An Interview with Anne Ranasinghe on Aspects of Culture in Sri Lanka

Le Roy Robinson

Anne Ranasinghe is a journalist, short story and radio play writer, and poet. Some of her work has been translated into several languages — Sinhalese, Tamil, Dutch and Serbo-Croat; one book of her poems has been translated into German, her native language. She has won prizes for poems, short stories, a radio play and essays.

She was born Anneliese Katz in Essen, Germany, in 1925. She had her basic education in Essen, then entered the Jawne Gymnasium in Cologne in 1936. Caught up in Hitler’s persecution of the Jews, her parents sent her to England in 1939. Her parents were deported to the ghetto in Lodz, Poland, in 1941, and were murdered in Auschwitz in 1944.

She completed her high school education at Parkstone Girls’ Grammar School in Dorset, England. When she graduated, World War II was at its height, so as war service she started nursing. She trained at Charing Cross Hospital and Kings College, Moorfields Eye Hospital, the Chelsea Hospital for Women, and the Burden Neurological Research Institute in Bristol.

In 1949 Anne Ranasinghe married Dr. Don Abraham Ranasinghe, who was pursuing post-graduate studies in England. He later became Professor and Head of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology of the Medical Faculty of the University of Colombo. On retirement he was honored as Professor Emeritus. In 1979 he was appointed Chancellor of the Univer-
sity of Colombo and in 1980 was awarded the degree of Doctor of Science Honoris Causa. He died in March 1981.

Anne Ranasinghe, who joined her husband in Sri Lanka in 1951, became a citizen of Sri Lanka in 1956. She is the mother of seven children, three by her husband's previous marriage and four by theirs.

She began her writing career in the late 1960s after obtaining a Diploma in Journalism at the Colombo Polytechnic.

For the last 15 years she has been working as Executive Secretary of the Amnesty International South Asia Publications Service in Colombo.*

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ROBINSON: Now your work for Amnesty International?

RANASINGHE: Yes. For the Amnesty International South Asia Publications Service. This started as an experiment 15 years ago. AI SAPS as it is called is a decentralized office, part of the AI International Secretariat in London. Part of the Press and Publications Department. We print the AI monthly Newsletter and distribute it in 40 odd countries in the Asian and Pacific Region, act as a sort of regional information office, and print and distribute other AI material.

ROBINSON: Considering the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, does this work cause problems for you?

RANASINGHE: AI has a very specific point of view and expresses it internationally. But Amnesty also has very clear working rules. None of its members may engage in human rights activities in their own countries in the name of Amnesty International. This ruling serves a dou

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ble purpose. It prevents people from working within the framework of any particular bias they may have because of their knowledge of the local scene. It also protects them to some extent. AI is, of course, sometimes felt to be controversial. It's frequently not understood by governments. Actually AI has a very narrow mandate. It works for the release of prisoners of conscience, for prompt and fair trials for all political prisoners, and opposes the death penalty and torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishments of all prisoners without reservation. Sri Lanka, by the way, has not yet abolished the death penalty but has not enforced it since 1977.

ROBINSON: Would you say something about the history of the death penalty in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Well, in ancient times it was the King who was the supreme arbiter over life and death. But there were some constraints: the King had to abide by the laws of the country, and he would also seek and take note of advice given by the Buddhist clergy. He had a council of ministers assigned to him, and the death sentence had to be decreed by a majority of these ministers. Even after sentencing, the condemned man could appeal to the people; and in such a case 70 judges would be selected to re-examine his case. But after the second century that system ceased, and the king alone imposed the death penalty, and there was no appeal. For offenses which did not seem severe enough for the death penalty they used mutilation, amputation — arms, legs, noses, ears or hands. Mutilation was used both as a punishment and as a deterrent, and sometimes people died as a result. Probably, I should imagine, because they had no efficient way of staunching the bleeding, of combating shock and also of dealing with infections.

ROBINSON: What was the status of people who had been mutilated?
RANASINGHE: As far as I know no special mention has been made of an altered status. I guess if they survived they went back and picked up the pieces of their lives.

ROBINSON: What were the methods of execution?


ROBINSON: Is there any history of protests against executions?

RANASINGHE: I don't think so. The King is supposed to have delivered the verdict with the words "Tallu kerala dapiya" (Push this fellow away) and there was no way of protesting. Donovan Moldrich writes about this in *Hangman Spare That Noose*.

ROBINSON: How about protests by Buddhist priests?

RANASINGHE: The strange thing to me is the attitude of priests to the death penalty. Again according to Donovan Moldrich, in September 1977 the Sri Lanka Mahabodhi Maitri presided over by Mr. Siri Perera QC urged the government to abolish the death penalty. But less than three weeks later the Venerable Pandit Welletota Pannadasi, Maha Thera and Vice President of the All Ceylon Tri-Nikaya Maha Sangha Sabha, said that although there was vigorous campaigning to abolish the death penalty, this would have dangerous results and that therefore, although they were bhikkus (Buddhist priests), they were totally opposed to the withdrawal of the death penalty. Yet Buddhist priests are supposed to walk with their eyes cast to the ground to avoid trampling ants and other creatures inadvertently with their feet? Sir Edwin Wijeratne, member of the Morris Commission which was appointed in 1958 by the then Governor General, Sir Oliver Goonetilleke, to inquire into Capital Punishment, in his dissenting vote (to retain Capital Punishment) also based his arguments on
the compliance of Buddhist Priests with the death penalty in the time of the Kings, their unwillingness to interfere in what appeared to them a purely civil matter.

ROBINSON: You said that after the 2nd century the King alone imposed the death penalty. What happened after that?

RANASINGHE: As time went on there appears to have been an improvement in the system of justice. For example, already in the 11th century there was a kind of jury system, and degrees of culpability were taken into consideration. The problem is that the Mahavamsa or Great Chronicle and the Culavamsa or Lesser Chronicle were written by Buddhist priests, and didn’t touch on subjects which were not of interest to the priests. So there is little information on socio-economic conditions. But Robert Knox, who was for many years a prisoner in the kingdom of Kandy, gave some wonderful insights into the Sri Lanka of his time.

ROBINSON: Who was he?

RANASINGHE: Robert Knox was a sailor in the service of the English East India Company. He was captured by the King of Kandy in 1660 and kept prisoner for 20 years. After he escaped and returned to England, he wrote An Historical Relation of Ceylon. It’s an absolutely fascinating account of his encounter with this strange country and society. Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe is supposed to have been partially inspired by it.

ROBINSON: How accurate is Knox’s An Historical Relation of Ceylon?

RANASINGHE: His account has a very high reputation. Firstly because he was not religiously biased. Although he was a Puritan, he had surprising religious tolerance. Secondly, he lived in the Kandyan Kingdom for twenty years, moving around as a peddler for the last period before he escaped, and he had unlimited opportunities to
study the country and its people. And thirdly he wrote the book for his own pleasure. There was no reason for him to distort the truth. Altogether, being a European captive in King Rajasingha's Ceylon was not so bad. Usually, they were individually quartered in different villages, scattered throughout the Kandyan Kingdom. The village was responsible for supplying food free of charge, and the "prisoner" did not have to work for it.

But for their other requirements they had to earn money. First of all the English started knitting caps, and when the supply of those exceeded demand they began animal husbandry as well as keeping cattle, and growing rice. Many married into Sinhalese families. Knox began to lend corn, and made 50% profit per annum.

The captives soon realized that as King's prisoners they were very privileged, and even enjoyed the King's special protection. And all this explains Knox's ability to move within reason, and observe, even before he started peddling.

ROBINSON: Is the book well known today? I mean, who reads it? Has it been translated into the local languages?

RANASINGHE: It was translated into Sinhala in 1959 by David Karunaratne — that was the period of Sinhala resurgence. And again in 1972. I believe it is used widely for teaching purposes at schools and universities.

ROBINSON: Have you read the book?

RANASINGHE: Repeatedly. I was totally captivated by it when I first came upon it. And, although there are 300 years between him and me, I think many of his observations are still valid today. Actually, there were three books published by foreigners on 17th century Ceylon — and all three writers were clearly intelligent observers. And by some fortunate chance each of the three lived in a different
part of Ceylon, and so we have descriptions of three different geographical areas and societies.

ROBINSON: Have all three books been translated into Sinhala and Tamil?

RANASINGHE: As far as I know only Knox's book has been translated. Rebeiro's "Tragedy" is hardly known — I have not seen it, and although I own a copy of Baldaeus I have not read it from cover to cover. It's rather heavy going and not really as interesting as Knox. But very useful for reference.

ROBINSON: Tell me a little about the three books.

RANASINGHE: It's exceedingly strange but all three were written within approximately 25 years of each other — between 1672 and 1685. Knox's book — it's the best known of the three — was published in 1680. As I suggested, he describes the Kandyan Kingdom and its people. Then there was Captain Joao Rebeiro. He wrote the *Historical Tragedy of Ceilao*; he dedicated it to King Pedro IV of Portugal. Rebeiro spent 18 years in the Portuguese garrison here, so he describes the Low Country Sinhalese of the Maritime Provinces. At that time they were under Portuguese rule. And Phillipus Baldaeus. His *Description of Ceylon* deals with the Tamil society of the Northern Provinces. The Reverend Phillipus Baldeus came to Sri Lanka when Colombo was conquered by the Dutch in 1656. He was responsible for converting the Tamil communities of Northern Ceylon to the Dutch Reformed Religion. Just as Knox spoke fluent Sinhala in the end, so Baldaeus learned Tamil. He had to, in order to preach and convert. His book was published in 1672 in Amsterdam, in Dutch. The actual title of his book was "*A True and Exact Description of the Most Celebrated East India Coasts of Malabar and Choromandel. As also the Great Island of Ceylon and the Religion of the Heathens of the East Indies*".
ROBINSON: We were talking about the death penalty when you brought up Robert Knox. Did he write about the death penalty in 17th century Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Yes. He made several references to it. Now let me refer directly to Knox's book. In this chapter titled "Concerning the King's Manners, Vices, Recreation and Religion", he says the Kandyan King seemed to be naturally disposed to cruelty: that he sheds a great deal of blood and gives no reason for it. That his cruelty appears both in the tortures and painful deaths he inflicts, and in the extent of his punishments For example: upon whole families for the misdeeds of only one of them. The King would first torture his victims by pulling away their flesh with pincers, then burning them with hot irons which were affixed in order to make them confess. And after confessing — more than they ever knew or saw, according to Knox — the King would command that their two hands should be fixed about their necks, to make them eat their own flesh, and for mothers to eat the flesh of their own children. The condemned would then be led through the city — to terrify the public — to the place of execution, and the dogs would follow in order to eat them. Knox then says that at the place of execution there were always some people sticking up upon poles — who had been impaled — and others hanging up in quarters on trees; besides the remains of those who were killed by elephants, or in other ways, lying scattered on the ground. Knox stresses that the place of execution was always near the main highway so that all could see what was going on and become frightened. In another chapter Knox talks about "beasts, tame and wild, and insects", and he gives a marvellous account of how to catch elephants and explains that the King made use of elephants as executioners... "they will run their Teeth through the
body and then tear it in pieces, and throw it limb from limb. They have sharp Iron with a socket with three edges, which they put on their Teeth at such times..." And there’s an explicit drawing of an elephant in action. Executing. Coming back to the death penalty... according to Knox, a husband whose wife had been adulterous had the right to kill both his wife and her lover. Women who were punished for murder in the Kandyan Kingdom were usually drowned. A women who had sexual relations with a man of lower caste could be killed by her own family in order to expunge the insult.

ROBINSON: What happened to men who slept with lower caste women?

RANASINGHE: Nothing happened to them. Donovan Moldrich cites H. N. C. Stevenson, a sociologist, on the double standards exercised in respect of women. Apparently it was argued in India, where the same system prevailed, that men were only "externally polluted", whereas women were "internally polluted" if they had sex with lower caste men. There is also the terrible story of Ehelapola. This of course was 200 years after Knox — during the British occupation. Ehelapola was the Chief Adigar or Councillor of King Sri Vikrama Rajasingha and had conspired with the British to oust the King. The King decided to revenge himself on Ehelapola’s wife and children. He forced the mother to pound the children’s heads with a pestle in a mortar. But whether this is fact or legend is not clear.

ROBINSON: Well, either way, what happened to the wife?

RANASINGHE: She was drowned. What’s amazing to me, truly staggering, is how little the world has changed in the last 300 years. Recently torture and ill treatment and horrifying executions were reported from 94 countries spanning the whole geopolitical spectrum. What used to be considered excesses of the Dark Ages has become a modern epidemic. It’s ironic that in this enlightened 20th century torture still
performs its traditional function: to intimidate both the prisoner and society as a whole, to obtain information and to extract confessions.

ROBINSON: You said that the death penalty has not been enforced in Sri Lanka since 1977. In general what is the history of attempts to abolish the death penalty here?

RANASINGHE: It seems that throughout the recorded history of Ceylon except for four brief periods, a murderer was liable to execution. The four periods are in the first century, when King Amanda-gamini abolished capital punishment; in the third century King Voharika Tissa, and at the beginning of the fourth century King Sirisangsabodhi (who secretly set free criminals who were condemned to death and in their stead exhibited men who had died a natural death). King Parakrama Bahu the Second who lived in the 12th century abolished the death penalty for the period of his reign.

ROBINSON: And in more modern times?

RANASINGHE: Well, I think the first attempt to abolish it in the present century was in 1928. There was a motion by D. S. Senanayeke, who later became the first Prime Minister after Independence in 1948. His motion was defeated. Another member of the Legislative Council opposed it on the grounds that at that time it had still not been abolished in the United Kingdom with its great history of justice and democracy. A second attempt to abolish capital punishment was defeated in 1936, and a third in 1942.

ROBINSON: What about after 1948 and independence?

RANASINGHE: There were new moves. First by Fred de Silva, who was the M. P. for Kandy. Later by Dr. G. P. Malalasekera. He was the President of the All Ceylon Buddhist Congress. 1956 was the 2500th year of Buddhism, so he felt that was an appropriate moment. Then in the General Elections of 1956 the ruling United National Party
was defeated by the Mahajana Eksath Peramuna, a coalition led by S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike, the President of the Sri Lanka Freedom Party. But P. N. Cumaranatunga has already told you about this political history. The point here is that at the first Cabinet Meeting in 1956 Bandaranaike pressed a Cabinet decision to suspend the death penalty for a period of three years. In April 1958 the suspension of Capital Punishment Act was passed by both Houses of Parliament. During the second Reading the Minister of Justice informed the Senate that the Government proposed to appoint a Commission to go into the question thoroughly, and the Governor General appointed a four member Commission in October 1958. The Chairman was Dr. Norval Morris, Dean of the Faculty of Law of the University of Adelaide, and the other members, Sir Edwin Wijeratne, a former Minister of Home Affairs, Professor T. Nadaraya, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and head of the Department of Law at the Ceylon University, and Mr. S. Canagaraya, Secretary of the Commission. The Commission made a careful study of every aspect of the death penalty, and it was an ironical coincidence that its report was published just two weeks before the assassination of Mr. Bandaranaike. He was shot at his home just a few yards away from the house where I was living then, and still am living at today. In a last message to the nation, just before he died, Bandaranaike asked the people not to revenge themselves on the man who had shot him but to have compassion. But the government of the day restored the death penalty almost immediately — I think less than a week after his death. There was a subsequent storm of protest. I think the main reason was the fact that the death penalty was to be re-introduced retroactively. The chief opposition speaker was Senator Nadesan. He'd originally been retentionist but had changed his mind after reading
an essay by Tolstoy. Nadesan declared the Government was prostituting the legislature of the country and was acting in a spirit of revenge that was unworthy of any government. Mr. Nadesan — his full name was Somasundaram Nadesan — died recently, a great loss to the country, the Legal Profession and the cause of human rights. He was a former senator (the Senate was abolished) and former President of the Bar Council, a Queen’s Council and staunch and successful human rights lawyer.

ROBINSON: What are your own views on capital punishment?

RANASINGHE: Before I worked for AI I was a bit ambivalent. Like most people I guess I had not thought the whole thing through. Like Senator Nadesan, I also read an essay that helped me to clarify my thinking. Not Tolstoy’s, but Albert Camus’ “Reflections on the Guillotine”.

ROBINSON: I’ve read L’Etranger and La Peste, but what does Camus say in this essay?

RANASINGHE: Camus recounts how shortly before World War I a shocking murder occurred in France. A man had killed a family of farmers, including the children. He was condemned to death. The case was widely publicized. It was generally recognized that even decapitation was too mild a punishment for such a monster. Apparently Camus’ father was totally outraged, especially by the murder of the children. For the first time in his life he decided to watch an execution. A public execution in the presence of a great crowd. He never told Camus what he saw that morning, but Camus remembers that his father rushed home wildly, spoke to no one, threw himself onto his bed, and after a while began to vomit. As Camus puts it, his father had just discovered the terrible reality that lies behind the bland statements that mask such events. Let me quote Camus here: “In
stead of thinking of the murdered children my father could only recall the trembling body he had seen thrown on a board to have its head chopped off”.

It so happened that soon after I read this essay I came across the findings made by two French doctors who had been asked to examine bodies after guillotining. Their report indicated very clearly that death was by no means instantaneous. I’ll spare you the details. They still give me occasional sleepless nights.

ROBINSON: Is there any famous writing by Sri Lankans on the Death Penalty?

RANASINGHE: The only document I know is Donovan Moldrich’s book — I already quoted from it — Hangman Spare That Noose. It is a very comprehensive and detailed historical and analytical survey of the death penalty with special reference to Sri Lanka. A Committee for the Abolition of the Death Penalty had been set up in Colombo, chaired by Mr. Nadesan, and the book was published in 1983 for the Committee. I served on this Committee too.

ROBINSON: You know the usual arguments in favour of the death penalty. For particularly horrible offenses it’s the only fitting punishment. It acts as a deterrent. And those who commit certain grave offences should be put to death to protect society. What do you yourself say about these ideas?

RANASINGHE: Well, the first counter-argument is that there is lack of convincing evidence that the death penalty has any more power to deter than, for instance, a long period of imprisonment. This was also the finding of the Morris Commission in Sri Lanka. Secondly, execution by whatever means is a cruel, degrading and inhuman punishment. It degrades the executioner and the system of justice in the name of which he executes. And thirdly — and perhaps this is the
most powerful counter-argument — the death penalty is irreversi­
ble. It’s decided upon by fallible processes of law which are ad­
ministered by fallible human beings, and it can be, and has been, in­
flicted on people who were innocent.

ROBINSON: Can you cite a particular case?

RANASINGHE: You’re from California, so perhaps you know about the
Burton Abbott case. He was executed in March, 1957. He'd been con­
demned to death for the murder of a 14 year old girl. He had pro­
tested his innocence, but no one took any heed. The night before his
execution he was shifted to a new cell — as is customary in Ameri­
can prisons — thus letting him know what awaited him in the morn­
ing. His execution was scheduled for 10 a.m. At 9:10 a reprieve was
granted to allow the defense attorney to present an appeal. At 11
a.m. the appeal was rejected. At 11:15 Abbott entered the gas
chamber. At 11:18 he began to breathe the first fumes of gas. At 11:20 the
secretary of the reprieve board phoned the prison warden to say that
the board had reversed its decision. The governor had been called,
but he had gone sailing, and so they could not reach him. So they call­
ed the prison directly. But too late. By the time Abbott was removed
from the gas chamber he was dead. Camus refers to this incident as
well. He points out that had the weather been bad the governor
would not have gone sailing, Abbott would not have died and might
have proved his innocence. Had another kind of punishment been im­
posed there would have been a chance of reversal. Capital punish­
ment does not allow for this.

ROBINSON: Incidentally — or maybe not so incidentally — what meth­
method of execution is used in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Hanging.

ROBINSON: Have women also been hanged?
RANASINGHE: I don’t think so.

ROBINSON: How about innocent people — any history of an execution?

RANASINGHE: I have tried to find out. Apparently not.

ROBINSON: You said that after Mr. Bandaranaike’s death the death penalty was re-introduced retroactively. Did Sri Lanka then start hanging people again?

RANASINGHE: Yes. An AI report quoted the figures, but the Ministry of Justice at that time explained that those figures merely “disclosed a speeding up of disposal of appeals and quick decisions about the prerogative of mercy”. Anyway, since 1975 there has been a dramatic drop in the number of executions here. And, as I said, although the death penalty is still on the statute books, no one has been executed since 1977, when the United National Party again came to power.

ROBINSON: Is there any special reason that the death penalty has not been imposed since 1977?

RANASINGHE: I’m not sure, but it could by the Maru Sira case. “Killer” Sira. His real name was D. J. Siripala. He was a young man without proper schooling, and he took to a life of crime. While imprisoned he escaped several times in daring escapades. He became a sort of folk hero. Then he killed a man and was condemned to death. The date of execution was set for August 5, 1975. And his barbarous death added to the legend.

ROBINSON: Why “barbarous”?

RANASINGHE: The Public Trustee reported that Maru Sira was not judicially hanged.

ROBINSON: Public Trustee?

RANASINGHE: A Public Trustee is a person appointed by the Public Service Commission, and responsible to the Secretary of the Ministry of
Justice. — But about Maru Sira — apparently the wardens were frightened by Maru Sira’s threats of vengeance — and also aware of his history of escaping. So in order to forestall any untoward incident they gave him a sedative the night before the execution. The Public Trustee said that having been given an excessive dose of Largactil he collapsed into unconsciousness from which he never recovered. He was carried on a stretcher and laid across the trap door of the scaffold. The noose was placed around his neck, and, upon the trap door being opened, his body dropped 2 feet 2 inches. His death was caused by strangulation, by asphyxia caused by strangulation, and so there was no judicial hanging. Had Siripala stood erect he would have stood 9 inches above the noose. He would then have fallen 7 feet 11 inches. There were other pathetic factors which added to the public horror. His father had tried to see him before his execution and had been refused. His wife Ran Menika said she had visited him every month but was so poor that in order to find money for the bus journey to the prison she had to sell her sugar ration. At the time sugar sold for 75 cents at a subsidized rate but fetched several rupees in the open market. Some poems said to have been written by Siripala were found after his death and added to the pathos.

ROBINSON: Poems? Were they published?

RANASINGHE: I don’t think so. They were written in Sinhala, and were probably in the form of letters, maybe to his wife or friends. It’s a custom. Two films were made. Siripala Saha Ran Menika and Maru Sira. Tremendous box office hits. At that time AI was actively campaigning against the death penalty, and I remember we placed some questionnaires at the cinemas to find out in what way the people reacted after seeing the film. Not many bothered to fill in the form.
The ultimate result was not very revealing. The numbers were insufficient.

ROBINSON: Was Siripala the last man to be executed in Sri Lanka?
RANASINGHE: No. A man called Jayasinghe Manachige Chandradasa was.

ROBINSON: When was that?
RANASINGHE: 23 June 1976. He was sentenced at the Matara High Court on 12 March 1974, an appeal was filed 20th March 1974, and the appeal was dismissed on 3 February 1976.

ROBINSON: Isn’t that a great time lapse?
RANASINGHE: Yes. The delay between sentencing somebody to death in the courts and the final order has been heavily criticized. It has led to congestion and increasingly unsatisfactory conditions in the death-rows the cells of which were at times appallingly overcrowded. Talking of death-rows: earlier I mentioned the difficulty I have in reconciling the attitude of the Buddhist clergy to the death penalty. I want to illustrate this further: every Sunday on the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Channel is a programme called “What Buddhism means to me” and different people are interviewed. A couple of weeks ago the person interviewed was a senior prison official and he related the following story: A prisoner in Kandy was condemned to death to be hanged on a certain date. But an appeal was made by a priest of the Malwatte Chapter to postpone the execution because on that same date an ordination ceremony was to take place at the Temple of the Tooth which is close by, and it was felt that an execution would be an inauspicious beginning. The hanging was postponed. The next day fixed for the execution happened to be a full moon day, so again it was postponed as requested by the priest, and granted. Subsequently on a later date, the man was hanged. Now the reason
ing, the morality, escapes me totally. The prison official cited this ex­
ample as an illustration of the benevolence of Buddhism. While I am
a great admirer of Buddhist philosophy there seems something total­
ly incongruous in all this: a postponement for the sake of the temple,
for the sake of the new priests. But not a word about the ethic of kill­
ing when Buddhism is concerned with the preservation of life.

ROBINSON: Coming back to Robert Knox, how was he captured in the
first place?

RANASINGHE: He was sailing on the ship his father captained — the
"Ann" — and they were caught in a great storm. The ship was dam­
egaged and they sailed to Kottiar to repair it. Apparently the sailors
were treated very well by the country people. They moved about free­
ly and without suspicion, ignoring the fact of which they were aware
that the previous year some sailors had been captured by the
Sinhalese. King Rajasinha delighted in taking Europeans prisoner,
and from time to time he had well over a thousand scattered through
the various villages of the Kandyan Kingdom. When after some time
they gave up hope of being able to escape the Europeans often settl­
ed down with local women.

ROBINSON: Were there any female European prisoners?

RANASINGHE: Well, if there were Knox doesn’t mention them. But I
don’t suppose they carried women on their ships. Anyway, it seems
that Knox was rather a dour man, not very gregarious. All except one
of his friends set up households or moved into existing families, but
he remained without female company throughout his captivity. In a
way it’s a pity that Knox didn’t have a wife or at least a girl friend,
because there is very little information in his *Historical Relation* about
women and their place in the society of that time. But what there is, is
fascinating.
ROBINSON: For instance?

RANASINGHE: Knox enumerates the women's tasks. To beat the rice out of the husk. To fetch both wood and water — the wood they carried on their heads, the water in an earthen pot, placing it upon their hip. And it was the women's job to bring the cattle home. Women cut the vegetables and cooked. But it was not "lawful" for a woman — "although they be great men's wives" — to sit on a stool in the presence of a man.

As for dress, apparently they didn't bother to dress up while at home, but when they went out they put on all their finery. Short frocks of fine white calico embroidered with blue and red thread. On their arms silver bracelets, and their fingers and toes full of silver rings. Round their necks necklaces of beads or silver, curiously wrought and engraved, hanging down as low as their breasts. In their ears, ornaments made of silver and set with stones. And about their waists they slung one or two silver girdles. Knox also describes how they bored their ears so that earrings could be inserted and how they oiled their hair with coconut oil to make it smooth and comb it all behind.

ROBINSON: Some of those women must have been very attractive. Does Knox say how the women of 17th century Kandy met the men they married?

RANASINGHE: According to Knox, young people would sometimes sleep in houses other than their own, and so came to meet "bedfellows". Their parents would not mind this as long as the young men were of as "good quality". The parents would in fact be rather pleased. Because their daughters could then command these young men to help them in any work or business. It was unknown for a man to have more than one wife. And Knox says there was no wooing. The
parents commonly made the match and in their choice regarded quality and descent more important than beauty. But a woman often had two husbands, as it was common for two brothers to keep house with one wife, and the children called both men “father”. But apparently marriages didn’t last long. And men and woman often married four or five times before they settled down. As for the children, the Common Law decreed the males for the man and the females for the woman.

ROBINSON: But you said Knox had a limited knowledge of women, having not had personal relationships.

RANASINGHE: Yes. His view is superficial and masculine, and he gives us no glimpse of the deeper structure and functioning of the family. Typically, I mean, bachelorlike, he had a fund of risqué stories. It seems that the young women of his acquaintance were experts in having extra marital love affairs — “it being their continual practice” — and in keeping their designs from the husband’s knowledge. Knox relates how a husband came home and there was another man within with his wife. The woman took a pan of hot ashes, and, on opening the door for her husband, she cast them in his eyes so that she and her bedfellow could escape. Or, Knox says, if a couple was unable to meet at either his or her house, the woman and her paramour would plan a rendezvous in the fields in the evening when she had to fetch the cattle back while her husband stayed at home blissful in his ignorance and holding the baby!

ROBINSON: Knox seems to have found all this amusing.

RANASINGHE: As for Knox’s attitude, there’s another story. A husband returned home while his wife had a male friend with her. So before letting him in she helped the friend to make a hole in the thatch of the roof for him to climb out while she stayed behind to take all the
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blame. To Knox this appeared the acme of a loving relationship.

ROBINSON: What was the position of women in early history in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Well, they weren't in a very enviable position. A woman's life was spent in complete subservience to her husband. She had little authority in the home. She took absolutely no part in public activities. If she was widowed she lost her personal significance altogether. As a matter of fact, the birth of a daughter in those days was considered a major tragedy. The only way in which a woman could win recognition was as a mother of sons.

ROBINSON: What would you say is the situation of women in Sri Lanka today?

RANASINGHE: As Jegatheeswari Nagendran and Malika Jayasinghe have told you, Sri Lankan women have come a long way from their earlier restricted pattern of life. They are emerging more and more rapidly to follow the same kind of lives as women in other parts of the world.

As you can see, they are marvellously endowed by nature. Physically they're beautiful, with small delicate bones and magnificent eyes, teeth and hair. They also have excellent brains, perseverance, and artistic talent in a large measure. And nimble fingers.

Well, these modern women attend schools and universities. They sit in equal competition with men for their examinations. They marry and attend to household duties, look after their husbands and bring up their children. Of course, their lives vary according to their circumstances, the areas where they live and the families they are born into. Which to some extent is the same all over the world. Townsfolk are quicker to accept changes and adopt new ways of life.
than village people who live in remote areas and are not so exposed to the impact of constant outside influences.

ROBINSON: Then to be more specific what is the situation of women in the villages of Sri Lanka today?

RANASINGHE: In some of the villages changes are slow to be accepted. I guess it depends on how remote they are from large towns, and their influence. Many of the old customs are still observed. This is especially so in the area of marriage and where the position of women is concerned. That is, in a marriage according to the older standards, the duties of husband and wife are reciprocal but don't overlap. When a girl gets married she knows exactly what is expected of her and at what point her husband takes over.

ROBINSON: In other words, a strict division of labor.

RANASINGHE: Yes. Though I think "division" is hardly the word here. And some of the wife's functions have not changed from Knox's time. That is, she is entirely responsible for her household. She does the cooking — and, in case you don't know, rice and curry cookery is a time-consuming and complicated task. Until recently the wife hulled the rice, and the grain which is used in the form of rice flour in a large number of dishes is pounded by her. If she uses an open fire — and in the villages many women still do — she has to collect the firewood for the hearth. She cleans and sweeps the house and compound, looks after her children, sews their clothes. And she collects water from the well. In the paddy fields she helps with the weeding and harvesting, and, if there is chena land, in the cultivation of that too. Transplanting the young paddy plants is entirely women's work. And after the reaping it is the women who carry the grain from the threshing floor to the granary. If she lives in a rubber growing area she will have to go out and tap the trees for latex. And
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if she wants home-grown vegetables — maybe to supplement the family income — well, that too is her job. She may engage in lace making, or cottage crafts such as weaving bags or mats or baskets, and coir making. And plaiting the cadjun which is used to thatch village houses is also women's work. Cadjun is made out of dried palm leaves and as it decays quickly it has to be replaced at least once a year.

ROBINSON: What does the village husband do?

RANASINGHE: Well, in comparison, her husband lives a life of leisure. He provides the food and clothing. He manages the property, threshes and winnows the paddy, and does repairs to the house. He also looks after the livestock, if any.

ROBINSON: Doesn't the husband ever share any of the house work in the village?

RANASINGHE: There is no companionable labor between husband and wife. In fact, he would consider it absolutely degrading to help with her household affairs. The household rotates around the husband — and concentrates on his comfort and convenience. And he doesn't have the slightest twinge of a bad conscience in relaxing while she works. Nor would she dream of expecting any help from him. It simply is not done.

To an outsider, village married life looks very formal and even cool. There's none of the European familiarity. Husband and wife eat separately, she assisting him; she eats later, often when all the rest of the household have finished eating. They sleep separately. They work separately. And in their spare time the men congregate together — away from the women. In public their behavior is restrained. A show of affection is unheard of. Even joking is very mild. But this doesn't mean that there is no depth of feeling. Onesimply doesn't
display emotions of love and affection in public.

ROBINSON: Can the village women share at all in the making of important decisions?

RANASINGHE: Oh yes. The women have power. They have a say and are listened to. And in all matters of importance joint decisions are made by husband and wife. She is in charge of the household finances, and she usually spends money at her discretion — and without interference. You see, it's generally accepted that women are more reliable and responsible in the handling of money than men.

Of course, the relative wealth of a couple makes a difference to their attitudes and way of life. A rich man may treat his poorer wife very badly. On the other hand, if the wife has more wealth than the husband it can lead to an impossible situation in the home. For example, in the Kandyan area there's a special type of marriage known as Binna. In a Binna marriage the husband leaves his own village to live with the rich wife and her people, on their land. This happens usually only when the husband is poor and the wife has no brothers to look after the lands. Well, under these circumstances the man is under obligation to work for the wife and her parents. And he has absolutely no rights in the household. A folk saying explains that a Binna husband must always hold himself in readiness by having at hand a walking stick, a talapat — an umbrella — in case it rains, and a torch, so that he's prepared at any time, whatever the weather or his health, in case his wife decides to throw him out. Not exactly an enviable state of affairs for these men, either.

ROBINSON: What about property rights? Inheritance patterns?

RANASINGHE: That depends on the wealth of the family. Both rich and poor alike allow their sons to inherit. But the rich control the property rights of their daughters. They use this in their marriage machina-
tions. The poor share whatever there is equally between sons and daughters. Daughters who leave home to get married are given dowries but then lose their right of inheritance. The Binna married girl who lives with her husband on her parents' land will inherit that. Unmarried women are under the control of the men in the family, and they will make all arrangements for their marriages or lives — in the first place to satisfy family prestige requirements. The men decide upon the size of the dowry.

ROBINSON: As for village improvement in general, I understand there are voluntary organizations at work.

RANASINGHE: Oh, yes. Sure there are. And they have taught the villagers not only to handle problems of home, health and children but also crafts and agriculture. They teach civic responsibility and a wider outlook on life in general. They encourage the communities to help themselves. Their influence has made a tremendous impact on village life.

ROBINSON: As for the towns and cities, is the situation of women much better?

RANASINGHE: Yes. For one thing, co-education, especially at university level, gives some freedom of choice in marriage partners. And with greater industrialization couples often move away from ancestral homes to set up independent households. Free education is now producing a generation of highly literate women who have penetrated the professions, working as doctors and lawyers, architects and nurses, accountants and journalists. But Malika Jayasinghe and Jegatheeswari Nagendran have told you something about this. The thing is these women, either from choice or as a matter of economic necessity, frequently continue to work after marriage. And it goes without saying that the old dominance of the husband collapses in the
face of an equally educated, equally literate and equally effective wage-earning wife. So in the towns we have a situation which very nearly approximates to that of the West. Here too we find the problem of the working girl who is not so well educated but must work to make out finances. Telephone operators, salesgirls and factory workers earn very little. And the principle of equal pay for equal work has not yet been accepted here. If they are married and they have to work, the children’s welfare is a problem, for help is expensive and there aren’t many creches, nurseries. Yet somehow these women work and manage.

ROBINSON: In general what is the legal status of women in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: It’s subject to the Roman Dutch Law which is a legacy left by the Dutch invaders. Hope A. Todd has told you a little about the Dutch in Ceylon. Ceylon women have unrestricted rights of owning and acquiring properties, independent of their husbands. They can marry once they are over 18 years old. Grounds for divorce are adultery and malicious desertion. Both husbands and wives enjoy equal rights of maintenance. Divorce can be by mutual consent.

ROBINSON: Sri Lanka had a woman prime minister, so how about a comment on women in politics in Sri Lanka?

RANASINGHE: Yes, Sirimavo Bandaranaike was the first woman prime minister. In 1960. Followed by Golda Meir in Israel. Women in politics? Till 1927 they were not heard of. The first move towards a political group for women was regarded tolerantly but not very seriously. 1931 and the universal franchise brought the vote to women here. They formed a political union, began to attend international conferences, and became members of municipal and village councils, and members of the Senate and Parliament.

ROBINSON: How do you think the future looks for women in Sri Lanka?
RANASINGHE: That's what you might call a loaded question. How does the future look for everybody in Sri Lanka? But satisfactory progress for all humanity depends to a large extent on the quality of the women who, as mothers, exert a tremendous influence. And the purposeful development of a country needs their maximum cooperation and participation. Yes, women in Sri Lanka have come a long way in almost every area — but that does not mean that the ideal has been achieved. Plenty remains to be done. The literacy rate among the younger generation is extremely high — almost 90% — and I have no doubt that increasing pressure will be exerted by this educated group until equality of opportunity has been achieved in every area. It's bound to come. In the not so very distant future. And then every woman will be mistress of her own destiny and will work in equal partnership with men in every field, be it cultural, social, or economic. Or political. Especially political. Women will participate in larger numbers in politics, and they'll exercise a stabilizing influence on this up till now predominatly male field. And see what a mess the men have made of it!