers and the party has not always been smooth. As the writers mature and strive for perfect rendition of feeling, tone and language, they find themselves in conflict with the norms held by the party, and thereafter bickering begin.”

Citing an example of such bickering, Kailasapathy mentions that

“S. Ponnuthurai, an important Tamil writer in Sri Lanka, has had difficulties with the party due to his alleged amoral attitude in the treatment of sex in his novels and short stories. The examples, could be multiplied” Says Kailasapathy and continues:

“But broadly speaking many Tamil writers have had or have emotional attachment to the communist movement because it provides them with a world–outlook, a well–knit fraternity, and an important role in the ongoing cultural revolution”.

At this point I must hasten to add that, I as an individual do not subscribe to this view, because the communist ideology itself is now subject to question in most parts of the world.

However, Kailasapathy justifies that it is partly due to the backing they had from the communist movement that the writers launched the movement for the use of the spoken language in literature in the late fifties”.

We may refer to one more statement by Kailasapathy on this question of challenges for the contemporary writer, before we move on specifically to other aspects of this talk.

Says Kailasapathy: Another area in which we see the conflict between tradition and modernity is literary criticism. It goes without

saying that as new forms and experimentations take place, a certain amount of conceptual or theoretical writings are thrown up that provide the rationalization for the change. However, the critical function is relatively more of a cerebral activity compared to the creative impulse and is inevitably meant for a limited readership.

“Broadly speaking, the critics who are modern-oriented are familiar with western literary works and have had some experience of travel outside their countries. The creative writers have had lesser opportunities for education and travel. As a result, a sort of gulf tends to develop between them, although the dividing lines are not always sharply drawn. The critics too are not a monolithic group; ideology and other factors help to differentiate between them”.

Writers in Tamil come from three different groups. The older generation who are bilingual, the post-fifty six generation who are primarily Tamil-only educated and those believing in a political ideology. Prof. K. Sivathamby mentions the names of S. Vythialingam, Ilangayarkone, A.S. Muruganandan, A.N. Kandasamy, K. Ganesh as examples of the three groups in the early stages of writing in Tamil in this country. He doesn't fail to mention that Ilankeeran, Dickwella Kamal and M.M.M. Maharoof among the Muslims, C.V. Velupillai, Sithamparanathan, Pavalur, N.S.M. Ramiah and Tellawatta Joseph among the Tamils of recent Indian origin, though preserving their distinct also identified themselves with the mainstream Lankan writers.

In any study of the Sri Lankan Tamil writing the role of the Sri Lankan Progressive Writers' Association under the leadership of Premjee Gnanasunderam should not be dismissed. A large majority of writers in Tamil here accepted the guidelines promulgated by the Progressive Writers' Association. There were dissenters too. S. Ponnuthirai, M. Thalayasingham, Dharma Civaramoo and A. Yesurasa were just a few writers who proved their mettle in their own ways.

Having said that let us consider the few earlier publications which indicate that there was and is a thriving Sri Lanka writing in Tamil. The first few books, published in the early sixties set the pattern for the publication of exclusive Sri Lankan Tamil writing.

The following books published in the early sixties identified the Sri Lankan Tamil writers as characteristically different from the Tamilnadu writers in language style, view point and content:

Kavaloor Rasadurai's collection of short stories titled *Kulanthai Oru Deivam*, Neervai Ponnian's collection of short stories titled *Meydum Pallamum*, Ilankaeran's novel *Neethiyae Nee Kearnl*, N.K. Rangunathan's collection of short stories *Nilavilae Pesuvom* and Benedict Balan's novel *Kutti*.

Again the special talent of the Lankan writers as socially concerned writers *vis-a-vis* Tamilnadu writers, come to be focused when the following books were published: K. Daniel's collection of short stories titled *Daniel Kathaikal*, Dominic Jeeva's collection of short stories titled, *Thannerum Kaneerum*, *Pathukai*, *Salayin Thirupam*, S.Ganeshalingam's collections of short stories titled *Nallavan*, *Sangamam*, and his novels *Neenda Payanam*, *Sadangu*, etc. Illangayarkone's collections of short stories titled *Vellipathasaram*, S. Ponnuthurai's novel *Thee*, M. Thalayasingam's collection of short stories titled *Puthu Yugam Pirakirathu*. Sitpi Saravanabhavan's edition of a collection of prize-winning stories titled *Eelathu Parisu Kathaikal*.

In terms of statistics, between 1948 and 1955 there was only one collection of short stories published. But the figure rose to 40 between 1956 and 1965. There was a fall in figures between 1966 and 1970. Only 16 collections were published. These figures were in respect of short stories and anthologies. As far as novels go, 10 novels were published between 1943 and 1955, 35 between 1956 and 1965 and 26 between 1966 and 1970.

The Sahitya Mandalaya awarded a prize to Dominic Jeeva for his collection of short stories titled *Thannerum Kannerum* in 1961. This gives an impetus to more and more writers publishing their works.

An attempt was made in 1963 by the Progressive Writers' Association to integrate its activities with the progressive writers among the Sinhalese community.

The Marxist-oriented progressive association did not have a total acceptance to all writers in Tamil in this country. There were writers

and critics who did not totally accept Marxist thoughts. There were aesthetes who wanted writers to be apolitical. And there were also anti-communists who were conservatives.

Sivathamby identifies such writers in the early period as V.A. Rasaratnam, Arul Selvanayagam, Sovanna Nadarasa, T. Pakkianayagam, R. Nagarajan, K.P. Ratnam, Mahakavi. F.X.C. Nadarajah and Ilamuruganar. How far this observation by Sivathamby is correct is subject to review.

In the early sixties, there were a few little magazines which published creative and critical writing by both the so-called progressive camp and the so-called aesthetic camp. One such magazine was *Kalai Chelvi* edited by Sitpi Saravanabhavan, *Thenaruvi* by a group of writers like the now important filmmaker in India, Balu Mahendra and Arunmoli Devar. Sovanna Nadarsa, M. Thalayasingam and others wrote to *Kalai Chelvi* and voiced their opinion on controversial issues. As substantial number of independent writers, who were either progressive or anti-progressive in the Marxist sense, but generally absorbing all values in the progress of humankind wrote in both progressive labelled journals and not so-labelled journals.

The split in the communist party in 1963 as the Soviet Wing and the Chinese Wing, also had its repercussions among the Tamil writers here. *Mallikai* edited by Dominic Jeeva toed the Soviet line at the beginning, but later on accommodated writers from all quarters. *Vasantham* professed the Maoist point of view. While writers like Kailasapathy, Illankeeran, Neervai Ponnian, S. Ganeshalingam, S. Yoganathan, K. Kathirgamanathan, K. Daniel and others took up the Chinese stance. Sivathamby, Premjee, Domnic Jeeva, Theniyan and others followed the Soviet line.

The period 1965-1970 saw the weakening of the progressive forces, while the emergence of two important writers – S. Ponnuthurai and M. Thalayasingam, come to be noticed. *Poorani* was a magazine that was not anti – progressive but advocated Sarvodaya universalism.

A non-partisan and non-committal writer, would grade the late M. Thalayasingam as an innovative thinker, a critic and a remarkable

creative writer, whose proclamations of going beyond the narrow confines of Marxism and the assimilation of integrated yoga as manifested in the Sarvodaya Philosophy and the like are becoming a reality.

S. Ponnuthurai, though a talented craftsman and a stylist in language, lacked a sense of purpose in most of his writings. However his collection of short stories titled *Vee* is a superb study of the humankind in various manifestations. *Anjali* was another magazine which was progressive in outlook.

The Progressive Writers Association began to function briskly during 1970-77 in consonance with the then coalition government in power. But the sad fact is, in my opinion, the creative writing remained stereotyped with the Marxist formulae and non-experimental. The hackneyed theme of caste and class was the subject of fiction writing. And in the name of new poetry – there was nothing new nor was there poetry in them, A number of unskilled and slogan repeating young people who forgot that there was a past literary tradition began to fill the pages of newspapers. However, it was in the field of literary studies and literary criticism that the period witnessed productive activity.

The magazines *Theerthakari*, *Sudar*, *Sirithiran*, *Thayagam* *Thamilinпам*, *Kolunthu* and other journals gave opportunities to all writers who had different opinions.

This compensated adequately for the lack of creativity in a larger sense. Scholars like K.Kailasapathy, K. Sivathamby, R. Murugaiyan, M.T. Thalayasingham, M.A. Nuhman, Maunaguru, Chitrleka Maunaguru, P. Poologasingam, Chokkan, A. Shanmugasadas, S. Thillainathan, S. Velupillai, S. Thananjeyarajasingham, K. Shanmugalingam, M. Shanmugaratnam, Mayilankoodalur Nadarajan, N. Subramania Iyer, K. Arunachalam, Thurai Manoharan, and a few literary columnists showed the way in modern literary criticism to their counterparts in Tamilnadu. Tamilnadu academics and students in the universities began to acknowledge Lankan scholars as models of scholarship in the contemporary sense.

Although creative writing during the seventies compared poorly with the creative writing in Tamilnadu, one or two writers from Sri

Lanka showed promise. Among them were Sengai Aaliyan, Arul Subramaniam, Bala Manoharan, Santhan, Saddanathan, M.Kanagarajan and A. Yesurasa who wrote fiction with a certain degree of originality and freshness.

In poetry, however, some of the outstanding poets in this country came to be noticed . They included Cheran, V.I.S. Jayapalan, S. Sivasegaram, A.Yesurasa, M.A. Nuhman, Shanmugam Sivalingam, Visvaratnam, M. Ponnambalam, Eelevantan and others who could be mentioned here. Their poetic sensitivity was strikingly original and fresh. The part played by the Express Newspaper Company in publishing a number of works by Lankan writers and the restriction brought about in importing pulp magazines from Tamilnadu led to the boosting up of the image of the Lankan writers in the minds of the local readers. The Sri Lankan consciousness among the Lankan writers came to be felt. Sri Lankan readers of Tamil writing began to accept the individuality of the writers here *vis-a-vis* the largely escapist writers of the popular variety across the Palk–strait.

At this point, I wish to quote a comment by Arthur Melville Hark, a scholar and critic. He said “when free verse is agreeably modulated, its rhythms will either approximate to rhythm perfectly feasible in meter but perhaps disguised to look new, or else will be new, but not beyond the reach of metrical experiment”. Taking a cue from this Kailasapathy said, ‘In my view the only poet writing in Tamil who comes very close to this definition is R. Murugaiyan. He has a sound grading in classical poetry. He can always be relied upon to be more interesting, lively, provocative, wide-ranging, psychologically penetrating, technically skilful and ingenious than most of his contemporaries.’

I wish to mention here the role of Sillayoor Selvarajan who has written a book on the early Tamil novels of Sri Lanka. He is also a very creative poet and uses the language appropriately. His columns on literary matters were also appreciated very much in most quarters. He wrote the first film script in Tamil in book form. He is also a performing artiste and has acted in an English film.

Talking about books on contemporary Tamil writing, one notes that a number of books have appeared in recent times covering short stories, novels, language in fiction, criticism, folk literature etc. But one book titled *Irupatham Nootrandu Eelathu Thamil Ilakkiyam*, meaning 20th Century Sri Lankan Tamil Literature needs mention. It is written by M.A. Nuhman and Maunaguru and Chitrалека. They say that the capitalist social system, the resultant modernization and the social changes accruing from it were energetic forces behind the 20th Century Sri Lankan Tamil Literature. It depicted the common man. The political, social and economic changes, after 1950 gave a socio-political consciousness to local writing. Sri Lankan Tamil writers escaped commercialization. These academics picture a very sensitive poet Mahakavi, who excelled in limericks, as a phenomenal figure in poetry and poetic drama. They also talk about Murugaiyan, Neelavanan, Sillayoor Selvarajan and others including writers of *verse-libre*.

Coming into the scene in the eighties, we have to rely on observations by academics who live in the northern peninsula.

Having no direct access to the kind of literature now being produced or plays performed since the beginning of the eighties, we have to rely heavily on some authorities who have observed the passing scene while being stationed in the Jaffna peninsula.

One such authority is Prof. K. Sivathamby. In his book in Tamil called *Eelathil Thamil Ilakkiyam* meaning Tamil Literature in Sri Lanka, Sivathamby has this to say : “The young people lived totally in a Tamilised atmosphere. They had not known the artistic tradition that preceded them. They were interested in fighting against the injustices caused to them. As an expression of the militant group, a new literary voice was heard. Although the previous generation too had faced oppression, it was the new creative writers who had the stamp of experience borne out of the horrendous nature of the oppression. In this context poetry took precedence followed by fiction. The first to come out of this social phenomenon was Cheran. His poems showed how a member of the younger generation assimilated the new social experience felt by the Tamilians in Sri Lanka”.

Sivathamby continues:

“.....The most important artistic expression of the new experience was in the field of drama. The play *Man Sumantha Meniyar* written by Kulandai Shanmugalingam and produced by Sithamparanathan was a marvelous production. The heavy burdens of a youth in a Tamil family, the struggle he experiences in facing these challenges, the expectation that it is in his future that the prosperity of the family rests, are all portrayed in this play. Shanmugalingam's other plays *Mathoru Pahan* and other plays also expressed the new feeling. The dance movements, poetic language employed in the dialogue, the musical forms etc. make them a powerful medium of communication in these plays.”

In the opinion of Prof. K. Sivathamby, the Sri Lankan Tamil literature beginning in the sixties with individual characteristics and critical outlook has now entered a new era. Sivathamby talks about a collection of poems by feminists titled *Sollatha Cheithikal* meaning Unspoken Messages. Theniyan, Santhan, Sembian Selvan, Sengai Aaliyan, Nandhi and Kohila Mahendran are some other names mentioned by him as creative writers. As chroniclers of the literary history of Tamil writing in Sri Lanka, Sivathamby's list includes the following names; A. Shanmugadas, Chirtaleka Maunaguru, M.A. Nuhman, C. Maunaguru, N. Subramania Iyer, K. Arunachalam, Chokkalingam.

Let me conclude this brief introduction by suggesting a select few names of writers whose works could be compiled as an anthology of creative and critical writing beginning from the late 70s to later 85s.

Short Stories: Santhan, Saddanathan, Kanagarasan, Uma Varatharajan, S. Yoganathan, Theniyan, P.M. Punniyameen, Sulaima Samee, Yoga Balachandran and Thamarachelvi.

Novels: S. Ganeshalingam, Sengai Aaliyan, Kohila Mahendran, Sembian Selvan, K. Sathasivam, K. Daniel, Theniyan, N.Soma Kanthan, S. Gunaratnam, Abdul Samathu.

Poetry: Cheran, Jeyabalan, Sivasegeram, Nuhman, Aadavan, Yesurasa, Memon Kavi, M. Palakrishnan, Eela Ganesh, Visvaratnam.

Drama: Kulanthai Shanmugalingam, Mownaguru, N. Sundaram Pillai, Chokkan.

Here the names are inadequate because plays are hardly written in book form:

Criticism: M.A. Nuhman, K. Shanmugalingam, N. Shanmugaratnam, Arunachalam, Thurai Manoharan, Subramania Iyer, Teliwatte Joseph, A. Sivanesa Chelvan.

Well these names are my personal choice. They are representative and include variety.

As for the most important names in the whole period beginning from 1948 to date one has to mention long lists. So I avoid that and stop here.

Towards Sinhala – Tamil Understanding

I. A Question of Dialogue

Serious minded Tamil writers and readers already know a great deal about the Sinhala writers, through the Little Magazines in Tamil. Even mass circulated dailies have published translations from Sinhala writing. Martin Wickremasinghe, Ediriweera Sarathchandra, Siri Gunasinghe, Gunadasa Amarasekera, K. Jayatileke, Wimal Dissanayake, Reggie Siriwardena and A.J. Gunawardene are names very familiar to Tamil readers. Works of Dayananda Gunawardene and Martin Wickramasinghe have also been dramatized in Tamil. Seminars on Sinhala cinema with particular reference to Lester James Peiris' films provoked stimulating discussion on aesthetics among young writers.

So, there is a conscious effort on the part of young Tamil writers to understand what is taking place in the Sinhala Literary world. Can this be said of the Sinhala reading public on the local Tamil Literary scene? I fear not, at least not in the field of English writing.

Some of the short stories translated into Tamil from Sinhala however, had a few Tamil speaking characters; but I have not read a single Sinhala short story which attempted to portray the Tamil living in full. On the other hand there have been a few stories in Tamil which portrayed Sinhala characters in perspective.

I believe Tamil writers are seriously looking at their Sinhala brethren as part of their own experience, own thinking and own identity, though politicians regard things differently. Many Tamil writers have told me that they are interested in meeting Sinhala writers and entering into a dialogue with them to discuss common problems. Except for a few dons who work together in various university campuses, the others involved in writing have not met at all.

So why cannot there be dialogues among Ceylonese writers?

Initially there will be certain difficulties of direct communication among them, because of their respective spoken tongues. Unfortunately a majority of the Tamil writers in Ceylon are not so fluent in English and I suppose this is so with some Sinhala writers too. Nevertheless the English educated writers among them can act as translators or agents in communicating their ideas. The number of people proficient in both Sinhala and Tamil is also increasing.

It is interesting to note that while the majority of the major Sinhala writers had been influenced by Western writers and literary modes, almost all the Tamil writers are rooted and wedded to their own local idiom. One reason why the local Tamil writers are not particularly interested in Western bourgeoisie writing is that many of them come from lower middle and working classes. People like Dominic Jeeva (Editor of *Mallikai*), K. Daniel and Illankeeran (Editor of *Janavegam*) are proud to be called proletarian writers. Instead of looking at the West for everything the Tamil writer in Ceylon wishes to have literary connections with his Sinhala counterpart in particular and Asian writers in general.

In a broadcast over the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation Mr. Reggie Siriwardena once suggested that the Sinhala writer could draw inspiration from neighboring Indian writers and translate them into Sinhala, instead of translating Western writers. Relevance in terms of changing Asiatic Society is equally important to Ceylonese writers both Sinhala and Tamil.

So, why cannot there be a common consciousness among us as to what a Ceylonese idiom is? Surely we can find common grounds despite slight ethnical variations. Unity in diversity is all the more necessary now than ever before. Literature can thus forge a path for understanding and mutual appreciation.

II. A Tamil – Sinhala Dictionary

The Sinhala Sandesha poetry bears many references to the fact that Tamil had in fact been taught in the *pirivenas* in earlier times according to Peter Abeysekera in his foreword to a Tamil–Sinhala Dictionary.

He made reference to this to emphasise the close relationship between the two races since ancient times. He further said, “Just as much as Sri Rahula was well versed in Tamil, people like Nannool Thuraiyar were fluent in Sinhala”.

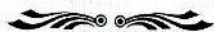
I have to quote from the forewords written by eminent Sinhala scholars to stress the importance of a Tamil–Sinhala Dictionary. Dr. Premadasa Udagama while hoping for a new generation of bilingual (Sinhala–Tamil) learned men who would help in the country’s welfare, has commended the individual effort of N.D.Peiris in compiling this useful dictionary for students, writers and translators.

Apart from the dictionary itself, the long introduction by the late Ven. Panditha Hissalle Dharmaratne Thero is also elucidatory. The late Thero was awarded a Gold Medal at the second International Tamil Seminar held in Madras for his translation of the Tamil epic *Silapadikaram* into Sinhala. I quote from him:

When Jaffna was under the dominion of the Sinhala Kings, a great number of Tamil words got into the Sinhala vocabulary since the 2nd Century to the Kandyan period. The influence of Tamil can be seen in literary words, grammar and inscriptions. Tamil bhikhus from South India came to Sri Lanka by about the 14th Century. Not only the clergy, even the laymen gained proficiency in Tamil during the Polonnaruwa, Dambadeniya, Kurunegala, Gampola, Kotte, Sitawaka and Kandyan periods in our history. Sri Rahula, Vithagama Maithri, Ranasekelle Alagiyavannumuka Vetti and Kirimaltiyanae Kivindu were notable Tamil Scholars. After 1815 however, the Sinhala people turned to English. The absence of suitable books in Tamil for the Sinhala beginner discouraged them from studying this language. It is in this respect that the new Tamil-Sinhala Dictionary is useful.

Mr.N.D.Peiris is a well known bilingual writer. He earlier brought out a Sinhala-Tamil Dictionary and he has worked on this new project for the last six years and has more than fifteen years experience in teaching Sinhala to Tamil students. Mr. Peiris deserves the gratitude of both the Tamils and Sinhalese for his untiring efforts to initiate a dialogue between the two communities.

Part II



Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

An interview in five parts given by K.S. Sivakumaran to
LeRoy Robinson of the Faculty of Economics,
University of Nagasaki, Japan.

Acknowledgement

Part 1: Reprinted from Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Nagasaki University, Humanities, Vol. 28, No. 2, pp. 105 – 137. January 1988; Part 2: Reprinted from Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 68, No. 4, Nagasaki University. March 1989; Part 3: Reprinted from Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 69, No. 2, Nagasaki University, September 1989; Part 4: Reprinted from Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Art, Nagasaki University, Humanities, Vol. 30. No. 2, pp. 77 – 118, January, 1990; Part 5: Reprinted from Keel to Keizai, Vol. 69, No. 4, Nagasaki University, March 1990.

Introduction

K. S. Sivakumaran has for long enjoyed a reputation as a writer who has addressed himself to both Tamil and Sinhala Literature in our multi-ethnic and multi-lingual society. By writing in English, he has been able to interpret Tamil literature which he is acquainted with at first hand to the country's bilingual intelligentsia. Some of these writings have appeared in translation in Sinhala, so that his insights have reached the larger Sinhala readership as well. When it comes to Sinhala, Sivakumran does not possess the same first hand acquaintance with the language, but then that is part of our multi-lingual reality. (How many Sinhalese incidentally know Tamil well enough to translate from that language?) But here again Sivakumaran has been able to bridge the gap at least in a seminal way by introducing Sinhala writers of whom he had read in the English press to the Tamil reader and translating them into Tamil through English. English therefore remains dominant in this exercise but that too is part of our multi-lingual reality. That the intelligentsia of this country consisting of both Sinhalese and Tamils should have had to communicate with each other in the language of a colonial power has contributed in no small measure to the alienation between the two communities which remains the dominant reality in inter-communal relations in Sri Lanka today.

Literature being a reflection of emotive experience is best equipped to bring about understanding between the communities. But the tragic reality is that very few Sinhalese or Tamils know the other's language well enough to savour a work of literature. So translation and interpretation remain paramount and this had been Sivakumaran's chosen field.

He has set about it with a zeal bordering on the missionary and this volume itself is enough to bear testimony to his mission. It covers a wide range of issues pertaining to Sinhala, Tamil and English

language literatures published in Sri Lanka. It is an ideal window which reveals in particular Tamil writing and other artistic activities in that language but also touches on other literatures as well.

It offers an overview of cultural activity in Sri Lanka from which both the average reader as well as the specialist can benefit.

December, 1991

Ajith Samaranayake

Associate Editor of 'The Island'
(Sunday and Daily)

LeRoy Robinson – The Interviewer

Aspects of Sri Lankan Culture are made known in Japan through English. The Nagasaki University in Japan publishes at least four journals in English. An American teaching in the Faculty of Economics in this University, LeRoy Robinson is the respected academic who is responsible in introducing Lankan writers and others associated with culture in a broad sense. We understand that these academic journals are widely circulated among other universities in that country.

The four journals publishing the interviews with Lankans are Keito Keiza (Management and Economics), Kiyō (Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts), Tonan Azia Nenpo (Annual of the South Asia Research Society) and Keizai Nempo (Annual of Economics Department).

LeRoy Robinson, 68, an American, is an authority on the radical US playwright and screenwriter John Howard Lawson. Robinson has written more than 40 articles on Lawson. He is a frequent contributor to Kyushu American Literature. His studies on literary people include pieces on Eugene O'Neill and others.

LeRoy Robinson has done more than 30 interviews in English of Lankan people involved in cultural activities. The South East Asia Research Society of the Nagasaki University hopes to collect these interviews to a book form.

LeRoy Robinson used to review books for the Los Angeles Mirror (now defunct), and for the Los Angeles Time. He has also broadcast a 30 minutes show called “The Saturday Night Review” over Radio Puerto Rico. And over Radio Japan, he has read English news bulletins. He says modestly that he is more a journalist than an academic.

A Note

This collection of interviews is presented in its original form. They are reprinted from Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Nagasaki University, Humanities, Vol. 28, No. 2 pp. 105-137, (January 1988), Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 68, No. 4 (March 1989), Nagasaki University Bulletin of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Nagasaki University, Humanities, Vol. 30 No. 2, pp. 77-118, (January 1990) and Keiei to Keizai, Vol. 69 No. 4 (March 1990), Nagasaki University.

The interview was conducted for a long period through correspondence. The style of conversation has been followed in presenting or discussing facts. As in a dialogue, there has been no coherent stream of thoughts, and therefore there appears disconnected patches occasionally in this book. However, details and facts are covered, although analysis in depth might not have been possible at all times.

I am indebted to Mr. LeRoy Robinson, for considering me to express my views on certain aspects of contemporary writing and the arts, especially carried out in the Tamil language, and publishing them in the academic journals of the Nagasaki University in Japan.

I am grateful to Ajith Samaranayake, a bilingual critic, for introducing me and my writing.

My thanks are due to Messrs James Lanerolle, Edmund Ranasinghe, and Gamini Weerakoon under whom I worked as a journalist during 1985-1991, for their estimation of me as a professional journalist.

I also wish to thank the printers for their co-operation, and my wife, Pushpa, for her painstaking efforts in going through the proofs of this booklet.

K.S. Sivakumaran

19.8.1992

1

- R: Dr. E. Sarachchandra is usually credited with reviving Sinhala drama. Didn't Dr. Vithiananthan do something like that for Tamil drama?
- S: Professor Vithiananthan is widely recognized here for his popularization of Sri Lankan folk drama. He himself says he re-oriented Naatu Koothu stylized plays to suit modern times. He had seen Sarachchandra's *Maname* in 1956. In fact, Sarachchandra told Vithiananthan that many Sinhala folk plays had some connection with Tamil folk plays, especially Christian Tamil folk plays. Anyway, after that, Vithiananthan became more active in folk theatre. In the late 1940s he had already produced Professor Kanapathipillai's *Nattavan Nagara Vazkai* (Villager's Urban Life) as a university project. The performers were students. In the early 1950s he also produced the late Professor K. Kanapathipillai's *Sankili*, a historical play about the last Tamil king of Jaffna. In 1952, he also did Kanapathipillai's *Udayar Middukku* at the University of Peradeniya. Incidentally, two other later well-known professors acted in this play, Kanagasabapathi Kailasapathi and Karthigesu Sivathamby. Kailasapathi was an editor of *Thinakaran*, a Tamil newspaper. He was a Tamil intellectual who fostered Sri Lanka consciousness among writers. He was also the pioneer in the modern sociological approach to literary criticism. Kailasapathi was the author of many books in Tamil and one in English, *Tamil Heroic Poetry*. He also wrote a book on Tamil novels. And he wrote an introduction to my *Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka*.
- R: Many academics in Sri Lanka are quite active in the production of culture, aren't they? What was Dr. Vithiananthan's academic status, by the way?

S: He was the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jaffna. He served three terms in that position. He had been at the University of Peradeniya for 25 years. Later he became the President and the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Jaffna. You can say he went up the academic ladder slowly but steadily, starting as an assistant lecturer.

R: What was his background?

S: He was the son of an attorney in Tellipallai . He went to St. John's College in Jaffna. Then to the then University College. He got his Ph.D from London University when he was about 26 years old. He wrote his dissertation about *Paththup Pattu*. That's an anthology of Sangam literature of the 2nd century A.D. It consists of ten works in song.

R: Briefly what were some of Dr. Vithiananthan's other academic writings?

S: *Illekkiya Thenral*, a collection of literary essays. *Thamizar Salpu* (Tamilian Civilization). He edited *Alankara Roopan Nadagam*, a folk play from Batticaloa. He'd also edited folk songs from Batticaloa and Mannar. He'd written numerous articles on literature and the arts. He'd also written on politics in Sri Lanka.

R: Before, you said he re-oriented Koothu. How?

S: He didn't change the dances or the songs, but he introduced an element of drama into folk plays mostly taken from *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*. He shortened the duration of plays that often were very long. He tightened the production, he said. He made the Annavi drummers beat rhythms in consonance with the singing. He put what you might call the chorus to the side of the stage so as not to distract the attention of the audience from the actors. He did not use props. Only a black curtain, for the background. He left a lot to the imagination of the viewers. He said he "sophisticated" traditional folk plays.

- R: Had he written any plays himself?
- S: Yes, folk plays. That is plays in the folk tradition, *Ravanesan*, for example, *Vali Vathai*.
- R: I suppose Dr. Vithiananthan was a teacher of drama?
- S: As President and then Vice-Chancellor he had had a reduced teaching load, of course, but he taught literature in post-graduate courses. In the 1950s he was the Chairman of the Tamil Drama Panel of the National Arts Council. He went to Chilaw, Mannar, Mulaitivu, Trincomalee and other districts and put on drama festivals there and conducted seminars on drama script-writing. He helped put on school drama competitions. Now, in conjunction with the Jaffna Cultural Council, he did seminars and workshops in Tamil folk drama. He was a teacher in the best sense.

By the way, if you're interested in Nattuk Koothu, you might like to know about a book published in Tamil, a short time ago, even if you can't read it. The Folk Arts Panel of the Jaffna District Culture Council published it. It's called *Kattavarayan Naatakam*. It's edited by Dr. E. Balasundaram, a senior lecturer in Tamil at the University of Jaffna. The reason I mention it, is that there are many styles in Koothu and this is a religious folk play associated with the worship of a minor god, Kaathavarayar. It's usually performed in Jaffna, Batticaloa, Trincomalee regions where the rural peoples still worship so-called minor gods and goddesses. Dr. Balasundaram had visited various places where this play is performed as an oral operatic play without a written script. He had gathered scripts where he could and transcribed them and edited the play. To refer to Professor Vithiananthan again, in this book he makes a very important observation. That is that the Sri Lankan Tamils can be distinguished according to the regions they live in. That is, they have their own individual cultural characteristics region by region. One of the cultural aspects they have in common is the tradition of folk plays.

- R: I would like to change the subject to fiction, but before I do, you may like to say more about Dr. Kailasapathy who wrote the introduction to your *Tamil Writing in Sri Lanka*.
- S: Yes, thank you. I would. Professor Kailasapathy was admired in both literary and academic circles in Sri Lanka. He was magnanimous in imparting his knowledge. As I've suggested his approach was basically scientific and sociological. He encouraged awareness of an identifiable Sri Lankan Tamil literature as distinguished from that of Tamil Nadu. As a literary critic, he tried to evaluate Western literary theories and to harmonize them with parallel concepts in Tamil literature. He radicalized the somewhat insular and tradition bound art for art's sake Victorian approach to literature here.
- R: As long as you're introducing important Tamil professors who are active in cultural affairs, how about saying more about Dr. Karthigesu Sivathamby? I know he's the Head of the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna and has been Chairman of the Tamil Drama Panel and the Tamil Literature Panel of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs.
- S: Professor Sivathamby has a wide range of interests: history, sociology, economics, literature, theatre, cinema, mass communication. His areas of specialization are Tamil, social and literary history, cultural communication among Tamils, and literary criticism. He's also interested in curriculum development, glossary making. He's written about 14 books in Tamil and three in English: *The Tamil Film as a Medium of Communication*, *Drama in Ancient Tamil Society*, and *Literary History of Tamil*. He considers himself a Marxist.
- R: You said before that when Sivathamby was a university student he performed on the stage as an actor. Is he still active in Tamil theatre?

- S: Yes. Recently he's been indirectly involved in three or four productions in the North. *Man Sumantha Meaniyar* (*Those with Bodies that Carried the Soil*) is the name of one. *Mathoru Pahan* is another. These titles come from lines in devotional songs (thevarams) from the depth of Hindu culture. The plays are basically in the Koothu tradition I described before.
- R: You said Dr. Sivathamby considers himself a Marxist. How does he view contemporary Tamil literature?
- S: He thinks there's a debate going on now as to how social consciousness could or should be expressed in fiction. He himself finds the whole ideology of progressivism in literature and the arts is not adequate enough in the current crisis. He says the challenges facing the art today are new. He says the most important question is to what extent nationalism is a valid and necessary concept in social formation. For example, the theatre he is interested in developing in Tamil culture is what he calls *Deshiya Ilakiyam*, nationalistic literature. He thinks nationalistic literature contributed a great deal to the revitalization of Tamil literature as a whole in the 1960s and 1970s.
- R: Then let's change the subject to fiction. Particularly novels. What is the history of Sri Lankan novels written in Tamil language?
- S: Let me answer your question by referring to a book on that subject by Silayoor Selvarajan, *The Growth of the Tamil Novel in Ceylon*. It was published in 1967. Selvarajan says the first Tamil novel written by a Ceylonese – S. Ignacittamby of Trincomalee – was an adaptation of a Portuguese novella called *Orzon and Valentine*. That was in 1891. According to S.M. Kamaldeen, the first novel written by any Ceylonese was published in 1888 *Asenbae* by Siddique Lebbe, a Muslim. The second Ceylon Tamil novelist was T. Saravanamuttu Pillai who wrote *Mohanangi* in 1895.

R: Were there any Sri Lankan Tamil women writing novels at that time?

S: No, Sri Lanka had to wait until 1924 for the appearance of the first woman novelist writing in Tamil, S. Sellammal. The title of her novel was *Rasadurai*. The second Tamil woman novelist appeared five years or so later, S. Rasammal. Her novel was called *Saraswathi*.

Look, to save time, let's just say that *serious* novels came to be written in Tamil by Sri Lankans only after 1956. Illankeeran, V.A. Rasaratnam, S. Ganeshalingan, Benedict Palan, C.V. Velupillai, S. Yoganathan, Chengai Aaliyan, and several others, since the 70's. They dealt with contemporary social themes in an analytical way. Have you ever heard of any of these people?

R: Only C.V. Velupillai and S. Ganeshalingan. But, why was 1956 the turning point? Because of the Sinhala Only language policy?

S: As you know, Sri Lanka became independent from Great Britain in 1948. Before that time, Ceylonese literary efforts in Tamil did not press for a Ceylonese identity. The lives of Tamil-speaking Ceylonese were depicted as the continuity of a Tamil heritage derived chiefly from the literary tradition of South India. The pre-independence Tamil writers here were mainly interested in the advancement of religion. Between 1956 and 1963 a progressive literary movement in Tamil came into full force. It was the primary force in determining what Ceylonese Tamil literature was or should be. Realism and national identity were emphasized. There was a new political consciousness.

R: What was the volume of Tamil literary activity at that time?

S: Between 1948 and 1970, a total of 71 novels written in Tamil were published in Sri Lanka. There were 57 collections of short stories. There were 98 anthologies of poetry. There were 49 plays. Keep in mind that Sri Lankan Tamil writers had heavy competition from South India. There were not many readers of

Ceylonese books in Tamil here. There was only one main Tamil publishing house here. Many writers had to bear the costs of publication themselves. Many still do. They even had a hand in the sale and distribution of their own books.

One reason for the relatively poor sale of Ceylonese Tamil fiction is that hardly any of those books was used in education. Only a few books by Ceylonese Tamils were recommended as Tamil texts in higher grades. Even the libraries did not display books by Ceylonese Tamils. Another reason was much of the Tamil fiction here lacked popular appeal. Readers nurtured in the South Indian tradition of escapist reading matter were discouraged by the literary quality of the works I've been referring to. The Ceylon Tamil writers I've mentioned were socially committed like S. Ganeshalingan.

- R: Before you go into Ganeshalingan's book, could you go a little into fiction about the Tamils of Indian origin who mostly work on tea plantations in Sri Lanka?
- S: In the last part of the 1970s, a writer from Badulla by the name of Teliwatta Joseph depicted the life of tea workers in a collection of short stories called *Naam Irukkum Nadu* (The Country We Live In). The title story stresses that those of Indian origin in Sri Lanka should consider the country they live in now as their own homeland. In another story he describes the backwardness of the educational system in the hill country where the tea plantations are located. And yet another story shows how youngsters in this area are corrupted by third-rate films. One other story is about a chaste girl who is driven into prostitution because of poverty.

A few years ago, three writers who come from the tea estate area put out a collection of short stories, *Thottak Kattinile* (In the Jungle of the Estates). It was published by the Matale Tamil Writers' Union. One story describes the dilemma of a married estate woman with two children who tries to avoid being molested by the estate's superintendent. She has to succumb;

otherwise, her husband will lose his job. In another story, an old Tamil woman and a Sinhala foreman (kangany) help people in adversity regardless of their race connection. All the stories in this collection are ironic comments on the life partners in the so-called jungle of estates in the tea country. This collection is important because it proves Tamil writers from estate areas are equally as imaginative and artistic as their counterparts in the North and East who usually get more attention. Anyway, these three writers represented in this collection write with firm convictions and an awareness of the realities of life in their area.

R: Then, let's take Ganeshalingan and his work.

S: All right. But I want to repeat one point. Local Tamil writers like Ganeshalingan wrote realistic social novels. They were aware of the root causes of social problems. Take Ganeshalingan's *Neenda Payanam*, for example, *The Long Journey*. His first novel, *Neenda Payanam* is about the gradual changes taking place in a small village in the Jaffna area, mainly social and political changes in relation to the awakening of the so-called low caste people, the depressed class people. They tear down the barricades of social values rooted in religious beliefs. Eventually they become strong enough to gain representations in their own local government. The novel describes their struggle, their long journey, for social and political emancipation. *Neenda Payanam*, is a novel about caste. The caste problem cannot be said to have been solved here even now. It exists in some form or the other in all grades of society. The irony is that even among the so-called low caste people, there is a caste system. This novel ought to be translated into Sinhala or English or both. It ought to be filmed as Martin Wickremasinghe's *Gamperaliya* was filmed.

R: Speaking of translation, is there much translation going on between Sinhala and Tamil here?

S: This is a very important question. A few Tamil works have been translated into Sinhala and English, but there is more translation

from Sinhala into Tamil than from Tamil into Sinhala. There is a Jaffna monthly, *Mallikai* (Jasmine) which publishes many translations of Sinhala writing. I wish that more and more writing in the three languages used here could be made available, so that a better understanding prevailed among readers towards each other's culture.

- R: What kind of Sinhala works have been translated into Tamil? Just a couple of examples, please.
- S: You know a little about Munidasa Cumaratunga. Sarojini Arunasalam has translated his *Magul Kama* (Kalyana Chappadu). *Hathpana* (Chettup Pilaitha Chinasamy), and *Heen Saraya* (Meliyar Midukku). T. Kanagaratnam has published a collection of twelve Sinhala short stories by people like Wickremasinghe, Sarachchandra, A.V. Suraweera, whom you know. Its title is *Setu Bandanam*, Wickremasinghe's novel *Gamperaliya* (Gramap Piralvu) was put into Tamil by M.M. Uwise. Works by K. Jayatilake and Karunasena Jayalath have been translated into Tamil by Thambi Aiyah Devadas. Many other Sinhala writers' short stories and poems have also been translated into Tamil and published in Jaffna in magazines like *Mallikai* and *Alai*.
- R: What about Tamil works into Sinhala?
- S: A couple of old Tamil epics, *Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* were translated by Hiselle Dharmaratne Thero. A few short stories by Ganeshalingan, *Aluth Satanpata*, were put into Sinhala by Ranjit Perera. Kanagaratnam, again, has translated some Tamil short stories, *Demala Keti Kathawa*, K.G. Amaradasa has translated a few short stories into Sinhala.
- R: Have you done much translation from Sinhala or English into Tamil?
- S: I don't translate from Sinhala. May I also say I am a bilingual (English and Tamil) writer? I have translated numerous non-fiction articles in English into Tamil. An article by Arya Abeysinghe and

Iranganie Abeysinghe on contemporary English writing in Sri Lanka from *New Ceylon Writing*. I've translated poetry by Wimal Dissanayake, whom you have interviewed. I've also translated the views expressed in English by Mervyn de Silva, Reggie Siriwardene, D.C.R.A. Goonetilake, Ediriweera Sarachchandra, Siri Goonesinghe, G. Tissa Kariyawasam, and others, into Tamil and published them in local magazines.

R: Has anybody translated your work into Sinhala?

S: A few of my articles have been translated into Sinhala by Susil Siriwardana and Piyal Somaratne and published in *Mavatha* and *Navaliya*.

R: To go back to Ganeshalingan, what, briefly, is the plot of *Neenda Payanam*?

S: A young man of the Sembattu Pallar caste is beaten up by Vellalar caste youths during a temple festival. He had slept in the temple premises allocated to the Vellalar or high caste. That's how the novel begins. But, briefly, this Sembattu Pallar young man has three young women friends. One belongs to a high caste. One belongs to his own caste. One belongs to a lower caste. He marries the last. By having the young man marry the latter young woman, Ganeshalingan wants to stress the idea that reformation of society takes place first in the young man's own home.

R: Would you describe a couple of Ganeshalingan's other novels?

S: His second novel was *Sadangu*. That refers to ceremonies or rituals. In this novel it means marriage ceremonies. *Sadangu* deals with all possible ceremonies and customs and observances associated with an average Jaffna Hindu rural wedding. Ganeshalingan laughs at the foolishness of conservative people who only look to the old customs and ceremonies but who ignore the susceptibilities of the marriage partners whose marriage has been arranged for them. He scoffs at parents who refuse to see a new generation emerging, who thrust on their offspring their own concept of

life rooted in a feudal society. Ganeshalingan's third novel was *Sevvanam* (The Crimson Sky). It centers around an upper middle class businessman who accumulated wealth suddenly in the midst of political and social changes. His foil is a trade unionist, university educated, who associates himself with the proletariat. The novelist suggests a Marxist solution to eradicate social evils.

- R: I understand there are some Sri Lankan Muslims who write in the Tamil language. Would you say something about them?
- S: Let me mention Zubair, a Jaffna Muslim who writes under the pen name of Ilankeeran. He used to publish a literary magazine called *Maragatham*, but it died due to lack of adequate financial support. He then edited *Tholilalie* and then *Janavegam*, two political weeklies. He's one of the finest political analysts using the Tamil language in Sri Lanka. He himself is the product of the class struggle. As a Marxist and member of the proletariat, he has identified himself as a progressive writer. One of his novels, *Theutralum Puyalum* (The Breeze and the Storm), is set in Ceylon. The story centers on a lower middle class Muslim family in Jaffna. They are torn apart by conflicting values. The son falls in love with a rich girl in Colombo. They have a passionate relationship. She becomes pregnant. Her family forces her into an abortion and then into a hasty marriage with a cousin who has the wealth and status and education they want in their daughter's husband. This experience, this betrayal as the young man sees it, sours his attitude toward life. He falls a victim to both physical and mental disease. He dies. There's another love story running parallel to this one. The young man's sister loves a neighbour of a lower caste. In spite of severe opposition, their attachment deepens. They have the courage to venture on marriage. Progressive ideology thus triumphs at the end.

There are other Muslim writers like A. Abdus Samanthu, Jalaldeen, M.M. Mansoor, S.M. Nagoor Gany, *et.al* who have depicted the Muslim life style in Sri Lanka.

- R: Has any critic in Sri Lanka written about Sri Lankan Muslims, writing in Tamil?
- S: Professor Vithiananthan included an essay on this topic in *Illakiya Thenral*. The first person to write about this, though, was Professor M.M. Uwise who wrote his M.A. thesis on the Muslim contribution to Tamil literature. A few years ago, Al Haj S.M. Hanifa, an attorney-at-law published *Islamiya Ilakkiya Valarchchi*, a collection of essays on Islamic writing in Tamil.
- R: What is the name of one Islamic Tamil literary work?
- S: Probably the most widely known piece is *Chirapuranam*. It tells the story of Prophet Mohammed. It's poetry written in the style of a Tamil epic.
- R: In discussing translations, you referred to short stories. Would you say something about your collection of your own short stories?
- S: A general comment. The stories in *Sivakumaran Kathaihal* were written in the late 1960s, and so they reflect the limited range of experience of an adolescent. Most of the stories were on psychological themes. They were experimental in form in the sense they were tight like a Western short story. Incidentally, the book came out of the printer's at Batticaloa in a bartered condition, and then it could not be circulated widely on account of the worsened conditions in the North and East.
- R: Why "battered"?
- S: Because the pages of the book were not collated into one unit. Lots of printing mistakes. Fourteen stories were planned but only seven were actually printed. There was no jacket for the book. It was a slipshod job. But I couldn't blame the publisher. He had to print the book in a hurry and under trying conditions.
- R: How about describing a couple of these stories?

- S: Well, one, “Ilai,” is about the quarrels between a married couple. They separate, unite, separate. I used a lot of Tamil regional dialects. Another one, “Uraividam Melidam”, is a sketch of a young man with an inferiority complex.
- R: My impression is that many writers in Sri Lanka deal with the inferiority complex theme.
- S: Most Tamil writers, however, ignore this aspect. Most writers concentrate on social realism. Only a few writers have written on psychological themes. But, yes, there’s a story by A. Muttulingam, “Pakkuvam”, which is a good one on the inferiority complex theme. It’s written compactly. It’s about the attainment of maturity of a young but unattractive woman immediately after her younger sister precedes her in biological changes of life. The title translates as “Puberty.” She has an inferiority complex. Her sister is more attractive and very popular, so she begins to be depressed. But a man comes to her rescue. He comforts her psychologically. He tells her she’s pretty. He advises her to be more attentive to her personal appearance. Anyway, she becomes emotionally mature. “Pakkuvam” is a story of the 1960s. It was published in a collection called *Eelathu Parisu Kathaihal* (Sri Lankan Prize Winning Stories).
- R: Were there any stories in that collection that deal with less subjective themes?
- S: Yes. Thiru Senthooran’s story “Urimai Enge?” (Where are the Rights?), was about the failure of a Tamil tea estate worker to obtain Sri Lankan citizenship rights because of the laws and regulations prevailing at that time. The dialogue was colloquial. The characterization was realistic. On the other hand, another story in the same collection, “Nattukku Iruvar” (Two for the State) was merely a piece of propaganda.
- R: Incidentally, what is the Tamil for “stories” and “short stories” and “novels” and “fiction”?

- S: As you must have guessed by this time, *kathaihal* is stories. Short stories is *ciru kathaihal*. *Punai kathaihal* is fiction. *Navalhal* is novels.
- R: Would you comment then on some of the other Tamil writers of *ciru kathaihal* in Sri Lanka?
- S: Yes, but to begin with let's go back a little to the late 1930s and early 1940s. One of the innovators of Tamil short story writing was a Divisional Revenue Officer by the name of N. Sivagnanasunderam. He used the pen-name *Ilankayarkone*. In English, King of Lanka. He usually published his stories in South Indian magazines like *Manikodi*, *Sooravali*, *Sakthi*. He's dead now. As for the stories, *Vellipathasaram* (The Silver Anklet) was a collection of his stories published in the early 1960s. "The Silver Anklet", the title story, tells about the romantic attachment of a newly married couple. 'Manithakurangu' (The Human Ape) deals with the open-heartedness of an ugly man who marries a beautiful but lascivious woman. "Anathai" (The Orphan) satirizes sophisticated women who have the license even to give birth before marriage and discard their children. Ilankayarkone was essentially a formalist but his stories were exposition of humanism.
- R: Who is one of the Tamil writers in Sri Lanka who mainly deals with social problems in short stories?
- S: S. Yoganathan. I mentioned his name before. He's a social realist. If that's what you mean. He usually probes the minds of the characters instead of objectively reporting the transitional conditions of society, but one of his stories, "Cholakam" (Southerly Wind) is a vivid description of the poverty and gloom in the lives of a fisher family in the North. Another one, "Kalaigan" (The Artist), exposes the character trait of pseudo-artists who refuse to look at and understand the sordid aspects of life around them. Yoganathan has published a few novels, too. *Iraival Thai Nadu* (Surrogate Motherland) is one of them. As Professor has

said, Yoganathan used to speak of a Sri Lankan consciousness but now he suddenly feels that Sri Lanka is only a surrogate homeland. This is a story about alienation. Sivathamby says the title of this story sums up the disenchantment and the suffering of the Tamil people in Sri Lanka recently.

R: Who are other important Tamil authors of realistic short fiction of this kind?

S: I must mention the name of A. Santhan, K. Saddanathan, Theniyan and a few others. As an American, you may be interested in Mr. Kathirgamanathan. He died young in the early 1970s at the age of thirty. He was among the first group of university students here who studied in the Tamil medium. Many of them became writers. Kathirgamanathan's "Vietnam Unathu Devathaikalina Deva Vaku." (Vietnam: The Holy Pronouncements of Your Own Angels) is a short story that makes a strong statement. The main character, a patriotic young Vietnamese woman, condemns the American presence in Saigon. It's a condemnation of imperialism, American or French. That was Kathirgamanathan's last story. Speaking of Vietnam, K. Ganesh, a progressive Tamil poet who once edited a little magazine called *Bharathi*, has translated Ho Chi Minh's poems into Tamil. Ho Chi Minh wrote these poems in prison in South China in the 1930s. He wrote them in Chinese. They were translated into English by Eileen Palmer, in the early 1970s. Ganesh translated them into Tamil from her English version. Ganesh is interested in introducing South East Asian writings to Tamil readers. He's also translated a collection of stories by Lu Sun, a Chinese writer who died in 1936, and an anthology of Bulgarian patriotic poetry.

R: Let's get into poetry written by Tamils in Sri Lanka too, but first would you mention at least one Tamil woman who writes short stories?

S: Bhavani Alvapillai. That was her maiden name. She uses the name Bhavani. She startles her readers with highly shocking depictions of characters who attempt to defy the conventional social beliefs and morals of the Tamils. She deals with the romantic and sexual stirrings of young couples. She makes a sincere effort to put in plain words the undertones and hidden aspirations that often ripple and bubble around in the unconscious mind. Her collection of short stories published in the early 1960s, *Kadavularum Manitharkalum* (Gods and Men), is provocative. For example, one story called “Anbin Vilai” (Price of Love) is about the love and marriage of a brother and sister who do not know they are of the same blood and kin. When they learn the truth, the wife commits suicide after leaving her daughter with her husband’s brother. The daughter faces many challenging problems in society until she is rescued by her sweetheart who himself has to hurdle many obstacles. “Manipura”, another of Bhavani’s stories, deals with the sexual relationship between two lovers on the eve of the young woman’s marriage to another man. (Manipura is a species of pigeons or doves white in colour). “Saria Thappa?” (Is it Right or Wrong?) is the story of a married woman who hates her husband and her child. She falls in love with a friend of her husband. She undergoes an emotional struggle whether to stay with her husband and child or elope with her lover. The situation and the characters in stories like these create an impression that Bhavani is indifferent to the prevailing social barriers. However objectionable the contents of her stories may be, though, there is unity in their form.

I’d also like to mention Kohila Mahendran. She was trained as a science teacher. She was a medical student at one time. She writes with psychological depth. Her husband is a teacher too, and her father now retired, used to be a school principal. Anyway, she is my favourite among the woman writers in Sri Lanka, writing in Tamil. She has an intellectual approach,

artistic ability, psychological insight, and concern for tight story structure. One of her stories is about a woman science teacher. The narrator is one of her students. At a staff meeting the teacher suggests celebrating the New Year by distributing nutritious food to needy children. One of her students, the narrator, has told her that many of the school's students come from poor families and suffer from malnutrition. She suddenly experiences the shock of learning things she did not know about her own environment. In another story Mrs. Mahendran exposes employment agents operating in Jaffna who take innocent people for a ride by promising them lucrative jobs in foreign countries and leaving them stranded. In this story an uneducated depressed class woman is brought to Colombo by one of these agents who makes her believe Colombo is Nigeria. He finds her a job as a maid-servant in a Tamil household. When she finally learns the facts, she puts the agent to shame.

- R: Has Kohila Mahendran written any novels?
- S: Yes, as a matter of fact, her first novel appeared recently. *Thuyilum Oru Nal Kalaiyum* (Even the Slumber Will One Day be Disturbed). She raises the problem of the moral and psychological placement of a Tamil woman in a rigid conservative Jaffna society. At a superficial level the story's about platonic love and marital relationship. At a deeper level, it raises many questions about the freedom of choice of individualism of a woman in a male dominated society. The idea of revolt against hypocritical practices. The story judiciously includes as passing events, current happenings in the North.
- R: You've mentioned *Mallikai* (Jasmine), a Tamil literary monthly in the North. What kind of journal is it? Are any of its editors fiction writers?
- S: Its chief editor Dominic Jeeva has brought out four collections of short stories. His own short stories *Thanneerum Kanneerum* (Water and Tear Drops), *Salayin Thirupam* (Turn of the Road), *Pathukai*

(Footwear). And *Valvin Dharisanangal* (Visions of Life). Jeeva considers himself a member of the working class. He is proud he was born into a family of hairdressers. He himself worked in his own barber shop when he was young. In his fiction he deals with the problems of the downtrodden. He severely condemns caste differences, social discrimination, literary escapism, bourgeois sophistication. In *Pathukai*, published in the early 1960s, he portrays characters who belong to the lowest of the low, he satirizes pseudo-intellectuals, he depicts the love affairs of middle class people. As an editor, Jeeva, who proclaims himself a pro Soviet communist, publishes contributions from non-Marxist writers and intellectuals. Even anti-Marxists are acceptable if they have contributed in a significant way to Sri Lankan Tamil arts and letters. In that sense, *Mallikai* is a journal of liberal ideas. It's an open forum.

- R: What are the names at least of other Tamil literary magazines?
- S: *Alai* (The Wave), *Thayaham* (Motherland), *Puthusu* (New), *Vayal* (Field), *Vyuham*, *Munaipu*, *Naan*, *Ullam*. There were others, now defunct. I want to add that a book called *Eelathil Irunthu Oar Ilakkiya Kural*, compilation of views and interviews given by Dominic Jeeva, was published a few years ago. His views on arts and letters and the like.
- R: What was the main theme?
- S: His main point was that Lankan Tamil literature has its own intrinsic identity and that most Tamil writers here are socially conscious and write with purpose rather than just churning out cheap escapist pot-boilers. Literature should not merely reflect contemporary life but also serve a social function to improve present conditions. Jeeva tends to dismiss anything other than Marxism as useless. For instance, he calls Jean Paul Sarte a fake. Existentialism a spent force.

- R: Now to get to poetry, is there at least one particular Tamil poet you'd like to call attention to?
- S: Eelavanan. His real name was M. Dharmarajah. He's dead now. His *Akkini Pookkal* (Fire Flowers) was published in the 1970s. Eelavanan's poems express a love of humanity, the urge to see a new world emerging, determination to wipe out social injustices through collective efforts. Eelavanan attacks the "beauty" poets, the mere aesthetes, who fail to deal with the needs of the time. He wants songs to be sung for those people who burn like flowers in a furnace of flames. He means the underprivileged, the suppressed, the exploited. He hates war. He condemns genocide. He dreams of a socialist world in which everyone will live not only for himself but for everybody else.

I'd also like to mention Eelaganesh. His real name is N. Dharmalingam. His *Pasikkul Pasi* (Hunger within Hunger) was published in the 1980s. He also expresses a genuine concern for human condition. He also expresses his inability to get things changed. He himself is an unwilling participant in the miseries of life. His poems are about love and poverty. In one poem, *Thottatu Pookkal* (Estate Flowers) he describes the misery that pervades the life of the impoverished people working on the tea estates. In another poem, *Desame Padil Sol* (Nation, what Do You Say?), he writes sadly about the separation of Tamil and Sinhalese friends in the current crisis.

- R: This last topic leads to questions other than those about literature. For one, how do you yourself view the inter-communal problems in Sri Lanka?
- S: We are a multi-racial society. That's a fact. In these circumstances, it's a good idea for all Sri Lankans to try to understand the psyche of the major communities in this island. Try to understand what their particular problems are. The majority of Sri Lankans are Sinhalese. This community's aspirations should be respected so long as they don't lead to a "tyranny of the majority". It's also an

ethical requisite that, however insignificant the minorities may be in terms of numbers, they should not be ignored or treated as aliens.

R: How should the prevailing enmity be dealt with?

S: Look, not all the Sinhalese are against the Tamils and not every Tamil is against the Sinhalese. Otherwise, how would you account for the magnanimity of so many Sinhalese during recent shameful happenings? How would you expect such harmonious working together of professionals, academics, artistes, writers, journalists? I'm glad to say that a Tamil, Ratnanathar Sivagurunathan, was twice elected the President of the Sri Lanka Working Journalists' Association, for example. How do you account for romance, love and marriage of people from various communities here? Only a few of us say 50,000 out of the total population of 15 million indulge in ugly activities both in the North and the South of the island.

R: Some Sinhalese seem to be afraid of Tamils, socially speaking, that is.

S: Only a very few Sinhalese think that the Tamils have been an obstacle to their progress in the fields of education, business, and the professions. Even if that were the case, it would be sheer foolhardiness to attempt to annihilate an entire community. A few people have been wrongly convinced by rabid racists among us that, by destructive acts such as destroying property or burning libraries, they could replace the hard-working Tamils. If a few Tamils and some members of other minorities in the island have enjoyed prestigious positions earlier, we have also contributed our fair share to the country's development.

R: Some Tamils express fear of being physically attacked.

S: In some areas the army and the police assumed superiority in their behaviour toward the Tamil people. This has created an understandable fear among Tamils that they may be the victim

of terrorism. That in turn may have produced terrorists among the Tamil youth. What we have in this country is a mutual fear of terrorism. Terrorism of any kind must be condemned. We have no right to take another person's life. Even if he is an enemy – imaginary or otherwise.

R: Do you have a recommendation on this point?

S: One immediate action should be to make it compulsory for the armed forces personnel posted to the North to be acquainted with the Tamil language.

R: Isn't this suggestion rather impractical?

S: Yes, one may ask why should the Sinhalese armed forces learn Tamil when they are of the predominant race in this country. Fair enough. But the majority cannot win the hearts of the minorities if they cannot speak to them on their own wave lengths.

R: In that case, why shouldn't the minority Tamils learn Sinhala? Or English?

S: Tamils did learn Sinhala earlier on their own accord, before it was thrust upon them. And the Tamil living outside the North and East by virtue of the fact that there is necessity to speak in Sinhala have learnt Sinhala. As for English, only about 8% of the entire population in Sri Lanka are familiar with the language. Tamil is spoken by nearly a quarter of the people - Sri Lankan Tamils, the Tamils of recent Indian origin, the majority of the Muslims and some sections of the Sinhalese and Burghers. It's an important language outside Sri Lanka too. Anyway, for greater harmony and better understanding we need to know each other's better understanding/ we need to know each other's languages here, at least in conversational or colloquial usage. The Tamil language is not far removed from Sinhala in idiomatic usage or even in vocabulary, you know. Just as there are many Sanskrit words or roots in Sinhala, there are many Tamil words of Sanskrit origin. A common ground is there or can be found. Similarly, there are

some Tamil words in Sinhala and some Sinhala words in Tamil. Both languages have words in common of Portuguese, Dutch, and English origin, too. It would not be very difficult for most of us to learn either Sinhala or Tamil – if we really want to learn.

R: Any suggestions?

S: The right atmosphere should be created.

R: Who should create it?

S: The politicians. They can set an example. They can learn these languages themselves. They can popularize them among the people they represent. If the politicians take to this as a crusade, it is bound to be followed by people at large. What the politicians can do is institutionalize this mission. The governments in power should formulate a substantial long term plan to carry out a project of translations.

R: Please explain this proposal a little.

S: A Bureau of Translations should be established. It should undertake a series of translations of both Sinhala and Tamil material into one another and also into English. If direct translations from Sinhala and Tamil into each other are not possible immediately on account of inadequate facilities and personnel, translations can be made first into English and then into Sinhala or Tamil.

R: Are there enough qualified translators in Sri Lanka to take on such a big project?

S: A necessary prerequisite is a scheme to train translators. Both at government and non-governmental levels, translators should be trained by competent persons.

R: Yes, but what would they translate?

S: Translators should begin with contemporary writing, creative and simple. The reason is that contemporary writing reflects contemporary living and current thinking. These translations can be

a singularly useful and productive instrument of communication. What we need today is understanding here. To understand each other, we need to communicate with each other more and better.

- R: As far as understanding communication are concerned, are you satisfied with the role of the press in Sri Lanka?
- S: The terrorists of all camps should sit down together and thrash out their grievances, genuine and imaginary, without using violence. What we need for ethnic amity is large – heartedness to understand each other. As for the media particularly the Sinhala press, they can be a little more discreet in this direction. There is too much stereotyping.
- R: Would you give an example of what you mean?
- S: Petty beliefs. False images. That the “Demala” (Tamil) is a dark person and a Dravidian. That the “Sinhalya” is a fair-complexioned person and an Aryan. That the Sinhala is a “modaya” (a fool or an idiot), sluggish. That the Demala is selfish and calculating. These prejudices should not cloud our genuine understanding of each other despite our mutual shortcomings. We in the press should not always be harping on the negative side.

- R: You started to discuss Tamil poetry before, but you were interrupted. Let's go back to poetry. Besides Eelavanan and Eelaganesh, who are some of the other poets writing in Tamil here that you'd like to mention?
- S: 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 line. 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 Cheran, he's a graduate in science, but writes about politics. He expresses his hurt feeling 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 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 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 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 on 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 root. 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.

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

S: 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.

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

S: In the introduction to the book, *Sollatha Seithikal* (Unspoken Messages), she mainly accuses Tamil literary critics, mostly men, of not viewing the writings by Tamil 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 labourers. 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.

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

S: Most of these women are relatively newcomers as poets. A. Shankari, S. Sivaramani, Sammarga, Selva, Ranga, Mazjura A. Majeed, Avvai, Premi, Renuka Navaratnam – they're new to me. Two others whose work is included in *Sollatha seitikal* I know: Maithreyi 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 attitude between men and women.

- R: Are most of the poems in this book similar in theme?
- S: 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 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 service man, a Sinhalese, and the whole world condemns her for losing chastity, but she excuses her rapist for having behaved the 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.
- R: Majeed is a Muslim. I suppose by her name. Are there many male Muslims writing poetry in Tamil?
- S: 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 has co-authored a book, in Tamil on 20th century Sri Lankan Tamil Literature. Actually, he is 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 the late Neelavanan, a poet from the Amparai district.

R: What does Nuhuman say in his political poems?

S: 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 1970s. He describes the barbaric destruction of the Jaffna Public Library in 1981 by the Sri Lanka armed force. 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 Natkal Varum* (Rainy Days Will Come). It was published in Tamilnadu. One is *Thiranaivu Katturaihal* (Critical Essays) and the other *Marxiyamum Thiranaivum* (Maxism and Literary Criticism).

Incidentally, we have one poet here who is a Sri Lankan who writes in Tamil but whose mother is Gujarati. 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 has 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*, Heroes of Hiroshima, and lately, *Eyanthira Sooriyan* (Mechanical Sun). The 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.

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

S: 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.

R: 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.

S: Well, as a matter of fact, there was a verse play, *Veriyattu*, performed in Jaffna. 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 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.

R: Is Murugaiyan, a well known playwright?

S: 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 has 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 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.

R: 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?

S: 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 and 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.

- R: I think I understand the other divisions, but what are the cycle songs?
- S: The life cycle songs include lullabies and children's songs, love songs, wedding songs and funeral songs. For example, Sainthadamma is a song 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 – pearllike 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. Thirumana Unjal are songs at Hindu weddings. A Hindu wedding is usually held in the bride's house. The couple sits 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.
- R: I suppose the theatre songs are from the folk play tradition you went into before.
- S: Yes. Song from Then-modi, Vada-modi, Annavi traditions, and from Nattu Koothu Christian folk drama. 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.

R: You said there were some work songs in his album. What kind?

S: There's a song sung by boatmen or fishermen about the travails of travelling 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.

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

S: 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. 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.

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

S: 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. Incidentally, wedding songs and work songs and funeral songs came out of the Little Tradition. Yet, even today, this is a living cultural reality in the villages in and around Jaffna.

R: Let's return to the topic of fiction, short stories written in the Tamil language by Sri Lankan writers. You've referred to Tamil

writers of the 1960s and 1970s, and the early 1980s. Who are some short story writers of the later 1970s and early 1980s?

S: 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 title *Anniya Virunthali* (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 humour monthly. *Sirithiran* is a coined word meaning one who laughs. The eight 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 humour and a satirical way of expressing the foibles of people in the villages of the northern peninsula.

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

S: Most of them are about social and/or economic problems peculiar to Sri Lankan Tamil society. For example, one story, “Muddaip Poriyalum Mulang 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 Mukkaal 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. One of the other stories in *Anniya Virunthali* is about the marriage problems prevailing in Jaffna Tamil society. Parents perform different poses to get a respectably employed

bridegroom for their daughters; 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 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 jokers.

R: What are the stories in this collection about?

S: 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 opportunity 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 has extramarital relationships, 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 the 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.

- R: Are there many stories around dealing with the educational problems of Sri Lankan Tamils these days?
- S: 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 Sinhalee. 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 offshoot 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 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 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 the 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.

R: Are all of Santhan's stories in this book similar to this ethnic conflict one?

S: 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 humour. 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 Thootu, by the way, refers to a message conveyed by Lord Krishna to Arujuna in the Mahabharata.

R: Can you comment on humour in modern short stories in Tamil in Sri Lanka?

S: There are many kinds of humour 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 humorous story. It's only seven paragraphs long, and each paragraph is only one sentence.

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

S: 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 learnt they are thousands and thousands of years old. Soon a proclamation is issued. It is: Find out the ethnic group.

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

S: 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 social and open-minded teenager. 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.

R: Has he written any stories with religious themes?

S: 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 *kondai*. 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 is not only on racial grounds but also on religious grounds narrow ways of thinking should give way to larger concepts of human love, understanding and sacrifice.

- R: Humane love. There seems to be many Tamil writers handling this theme in short stories about people of different cultural backgrounds.
- S: Not only in short stories of course. Vidhya – that’s the pen name of Kamala Thambirajah – has a novel, *Unakahave Valkiraen* (I live for You and You Alone), that’s a romance on the theme of undying love. 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*.
- R: 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?
- S: 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 behaviour of selfish husbands and sons. Indisciplined students. Foolishly conservative parents. As you are aware by now, these are common these days. Anyway, Annaledchumy Rajadurai portrays characters from all layers of society, and this collection is rather representative.

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

S: May be not exclusively. But Muthurasaratnam'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, compositor, rice mill worker, unemployed but artistically endowed alcoholic etc. 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.

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

SL There are some. N. Somakanthan is one. He's from the priestly caste 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 trustees of the temple almost eject the priest from the priesthood, the priest takes up to 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 to ploughing the field.

- R: You mentioned music awards and acting awards. Are there organizations that give prizes to Tamil short story writers in Sri Lanka?
- S: Some, but not many. Mostly local. On the national level, the Department of the Registrar of Copyright and Patents is one. It recently awarded R.5,000 to a collection of Tamil short stories it judged the best. The writer is P. Sivanandasarma. 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*, in English, 'Justifiable Struggle'. The title story, for instance, is the story of a Brahmin grandmother. She challenges the hypocrisy of her own peoples 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 Pulolloor 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 Athulathmudali, the former Minister of Trade and Shipping which the Department of Copyright is under. The title of Sathasivam's

book was *Oar 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 she 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.

- R: A friend of mine lives in Wellawatta, Godfrey Lorenz Andree. He used to be a jazz critic on the radio in Sri Lanka. He sometimes writes newspaper articles about the Burghers in Sri Lanka.
- S: 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.
- R: Almost all the stories you've referred to so far are gloomy in one way or another.
- S: 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 be not 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 Vadamaratchy 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 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 refugee 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 hides behind the shield of ethnic consciousness. Caste-ism still prevails in Jaffna while Jaffna is bleeding for the sake of 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 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 Madras. His stories often link the caste problem in Jaffna with the class problem in general. One character exploits caste difference 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 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 this kind of themes over and over again.

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- R: As a cultural journalist, have you written much about films in Sri Lanka?
- S: Yes, of course. I'm very interested in films. I've served as a member of the jury for local film festivals. I've a certificate from a workshop sponsored by the State Film Corporation and conducted in Sinhala for film script writers. I write and broadcast film reviews in both English and Tamil. I was one of the founding members of the Film Critics and Journalists Association. That's now defunct. But I am a committee member of the newly formed Sri Lanka Film Critics Association.
- R: Then you often interview local movie stars?
- S: Yes. Not so long ago, for example, I interviewed the actor Sillayoor Selvarajan. In local Tamil cultural circles, he's popularly known as Pal Kalai Vendar, the master of multi-faceted arts. He recently played an important role in an English film produced here, 'Sacrifice' directed by David Keith. A son of former Ethiopian leader Haile Selassie was also in the cast, Soloro Selassie. Selvarajan also appeared in the BBC TV film 'Lord Mountbatten' and acquired international notice. He played the part of a Muslim friend of Mahatma Gandhi. He's performed in local Sinhalese films too. 'Aadaarae Kathava' (A Love Story) and 'Sathyakriya' (Fruits of Good Behaviour) are two that come to mind. In 'Aadaarae Kathava' his own son Dileepan played the role of the hero. Selvarajan wrote the Tamil sections of the script himself. His wife Kamalini is an actress and they played together in "Komaligal" (Jokers), a Tamil film produced here. Kamalini is a graduate in Fine Arts. She has a weekly radio program on theatre. She broadcasts in Tamil. I participate in this program quite often. She writes short stories

in Tamil too. You asked me earlier about local Tamil music, so let me add that Selvarajan is also a song writer. His song “Kanmani Aadava” (Come Dance with Me, My Love) was used in a film, a Tamil film, “Nirmala”, and became quite popular. Nirmala is the name of the heroine. Selvarajan’s quite versatile. That’s why he’s called Pal Kalai Vendar. He’s a poet, a literary critic, a copy writer, a broadcaster. He started out as a journalist. He’s also produced a large number of documentary films. He’s also produced five children!

R: Let me warn you that we’ll have to go into children’s literature too, but first who’s one of the more famous Tamil women film actresses in Sri Lanka?

S: I’d like to mention Helen Kumari. Her name comes quickly to mind because she was recently honoured by the Young Men’s Tamil Cultural Organization here for her contribution to the local cultural scenes via the Tamil language. She has performed on the stage as well. She began acting as a child. She’s married to an actor, Rajasekeran. She played the role of the heroine in the comedy “Eamalikal” (The Deceived Ones) and in two sentimental melodramatic films, “Nenjukku Neethi” (Justice for the Heart) and “Thentralum Puyalum” (The Breeze and the Storm). All locally produced Tamil films. She’s an oriental dancer too and was the dance director on several Sinhala films. She choreographed light dances.

R: Is there much interest in movies among Tamil fiction writers in Sri Lanka?

S: Well, we do have, or did have, a writer like Balu Mahendran. He wrote short stories in Tamil. Experimental stories – he handled sex themes that were taboo in the 1960s. And he published a Tamil literary magazine, a monthly, “Thenaruvi”. That’s Stream of Honey. At the time – in the mid 1960s – he was a draughtsman in the Survey Department. He’d been educated at St. Michael’s College in Batticaloa and at Jaffna College in Vaddukodai. His

father was a teacher of Mathematics. But to get to the point of your question, he's now a film maker in Tamilnadu. He lives in Madras. He recently did a movie called "Veedu" (Home). He wrote the original story and the screen play and did the photography and edited it as well.

Some years ago, a Tamil novelist here who writes under the name of Chempian Chelvan – his real name is A. Rajagopal – did a film script adapted from a Tamil novel by a friend of his, Sengai Aaliyan, a civil servant who is one of our prolific local novelists. 'Vaadai Kattru' (Northerly Winds) was one of the important Tamil films of the time. It's about a love affair, a love triangle, in a fishing village.

R: Did Bala Mahendran move to Madras for political reasons?

S: No, I'd say professional reasons. You see, he'd studied film making at the Film Institute at Pune, in India. In case you didn't know, the Pune Film Institute is a cinema centre that is shaping the quality of Indian cinemas. Mahendran – he's called Balu Mahendra in India – had already been a professional photographer here, and in India he first became known as a photographer for the movies, a cinematographer, a film cameraman. Anyway, he had come back to Sri Lanka with high hopes, but he was disappointed here professionally and returned to India.

R: What disappointed him?

S: He was disappointed that local film producers – both Sinhalese and Tamils – did not make much of his talent even as a cameraman. There was an anti-South Indian film mood in Sri Lanka then. Even now the Sinhala critics call South Indian Tamil films "trash" without realizing these films have come of age. It was alright condemning the earlier film in the initial stages of the development of the "truly Sinhala cinema" but to continue with the same usage, leaves room to suspect racial undertones.

R: What is "Veedu" about?

- S: It revolves around the problem of building a house. It's set in Madras. A lower middle class woman lives in a rented place. She's an average woman, a working woman, the breadwinner of her family.
- R: Offhand, this doesn't seem a subject for drama.
- S: I haven't seen "Veedu" yet – yes, it does seem low key – but Professor Karthigesu Sivathamby – we referred to him before – has seen it, and he compares it with Ozu's "Tokyo Story" and Satyajit Rai's "Mahanagar". Mahendran himself has said he threw all commercial compromises into the air to create the film. There are no songs or dances. Songs and dances are customary in Tamil films. There are fewer than usual spoken sequences. That is, less dialogue. The film received an Indian National Film Award as the best Tamil film produced in Tamilnadu.
- R: Are there any women film directors or producers in Sri Lanka's Tamil communities?
- S: No, none.
- R: Then, let's go back to Chempian Chelvan. What kind of writing does he do?
- S: He's a critic. He's written poetry and drama and, as say, fiction. He's edited a few literary magazines and a few anthologies. Incidentally, he's a geography teacher in Jaffna.
- R: What's one of his novels?
- S: *Neruppu Mallikai*. I mentioned the Tamil literary magazine "Mallikai" before. To repeat, Mallikai means jasmine, and *Neruppu Mallikai* means red coloured jasmine flower. It's what I call a Jaffna Novel. It deals with a slice of life in Jaffna. In 1978 it won a prize in competition sponsored by the Tamil daily paper Virakesari, which used to publish books, as the best regional novel depicting aspects of life in the peninsula. It's a kind of social novel showing the residue of the feudal system still operating in

some parts of the north. But the accent seems to be on sex.

A petty businessman is trying his best to outrage the modesty of a widowed woman, to put it euphemistically. Her husband died prematurely. She has a daughter and a son. But because he's "low caste" her dead husband's family do not help her in any way. To make a living, she opens a boutique. In local usage, I think you know, boutique means a small shop of any kind not necessarily a shop specializing in women's clothing. In this case a boutique selling hoppers baked from rice flour. The mudalali I mentioned before, the businessman, is "high caste". He's already carrying on an illicit affair with another man's wife, but he wants to conquer the widow also. But she's true to her Tamil tradition and keeps him at bay. So he commits an act of arson and she burns to death in the fire he sets. As for the title, in the widow's compound there's a "neruppu mallikai" a jasmine plant with red flowers. Her wrath and curses are symbolized in the burnt plant's ashes. There's a suggestion that people like the businessman who commit such murderous acts should be tried and condemned.

I like the novel. It touches upon social realities – the problem of existence without adequate income, the problem of relations between the sexes, the problem of politics. All these are touched upon in the novel but they're not analyzed. So to me there's some kind of confusion. It's not one of the best Jaffna novels written in Tamil here, but it's a fairly important work by a local writer. We have many Jaffna novels here, most fair, a few very good.

- R: *Mallikai* reminds me of another Tamil literary magazine that you mentioned before. 'The Wave'.
- S: Yes. "Alai". It's edited by Jesurasa. In the late 1970s he published a book of his own short stories. *Tholaiyum Iruppum Enaya Kathaikalum*. 'The Distance, the Being, and other stories'. Most of them introduce a theme of alienation – private agony – and they're candid subjective observations of a narrator who's an

outsider trying hard to strike a balance with the environment he lives in. You've visited the University of Peradeniya, and one of Jesurasa's settings is there. The other is the fishing village area of Gurunagar in Jaffna.

R: Who is this outsider who tells the stories?

S: He's an educated youth from Gurunagar, but he lives in Colombo – and Kandy – where he works for the Postal Department. He's a sensitive young man. He enjoys reading, seeing artistic films. He wants to rise above his environment. He wants to live as honestly as possible. He has problems of unrequited love, maladjustment. But he overcomes pessimism and becomes skeptical and rational. I think he speaks for Jesurasa himself who has or had – an inclination toward flirting with existentialism. Anyway, as Shanmugan Sivalingam – he's a sensitive poet and critic himself – says in his foreword, the outlook is based on practical social, political, psychological and philosophical concepts.

R: Let's come back to short stories later. But to go back to India, so to speak, several people in Sri Lanka have mentioned visiting India. Have you ever gone to India?

S: Yes I've made five trips. I've been to New Delhi, Bombay, Agra, Thirupathy, Bangalore, Madras. My last trip lasted one month. And back to film in Madras, I attended a two-day German film festival at the German Cultural Institute in Colombo. And I also saw a couple of Tamil films and a Malayalam film, all three made in India.

R: Again I won't question you about the details, but what was your impression of Tamilnadu, say?

S: Well, let me put it this way – as a Tamilian. I felt proud to be in Tamilnadu. The Tamil consciousness reigns supreme there. Having lived in a cosmopolitan city like Colombo for over thirty years – most Sri Lankans are more “westernized” than most people in India – I'm used to the lack of an exclusively Tamil context.

But in Tamilnadu – in Madras and other places – I could feel a cultural atmosphere springing from a Dravidian foundation. On the other hand, I also experienced a sense of degradation. Let me explain this. Earlier I quoted to you the old Tamil saying “*Yathum Oore Yavarum Kelir*”. ‘Any country is my country and all the people are my relatives’. In Tamilnadu that saying seems to have been forgotten. A strong tendency toward parochialism was evident to me. There’s a lot of corruption, charlatanism and philistinism masquerading in the name of more than 2500 years of Dravidian culture. I mean that while the “Brahmins”, who are educated, think that they’re superior to the illiterate masses, the non-Brahmins think that since they belong to the masses, the Aryan Brahmins are exploitive. But most Brahmins in the South are Dravidian themselves. Anyway, as for India as a whole, it’s a nation of many contradictions. It’s a disintegrating conglomeration of different national identities grouped together artificially.

R: Before we get too far afield, let’s go back to the local music scene – and women. You referred before to Arunthathy Sri Ranganathan, a music controller at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation.

S: Yes. As I said in passing, she’s interested in African as well as Oriental music and she has an album she recorded in Nigeria with musicians from there. Is this too far afield? She also took part in a music festival in Lusaka, Zambia, sponsored by the Zambia Tamil Arts and Cultural Association. You’re in an economics faculty, so you may be interested to know that she graduated from the University of Sri Lanka with honours in economics. She hails from a talented family. One of her sisters, Ambika Thamootheram, is a vocalist. Another, Jayalakshmi Kandiah, is a dance teacher who produces ballets. She’s presently the Director of Music and Dance at the Indian Fine Arts Centre in Singapore. Arunthathy herself plays veena and sings. She’s produced several Tamil music cassettes. She’s performed in Singapore, Malaysia, the U.K.,

the U.S.A., Zimbabwe, Botswana and, of course, Nigeria and Zambia. She has a certificate for the teaching of Carnatic music – South Indian classical music – and she’s a visiting lecturer in music at the Open University, about which Mr. Herat has told you a little. She was recently awarded the title *Gana Pooshana Thilagam* by the Minister of Regional Development and Hindu Cultural Affairs. This title means, “a star among accomplished musicians”.

May I continue? I’d like to say something about her sister Jayalakshmi. A Sri Lankan Tamil holding such a prestigious position like hers in Singapore is a matter for local pride, you know. She used to operate her own school of music and dance and veena in Colombo. She’s also taught in London. At the School of Oriental and African Studies there she produced a dance ballet, Ramayana. She also had a weekly program on B.B.C. for a while. Here in Sri Lanka she presented the first veena arangetram – arangetram means debut, in this case the first public dance performance after graduation – and she produced and choreographed the first Tamil ballet for Rupavahini. Henry Jayasena has told you about Rupavahini. Also at one time Jayalakshmi was a visiting lecturer in fine arts at the University of Kelaniya. Her husband, Dr. A. Kandiah, is an academic, a lecturer in Tamil at Kelaniya University. He obtained his doctorate from London University. He’s written a few books in Tamil. As for versatility again, Jayalakshmi’s also a make up artist, a professional beautician.

- R: As long as we’re touching on dance, is there one man you’d like to mention?
- S: Yes. Sesa Palihakkara. He’s a well-known Sinhala dancer. What’s important is that he’s set up a trust, a foundation you’d say, to keep our traditional arts alive and to help talented young artists.
- R: What’s the name of the foundation in Colombo?

- S: The trust is called Gandharva Yatra. It operates a small school at Ugugoda. That's a village situated about 11 miles from Kandy, between Wattegama and Panwila. It's in the foothills of the Hunnasgiriya Range at an elevation of over 2,000 feet. Anyway geography aside, some children in that area are already being trained there.
- R: Why was the school established in such an out of the way place?
- S: Well, Sesa Palihakkara's idea is that the simple life style of an agricultural community will gain an added dimension from the rehabilitation of traditional art forms. And vice versa!
- R: How do you translate Gandharva Yatra?
- S: Yatra refers to the search for truth and excellence. It also refers to movement. Gandharva stems from old legend – excerpts from Jataka stories, Hindu mythologies about classical dancers, musicians and actors who performed at the heavenly courts of Indra, Brahma and Sakra.
- R: What traditional arts are the children being trained in?
- S: The curriculum is divided into two sections – folk and classical. Folk includes all the rituals, songs, dances and dramas from the Wap Magula to the Aluth Sahal Mangalya. Folk dramas like Sokari and Kolam, for example, Dr. Kariyawaam has told you about these. Certain old dances – Leekeli, Savarang, Pantheru, Udekki – will be re-styled. The students who show special aptitude will then be given the classical training. Ragadari music, vocal and instrumental, Kandyan dance – you've seen Chitrasena's group doing that. And Low Country and Indian dance. Also contemporary dance. There'll also be instruction in the fundamentals of painting and sculpture. And to refer to English again, the school intends to give instruction in English. Good instruction.

- R: As far as painting and sculpture are concerned, Donald Ramanayake had described the local art scene. Who are some of the well known Sri Lankan Tamil artists?
- S: I'm glad you asked this question. The truth is, although there are many good Sri Lankan Tamil artists, painters and sculptors, they're largely unknown outside the Tamil community. So, for example, a great artist like A. Marku remains unknown to many Sri Lankans. One reason is that there are no serious art critics in the Tamil language who can introduce him in English to other Sri Lankans. And the rest of the art critics on the island don't seem to care to know about the activities of Tamil speaking artists. This is not a healthy sign in a plural society like ours. I might add that the Sinhala cultural scene is adequately covered in the Tamil press. I don't think culture should be a one way traffic.
- R: Then please introduce us to A. Marku.
- S: Actually, his name is A. Mark. He signs his work as A. Marku, in the Tamil way. He was born in 1933 in Jaffna – in Gurunagar, the fishing area I mentioned before. He's created more than 1000 paintings and sculptures. He's a modernist in style. He likes Gaughin, Roualt, Cezanne, Picasso. He likes to quote Gaughin. Go to nature. Study nature. Take nature's essence, then create. He first studied art in Jaffna under an artist named Benedict. An amusing story is that he was also a student of a Jesuit priest – a general student, not an art student – Father Marcelline Jayakody, who used to teach at St. Patricks College in Jaffna. He – Father Jayakody – writes lyrics in Sinhala – he's a Sinhalese – and he composes Oriental music. Well, Mark drew the priest's portrait, and the priest blessed him as an artist. Donald Ramanayake told you something about David Paynter. Mark or Marku was a student of his too, at the Government College of Fine Arts. Mark himself used to teach at Hartley College in Point Pedro. Now he's the art teacher at Kokuvil Hindu College. Not too

long ago he organized an exhibition of paintings by some of his students.

R: What are the names at least of some of the other Tamil artists in Sri Lanka?

S: Well, in the north, say, in the Jaffna area, there's Benedict, there are M.Kandiah, Ramani, S. Ponnampalam and others. In Colombo, Samy, Moraes, D. Raja Segar and Mrs. Satyendra.

R: Do any of these artists live off their work as artists?

S: Segar says that he does. He claims that he's earning a substantial sum of money every month from his paintings. He's a modernist too. He's self taught. That is, he didn't go to any art school. Actually he was in the field of accountancy but gave that up to be a full time painter. He told me sometime ago that he'd been interested in photography and the plastic arts and used to read a lot about painting in encyclopaedias. He adores the paintings of Leonardo da Vinci. He says he was also influenced by Vincent Manan Sea. He's a Filipino painter who's not widely known in this part of the world. Segar likes to do water colours and pen and wash collages. His work is rather exotic. It seems to appeal to foreigners. They're his main buyers. Incidentally, he sometimes does covers for books. For example, S. Muralitharan's *Koodaikul Desam* (Nation in a Basket). This may be the first collection of Tamil poems written in Sri Lanka following the pattern of haiku, by the way.

R: You say "exotic". What kinds of subjects does Segar work with?

S: It's not only the subjects of course. But in a recent exhibition at the Lionel Wendt, his fifth One Man Show, he showed paintings on the ill treatment of children, the abuse of child labourers, cruelty to animals, fruitless eroticism, the frustrations of prostitution. Poverty is a recurrent theme in his work. One of the pictures is about a bull taken for castration.

- R: This is not actually my notion of exotic.
- S: By exotic I mean elements characteristic to this part of the world but unusual to Westerners. The pictures speak for themselves.
- R: What is Segar like in person? How old is he, anyway?
- S: He's in his early thirties. He has a pleasant appearance. There's an outer cover of cheerfulness, but I feel a mood of sorrow. Of disenchantment, I asked him a direct personal question: Is it unrequited love? Maybe, he said, I didn't want to probe, so I left it at that.
- R: Earlier you said that Segar goes along with Gaughin's idea of studying nature. Do you know how he approaches a painting?
- S: He says a painter should control his own painting and not the painting the painter, so he has a preconception of what to draw or paint. He doesn't totally depend on whatever from a painting may take in process. He says an artist's own individualistic style should be recognizable to a viewer even if the painting is not signed. In fact, some of his paintings do not include signatures. He says he paints only when he has an urge to paint. He has to be in the right mood. He says if a painter improves his technique and concentrates on craftsmanship then creativity is lost. You ought to know that this is a representative attitude here.
- R: Apparently he has a formula for making money.
- S: Look, I don't want to give the wrong impression about Segar. I'd like to point out one other interesting thing about him. He doesn't try to sell everything he paints. For instance, he's done a water colour of Lord Buddha which he does not want to sell. The spirit of the picture is personal to him, he says. He's also done paintings that he feels are unique to him that he doesn't sell to foreigners. Most of his buyers are foreigners, but he does not sell a painting he likes to a foreigner because he says then that painting would go out of the island.

- R: Going backward again, Rupavahni reminds me of broadcasting. Are radio or TV scripts ever published in Sri Lanka as they sometimes are in the United States? Normal Corwin's, for example?
- S: Rarely. As you know from your broadcasting experience, what goes on the airwaves is almost invariably gone with the wind. Broadcast scripts are seldom published. It's partly due to the ephemeral nature of the subject, it's partly due to the spoken language of the medium. But, yes, quite recently two former broadcasters S.K. Pararajasingham and N. Shanmugalingam, selected about twenty five scripts on a single theme – various aspects of Tamil culture in Sri Lanka – and collected them in a book entitled *Ithayaranjani*, 'Pleasing to the Heart'. The scripts were originally broadcast over commercial radio, by the way. The book's an excellent handbook of some of the finer points of the cultural traits of the local Tamil community.
- R: What kind of cultural traits are you referring to?
- S: Karagam jewellery, for example. Farmer's festivals. Draupathi Amman worship. Worship of Murugan or Krishnan or Kavadi. Omens. Cinema. Sarasvathi Pooja. Folk cultural traits are depicted in ancient Tamil literature.
- R: Then how about something on the two collectors – Pararajasingham and Shanmugalingam?
- S: Well, Pararajasingham is a graduate in science. He also studied carnatic music. He began his career as a teacher. Then he went into commercial broadcasting, starting as an announcer. He's a singer, and he announced with a cultivated melodic voice. He rose up to the position of music controller at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. He was also one of the pioneers of light classical Tamil music in this country. I mean music that is not intricate and complex like Carnatic music. Ragas, melodies but semi-classical. Perhaps Pararajasingham's greatest contribution is his effort to crystallize a consciousness for indigenous creative

music. As for Shanmugalingam, he's now a lecturer in sociology at the University of Jaffna. You see, we have quite a few versatile people here! He's a lyricist, a singer of light classical Tamil songs. He produced one musical program, *Kala Kuyil*, 'The Cuckoo Bird of the Time'. That was widely acclaimed. He once functioned as an assistant director of an Indo-Lanka co-production film. Both he and Pararajasingham have songs on Gangaiyale, the first Sri Lankan light classical Tamil music disc.

'Yal' is a musical instrument. An ancient musical instrument like a harp. It's not in use now. Swami Vipulananda the first Professor of Tamil at the University of Ceylon wrote a magnum opus on it. *Yal Nool*. Now to continue, you may be especially interested in knowing that Shanmugalingam is also a writer of sorts. He recently produced an offbeat publication. A kind of elegy to his dead father. His father was a teacher, an important figure in the Myliddy South area in Tellipalai in the Jaffna Peninsula. And in this book – really a booklet – *En Appavin Kathai* 'The Story of My Father', Shanmugalingam tries to give life to his father's past in an emotive poetic style. The booklet was published by his mother Nagulewari Nagalingam.

R: Why do you say offbeat?

S: It's customary among the Tamils to publish the life story of a deceased person in verse form;. It's called '*Kalvettu*'. It's rather formal. In recent times the elegy has sometimes been expressed in fiction such as *Appiah* by S. Ponnuthurai and even in drama. *Appiah* is an endearing term for father. In Shanmugalingam's case, he writes in the first person as if he's talking with his father.

R: Let's get into a broader subject. As a journalist who deals with all aspects of local culture, do you have any particular thoughts on the relationships among the various strata of culture? High brow, middle brow, low brow?

- S: “Culture” connotes many things to different people - High culture. Folk culture. Popular culture. Subculture. Yes, we have to have standards. Quite legitimately. But one cannot impose a uniform standard on all expression of culture. The reality is that in Sri Lanka the socially high culture is a bore for the majority of the aesthetically untrained masses. Sociologically untrained, too. On the other hand, the so-called popular culture here does not satisfy the more refined tastes of the few. There’s a conflict of interests, so to speak. The sensible approach to this uneasiness is to evaluate these respective “Cultures” in their own moulds. Aesthetic pluralism is inevitable, it’s one thing to condemn pretentious, half-baked, puerile, hotch-potch productions. It’s another thing to dismiss anything as culturally “untouchable” that appeals to wider sections of the people.
- R: Now, I wasn’t just kidding about children’s literature before. Really, who are some of the local Tamil writers of children’s literature?
- S: Well, earlier we were discussing the publication of broadcast scripts. Considerably, a few years ago a collection of short stories by P.M. Puniyameen, a Sri Lanka Muslim who writes in Tamil, came out. The stories were originally broadcast in Tamil over the Muslim Service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. *Nilalin Arumai*, ‘The Usefulness of shade’. The stories as a whole describe aspects of the daily lives of Muslims – Moors – in the Kandy region, which you’ve visited. Most of the stories centre around children themselves. Their behaviour is contrasted with the behaviour of adults. A couple of the stories show the situation of youngsters in search of motherly love. They lack it because their mothers have gone to the Middle East to earn a living. Puniyameen is still in his 20s. He graduated from the University of Peradeniya. He’s the head master of a school in the hill country. He’s also written a couple of other books.

Then, recently, Thimilai Thumilan, a teacher of Tamil at the Batticaloa Teachers’ Training College, published a collection

of poems for children. Over fifty poems. A lot are on lambs and cows and crows and cuckoos – you know, that sort of thing. Some are on important writers in Tamil literature – Thiru Valluvar, Bharathi, Vipulananda – and some are on Lord Buddha, Jesus, the Prophet Mohammed and Mahatma Gandhi. I think you can guess that these poems – shall we just say verses are basically meant to present moral values to children.

- R: Would you please briefly identify these Tamil writers?
- S: Briefly, Thiru Valluvar was a great Tamil poet of the 3rd century A.D. who composed '*Thirukkural*'. This contains over 1300 couplets on ethical values, similar to the codes of Manu in North India. Subramania Bahrathi – I think you know his name at least – is a great 20th century Tamil poet who fought for the independence of India. Vipulananda is a Sri Lankan swami from Karaitivu in the Batticaloa district. Belonging to the Ramakrishna Mission, he was the first Tamil professor in the University of Ceylon. He produced a magnum opus on 'yal' as I said before.

And, before you go to the next topic, let me refer to Dr. S. Maunaguru. He teaches in the Department of Fine Arts at the University of Jaffna. He's interested in Koothu, the Tamil folk plays we went into before, and he does research on the Sri Lanka drama tradition. He himself is a performing artist – a dancer and actor - and has written plays, *Sankaram* (Destruction), *Sari Pathi Malai* (Real Half Rains), *Nammaip Pidditha Pisasukal* (The Devils that Have Enslaved Us). Anyway, I know you're interested in theatre. But to the present point, Maunaguru recently published *Thappi Vantha Thadi Aadu* (The Lone Goat That Escaped), his two plays for children. These plays were originally performed a few years ago by the young students of St. John Bosco School in Jaffna. They were about nine or ten years old. Maunaguru used the koothu technique in writing and producing these two children's plays. He says that plays presented for children – and by children – should be presented without inhibition. He means

a polished performance is not so important. But the story should entertain children, like games do, or sports. Make-up should be exaggerated. Facial expressions, too. Costumes should be bright.

- R: Let's go back again. Earlier you referred to R. Murugaiyan's edition of *Mallikai Kavithaikal*, poems published in the literary magazine "*Mallikai*" (Jasmine). Would you like to describe the poems in this anthology?
- S: Well, in general. The collection is fairly representative of the trends in poetry written in Tamil here. There are poems by 51 poets in all. Even so, not all the important Tamil poets in Sri Lanka are represented. For example, M.A. Nuhuman, who we discussed earlier, is not included because he had not published poetry in "*Mallikai*". One good thing about the anthology is that it contains poems with regional undertones and styles.
- R: What are regional undertones?
- S: I mean the Tamil language is being spoken by nearly one quarter of the people of Sri Lanka, and it has its own regional dialects, and many of them are reflected in the collection.
- R: Again in general, what are the subjects of these poems? Earlier you said the editor of "*Mallikai*" Dominic Jeeva is communist, so may I presume most of the poems fall into the category of social realism?
- S: Yes, that's correct. The poems as a whole have direct relevance to contemporary life in this island. They are protest poems. Protest against exploitation and oppression. Against injustice and corruption and discrimination. They are poems in support of the working class in the sense that they express feelings that stress the power and glory of labourers. Some poems in the book praise the great achievements of humankind and encourage hope in the capability of people to change society for the better.

- R: As long as we're on poetry again, can we go back to S. Muralitharan's poem in the haiku form?
- S: *Koodaikul Desam*? No, they're not the same kind of poems. The book contains about seventy five three line statements. Statements of ideas. Really verse instead of poetry. Some of them are refreshing. Our tears are rain drops above the desert. Cigarette packets, little coffins at cheap price. May be that one's not so refreshing! Hey, who's there pouring milk into the river howling? But the book as a whole fails to form into a whole structure. But Muralitharan's still in his 20s, so he has time to develop. Incidentally, he's a student at the University of Peradeniya, in science.
- R: I'm glad you almost always give us some brief biographical information about all these people, which reminds me of another question. Have you read any good biographies lately?
- S: Yes, of course. Don't forget I just referred to Shanmugalingan's elegy to his dead father, *En Appavin Kathai*. But *Golden Bud* comes first to mind. A biography of our President Ranasinghe Premadasa. The writer is a Sri Lankan, a Malayalee born here, K. Rajappan. 'Golden Bud' is unusual because it's written in all three of the languages spoken in Sri Lanka – Sinhala, Tamil and English (Rajappan's wife is a Sri Lankan Tamil singer of light classical songs). This in itself is laudable when you consider the compartmentalization that is delaying the evolvement of a single Sri Lankan identity. Briefly, the book traces the major events of R. Premadasa's political career. What may especially interest you is that Premadasa has written six novels. One of them was turned into a popular-film. For your information, a few other politicians in the island have interests in literature, and the arts – T.B. Ilangaratne, Lakshman Jayakody, Tyronne Fernando, to name only three. R. Premadasa himself has been active in encouraging artistic enterprise here. The Tower Hall Project for one. Besides he's interested in sports, poverty alleviation, and so

on. R. Premadasa learned the rudiments of politics from A.E. Goonesinghe in the 20s and 30s. Rajappan stresses Premadasa's desire for ethnic harmony in our country.

Then, I mentioned S.M. Hanifa earlier, didn't I? He's an important scholar and publisher. He used to be a journalist too. He's worked for *Thinakaran*, the Tamil newspaper I referred to before, and the *Ceylon Observer* and the *Daily News*. Like me, he was also a Tamil Duty Editor in the news division of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. Well, P.M. Puniyameen – I mentioned him before – recently published a biography of S.M. Hanifa which gives a good picture of his importance in the world of contemporary Tamil literature as the editor and publisher of the *Thamil Mantram*, a small publishing company. Since 1953, for example, Hanifa – he's a Sri Lankan Muslim, by the way – has put out more than thirty books, Literary studies Religious works. He's a very religious man I hear. Poetry, including folk poetry and children's poems. Novels. Short stories. Hanifa himself has had a biography published by the *Muslim Times*, a biography of A.O.M. Hussain, who was an attorney in Kandy. He is dead. He was reported to have awakened a remote Muslim hamlet in the central region. He was a reformer, the son of A. Omar Lebbe Hajjar. The biography is called *The Great Son*.

As for Dominic Jeeva again, who's been editor of "Mallikai" for over twenty years, a collection of biographical articles about him, *Mallikai Jeeva*, was published recently by a group of Tamil writers in honour of his 60th birthday. There are twenty nine articles, so I'll just mention the names of a couple of other writers, Neela Padmanaban, K.M. Gothandam. May be I'm reporting myself, but let me say that Jeeva is one of the best examples of the revolutionary effect the progressive writers movement of the 1950s and 60s had on Tamil writing, demanding the depiction in literature of the poor and oppressed as opposed to that of the socially privileged and traditionally high placed. This movement

highlighted the social relevance of literature and insisted that the writer be an activist for social change. There were many debates, of course, and Jeeva – and K. Daniel – I mentioned him before too – both came from underprivileged and socially oppressed castes, were able, because of their courage, to write about social inequalities from inside, as it were. They wrote about their own sufferings.

Now, biography aside, let me tell you about Anthony Jeeva, too. Also a Sri Lankan Tamil and also born a Catholic. They haven't publicly renounced religion, but my guess is that they don't believe in a religious faith now. He – Anthony – is from the hill country. Dominic's from the north. Anyway, Anthony is a dramatist and freelance journalist. He's written a booklet called *Eelathil Tamil Nadagankal*. That's 'Tamil Drama in Sri Lanka'. He also runs a small publishing house – almost all the publishing houses here are small – and he's started a literary magazine called "Kolunthu" that he edits himself. Kolunthu means tender tea leaves. It's a journal covering the hill country political, social and cultural scenes. As for biography, in the first issue of "Kolunthu" – it's a fairly new journal – C.V. Velupillai has a biographical article on Kothandarama Natesa Aiyar. Other articles deal with the cultural activities of Sri Lankans in India, especially Tamilnadu, with hill country Tamil workers, with the history of the hill country and so on. There's also a piece on new poetry in Malaysia and a short story by Karuna Perera and a Bulgarian poem translated into Tamil by K. Ganesh. I told you about him before.

R: Who is Kothandarama Natesa Aiyar?

S: I was just coming to Aiyar because Anthony Jeeva has just published a biography of him by Saral Nadan. He was a Brahmin from Tamilnadu from Tanjavur, but he was a pioneer in the trade movement in Sri Lanka. Aiyar had a tremendous impact on local politics, particularly in relation to tea plantation workers, for

nearly thirty seven years until his death in 1947. Aiyar was the first to start a daily Tamil language newspaper in Sri Lanka, 'Desa Nesan'. He initiated many extensive studies on our plantation workers, the real "wretched of the earth". He first came to Lanka in 1919. He saw for himself the pitiable conditions of plantation workers under European estate owners. He came back in 1920 and started 'Desa Nesan'. He began to take an active part in trade union activities and in politics. Like Ranasinghe Premadasa he came into contact with A.E. Gooneinghe.

Aiyar learned that Sri Lankan born Tamils looked down on these Tamil "coolies" of Indian origin and that the Sinhalese hated them and that the European owners – British and Dutch mostly – treated them as slaves. Let me say that there were about 150 Indians who owned estates in Sri Lanka at that time, the 20s and 30s. They were against Aiyar too for fighting for the rights of estate workers. As you know, the worldwide economic depression resulted in large scale unemployment in Sri Lanka. It may interest you that Aiyar was a novelist too. That is he wrote at least one novel, *Moolayil Kunthiya Muthiyon Allathu Thupparium Thiran*. That's mouthful for you. Isn't it? In English, Moolayil Kunthiya Muthiyon translates as 'The Aged Person Squatting in the Corner', Allathu is 'or'. Thupparium Thiran, 'The clever detective'.

R: Then, briefly, and finally, who is Saral Nadan?

S: He's an important hill country writer. He's the manager of a tea estate, actually, but he's published poetry, fiction, criticism, and non-fiction, as in this case. Another of Nadan's biographies, as long as we're on that subject, is one of Cannapan Velsingam Velupillai, who wrote the article on Aiyar in the first issue of "Kolunthu". He – Velupillai – was a humanist writer who loved hill country folk lore and folk song. He was among the first to spotlight the plight of the estate people in his writings in English. He also wrote in Tamil, of course. He was once a member of Parliament

here and he was a trade unionist. He was married to a Sinhalese woman. As you should know by now, intercommunal marriage is very common in Sri Lanka. Velupillai edited a trade union periodical called “Maveli” and sometimes included articles on literature and the arts. He died five years ago. In fact, one of Velupillai’s novels has a trade unionist as its protagonist.

R: Was it written in English? What’s its name?

S: No, it’s in Tamil. *Ini Pada Maataen*. ‘I Won’t Bear it Any Longer’.

R: What was the name of that Hollywood movie about fifteen years ago or so in which city people cry out “No, no we won’t take it anymore?” Do you think Velupillai got his title from that?

S: It’s possible, but I doubt it. In any case, the novel is set in the Tamil speaking hill country. It covers two or three decades. Velupillai describes the frequent ethnic violence in the plantation sector, the plight of refugees. The narrator – he’s the protagonist – advises the hill country Tamils to fight for their rights in a constructive way. He tells his son to design houses for the displaced plantation workers. Velupillai implicitly affirms the idea of a Sri Lankan identity. It’s a constructive theme. The style is direct and simple. It’s a realistic novel. It reflects regional cadences. And it’s well structured.

- R: Let's return to Tamil fiction writing in Sri Lanka later. Now, I mentioned reading *Southern River* by Kenneth M. De Lanerolle earlier, but you've interviewed him, so could you give us some background on him?
- S: Kenneth De Lanerolle is in his late 70s now. He retired as Principal of Carey College, in Colombo, a few years ago. As you may know, earlier he was Principal of Wesley College in Colombo and Kingswood College in Kandy. These schools are secondary education institutions. They prepare students up to the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Examination. De Lanerolle used to be involved in the affairs of the University of Peradeniya as the head of a council that conducted two inquiries into the administration there. He pointed out a lot of shortcomings, he told me. And these persist even today.

De Lanerolle is a linguist. He has an M.A. in Linguistics from the University of Michigan. He's done comparative studies of Sinhalese and English intonation for example. He's published two other books besides *Southern River and Princes in All the Earth and Pale Hands*.

- R: As a linguist, what does De Lanerolle think about the language situation in Sri Lanka?
- S: He told me the introduction of education in our indigenous languages was desirable and correct but that it should have been combined with the teaching, the good teaching of English as a second language. At the university level, English should be the medium – the language of instruction. To quote him: "That is essential for a small country which has to play its part in the

world.” He’s also pointed out that the early school administrator of the Sinhala Only policy of the 1950s were carried away by nationalistic feelings. So English was badly taught in Sri Lanka, for a long time. As he put it once, village children in Sri Lanka got a daily dose of mutilated English.

R: What does he have to say as an educator about education in Sri Lanka in general?

S: In the interview with me – that was a couple of years ago – he said he could speak with some knowledge rather than with some authority, but his opinions were quite strong. I asked him to comment on the major transformations in education in Sri Lanka in his time. I’ll quote him again: “Frankly, I don’t think there have been any changes in education which could be chalked up as achievements... There are many more children receiving education. More schools. More children. But quality-wise I don’t think there has been any improvement.” He added that what we call free education here is not truly free education because it isn’t tied to a means test. Therefore, poor children have a difficult time completing their education.

R: Has De Lanerolle published much on education in Sri Lanka? How does he define education?

S: Let me give only a couple of examples. In 1979 he published an essay entitled “Towards Relevance in Education” that gives a good idea of his basic philosophy of education. Quoting again: “... if a school were structured and treated like a home, the demon of indiscipline would recede, for it cannot thrive in a climate of hard work, cooperation and commitment.” In *Princes in All the Earth*, which was published more recently, he wrote something similar: If only the confrontation between adult and child could be broken, if only adult and child could face the future together, through renewed family life, through schools which are homes of love and concern, and similar structures, of comradeship, then

their respective human rights will complement each other and Sri Lanka will have a fair chance of developing a life style that is the envy of all.”

R: You say De Lanerolle referred to the need for the “good teaching” of English as a second language in Sri Lanka. What is your own thinking on the use of English?

S: Let me remind you of what I said before. Only a small percentage of our people know how to use English for effective communication. This is a fact. But there is a fear in some quarters that English has brought in a cultural colonialism that is upsetting all our cherished values. But take journalism. Except for the elite few who can read English, the vast majority of the people in this country depend largely on their mother tongue newspapers, *Divaina*, *Davasa*, *Dinamina*, *Riviresa*, *Sri Lankadipa*, to name a few. In my opinion, one result of this is that issues are getting confused, getting coloured. And, again in my opinion, this is responsible for the continuation of unsolved national questions here. At the same time, to answer your question, a large number of people here are studying English. Despite selfish politicians who decry the use of English but who send their children abroad to give them the best education available – in English. But, yes, particularly the young people are eager to learn such a useful language.

R: What do you mean when you say issues are being confused or coloured?

S: I’m referring to mother tongue journalism. A lack of a high standard of balanced political consciousness. A lack of understanding of issues, a lack of objectivity, a kind of nationalistic mindedness emerges from the indigenous language newspapers. English is often in contrast with this. Anyway, although English is taught in many schools here, it is an optional subject, an elective subject. Students, particularly those in the rural areas, find it difficult to assimilate the universality found in the English language. I’m

not saying that the idiom of Sinhala or Tamil is parochial. No. But I think they fall short of assuming a world view. To repeat: they stress a nationalistic character than an international one.

R: Can you give one example of the nationalist mindedness you're talking about?

S: Well, my friends who are knowledgeable people from the Sinhalee community point out that the Sinhala newspapers concentrate on the theory that Sri Lanka belongs to the Sinhalee and the Sinhalese alone and that the other 'races' are alien to this country. They are interested in fostering Sinhala and Buddhist culture only. They are less interested in world affairs. These newspapers keep the people informed of what is happening in other parts of the world in politics or culture and so on. This is to keep the people believe in the theory of the superiority of the Sinhalese culture.

R: To go back to what you call effective communication, how effective do you think English education is in Sri Lanka?

S: As I've suggested, learning English in high schools here say, has its own problems. As far as university education is concerned, teaching English as a second language has been a perennial problem here. Profesor A.J. Gunawardene points out that the universities here have been turning out graduates who, despite years of instruction – can neither write nor speak English effectively.

R: Would you please identify Professor Gunawardene?

S: He's presently the Director of the Institute of Aesthetic Studies at the University of Kelaniya. He used to be Head of the Department of English at the University of Sri Jayawardenapura. He started his career as a journalist with the *Ceylon Daily News*. He wrote a literary column – Arts and Letters – under the name Rasika. He has a Ph.D. from an American university. Some time ago he edited a special edition of the *Tulane Drama Review* featuring Asian theatre. He now writes for the *Island* – a column called

“Marginal Comments” – under the pen-name Jayadeva. He’s also written film scripts in Sinhala, including the one for Baddegama, the Sinhala film based on Leonard Woolf’s *The Village in the Jungle*. By the way, Gunawardene’s wife Trellicia is a stage and film actress.

R: Backing up a bit, “effective” and “effectively” are matters of definition, but does Professor Gunawrdene offer an explanation of this inadequacy?

S: Well, he points out that teaching a second language to adult learners, university students in this case, is very difficult. He says it’s sometimes frustrating. He wrote an article about this, by the way, in ‘The Island’ last summer. One point he makes is that by the time they get to the University, students’ language habits are already fixed in their mother tongue. They are not familiar enough with English, but they are expected to apply English actively in the gathering of knowledge while they are still trying to acquire basic communicative skills. The point is that English is not a cram subject. To acquire it you need regular and consistent practice. I think one way to help the young learner here is to make English a compulsory subject in both primary and secondary schools.

R: It’s interesting to me that there’s still so much discussion of this topic in Sri Lanka.

S: Yes. As a matter of fact, we recently had a big international conference here on English language teaching in universities. Sponsored by the United States Information Agency, the Asia Foundation, and our University Grants Commission, I covered the story for ‘The Island.’ The main theme of the conference was ‘Teaching Techniques That Work.’

R: Who were some of the participants? What did they say?

S: From your country, there was Linda Hillman. She’s the chief co-ordinator of E.S.L courses at De Paul University in Chicago.

She's also a special consultant for the Orientation Program of the Asia Foundation. She stayed in the island for almost six weeks helping the English Language Teaching Unit.

From Sri Lanka, the head of the E.L.T.U., Mrs. Lalitha Gunawardena from the University of Peradeniya was there. So was Dr. Stanley Kalpage, the former Chairman of the University Grants Commission. He's the Sri Lanka Higher Commissioner in India now. Others participating were Mrs. Sarojini Knight of the E.L.T.U. at Peradeniya, and Mrs. Trellicia Gunawardena from the Institute of Aesthetic Studies. I mentioned earlier that she is also an actress.

- R: What were some of the topics discussed at the meeting?
- S: Audio-visual aid in the teaching of English for science and technology, for example. The conference was divided into two groups, you see. Art and Humanities. And Science and Technology. So, communication activities in the teaching of English for science and technology students and agriculture and medical students. That sort of thing. In Humanities: Communication competence in real situations, and so on.
- R: Were there any talks at the conference that especially interested you?
- S: Yes, of course. The first that comes to mind is Sarojini Knight's description of a technique of reading and note taking tried out at second year level in the Faculty of Arts at Peradeniya. She identified the main problems of the students: the inability to distinguish main points from supporting details in reading and in writing notes in an organized manner. Mrs. Knight pointed out that many students do not read much in their mother tongue, let alone English. In schools they have no training in taking notes. In fact, many teachers give summaries of their lectures to students, who then lack motivation to read and make their own notes. One disturbing thing was the comment by Mrs. Lalitha

Gunawardena, in another talk, that in Sri Lanka we still have a lot of untrained teachers teaching English incorrectly.

Incidentally, almost 95% of the English instructors in the universities here are women. May be that's because teaching English to adult students is a frustrating task. Only the women have the patience to drill and guide the students.

- R: I'm interested in this kind of shop talk, of course, but if you don't mind, I'm going to change the subject again. One of the people you mention interviewing was James Rutnam. I understand he was a very distinguished man – that is, he was active in many areas including politics, radical politics and archaeology.
- S: Yes, as I've written about Dr. Rutnam, he was a legend of our times in Sri Lanka. Politician – a radical nationalist – and archaeologist, yes. He was given an award by our former President for distinguished service to archaeology in Sri Lanka. Also genealogist, historian, anthropologist, teacher. He was well over 80 years old when I last met him at his residence. He was ill. He was rather frail. But he was still alert. He was the oldest surviving member of the Royal Asiatic Society of Ceylon. Thinking in terms of survival, he was the last surviving candidate who contested the State Council general elections in 1931. In fact, he was the only surviving delegate to the Ceylon National Congress sessions held in 1926. He was a delegate of the Progressive Nationalist Party. You might say he was one of the angry young men of the 1920s in Sri Lanka. In 1929 he led a strike against the Lake House Group of newspapers. He was influenced by the strong nationalism of A.E. Goonesinha of the Ceylon Labour Union. And he was the only surviving member of the Labour Party. That's now defunct too.
- R: Without going into all the details, would you mind giving us an idea of James Rutnam's way of thinking?
- S: The details are important, you know. He called himself a progressive liberal humanist. He said he was a cosmopolitan at heart from his

early years. As he put it, he went from tribalism to communalism to nationalism to internationalism to becoming a humanist. He said the life and thought of Thomas Henry Huxley and Bertrand Russell influenced his own.

R: Can you give the title of one of Jame Rutnam's books?

S: He didn't publish any books of his own, but he wrote extensively for newspapers and journals. He wrote in English, by the way. He'd done his research here and abroad – the British Museum, University libraries in the U.S.A. and in the U.S.S.R.

R: What was Dr. Rutnam's background?

S: He was born in Inuvil, in Jaffna. He had his early education in the Tamil medium. His father was in business. He was too for a short time in the family's transportation business. Before that he did his secondary school at St. Joseph's College, Colombo, and at St. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia. He was a Christian, you see. Then he studied law, but he did not become a lawyer. Later – after leaving business – he became a teacher. He later became the Principal of St. Xavier's College in Nuwara Eliya. At Law College he had edited a journal. He won a prize for legal research. Not long before he passed away, the University of Jaffna conferred a doctorate in literature on him. At Thinnavelly, on the premisses of the University of Jaffna, he established the Evelyn Rutnam Institute of Inter-Cultural Relations. The Tamil motto of this institute is '*Anbum Unmayum*', 'Love and Truth'. Evelyn was his wife. Evelyn Wijeratne. She's a Sinhalese. They met in church, fell in love, got married and enjoyed a very happy life together until she died about 25 years ago. Incidentally, his son Chandran Rutnam is a film producer with an international reputation.

R: Earlier you said James Rutnam received a presidential award in archaeology. What was one of his main contributions to that field in Sri Lanka?

- S: To put it simply, he resisted the prevailing interpretation of Sri Lankan culture as existing only in Aryan-Sinhala-Buddhist framework. In other words, he believed that Sri Lankan culture cannot be extracted from Indo-centrism. Details are very important in this, of course, but we can say he resisted the interpretation that certain Buddhist remains in the North and East were Sinhalese relics. Another local journalist who also writes in English and Tamil, A. Theva Rajan, has put this succinctly: Most Sinhalese are Buddhists but Buddhism has no special attachment to Sinhalese.
- R: Speaking of archaeology in Sri Lanka, I remember reading that the University of Pennsylvania has done some excavation work in the Northern area. I went to graduate school at Penn, so
- S: Perhaps that explains your interest in understanding aspects of our culture. Yes, as a matter of fact, the University of Pennsylvania Museum conducted the only systematic excavation at Kantharodai in Jaffna. That was one of the early settlements in the Jaffna Peninsula.
- R: I gather from your previous comments that like so much else in Sri Lanka these days even excavating early settlements has important contemporary repercussions.
- S: It's important for us. As Dr. Ponnampalam Raghupathy has said – he's one of our leading Tamil archaeologists; he used to teach at the University of Jaffna; he was a pupil of Dr. Karthigesu Indrapala, who is now in Australia – the first inhabitants of this island probably migrated here across a land bridge that existed between north-western Ceylon and south-eastern Tamilnadu. In short, both Sinhalese and Tamil identities stem from a common cultural stratum in the distant past.
- R: Now, let's change the subject again. In discussing the career of Sinhala actress Prema Ganegoda, Dr. Tissa Kariyawasam referred to numerous people and plays in the Sinhala theatre of the 1960

and 1970s. Similarly, what has been going on in the Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka?

- S: Let me confine my observations to the theatre I've personally seen in Colombo over the last twenty years or so. Frankly, I've lost my enthusiasm for the Tamil theatre here. There's hardly any creative dramatic activity here now. Many of the leading figures in Tamil theatre here have left Sri Lanka for greener pastures.
- R: Henry Jayasena seemed to dislike the attitude of Sri Lankan professionals who left the country for better opportunities elsewhere. How do you feel about the Tamil theatre people leaving the country?
- S: One cannot blame them. Neither our government nor foreign agencies have done much to help Tamil drama people with scholarships for training or study visits abroad. Theatrically inclined Tamils have sought foreign jobs – in places like Sweden and Nigeria – in order to enlarge their experience.

Incidentally, in his interview with me some years ago, Henry Jayaena said he was also disappointed with the local theatre world as it exists today. He used the word “disenchanted”. In recent years, he said, organizers of plays who come to book a play of his do not seem to know anything about his plays. He says they don't know anything about plays in general. Or playwrights, either. Before they book plays, they don't see them. They don't treat writers as artistes should be treated. That's why Jayasena is cool toward our local Sinhala theatre. On the other hand, he's still enthusiastic about the possibilities of television. At the Rupavahini Corporation, anyway. At the time he was writing a 13 episode teleplay on the theme of ethnic harmony. He said he was trying to look at both sides here – Sinhalese and Tamils – without any prejudice. He was hoping the play could bring about some kind of sense and understanding. Reggie Siriwardene, another of our local playwrights, has recently written a play – his

second – called *Prometheus* whose main theme is the relationship between rationality and emotion – a philosophical kind of drama – but it also touches on this theme of ethnic harmony.

- R: To go back, can you give us a quick historical review of modern Tamil theatre in Sri Lanka?
- S: Yes. But first let me mention that Henry Jayasena recently directed excerpts from five plays, older ones, three of which he's associated with – at the Awards Presentation of the State Sinhala Drama Festival. So he's still doing theatre work.

In the 1950s there was a series of disheartening farces and comedies. In the 1960s a series of historical romances, semi-classical themes. The types of plays I've seen in Colombo have been mainly these social dramas. Political orientation, you know. The concentration here is on problems of caste and class among the Tamil speaking community here. Of course, verse dramas still draw the attention of some playgoers. And folk plays with folk dances and folk song have also been staged in Colombo. Also, as in the Sinhala theatre of the time, there were many translations and adaptations of foreign plays into Tamil. In the choice of foreign plays too, the most important criterion was its social relevance. In any case, these adaptations served a useful function in bringing American or European themes to the attention of Tamil theatre goers.

- R: According to what I've been told, the Drama Society of the University of Peradeniya was quite important in the English and Sinhala theatres here. Was there a similar phenomenon in the Tamil theatre?
- S: Yes, of course. Universities contributed toward the development of local Tamil drama. The university Tamil stage had been in existence for over fifty years. R. Sivanandan – he's a dramatist, an actor, and a poet – has even written a book on that subject. He pays special tribute to the Reverend Francis Kingbury and

the late Swami Vipulananda as the pioneers of Tamil drama in the university. I mentioned Vipulananda before – the first Tamil professor in the University of Ceylon. And I've already mentioned the effort of Professor Subramaniam Vithiananthan to popularize traditional Tamil folk plays and to sophisticate them, so to speak. Sivanandan thinks that the outstanding Tamil plays produced by university people were *Apasuram* (Discordant Note) and *Vilippu* (Awakening) by N. Sunderalingam, and *Kadooliyam* (Rigorous Imprisonment), and *Iru Thuyarangaal* (Twin Sorrows) by R. Murugaiyan who, by the way, is an assistant registrar at the University of Jaffna. He also writes in English occasionally. Sivanandan's own play *Kalam Chivakkirathu* (The Times Are Reddening) was also one of the best Tamil university plays.

- R: What kind of plays did the Tamil drama group at universities do?
- S: There too almost all the plays that commanded serious attention were directly concerned with the lives and problems of common people. In terms of form they followed the realistic tradition. Naturalistic setting. Naturalistic dialogue. They gave us a fresh look at Tamil society in Sri Lanka. Not that they are in-depth looks into contemporary Tamil society. No. But they presented at a fundamental level some aspects of Tamil life in Sri Lanka.
- R: Would you describe some of these social dramas?
- S: At random. Without critical consideration. To give an idea of what they're about *Sadigal Illaiyadi Pappa* (There are no Castes, My Little One) is about a high-caste man spending the night in the house of a scavenger. *Nambikkai* (Hopes) rejects superstition. Rejects fear of ghosts and spirits. *Malai* (The Rains) is about a woman's self imposed mental illness. Conflict arising out of a guilt complex and woman's traditional inhibition, *Koodi Villaiyadu Pappa* (Join and Play, Little One) explores the communal celebration of joys shared in common. The collective sharing of each other's pain. *Thahuthi* (Fitness) is about the decay of the old social order

in caste society. *Kalam Chivakkirathu* says the old order will have to give way to a new socialistic society. The collective struggle of peasants to gain ownership of the land on which they've toiled so hard. *Vilippu*, suggested that the problem of unemployment cannot be solved by wire-pulling and going back to the village but only by a radical transformation of society.

While we're on this topic of school drama, for your information, Dr. Maunaguru – he wrote a play called *Sangaram* (Destruction) – and Kulanthai M. Shanmugalingam have recently published a book of seven plays staged by students at Chundikuli Girls College in Jaffna. *Ezhu Nadakankal* (Seven Plays). They're both in the Fine Arts Department of the University of Jaffna. Both are actors, too. Maunaguru also writes poetry and literary criticism. Shanmugalingam is also a director and playwright. One of the plays, *Mathoru Pahan* (Woman-an integral part) – there are four by Shanmugalingam – is written from the feminist point of view. Shanmugalingam's dialogue brings in all the traditional degrading viewpoints on women and then contemporary feminist views. The play drives home the theme that men and women are equal and have to jointly restructure the system into an equitable society. Did you know that Lord Siva is known as “*Mathoru Pahan*”, one half male and one half female? Another of Shanmugalingam's plays among these seven is *Pullahi Maramahi*. This title is from a Tamil devotional hymn about the evolution of humankind. You can translate it as “From plant to tree”. It is a satire. In Jaffna, parents want their children to be professionals. Not necessarily as people educated in the humanities or liberal arts or fine arts. Professionals who make money. The students in the play challenge their parents. They demand the right to choose the course of study they want. Dr. Maunaguru's three plays in the book are all operatic ballets. One of them, *Sari Pathi* (Right Half), also says that by joining hands both men and women can remove the road blocks to progress.

- R: While we're still on the subject of theatre, let me ask about Sugathapala De Silva. Dr. Kariyawasam gave me some background information on him already, but earlier you said you interviewed him a few years ago, so I wonder what you talked about.
- S: Well, one of the interesting topics was De Silva's idea of total theatre. His main point was that modern theatre has returned to something like ritualistic theatre in which it includes all forms of theatrical entertainment – music, dance, mimicry, pantomime, absurdism, expressionism. In short, as he puts it, reality as opposed to realism. As for the purpose of theatre, he said theatre should not celebrate the accepted values of society but should challenge them. He himself writes, he said, because he has something to say. What he writes is not preaching, but it can help people to think. He is not a Marxist, but he is a socialist. He is a novelist too, you know, and his latest novel describes the last forty years of social upheaval in Sri Lanka.

When I asked him about his work as a translator, playwright, director, actor, novelist – I asked him which of these roles was most important to him – he answered that although he has won prizes as a playwright and as a novelist he questions their importance. "I'm really afraid when someone says I am good," he said. That makes him cautious and apprehensive. He tries to improve all the time. He also said he enjoyed producing plays but he is not satisfied with any of his productions so far. So you can see Sugathapala De Silva is rather modest. He tries to understand the world all the time, and now and then he tries to interpret it as he sees it. As for the details of his work, I guess Dr. Kariyawasam has filled you in on De Silva's career.

- R: You said that among the other theatre people you have interviewed, there was Ediriweera Sarachchandra. Many people in the arts in Sri Lanka praise him very highly. It was several years ago, but what did you and Sarachchandra talk about?

S: I met Professor Sarachchandra at his residence in Pitakotte. We spoke about local culture in general, and of course, about Sinhala culture in particular – drama, fiction, poetry, criticism, film. He spoke warmly with friendliness. And listening to him was a treat for me. He seemed to feel, as many do, that there has been a decline in the arts in Sri Lanka. He also pointed to a general decline in morals here. Mainly because of the lure of money, Crime, Prostitution, Gambling, Narcotics, Pornography. So many kinds of corruption! The sale of children.

As for writing, Sarachchandra thought there were few new writers – good writers – coming up these days. No more than three or four good books a year, he said. He mentioned that the cost of publication has gone up. So have book prices. Many readers cannot afford to buy books. He also complained that the habit of reading is not encouraged in schools and that children do not read very much. He referred to the fact that people in the higher stratum of society usually read books in English but seldom books in Sinhala.

R: Did Dr. Sarachchandra talk about his own work? For example, *Maname*, which everybody says had a big influence on Sinhala theatre in the 50s and 60s?

S: Yes, he referred to *Maname* in passing – its relationship to nadagama and folk drama – but he said more about his poetic drama *Pemato Jayathi Soko* (Love is the Bringer of Sorrow). It's been performed over 100 times. He called it a kind of opera with songs set to music. He was proud. I think that it had been performed over 100 times. He said he'd like to write more operas like *Pemato*, but he felt the present atmosphere in our society didn't permit him to do that. As for *Maname*, which he calls a lyric drama, he said before he wrote it he had done research in nadagama for a long time. He emphasized that nadagama owes its origin to Tamil Nattukoothu and Therukoothu which moved from Tamil areas to Sinhala areas here a long time ago, in the

form of adaptation. All the music was purely of Tamil origin, though.

R: Did Sarachchandra say anything about other contemporary theatre people, Sugathapala De Silva, for example?

S: Well yes, he pointed out that, while people flocked to the theatre to see *Maname* because of its indigenous style, its Buddhist Jataka story, its music that fascinated Sinhala audiences, there was a movement against stylized drama. A movement led by Sugathapala De Silva. I think you know that De Silva's argument was that modern themes could not be expressed in stylized drama. And the tendency was toward dialogue drama talking directly of present day realities. A very strong protest theatre. Incidentally, Sarachchandra said, De Silva was a great director. He also liked him as a playwright – along with Dayananda Gunawardana, Buddhadasa Galapati, Bandula Jayawardana and Simon Navattegama.

R: What was Sarachchandra's opinion about these social protest plays?

S: He said they're more sloganizing than real art. You see he thinks that theatre can be used for political purposes but that such plays can never become permanent literature. His point was that drama ultimately has to say something about universal themes.

R: Then he himself has not written this kind of drama?

S: Oh, no. He wrote naturalistic plays. And he's written one recently with a contemporary theme based on what he called the "Dubai Syndrome". *Kirimutiya Gange Giya*. 'The Milk Pot Went down the River'. It's been performed at Sri Jayewardenapura University. But Sarachchandra's preference is for the aesthetic type of drama. Social theme – social relevance. But it must be universalistic in appeal.

As for Sinhala theatre today, he said it has become a money making concern. Producers are not interested in the quality of plays. Producers make a lot of money by providing entertainment. There is also a new class of playgoers today. Business people who like to be entertained. Laugh and go home, you know. They're not as serious minded as earlier audiences were. They're certainly not discriminative in their tastes. They don't understand what drama is. Sarachchandra hopes that the State will assist the development of local drama, as the National Theatre Trust used to do – selecting good plays and presenting them to the public at subsidized rates. He thought people would go to see good plays if the tickets weren't so expensive. He also thought it would be helpful if newspapers chose the right people to review plays. They shouldn't send people who know little or nothing about drama to review plays.

R: What does Sarachchandra think about Sinhala films these days?

S: He thinks that TV has practically replaced cinema. Soap operas are very popular. The tendency is to exploit sex.

R: Finally, and briefly again, what did Sarachchandra had to say about poetry and fiction and criticism.

S: He said that poetry is not a flourishing art here these days either. Although there's a lot of poetry published in newspapers. He likes the poem of Buddhadasa Galappathy and Ratnasiri Wijeinghe. He liked Sunil Ariyaratne as a lyricist. As for fiction in Sinhala, he referred to novelists Ranjit Dharmakirti and Kulasena Fonseka and a couple of others but he didn't go into any detail. On criticism, Sarachchandra was down on drama criticism, as I just mentioned. Low ebb, he said. Playgoers can't distinguish between good and bad, and the drama reviewer merely describes a play without offering critical analysis. As for academic critics, they're in their own ivory tower.

- R: You've given us a good opportunity to change the subject back to fiction. You say Sarachchandra referred to Kulasena Fonseka. You've interviewed him too. I know, so please say something about him too.
- S: Well, first of all, his full name is Wanniarachchige Kulasena Fonseka. He's in his mid fifties. He writes in Sinhala. He's a novelist and a short story writer and a TV script writer. He's won a couple of prizes for fiction. One for 5,000 rupees from the Ministry of Cultural Affairs. He also translates foreign fiction, short stories, into Sinhala. He started off in the printing department of the Colombo Municipality – he was a mono-typist and then became a reporter for Radio Ceylon. That was in the 60s. He rose up as a radio journalist, and now he is retired as the Sinhala Duty Editor in the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation's News Division. Interestingly, Fonseka is quite frank about this. I asked him whether his job helped him in the writing of fiction. He said that on the contrary his creative ability is being killed by him being a newsman. He said that news writing killed the creative use of language. But, as you know by now, it is very difficult to be a full time creative writer in this country and earn a livelihood. Like Sarachchandra, he also complained that a general deterioration in Sinhala culture has set it. As for his novels and stories, almost all of them end in tragedy. He doesn't have a romantic view of life. He thinks that life is tragic in reality. About writing, he said writing is a discipline. A writer has to work hard. It is the writer's responsibility to depict life as it is, but it is also his responsibility to help people become aware of the need to uplift the living conditions of the people, particularly those of the urban working class. You see, in his fiction he is mainly interested in describing the actualities of the lives of the poor and oppressed in Sri Lankan society. Fonseka himself is an unassuming person.
- R: This is a good chance for us to get back to writers in Sri Lanka who write fiction in Tamil. The novel, say?

S: That's fine. Well, earlier I told you about P.M. Puniyameen, a Sri Lankan Muslim who writes in Tamil – about *Nilalin Arumai* (The Usefulness of Shade), a collection of his short stories about children that were originally broadcast over the Muslim Service of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. I wanted to mention that his first novel was recently published, in Madras. Its title is *Adivanathu Olirvuhai* (Sparks in the Horizon). It is mainly about certain general cultural factors that affect the Moors in our country, particularly those living in the central region. In the novel Puniyameen describes these central region Moors as generally backward. They lack social consciousness. They lack political consciousness. They need employment. They also need educational facilities. One interesting aspect of the novel is a debate about the formation of a separate political party for the Moors in Sri Lanka. The novel suggests that the time is not ripe yet for such a party. The main reason is that the Moors here are scattered all over the country. They gain whatever influence they have been affiliated to the other national political parties.

The hero of *Adivanathu Olirvuhai* is a socially conscious university lecturer. He is interested in writing. Puniyameen is at his best when he depicts the encounter this man has with two women. The woman who loves him is a doctor. She is also interested in writing. At first the lecturer is slightly confused because of his infatuation with a younger woman. But he begins to have a deeply understanding love affair with the older, more mature woman.

R: Earlier you talked about a Tamil woman short story writer who was a medical student once. Does she also do novels? Kohila Mahendran?

S: Yes, Kohila Mahendran. As a matter of fact, I referred to her first novel. *Thuyilum Oru Nal Kalaiyum* (Even the Slumber Will One Day Be Disturbed). It's also a love story on the surface. But, more than that, a questioning of a woman's place in a male-dominated

society. As I said before, the idea of revolt against hypocritical practices is raised. Yes, Mahendran's most recent novel is about the danger of AIDS in Sri Lanka.

R: AIDS? But I understand there have been only two cases of AIDS reported in Sri Lanka.

S: This novel is set in the future. In early 1991. It's title is *Thoovanam Kavanam* (Watch Out, it's Drizzling). Mahendran uses the stream of consciousness technique. The story is imaginary. That is, it takes place in the mind of the narrator, the mother of two daughters. Her name is Veena. She's a teacher, her husband is an engineer. He married her even though she did not offer him a dowry. He is working in Saudi Arabia. There are two locales in the novel – Saudi Arabia and Jaffna. The narrator imagines her husband contracts AIDS in Saudi Arabia by having a sexual relationship with a male companion. The husband comes home to die. Kohila Mahendran wants to warn us that people here may have to face not only an ethnic war but also even an epidemic of AIDS, because of the worsening conditions here.

Another novel comes to mind because the novelist is a medical doctor in Bandarawela who I referred to earlier. Pulolyoor K. Sathasivam. He hails from Jaffna. Pulolyoor is a village in the Jaffna peninsula. *Nanayam*, is his latest novel. It means 'Uprightness'. It's the story of a middle-class rural Tamil family in the Vadamadachi region of Jaffna. Dr. Sathasivam seems to be stressing that honesty – uprightiness – should be the criterion in judging a man's success. The novel starts with a wedding. Mangalam – she's the main female character – is educated in a leading school in Colombo. She prefers the Western life style there to that of her home town. She marries a socially conscious psychiatrist. She really wanted to marry another man, a Colombo Chetty. But her father and brother broke up that affair and got her married to the psychiatrist for social status. She doesn't seem to like her husband. She's brought him a fat dowry, so she expects

him to dance to her tune. Conflicts arise. Finally, she elopes with the Colombo Chetty! Before that, though, her brother who is a spendthrift leads a very corrupt life, enters local politics. He gets involved in a murder. He ruins the family and runs away. He dies pathetically. No one at his bedside. This may not be a major novel, but one of its welcome features is the way Sathasivam captures the rural flavour. Regional nuances. The rural idiom.

Sathasivam was a doctor in a plantation area, and through his first hand experience living in the estates, he knows the rural areas quite well. And he has another novel on the lives of Tamil-speaking plantation workers. It's called *Moodathinulle*, 'In the Mist', in English. It's set in an estate in the Uva province. You could say that in sub-human surroundings some people learn about the human condition – its positive possibilities. Young men and women who believe in human rights and social justice – and conditioned by trade union discipline – safeguard themselves from all kinds of onslaughts. They ultimately realize that human understanding can transcend racial and class barriers. But the sordid details of plantation life have been recounted in most Tamil fiction here. I've already referred to K. Ganesh and C.V. Velupillai and Anthony Jeeva. Some of the Tamil writers of the so-called immediate Indian origin.

- R: The Tamils who work on plantations in Sri Lanka seem to be in a precarious situation.
- S: When racism periodically runs high in this country, they are the main victims. Strangely enough. They originally came here from Tamilnadu as poorly paid labourers during the coffee plantation era under the British. They were exploited to the full in the building up of the British crop economy. Even now, under the State Plantation Sector, their conditions haven't improved very much. I say strangely enough because the main reason for singling out these poor Tamils of recent Indian origin seems to be that they are considered a threat to the uplift of the Kandyan and

up-country areas. The situation is so bad that in the eagerness to have everything mono-racial in this country the inhuman beasts among us take revenge on the hapless estate people whose only fault is that they are Tamil speaking.

As for the fiction written about their plight, basically all of the stories speak of their sub-human standard of living. How they're exploited by the estate bureaucracy. How hard they have to toil. How their women are sexually assaulted even if they're considered Kallathonis – social outcastes.

R: How about other doctors in Tamil fiction?

S: Yes. There's Kamala Thambirajah's novel – her second – *Naan Oru Anathai* (I'm an Orphan). I've already mentioned her first novel, *Unakkahave Valkiraen* (I Live for You Alone). An exotic romance involving a Pakistani and a Lankan Tamil. In *Nan Oru Anathai* – to come back to your suggestion – Vidhya – that's Thambirajah's pen-name – has a Tamil woman doctor as her heroine. She's attached to a nursing home in Colombo. She is the product of a semi-feudal family in Jaffna. Her father is of somewhat lower caste than her mother. He has to struggle to exist in the caste dominated society in the north. The woman doctor – she's a spinster – gradually moves into high society in Colombo. She's orthodox in behaviour, but she's a free woman capable of making her own decisions. Not necessarily as a Tamil woman but as an intelligent enlightened woman.

S: Then *Orphan* is also a social consciousness novel like many you've referred to?

S: Not exactly. Narayani – that's the heroine – Narayani's problem is more psychological than social. It's a romance that ends in tragedy. Three men cross Narayani's path. She willingly submits to one who loves her deeply. He is an orphan, too. (Her parents were killed in an automobile accident after she completed her medical training). He is an engineer by profession. The irony is

that before their relationship can be legalized, Narayani also dies in an accident. There is more to the story – her own brother calls her a loose woman, and her friendship with another man makes the engineer suspicious. But what is refreshing is that Kamala Thambirajah has selected Colombo as the locale and portrays the life style of middle class or upper middle class people. Reading most of the time about the hardships of the proletariat only tires most readers. And after all, bourgeois life also needs to be treated in fiction.

- R: Does this *Orphan* novel appeal to Tamil women readers?
- S: I think it does. Because Thambirajah shows an awareness of the changing values of many Tamil women. She suggests that the conventional Tamil woman is getting harder to find in society now. Neither in Sri Lanka nor in Tamilnadu. And that's the impression I get too reading Tamil fiction. Most women these days are challenging male chauvinism.
- R: Earlier you also said Kamala Thambirajah was an actress as well as writer. She played in the Tamil film *Ponmani* (Beads of Gold). Would you mind going a little more into her background?
- S: She has worked at the Rupavahini Corporation as a producer of children's programmes. She also reads news in Tamil over the TV and the radio. She graduated from the University of Peradeniya. She worked as a journalist for the Virakesari Publishing Company. That is the publisher of *Nan Oru Anathai*. She was a press officer in the government's Information Department. She worked in the Maldives, a public relations officer for the Iranian Embassy in Colombo, too. She played the main role in *Ponmani*. Kavaloor Rasadurai was the screenwriter. The director was Dharmasena Pathiraja.
- R: The Maldives. It is not related to our theme of aspect of culture in Sri Lanka, but...

S: I am not an expert on the Maldives! But, if you are really interested in the Maldives, I did read a book, *The New Maldives* that I can tell you about. The writer used to be the Royal Nepalese Consul General in Sri Lanka. Now he is a citizen of Sri Lanka, A Justice of the Peace. He is Dr. Subash Chawla. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Delhi. He is a Punjabi Hindu. He was born in the mid 1930s in Rawalpindi. He is the Head of a sports goods company, in Colombo. His doctoral dissertation was on the sports good industry. He also has an M.A. in Retailing from the University of Pittsburgh. He is also an industrial and marketing consultant here.

As for what he says about the Maldives, it is impossible to sum it up briefly. The book is an account of the history of the Maldives. The land and its people, you know, the constitutional history of the Republic. The economy, education, it is rather comprehensive. But it is not too long, and it has colour photographs and map and charts.

R: Did anything in Dr. Subash Chawla's book on the Maldives strike you as a cultural journalist?

S: Yes. But, as I said, I'm not an expert on the Maldives. What interested me most was the claim that the Maldivian people – they're almost all Sunni Muslims – inherited at least part of their civilization from India. Dr. Chawla thinks that the original settlers were Hindus. That was 3500 years ago. He thinks – the Maldivians' language, Dhivehi – is based on Ely, an offshoot of Sanskrit. Chawla says Dhivehi has a strong affinity to Hindi. He thinks that Islam came to the Maldives only around 1150 A.D. In the pre-Muslim days the local people were the Redi. And then the Hoin. According to Chawla there were Tamil predecessors among the pre-Dhivehi speaking people of Giravaru Island. These people were called Tamila. Be all this as it may, Chawla substantiates his views by reference to the discovery of a Phallus Temple in Nilandu with many Shivalingams, and a coral slab

in the National Museum in Male. There are some hieroglyphic characters on the slab that he says resemble the pre-historic script of the Indus valley civilisation that flourished on the banks of the Indus River over 3500 years ago. On the other hand, he admits that the Maldivians are more similar to the Indo-Gangetic people than to the people of the Indus Valley.

- R: Let's come back to our own mainstream. The name Muslim allows me to ask you again about Sri Lankan novels written in Tamil by Muslims or Moors as you call them here. You've mentioned a couple, of course, but are there others you've liked?
- S: There's al readable one that comes to mind. *Charithiram Thodarkirathu*. It doesn't give full artistic satisfaction, may be, but it's welcome in the depiction of the lives of Muslims in the Kalmunai district. You can translate the title as "History Continues". It's the second novel of M.P. Muhammed Jaleel. It's set in Kalmunai, as I said, and all the characters are Muslims. It's about a widow who tries to continue the good work begun by her late husband – a doctor and active social worker – but who meets opposition from her parents – and from her brother-in-law who she thinks was responsible at least indirectly for her husband's untimely death. Her parents oppose her doing social work because they think she is behaving in a way not in keeping with the traditions of Muslim women. Her father even burns down a cottage she started to promote the spinning and weaving industry in Kalmunai. The novel ends on a tragic note when this Muslim widow kills her two children and herself. The main theme of the novel is that often the good intentions of socially conscious people are thwarted. The odds are against them. The main villain here is the wicked brother-in-law. Critically speaking the novelist's enthusiasm for ideas leaves the characterisation flat. Most of the characters are vehicles for Jaleel to peg ideas on. Their inner feelings and thoughts are seldom expressed either in monologue or dialogue. As for the dialogue, it's not colloquial. And

it's not intrinsically the Tamil idiom of the Muslim community in Kalmunai. A realistic flavour is missing. Somehow it fails to ring true. But as I say it's readable.

R: Earlier you referred to what Ediriweera Sarachchanda called the Dubai Complex. Are there many Tamil novels on this theme?

S: There are a few. Nellai K. Peran has published one—really a novella called *Vimanagal Meendum Varum*. That's 'Planes Will Come Again'. The airplanes in the title are those that take loadsful of human cargo from Sri Lanka to the Gulf states where they're employed as manual labourers. Often in very unfavourable conditions. In this case, the main character works as a labourer in Kuwait, Nellai K. Peran seems to be saying that industrious young Tamils from Jaffna will continue going to alien lands to work so that their sisters are married with dowries. Peran is a postmaster. On official leave he himself worked in the Middle East. He's had experience in journalism, and the novella is written more like reportage than fiction, *Vimanagal Meendum Varum* is about Shankar, a Jaffna Tamil youth of lower class origin. Like many young men in the feudalistic set up remaining in Jaffna he goes to the Middle East a couple of times to earn money for the dowries of his three sisters. Family obligations, you know. He's a man of character and responsibility. But not all those who go out there to earn money are so good. Some become corrupt. One big irony that Peran plays on in the novel is that people in Jaffna who are so proud of caste "superiority" do not know their own children working in Gulf States do jobs that so-called low caste people do in Jaffna. Also Shankar is something of a progressive. So when he learns that one of his sisters is in love with a young fellow whose caste is a shade lower than hers, he feels happy but also indignant that his own family are still so caste conscious.

Nellai K. Peran has written other novels. One is *Valaivuhalum Ner Koduhalum* (Curves and Sraight Lines). He's also published short stories. *Oru Pattadani Nesavukkup Pohiral* (A Woman

Graduate Goes for Weaving). One of his stories, ‘When Truth Gets Accumulated’, narrates the experience of Lankans employed on a ship in the Persian Gulf. Dubai Syndrome again. Peran writes in naturalistic style. Usually he tries to convey the contradictions in contemporary life in Jaffna. ‘It will Die Slowly’ shows how caste conscious people in Jaffna are gradually facing realities and slowly changing their views. ‘Children’ shows how the fear psychosis now prevalent in Jaffna is eating into psyches of the children there. Some of his stories are psychological. ‘Sigh’ describes the turn of events in the life of an arrogant girl who realizes later in life that she missed the bus by her superiority complex.

And mentioning Kalmunai reminded me of Udayappa Manickam Varatharajah, who happens to be from Kalmunai, Pandiruppu. His father was from Tamilnadu and his mother is a Sri Lankan Tamil. Varatharajah used to be on the editorial board of a little magazine called “Viewham”. Actually, he’s the manager of a sewing machine factory. The book of his I’m thinking about is *Ul Mana Yathirai* (A Mental Pilgrimage). It is a collection of thirteen of his short stories. We talked about film a little while ago, and most of his stories could easily be made into short films or telefilms. The stories are clever expositions of falsehoods, vanities and charlatanism. Most of them depict conflicts he has encountered in his own life, I think. The main characters are not alienated, and they manage to accept realities.

- R: You’ve taken us well into short stories written in Tamil in Sri Lanka, so why don’t you just continue bringing in the writers you’d care to.
- S: Yes, let’s do that. The name Pulolyoor reminded me another Tamil short story writer, anyway. Pulolyoor A. Ratnavelton. I’ve already told you about Kohila Mahendran. She and A. Ratnavelton have jointly published a collection of their short stories, *Arimuga Viza* (The Opening Ceremony). In fact, they’ve jointly written one of the stories. He did the first part, she did the second part.

The title story. The story centers around the question of whether a newly married woman should tell her husband about all her previous infatuations. Shouldn't there be a kind of privacy even in marital intimacy? In Ratnavelton's part, written from a male adolescent point of view, the husband should know everything about his wife. After marriage they shouldn't keep any secret from each other. Ratnavelton's tone is typical of pulp romances. Anyway, the story pauses when the husband who is waiting for his wife to come home discovers something of her untold past. Ratnavelton successfully depicts the expectations of an inexperienced young man at this point. Then Mahendran picks up the story. She continues it and concludes it on a constructive note. The woman in a man's life can be a creative source. Shakthi. The wife assures the husband that though she had some kind of affair before marriage she is faithful to him now. She had not considered her "passing phases" as serious enough to be told to her husband. Most of all, as an individual, she has the right to withhold from him anything she thinks is trivial. She comforts him with a gentle touch. He becomes assured. Mahendran's kind of stance is quite new in local Tamil fiction.

Kohila Mahendran has also published *Muranpadugalin Aruvadai* (Harvest of Conflicts). In one story – there are fourteen in this collection – she describes the attitudes of different generations regarding property in conjugal relationships. The pathetic feelings of a woman caught in the conflict both as wife and mother. In another story, a man promises to marry a woman but deceives her. Both are Muslims. The woman remains a spinster. Then the man pleads with her to marry him and look after his sick wife and child. She refuses. Mahendran again avoids sentimentalism and expresses a view new to present day Muslim women in Sri Lanka. A Muslim man, by the way, may have more than one wife.

- R: Before you continue, let me ask you a question about the teaching of Tamil literature in schools in Sri Lanka.
- S: I have the feeling that out-moded methods of teaching Tamil literature have dulled the sensitivities of many students in our schools, dulled their critical acumen. I say this because in conversations with many teachers I have often found they consider literature as something remote. Something inviolable, you know. Meant only to be admired and not critically evaluated. This attitude is a residue of the medieval commentarial tradition. Frankly in many instances teachers don't seem to know their purpose in teaching literature. They're clearly ignorant of critical standards as we know them today.
- R: I guess that answers my question. To go on, you've been referring mostly to Sri Lankan Tamil writer who seems to be fairly well known. How about at least one who is not so well known but who interests you?
- S: A comparatively unknown writer, K. Thanikasalam. He's a compositor in a printing company in Jaffna. The National Arts and Literature Association published his *Pirambadi* (Caning), a collection of short stories. Thanikasalam has had some kind of Marxist education, and his stories are somewhat analytical. Those in his collection were originally published in '*Thayaham*', a Tamil literary magazine in Jaffna. They're among the most representative writings focusing on the wretched life of the average Tamil people in the North during the past few years. The stories – such as 'Towards the South' – are realistic portraits of the people who because of class and caste, encounter unbearable difficulties. "A Road is Being Opened", tells how all the people in a hamlet get together and construct a needed road against the wishes of a few of their oppressors. "Relationship is Coming To Be Felt", concerns the transcendence of racial animosities and the communication of the feeling of brotherhood. Similarly, "Sons

of the Land” describes how Sri Lankans who belong to different ethnic groups travel together abroad and develop comradeship.

On this last theme, the title story of A. Santhan’s *Innoru Ven Iravu* (Another White Night) is about four people who meet at a restaurant in Russia - A Tunisian, a Tamil girl from Tamilnadu, and a Tamil boy and a Sinhalese girl from Lanka. They have tea together. Georgia tea. The Tamilnadu girl says “Georgia tea cannot come close to our tea” – Tamilnadu tea, that is. For her the best tea in the world is Indian tea. But both the Sri Lankans – Sinhalese and Tamil – ask at the same time: “What are you saying?” In a foreign country both Sinhalese and Tamil speak as one. Sri Lankans consider Ceylon tea to be the best in the world.

- R: You mentioned Santhan earlier too. What’s his background?
- S: He’s in his 40s. He graduated from Katubedde Technical College. He worked as a draughtsman for the government for over fifteen years. Now he’s an instructor in a technical education school in Jaffna. As *Innoru Ven Iravu* suggests, Santhan’s rather international in thinking. In the early 60s he won an All-Island Tamil essay contest on the subject of peace, world peace. A little later he got a consolation prize in an English essay contest sponsored by a journal in Czechoslovakia. He’s participated in a Russian language teachers’ workshop in Lumumba University in the U.S.S.R. and also in a training course for technical education for teachers, in Moscow. One of his books, *Oli Sirantha Nattilae* (In a Country with Brightness) is a travelogue on the Soviet Union. Some of his Tamil stories have been translated into English and published in journals like the Illustrated Weekly of India.
- R: You mentioned a Muslim woman character in Kokila Mahendran’s story in *Harvests of Conflict*. How about another Sri Lankan Muslim woman writer writing in Tamil?
- S: Sulaima A. Samee. She’s from Dharga Town. She began writing in the 70s. On Tamil radio she presents the Muslim women’s

magazine programme. She is also a trained teacher of the blind. She writes articles, poems, short stories, plays, criticism – for local newspapers and magazines. She has won prizes in all-island short story competitions. Her most recent book is *Mana Chumaikal* in Tamil. In English, ‘Burdens of the Mind’. It is a collection of ten short stories. Almost all of them pinpoint social disparities, corruption and other evils. Her style is simple and direct. Her characters are all ordinary people. They are all Muslims. Samee tries to show that a lot of these people are “cripples” of the mind. It takes a long time for them to see other people and things as a whole. Perhaps the most interesting story in this collection is one on a deceitful marriage. A wife is unfaithful to her husband. She is also jealous of a woman, who is a neighbour. So she spreads false rumours about her and spoils the young woman’s opportunity for marriage. Then the husband discovers his wife’s illicit sexual behaviour. He divorces her. He gets married to the young woman. A lot of the stories in *Mana Chumaikal* deal with ironical situations. In one, showy people mistreat a helpless old beggar. They drive him to his death. Then they bear his funeral expenses to earn good names for themselves in society! In another story, Samee has a man suddenly die. He is the father of four children and looked after his own family very well – and the members of his wife’s family too. At this funeral these relatives promise to take care of his widow and children. Actually, they hate spending 40 rupees a month on her. They tell her that directly. Then the widow’s own mother suggests that she, the widow, go to Dubai – Dubai Complex again – and earn enough money for herself and her children. The power of money is shown in another story too. A philanthropic businessman fails in his own business. But even when he goes down in life he remains basically human. For example, he has helped a young man come up in life. The young man is grateful. Even when the young man’s leg is amputated, the kindly businessman offers him one of his daughters to be his wife. But the young man’s parents – they had been poor but

had become prosperous because of their son's earnings in the Middle East acquire an attitude of superiority toward the once well-to-do man who had helped their son.

The main theme in most of these stories by Sulaima Samee is "cripples of the mind", as I said. But amputation and other physical handicaps come up again. In another story, two pen pals fall in love. One day they meet. The boy finds out: the girl has a slight limp. He tells her he cannot marry her because of her "handicap". The girl is very hurt, of course, and she tells him that some day he will have to suffer for his cruel behaviour. Then she gets married to another man, her cousin, and she bears children. Then the boy meets with an accident and one of his legs is amputated. He writes a letter to his former pen pal and apologizes for his bad behaviour. Here Samee underpins belated realization of folly – and retribution. Another story in this same collection of hers deals with the conflict between traditional Muslims and converted Muslims. A man runs a barber salon in Alutgama. When he is thirty five years old he converts to Islam. But he is considered an outcaste by the rest of the Muslims in that area. Then a progressive thinking young man from the upper echelons of the Moor community there comes forward to marry the barber's daughter. He succeeds in changing the attitude of his conservative parents for the better.

- R: From what you say there are many Tamil women writers too pursuing similar themes – changing attitudes for the social better.
- S: Yes, but aside from the ones I've already mentioned, there's also Kavitha. That's the pen name of Nageswari Kanapathipillai. She is a teacher at Akkaraipattu. She is married to an attorney at law who is also a politician and writer, Segu Isadeen. He uses the pen name of Vedanti. Kavitha's most recent collection of short stories is called *Yugangal Kanakkilla* (Epochs Are Uncountable). Actually, Kavitha has a bias toward traditional Tamilian concepts of womanhood. In "Naer Kodu" (Straight Line) she has a Tamil

father and a Burgher mother who pull in different directions to make their daughter adopt their respective customs. The daughter leans towards her father's Tamilian way of life. And in the title story Kavitha suggests that even among the present generation of young women feminists can be as tender as has been idealized. Her characters are mostly women. They are idealists trying hard to adjust their lives in opposing environments and situations. In short, her women characters attune themselves to realities without sacrificing their noble character traits.

As far as changing for the better, I mentioned Kopay Sivam – that's the pen name of P. Sivanandasarma, a draughtsman in the Irrigation Department – has a story – the title story in *Niyayamana Porattangal* (Justifiable Struggles) – about a Brahmin grandmother who challenges the hypocrisy of her own people who castigate a family in their own circle for marrying outside their caste. In a similar story “*Oru Marana Urvalam Purapadda Pohirathu*’ (A Funeral Procession is about to start), orthodoxy in funeral rites is shown as meaningless when those insisting on such formalities cannot help to get the daughter of a Brahmin man married because they disowned him long ago for marrying outside their caste.

Kopay Sivam often writes about his own class of people – Brahmins in the local Tamil community. Despite the conservative social milieu from which his characters are drawn, he succeeds in expressing a progressive point of view. In this same book, Sivanandasarma has a rather unusual love story interpreting the woman character as a person growing mature in this changing society, “*Nilalhalum Nijanggalum*”. (Shadows and Realities). It is about a kind of love between two young people who cannot make up their minds to declare their love to each other. Being educated they both analyse their own sentiments and reactions, and so hesitate. Then, surprisingly contrary to expectations,

the girl, devoid of any sentimental feeling, chooses to marry somebody else, and it is the boy who suffers.

- R: Before we go on.... You've been kind enough to teach me a few words in Tamil – I don't remember all the words in the titles you translated to me! – *kathaihal* for stories and *ciru kathaihal* for short stories and *navalhal* for novels. May I ask you the Tamil word for poetry and poet, book and literature?
- S: Literature is *ilakkiyam*. Book is *puttakam*. *Kaaviyam* is epic poetry. Poetry is *Kavithai*. Poet is *Kavignan*. And – chauvinistic traditions - poetess is *penn kavi*. *Penn* is female.
- R: Then, to end this lesson in the Tamil language – and this part of our interview – how do you say peace in Tamil?
- S: Yes, let's hope for peace here and everywhere. *Amaithi*.

R: 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?

S: Of course. You know, Jegatheeswari Nagendran writes poetry in English. So does C.V. Velupillai, who has also done fiction in English, like S.I. Frances and Rajah Proctor who do short stories. You have met Francis, of course. Anyway, take John Regis. He has an unusual name for a Sri Lankan. He is a Christian from Kerala who settled down here. He is a journalist writing for *Virakesari*. He used to write a column on local affairs; he is 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, 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 vaiththai Iraiva*”. Regi'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. Earlier you asked me the Tamil word for peace and one of the striking poems in this collection is a peace poem called, “The Enlightenment”. Regi

says the architects of acceleration dream of 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. There is 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 Regi does have a few good lines. “Truth flashed in effulgent splendour. Life is a dew drop on a blade of grass.” Of course, this too was inspired by another Tamil poem.

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

S: Anbu Mohideen. *Mathulam Muththukkal*. It was also 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 produce 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 is not going to relieve the hardships of the pain-infested friends of ours. I would say these poems

are representative of the Tamil speaking Muslim community's experience of everyday life in the Eastern part of the country.

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

S: Let us see. I have 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, "Sita is in a Land without Rama", he has some metaphors that are somewhat innovative in Tamil. Poems without the music of conjugal love. Peahens without plumes of money. In another verse called "I am 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 is a collection of almost 50 of his poems called *Ariyap Padathavarkal Ninaivaha* (in Memory of the Unknown). This is how Yesurasa describes Ruwanveliseya. Coning whitish curve filling the space. Curling helmet feeling gently the sky. Ruwanveliseya is a Buddhist shrine, a dagaba. It was built by an ancient Sinhala king. It is 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 is a good description of fear and anxiety among the Tamil people living in Colombo shortly after the communal troubles

of 1977. I am going to go into detail so you can learn a lot about certain “aspects” of our culture from this story. Krishna is a public servant. Newly married, he and his wife live in Colombo, in an annex. The landlord is also a Tamil. One day Krishna 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 to them in Sinhala. This makes Krishna 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. Krishna gets off the bus and meets Baddurdeen, a Muslim boutique keeper. Baddurdeen, also speaks Sinhala and Tamil fluently. He greets Krishna in Tamil in a loud voice. Krishna 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 Krishna’s colleagues speak with him in Sinhala.

They are all friendly with him. He is popular. He is 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 Krishna before because he thinks Krishna 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, Krishna spends the time reading a foreign English magazine. That is 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 is 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 have inherited a tradition of cross cultures. They are 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 to 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 is 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 is 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 column from non-Tamil speaking people.

And let me finish this point of discussion by also referring to "Anarvana". That is a Sinhala quarterly published by the Coordinating Secretariat for Plantation Areas. A recent issue had an interesting article by Gunasena Vithana, a Moscow wing Communist writer, on the duty of Sri Lanka's writer 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 – its 46th – to Tamil Literature in Sri Lanka. It was edited by Piyal Somaratne, a film and literary critic. Wiesunya, 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 is a specialist in mechanical engineering. He has published two anthologies of his poems. *Nathikarayin Moongil* (Bamboo by the River Bank) and *Seppanitta Padimangal* (Polished Images). He has also published his Tamil translations of Mao Tse Tung's poems and admits that his own poetry is politically motivated. I will 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 almighty computer cannot answer. From all this you may assume Sivasegaram is a very cerebral poet. Actually, he is a sensitive writer. He is 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 would like to call your attention to is Kurinchi Thennavan. He has 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 have already commented on. The book I called *Kurinchi Thennavam Kavithaikal*. Unusually, it has been translated into Sinhala and English. Thennavam himself is unusual among the writers of

this country in that he did not have much formal education. 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 is a kind of satire, biting satire. I have 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 is a saving scheme for non-government employees. They collect at retirement.

- R: Then let's go back again! – to Tamil novels written in Sri Lanka. Are there others that you would 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.
- S: How about love stories? *Meettatha Vennai* (The Unfiddled Veena). It is 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 are 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 is Arul Subramaniam's *Nan Kedematten* (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 is 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 amend 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*, I mentioned before. Anyway, in *Nan Kedamatten*, Subramaniam shows his skill in the handling of subjects usually taboo in Tamil literature at the time. He is from Trincomalee. He was a clerk in a government department. He has 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 heroin is a Brahmin who takes up to prostitution to maintain a big family. K. Balachander wrote the story and directed the film. He is a slightly off beat film maker from Tamilnadu.

There is another Tamil novel dealing with love between cousins. Gnanarathan's *Oomai Ullengal* (The Silent Hearts). Unrequited love is the main theme. Ever 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's 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 to give up her job because a fellow employee made advances to her.

- R: One thing that interests me is that among all the novels you have 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 Collin de Silva's in English. *The Winds of Sinhala*, also set in ancient Ceylon.
- S: 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 is the first time that a Sri Lankan Tamil has interpreted the ancient history of Sri Lanka from a Marxian point of view. The novel is set in the period around 240 B.C., or a little earlier. The background is the reign of Suratissa, a Sinhala king, and the ascendancy of Sena and Guttaka, Tamil kings. Rasaratnam's protagonist – he is 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 to force Suratissa to give up his religious mission – during this time more attention was given to building viharas and dagabas than to developing agriculture – and to devote himself to agriculture and the welfare of the people. Rasaratnam sympathizes 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 dreamt 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 short story "Boat" was one of the earliest Tamil stories to portray the way of life in Muthur, in the east coast, in realistic terms. *Krouncha Pravaigal* refers to ancient eagle-like birds.

R: 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?

S: Ocassionally. Not so long ago I did an interview for The Island with P.P. Devaraj. He is the Minister of State for Hindu Religious, Cultural and Tamil Affairs.

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

S: Background first. Devaraj had his secondary education at 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. Thondaman 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 is a Sri Lankan citizen of Pakistani origin – is head of the Democracti Workers Congress, which is more left of centre.

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 change to participate in parliamentary debates. They limited his time, but as a Minister he is able to do something. He said he wants to contribute intellectually to the body politic. He has worked in political movements and with C.W.C. and 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.

R: Can you describe the Ministry for Hindu Religious, Cultural and Tamil Affairs?

S: 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 Ethics" – 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. This Ministry is also trying to organize workshops and performance 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 is getting advice from eminent legal and political science groups among the Tamils. He will 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.

- R: Is there any cooperation between Devaraj's Ministry and those relating to Sinhalese cultural activities?
- S: He mentioned the possibility of cooperating in the making of translations. Sinhala into Tamil; Tamil into Sinhala. He has 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.
- R: In relation to literature here, you have spoken about the serious problems of the Tamil workers in the plantation sector. Did you speak with Devaraj about that?
- S: 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. Education 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 folk arts alive. Traditional folk culture is being slighted. So he is trying to activate folk culture in the area. Giving encouragement to Carnatic musicians, for instance.
- R: 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.

S: Well, Sivagurunathan is editor of “Thinakaran” and “Thinakaran Vara Manjari”. He started at “Thinakaran” 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 around 1961. He also edited the Lake House Tamil daily and weekly. Sivagurunathan is also an attorney at law. At Law College he is a visiting lecturer. He graduated in Arts from the University of Peradeniya in the early 1950s. For the last ten years or so he has 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: Tamil, Sinhala and English. The Association itself includes print, radio and TV journalists from all fronts, right, left and centre, and languages. Sinhala, Tamil, English.

I am glad you asked this question. I would like to stress that Sivagurunathan’s election is a happy augury. I hope it shows that parochialism is gradually fading away 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 Aloysius Jeyaraj Canagaratna. Among Tamil speaking authors, he’s known as A.J. He too graduated from the University of Peradeniya in the 50s. He was an English major. He was fluent in English but not very fluent in Tamil. Now he is a leading Tamil writer, a literary critic. He once wrote a book called *maththu* (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 is 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 is 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.

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

S: I know you're interested in the professional versatility that many Sri Lankans display, so I'll introduce you to Mohammed Mana Mackeen. He sometimes uses the pen-name M – Three. He is 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 has been a freelance journalist in Tamil for more than 25 years. He is still in his 50s. Mackeen himself says he owes a lot to Sivagurunathan. He used to write a daily column on political and cultural affairs in the *Thinakaran* – Sivagurunathan is the editor – and now he edits a feature page called “Light Reading”. He has contributed to literature here, and theatre, and broadcasting and even musical entertainment. That is a versatility. Also, in the 1960s, Mackeen was on the Islamic Fine Arts Council and, in the '70s, on the Tamil Dance Panel. He has written a lot about film for regional Tamil newspapers here such as “Eelanadu” and “Cheithi”. He has 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-1960 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, Tamil theatre. He has been involved in it for over 20 years. He was once awarded a plaque of honor by Chelliah Rajadurai for his theatrical service. He was the first to present a Sinhala play in Tamil, Dayanananda Gunawardena’s *Ibbikata* (Tortoise Shell). He is 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 the in the mid-1970s, and it was selected as a festival play by the Tamil Drama Panel. Chelliah Rajadurai 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 programmes. And he is still young at heart!

- R: Then let us do short stories in Tamil once more. A couple of Sri Lankan Muslim short story writers, say, then a couple of Sri Lankan Tamils?
- S: Let us summarize the themes in *Pirarthanai* (Prayers) by M.I.M. Muzammil, a fairly new writer, a Muslim who writes in Tamil. Like many of the writers I have 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 are all set in a provincial milieu.

So are most of the stories in Maruthur A. Majeed’s *Panneer Vasam Veasukirathu* (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 Tender 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 is a realist. Most of his characters are old people with old values. For instance, 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. Checkovian. 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 is *Thotta Kattinillae* (In the Jungle of the Estates). There are nine stories by three writers. Three stories each by 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 Kattan" are derogatory terms in Tamil applied to the estates and 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 labourer 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” (Relationships) 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 own 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 home towns. Somu is from Matale. So is Vadivelan. Incidentally, *Thotta Kattinilae* 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 grand-children to help them celebrate the new year. The second story’s about the employment of very old people to fell trees to continue existence. 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, Thalayasingham. *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 “Iraththam” (Blood), a young man brought up in the 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 Thalayasingham 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 “Koyilhal” Thalayasingham speaks about the ideal that will transcend death. “Koyilhal” means temples. “Sabatham” (The vow) says sex is an obstacle to attaining the ultimate purpose of life, but “Tholuhai” (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, Thalayasingham 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, Thalayasingham 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 *Baghavanin Pathangalil* (At the feet 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.

This concludes the interview.

Appendix

The Superiors Speak

It was with utmost regret that I heard from Mr. K. S. Sivakumaran that he wishes to leave Upali Newspapers Ltd., due to personal reasons.

Mr. Sivakumaran is one of the very best journalists in the *Island*. He will be sorely missed, not only by the management and by his colleagues, but more particularly by readers, who undoubtedly looked forward regularly, to read his very popular features and columns on cultural matters.

He was recruited in February, 1985 as the Deputy Features Editor of the *Island*. We handpicked him for this position from among several candidates, due to his extensive association with matters literary and cultural in his earlier assignment. He had been a writer in English and in Tamil for over three decades, and a radio journalist for ten years; and he had held senior positions in both the National Television Service (S.L.B.C. and Rupavahini). He has also worked at the U.S.I.S. Colombo, as an Information Assistant.

Over nearly seven years, he worked for both the *Daily Island* and the *Sunday Island*. At the *Sunday Island* he handled subbing, layout and overall supervision except of the news and sports pages. Subsequently we gave him the task of editing the 'Cultural page' of the Daily 'Island' – a task which he faced up to with eminent success. He compiled, sub edited and laid out every one of the 'Cultural Pages', which carried news and feature on films, dance, drama and music, as well as literary reviews – many of which were written by him.

When I carried out a Reader Opinion Survey a few months ago, one of the questions asked of readers, related to the grading of their preference in respect of features, I was pleasantly surprised to find that Mr. Sivakumaran's Cultural Features ranked high in reader preferences.

Mr. Sivakumaran is a writer in his own right with several Tamil language books and at least one English language book to his credit. He is a recognized literary, drama and dance critic witness his appointments, 'inter alia' as a member of the English panel of the National Arts Council, a member of the National chapter of the UNESCO, and a visiting lecturer in journalism at the University of Colombo.

Despite his outstanding competence, his extensive reading and his exceptional accomplishments, Mr. Sivakumaran is one of the most unassuming and humble persons I have known. He is not one of those "assured of certain certainties", but is perpetually questing and questioning.

His mother tongue is Tamil and therefore, his familiarity apart from English, is more with Tamil culture and literature but he has been constantly endeavouring to do what he can to achieve a dialogue between Tamil and Sinhala cultural interests. In this sense Mr. Sivakumaran is a harbinger of National Integration.

Courteous and mild mannered almost to a fault, tactful and eminently sociable, he is nonetheless a person of firm and honest convictions who is ever ready to listen, to discuss, to debate and to learn.

Although Mr. Sivakumaran is leaving our permanent establishment, he has agreed to continue to write to the 'ISLAND' whenever he can – and I do hope, for the sake of our readers and for the sake of our country, this will be very often!

I am sorry to see Mr. Sivakumaran leave us: but I am sure he will be shortly painting on a much bigger canvas and that he has much bigger achievements in store in the future.

I wish him well.

26.11.1991

James H. Lanerolle
 Managing Director
 Upali Newspapers Ltd.

Mr. K.S. Sivakumaran worked for *The Island* newspaper from 1985 to 1991. u;e joined us as the Deputy Features Editor and leaves in that capacity. During his period of service, he was given responsibility of producing the feature pages of the Sunday edition of 'The Island', apart from writing feature articles for the paper. In 1986, he initiated compiling, writing and making of the 'Culture' page of *The Island* daily until October this year. This page was well received by all those involved in the arts in this country.

Mr. Sivakumaran's own contributions had been mainly in the field of reviewing. u;e has reviewed books, plays, films, musical concerts, art exhibitions etc. and wrote a regular column called 'Gleanings' on matters of arts and kindred subjects. u;e covered not only the Tamil cultural scene, but also artistic activities in the English language. u;e had also reviewed a few plays and films in Sinhala.

Mr. Sivakumaran has cultivated valuable contacts with artists and writers from all communities in Sri Lanka. Before coming over to 'The Island', he had established himself as a bilingual writer and critic in this country. u;e has a multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural approach to writing.

Journalist Mr. Sivakumaran had previously worked as Information Assistant for the USIS and Tamil News Editor for the SLBC. u;e is also a broadcaster and TV presenter in both English and Tamil.

Mr. Sivakumaran has written three books in Tamil and two in English.

With his long years of experience in the media, Mr. Sivakumaran can be depended upon. u;e had friendly associations with the staff of both Sinhala and English newspapers published by the Upali Newspapers Ltd.

I wish him well.

19.11.1991

Edmund Ranasinghe
Editor-in-Chief
Upali Newspapers Limited

Mr. K.S. Sivakumaran joined the editorial staff of *The Island* in February 1985 and leaves us at the end of November 1991 due to personal reasons.

On being recruited, he was appointed Deputy Features Editor and in this capacity performed the functions of the Features Editor of *The Island* as well as assisted the Features Editor as well as the Editor with regard to local and foreign features.

Before joining 'The Island' he was already well known as a radio journalist specialising in the arts and cultural field. In recognition of his knowledge and talents, he was also appointed editor of 'The Island's' cultural page and he continued with this task till he left us.

Earlier, reportage of cultural activities in 'The Island' was confined to a single column and Mr. Sivakumaran's task was to produce an entire page encompassing the varied spheres of cultural and literary activities. He was successful, in reporting and commenting on cultural and literary events of all three streams – English, Sinhala and Tamil and this page was much sought after by our reader. While editing the page, he contributed copiously in the form of reviews and features on drama, films, books etc.

His speciality has been Tamil literary and cultural activities and he is today, in addition to his reputation as a writer, also an outstanding radio and TV commentator in this sphere. Besides these activities, he also functioned as a foreign news editor of the paper for some time.

Mr. Sivakumaran has been a pleasant and popular journalist among his colleagues and 'The Island' wishes him well in all his future endeavours.

20.11.1991

Gamini Weerakoon
Editor, Sunday 'Island'

Sri Lankan Tamil Literature and Culture

A Purview through Reviews and Interviews

K.S. Sivakumaran



The name K S Sivakumaran (1936) is synonymous with Lankan Contemporary Literature and the Arts. For the past 65 years he had been covering the literary scene of all three languages. He used both Tamil and English as a literary journalist and a broadcaster. He had worked in various capacities in four national newspapers: *The Island* (Culture Page Editor), *Daily News* (Features Editor), *Virakesari* (Associate Editor) and *Navamani* (Editor-in-chief). With Radio Sri Lanka he has been an announcer both in English and Tamil. He was also a Tamil News Editor for the SLBC.

He is now a freelance writer. He writes poetry and short stories and reviews for both Lankan and foreign journals. He qualified himself for his BA (General) and MA (English) as an external candidate from the University of Peradeniya and the University of Madras respectively.

Apart from being a literary critic in Tamil, he also shone in his writing in English. His accomplishments were very high that the readers of *The Island*, where he compiled and edited the Culture Page and wrote his column titled Gleanings, ranked him high in reader preference. This happened during his stay with *The Island* in the 1980s.

It is very rarely we come across literary personalities like K S Sivakumaran. Because of his bilingual expertise and dexterity both in English and Tamil, he has made use of his talents to promote national cohesion and integration.

K S Sivakumaran had done yeoman services by writing about Tamil writing, literature and culture in English and vice a visa writing in English about Sinhala and English literature and films to the English knowing Lankans. More than his writing in English, his writing in Tamil exceeds more than thousand reviews etc. His books in English and Tamil number more than 40. He has contributed tremendously and enormously towards understanding not only Tamil literature and culture but also understanding the culture of Sinhala, Muslim, Malay and Burgher communities through his writing in English and Tamil.

In other words, he has been inevitably and steadily endeavouring and striving to do what he can accomplish to achieve a discourse among literary circles. From this point of view K S Sivakumaran is a forerunner and precursor in promoting national integration. It is not an exaggeration if I say that it is unthinkable for me to identify a similar personality in this or forthcoming generation of Tamils, especially when at present there is a deteriorating trend in the education of Tamils.

- Prof S Santhirasekaram



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