

VEDITANTIRIGE EDIRIWIRA SARACHCHANDRA

VEDITANTIRIGE EDIRIWIRA SARACHCHANDRA's father was a villager who, having attended a modern Buddhist high school and entered the lower civil service as a postmaster, celebrated his rise to middle-class status by adopting a European name—Charles Francis de Silva. He married Lydia de Pinto, a school teacher from the village of Ratgama in southern Ceylon. It was there, on 3 June 1914, that SARACHCHANDRA embarked upon life as VEDITANTIRIGE DE SILVA. He was a first child and only son. With an eye to preparing him for a career in the upper civil service—yet another step in the family's rise from the village—the elder de Silva entered his son in English-medium schools with curricula designed to comport with those in Britain, of whose huge eastern empire the tear-shaped island of Ceylon (in 1972 renamed Sri Lanka) was a small part.

SARACHCHANDRA, who chose this name as a pen name in college and later officially took it as his surname, passed his primary years in the southern town of Galle, attending Southlands Girls School which, in the lower grades, also accepted boys. Following his often-transferred father, he progressed through a series of Christian missionary schools: Richmond Collegiate in Galle (Wesleyan); St. John's Collegiate in Panadura and St. Thomas in Mount Lavinia (Anglican); and back in Galle, St. Aloysius (Jesuit).

Though the schools he attended were Christian, SARACHCHANDRA was raised a Buddhist, following the tradition of his father, many of his mother's relatives, and the vast majority of his countrymen. Consequently, he was not required to attend religious classes or chapel but spent his time in academic studies. He achieved a fluent command of English.

A slight boy, SARACHCHANDRA cared little for athletics. During one grim year at boarding school, he suffered the cruel attentions of a bully and asked to be withdrawn. This episode aside, he disliked school for the same reasons that most restless boys do. Yet he was bright and rarely far from the top of his class.

Although he was in the science and mathematics stream during his high school years, his best memories reflect his awakening to the humanities. Still vivid in his mind is his Latin and Shakespeare teacher, Mr. Pereira, who flamboyantly declaimed his lessons in academic cap and gown; and his English teacher, C. V. A. Ratnayake, who thrilled him with Shelley's poetry. SARACHCHANDRA can still recite lines he learned in Ratnayake's class. He loved music too and taught himself to play one instrument after the other. Although chronically short of funds, his father managed occasionally to buy him indigenous instruments.

SARACHCHANDRA came of age in the complex cultural milieu of a rapidly Westernizing Sinhalese middle class within a colonial society. His sense of the world was shaped by the contrasting attractions of British modernity, on one hand, and Sri Lankan (and Indian) tradition, on the other. At home his father often spoke to him in English, his mother in Sinhalese. During a desperate bout with typhoid at about age ten, he was treated in turn by Western-trained doctors who wrote out prescriptions silently and traditional practitioners who recited Sanskrit texts, gossiped, and joked.

The family owned a foot-pedal organ on which his mother played Western music and a gramophone for his father's collection of Indian and Sinhalese theater songs. SARACHCHANDRA himself preferred to play South Asian melodies on the organ and delighted in village folk rituals, songs, and dances.

SARACHCHANDRA mastered the Western idiom and became an accomplished writer in English. (While at St. Thomas he won an essay contest and tried his hand at short stories and poems.) But as he matured, he hearkened more passionately to his own traditions, to the short stories and verses of the Indian Rabindranath Tagore, and to the folkways he witnessed in the hill villages around Hewaheta, a town thirty miles from Kandy where he lived with his family for a year or two between high school and university. Here he heard farmers sing old songs and perform ancient plays at harvest time. He was also inspired by India's cultural renaissance, in which Tagore was the dominating figure, and by a related nationalism in Sri Lanka, a movement linked to a revival of Sinhalese Buddhism and its associated cultural heritage. Among leading exponents of this trend were Malalasekera, the Pali and Sanskrit scholar, who promoted, among other things, the return to national dress and Kularatna, the leading proponent of Buddhist education. At the same time the singer Surya Sena was achieving renown by popularizing Sinhalese folk songs.

At Hewaheta he also devoted himself to private study. Under Buddhist monks invited by his father from neighboring temples, he

studied Sinhalese as well as the classical languages of Buddhist tradition, Pali and Sanskrit. He visited the local villages observing the old ways and collecting folk songs. Indeed he became so engrossed with music, and with Indian music especially, that he proposed attending a university in India where he could study it seriously. But his father insisted upon British qualifications and arranged for various friends and relations to impress upon him that an Indian degree would be catastrophic. He relented and entered University College in Colombo, the colony's premier English-language college, which later became the University of Ceylon. Here, however, he pursued Oriental Studies. He threw himself into the formal study of Sinhalese, Pali, and Sanskrit and sat at the feet of the Venerable Doctor Rambukwella Siddhartha and the great Malalasekera himself.

Early in his university days occurred one of the formative experiences of his life. Rabindranath Tagore and his troupe visited Sri Lanka and SARACHCHANDRA watched the performance. "I was fascinated by it," he remembers, "particularly by the music." Inspired by Tagore and by the Indian classical dancer, Uday Shankar, who came to Ceylon about the same time, SARACHCHANDRA took up the sitar—which became his favorite instrument—and with like-minded friends formed a society for oriental music at the university. They sang Tagore's songs, studied the sitar, and learned to dance in the traditional Kandyan style. (Kandy was the seat of the last Sinhalese monarchy and, therefore, of its old culture.) Among their mentors was the Buddhist monk Rambukwella Siddhartha, who rendered Sinhalese folk songs in a deep, stentorian voice. Around this time, SARACHCHANDRA submitted articles about Sinhalese folklore and music to newspapers and magazines. He signed them "Sarachchandra," a name famous in Bengali literature, which he now began to use as his own.

Following his baccalaureate degree (with honors) in 1936, SARACHCHANDRA joined the *Ceylon Daily News*. While apprenticing as a young newspaperman he also courted Aileen Beleeth, a fellow member of the Oriental Music Society, whose lovely renditions of Bengali songs captivated him. They married in 1939. Quitting his job at the newspaper, he and Aileen went to Santiniketan, Tagore's "Abode of Peace" in Bengal, where for a year and a half they lived and studied with other Sinhalese who were seeking their cultural roots. (Sri Lanka is believed to have been originally settled by people from Bengal.) Many, like SARACHCHANDRA, later became prominent in the arts. While Aileen studied Bengali singing and dancing, SARACHCHANDRA plunged deeply into Indian philosophy and music and took sitar lessons.

Upon returning to Sri Lanka, SARACHCHANDRA had to confront the consequences of his stay in India: he had no job, and he and Aileen

now possessed a baby daughter, Nandita, born in 1940. Fortunately, St. Thomas School took him on as a part-time teacher of Sinhalese and music. For a time the young couple existed on his small salary and pursued an active life in music and dance, with Aileen performing in Indian-style ballets. But teaching did not pay enough, so in 1942 SARACHCHANDRA joined the staff of scholars compiling the *Sinhalese Etymological Dictionary*, a project being carried out under the auspices of the University of Ceylon. As assistant editor he was able to study on the side. He soon qualified for a master's degree in Indian philosophy and, because of his unusual industry and versatility, was hired by the university as a part-time lecturer.

As a lecturer he taught Sinhalese literature and, in 1943, created a stir with his first book, *Modern Sinhalese Fiction*. In it he examined virtually all contemporary Sinhalese writing and held it to rigorous critical standards. He was the first to do so. Separating the wheat from the chaff is the unavoidable burden of the critic and a necessary one if a nation's literature is to mature. As SARACHCHANDRA pointed out in his book, Sinhalese writing had its share of mediocre efforts and even plagiarism. But criticism is a thankless task. "I was badly lashed," he says, remembering the angry reaction of some of his subjects. In the same year, working with a colleague, he translated Moliere's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* into Sinhalese. Staged on 16 December 1943, it was his first full-fledged theatrical production. His adaptation of Nikolai Gogol's *The Marriage* followed in 1945, a year in which he also published his Sinhalese translations of twelve French short stories, including works by Guy de Maupassant and Alphonse Daudet.

By 1944 SARACHCHANDRA had a full-time appointment at the university. This was a boon, for the university provided fellowships to promising young faculty members and, in 1947, gave one to SARACHCHANDRA. He enrolled in a master's degree program at the University of London. Because of his thoroughly English education SARACHCHANDRA found the transition from Sri Lanka to England unremarkable: "It was like walking into a place that you know." He, Aileen, and their young daughter set up housekeeping in a working-class neighborhood.

Having studied Indian philosophy at Santiniketan and in Sri Lanka, SARACHCHANDRA decided to devote his two years at the University of London to Western philosophy. He had written in advance to Professor A. J. Ayer, a logical positivist and student of Bertrand Russell, admitting he had "no basic qualifications," but Ayer accepted him, and in 1949 he qualified for his master's degree in Philosophy. By virtue of a thesis titled *The Psychology of Perception in Pali Buddhism with Special Reference to the Theory of Bhavanga*—most of which he had

written before going to England—he earned an external doctorate in Buddhist Philosophy as well. Their second daughter, Sunetra, was born in 1949, the year they returned home.*

SARACHCHANDRA now joined the faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Ceylon in Peradeniya, which was to be his professional home for the rest of his teaching career. Here he expended his prodigious intellectual energies in several fields. Although officially a lecturer in Pali and Buddhist Philosophy, he was increasingly assigned to teach modern Sinhalese literature since he had earlier established himself as a leading literary critic. He revised and updated his book, *Modern Sinhalese Fiction*, and reissued it as *The Sinhalese Novel*. More and more, however, he was drawn to the theater. His Sinhalese translation of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* and, subsequently, his renditions of plays by Anton Chekov and Moliere were performed by the university's Dramatic Society. In 1952 SARACHCHANDRA staged a play of his own called *Pabavati*. In it he transposed one of the Jataka tales—stories concerning the former lives of the Buddha—into a contemporary drama told in the living idiom of spoken Sinhalese.

Aided by a small grant from the Asia Foundation, SARACHCHANDRA also returned to researching Sinhalese folk tradition. Together with his students and scholars, among them anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, he investigated folk rituals and dramas in villages of the south, as well as in the Kandyan hills and some parts of the Tamil north, the latter influenced by the culture of south, rather than north, India.

The research was difficult. "With the rapid urbanization of the village," he wrote in his *Introduction to Folk Drama of Ceylon*, "most folk plays have either completely disappeared or have changed beyond recognition, so that, to get at the genuine article, one has often to go to remote places. Even in remote places, however, folk plays and similar entertainments have ceased to be a part of the regular village life. In the villages, the landed gentry do not often have the means to patronize such entertainments, and professional players are seeking more fruitful means of earning their livelihood. The younger people, too, are cultivating different tastes."

But SARACHCHANDRA made contacts in the villages and waited for word of a performance. Then he and his team attended, photographing key scenes and taking down the oral text verbatim. The newly formed Folklore Society of Ceylon lent him its films of village plays to

*In the meantime, on 4 February 1948, Ceylon had become independent of Great Britain.

study. He published the results of his research in 1953 in his path-breaking *The Sinhalese Folk Play and the Modern Stage*.

SARACHCHANDRA's deepening knowledge of Sinhalese folk theater led to frustration concerning his own creative work. The European plays he had been translating and adapting for the local stage appealed strictly to a Westernized audience, a relatively small, urban one, since the cultural roots of these plays lay outside Sinhalese tradition. Most members of the Westernized intelligentsia were scornful of traditional dramatic forms and their unlettered, "primitive" performers. Nevertheless, SARACHCHANDRA now became preoccupied with resuscitating indigenous theater arts, not as anthropological curiosities, but as part of Sri Lanka's popular, modern theater. His own play *Pabavati* had grown from this desire, but he was dissatisfied with it, as were his audiences.

Somehow Chadbourne Gilpatric of the Rockefeller Foundation learned about SARACHCHANDRA's work and interests. SARACHCHANDRA recalls their extraordinary first encounter in the Common Room of his university when Gilpatric told him: "Go anywhere you like and study drama in any part of the world you like." As a result he spent most of 1955 "doing nothing but seeing plays" in Asia and the United States.

He toured India, then Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Japan where he saw Chinese opera and Japanese Noh and Kabuki theater for the first time. In the United States he discovered that theater there faced a question similar to the one that preoccupied him: in an age when the cinema was "swallowing up the entire theater . . . what can we give an audience that comes to see a play that it does not get in the cinema?" He discussed this problem with professors at several American universities and here and there observed experiments in community repertory theater. But nothing he saw in the United States excited him nearly as much as his brief exposure to Kabuki theater. He therefore cut short his stay in the United States and returned to Japan and for six months immersed himself in Kabuki. Expressing his excitement through the hero of a novel about Japan that he wrote (*Foam upon the Stream*), SARACHCHANDRA said: "Watching Kabuki I feel I have never known a keener pleasure. . . . In a moment we have gone back many centuries: as the players dance, the notion comes to me that on the ancient Indian stage it must have been thus the royal Dushyanta entered in his horse-drawn chariot. Thus Sakuntala, troubled by a bee, must have expressed her persecution."

In Japan SARACHCHANDRA saw ancient traditions thriving in the modern world, a great past that "lifted its head up proudly to the

present.” He also saw in the highly sophisticated Kabuki a way to resolve the problem of adapting traditional folk plays for modern audiences. Returning home he rushed into the production of a new play, *Maname*.

SARACHCHANDRA chose to work in the *nadagama* tradition. Nadagama was Tamil in origin but had been adapted and incorporated into Sinhalese folk drama and possessed a completely theatrical form comparable to Kabuki. He had already studied nadagama extensively and described it in *The Sinhalese Folk Play*. To help him produce the new play properly, however, he recruited an old play master from the village—a man who had turned to puppeteering when popular interest in nadagama had begun to wane. Together with him and with student performers, SARACHCHANDRA pieced his play together, act by act. Costumes were created by Siri Gunasinghe, who was on the staff of the university at the time. *Maname* opened on 3 November 1956.

In using the nadagama form for this play, SARACHCHANDRA refined and shortened it; in the village a performance went on all night long. But he kept its essential elements: a narrator; a repeating chorus; songs, chants, and rhythmic prose, punctuated by drums and cymbals; and costumes and music directly from the nadagama repertory. Everything was highly stylized. *Maname* was performed on an open, setless stage. In SARACHCHANDRA’s conceptualization this was “total theater, using all the art forms for communicating with the audience.”

Maname was an instant success. As one who saw it on opening night relates: “the sense of elation and excitement that swept through the audience . . . was unforgettable.”

Maname is based on a Buddhist folk story familiar to all. A talented young prince, Maname, son of an Indian king, fights a duel with the king of the forest dwellers (Veddahs) and is betrayed by his own wife. In the original tale she has become infatuated with the rugged Veddah king (who has made her the price of Maname’s release) and at the duel’s climax, gives a sword to him rather than to Maname. Having killed Maname, however, the Veddah king banishes the princess for her matrimonial disloyalty.

SARACHCHANDRA’s *Maname* begins with verses of homage to the Buddha chanted by the narrator, or Master of the Text, after which the chorus enters and sings an invocation to the deities:

O gods in all your numbers. . . .
For us to act our play here,
Give sacred leave.

The narrator introduces each character in turn with a verse. Of Maname's bride, the princess, he intones:

What kind of beautiful woman was she who captured the
prince's heart?
I am sure you are all agog with longing to see her.
Wherefore in a little moment . . .
I shall stop the performance and bring the bright princess
before you.

Each character performs a distinctive dance step as he enters and sings a song describing himself. Of his years of study under the royal sage, Maname says:

I have crossed the sea of science
The arts of war, the plays of swordsmanship
And archery I've learned,
Skillful as I desired.
The time is come now I must go,
The king my father to my own land bids me.

As the story unfolds, the narrator supplies the links between episodes. The characters discourse in song and verse. At the end the cast joins the narrator in singing a benediction to the spectators.

SARACHCHANDRA followed the original story of Prince Maname up to a point, but taking a hint from the film "Rashomon" of Akira Kurosawa,* he added an element of moral ambiguity. In his *Maname* the young wife does not actually give the sword to the Veddah king. She merely hesitates in giving the sword to her husband and pleads for the Veddah's life. (After all, the king had done the noble thing of agreeing to a hand-to-hand duel, when his armed retinue could easily have empowered Maname.) Her hesitation permits the Veddah king to snatch the sword from her hands and kill Maname. Afterwards, she tells the Veddah she acted as she did because she had fallen in love with him. Upon reflection, he banishes her because of her fickle disregard for her husband's life. The audience is left satisfied that the princess received the punishment she deserved, but also in doubt as to whether her behavior was really wrong. As SARACHCHANDRA's narrator describes the fateful moment of her vacillation:

King Maname heard his queen. His thoughts were stirred
To tumult wondering whence this change in her.

*RMAF Awardee in Journalism, Literature, and Creative Communication Arts, 1965.

Sensing that pause the hunter king slipped free—
The evil fell alas! I do not know whose fault.

The tragedy is that one can be placed in situations where no moral choice is absolutely clear.

Maname's brilliant success revived Sri Lankan theater. In the 1960s and 1970s, theater became the most active art form in the country. Other playwrights experimented with "stylized dramas." SARACHCHANDRA had apparently resolved an artistic dilemma that was not only personal, but national.

Maname appeared at a particularly fecund moment in Sri Lanka's national life. At the time, many artists and intellectuals supported Mr. S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike's People's United Front, a populist coalition of strong Sinhalese Buddhist leaning that swept into power in 1956. Bandaranaike mobilized the latent yearning for national regeneration among the Sinhalese (contrasted to the Tamil) middle class and led the movement to restore elements of indigenous culture whose survival seemed in doubt. By auspicious coincidence, 1956 also marked the 2,500th anniversary of Buddhism and gave hope that a new efflorescence of Buddhism was underway. Under Bandaranaike, Sinhalese became the official language of instruction, and its teachers achieved parity with teachers of English. Traditional healers, Buddhist monks, and others who had been shunted aside in the rush toward modernization were restored to public esteem. The village was rediscovered.

Although he was not active politically SARACHCHANDRA was, of course, highly sympathetic to Bandaranaike's cultural program, but his plays also transcended it. "I wanted to get at the so-called racial unconscious," he says, "the roots of people's feelings and attitudes."

Building on *Maname's* success, SARACHCHANDRA continued to experiment. In the years that followed he brought out play after play that explored traditional dramatic forms and stories with a contemporary eye. Ranging beyond nadagama he incorporated elements of classical Sanskrit theater, Sinhalese courtly dramas, folk idylls, and whatever else appealed to him. For example, *Pemato Jayati Soko* (*Love is the Bringer of Sorrow*, 1968) is an opera using north Indian ragas and inspired in part by Chinese theater. Reflecting one of SARACHCHANDRA's lifetime preoccupations, it dwells on the profound responsibilities of teachers. But SARACHCHANDRA's finest work, *Sinhabahu* (1961), is squarely within the nadagama tradition. According to one critic, it is "undeniably the best play of our time." Its revival in 1972, one of many, drew more than six thousand spectators to the

University of Ceylon's open-air theater at Peradeniya, the largest audience ever.

Sinhabahu tells the story of the origins of the Sinhalese race, well known to all Sri Lankans. But using his stylized nadagama medium, SARACHCHANDRA elevates the myth to a universal level. As playwright and Buddhist scholar Bandula Jayawardhana has written in *Ediriwira Sarachchandra: Festschrift 1988*, SARACHCHANDRA's *Sinhabahu* addresses "the universal theme of human relations bound in the skein of family affections which shatter inevitably with growth and maturation."

In *Sinhabahu*, Princess Suppa Devi is carried away by a lion (sinha) while traveling through a forest in mythical Bengal. She lives with the lion in his cave and bears him twins, a daughter named Sinhasivali, and a son, Sinhabahu. When Sinhabahu matures, he persuades his mother to join him and his sister in leaving his lion father so that he can pursue his princely destiny. Escaping from the forest, they enter a realm governed by a regent of Suppa's father, and he takes Suppa as his wife.

The lion now ravages the countryside in search of his family. Finally, Sinhabahu himself volunteers to defend the people and, against the pleading of his mother, sets out to slay the lion. They confront each other. When the lion recognizes his son he is filled with love and moves to embrace him. Sinhabahu vacillates but, remembering his vow, decides to shoot. His first two arrows fail to harm the lion, for he is protected by an aura of love. But when the lion finally realizes that Sinhabahu is trying to kill him, anger overtakes him. The third arrow strikes him and he dies. (In the myth, but not in SARACHCHANDRA's play, Sinhabahu marries his sister and produces a rebellious son who, banished with a boatload of followers, reaches the island of Sri Lanka and founds the Sinhalese, or lion, race.)

As in *Maname*, SARACHCHANDRA's *Sinhabahu* explores crises of moral decision and their ambiguities. Should the princess have abandoned the lion to follow her son? (She does so "wavering and trembling.") Should Sinhabahu have killed his father? (He does so only by willfully deluding himself: "How can this fierce beast of the forest be my father? I am a man!") *Sinhabahu* does not resolve the issues, SARACHCHANDRA simply confronts his audience with them, and in this he replaces the moral certitude of myth with the modern dilemma of doubt. He has done this not only to give contemporaneity to his plays but to reveal his nonacceptance of certain outmoded values embedded in traditional stories. This is true concerning his attitude toward women who, in the literature that emerged from a feudal

tradition and was often passed along by cloistered monks, are invariably depicted as the *source* of evil and sorrow. SARACHCHANDRA's women, on the other hand, possess thoroughly human passions and are fundamentally good people who are caught up in complex moral dilemmas.

Sri Lankan theater reshaped itself in response to SARACHCHANDRA's work. While many playwrights imitated his neotraditional "stylized plays," others veered in the opposite direction and brought out plays of stark naturalism and direct social commentary. The latter became more prevalent as the euphoria of Bandaranaike's movement wore off and gave way, after his assassination by a Buddhist monk in 1959, to a period of disenchantment, especially among intellectuals. The country seemed to bog down. Burdened by unemployment, food scarcities, and crippling inefficiencies in government, the national mood turned grim.

SARACHCHANDRA shared in the mood and responded to it in his vernacular radio dramas in the Western style. For the stage he reserved myth and pageantry. He was criticized by some who considered such plays irrelevant in Sri Lanka's troubled times. But with a profound conviction about the value of such productions, he carried on. Moreover, his audiences continued to respond fervently.

By the mid-1960s, SARACHCHANDRA's marriage to Aileen had broken down and they divorced. While putting together a revival of his first play, *Pabavati*—"a total failure, a flop," he remembers ruefully—he met the gifted actress Lalitha Swarna Merrinnage. They fell in love and married. With Lalitha, SARACHCHANDRA started a new family; daughters Kisagotami and Yasodhara were born in 1966 and 1972, and son Ransi Dipankara in 1978. Lalitha accompanied SARACHCHANDRA to Denison University and Earlham College in the United States where he was a visiting lecturer in 1966 and illustrated the revised edition of his *The Folk Drama of Ceylon* (1966). She also often appeared in his plays.

The cultural malaise in Sri Lanka of the 1960s thoroughly appalled SARACHCHANDRA who at last turned actively to politics. When Mrs. Bandaranaike (widow of S. W. R. D.) ran for office again in 1970, he joined in the campaign. He spoke out on national questions, openly supporting Mrs. Bandaranaike's socialist program and her party, which proceeded to sweep to victory. Socialism, he believes, comports best with traditional Buddhist values. For this reason, he was quick to criticize the reckless zeal and impatience of extreme militants who promoted "the April insurgency" several months later. With some anguish he asked how "these young people from the villages, imbued with the best Sinhalese Buddhist traditions, could have resorted to such violent methods to rectify wrongs done to them?"

As Mrs. Bandaranaike introduced land reform measures and began nationalizing the plantations, SARACHCHANDRA returned to his usual routine of teaching and writing. He supported the new government but criticized some of its measures. Then came an invitation from the prime minister to become Sri Lanka's ambassador to France and permanent delegate to UNESCO. "Most ambassadors were selected . . . for political reasons," he notes, but Mrs. Bandaranaike "wanted cultural representation, in a country like France especially." And SARACHCHANDRA had an excellent knowledge of French, having translated a number of French plays and short stories into Sinhalese. He accepted. ("It was very difficult to refuse," he says candidly, "as I was badly in need of money.") Therefore, he took leave from the university, and in 1974 he and his family moved into Sri Lanka's ill-maintained but spacious ambassadorial residence in the French capital.

In Paris, SARACHCHANDRA encountered the dilemma of many Third World diplomats trying to represent poor nations in an atmosphere in which a high degree of conspicuous wealth is taken for granted. For countries like Sri Lanka, acquiring foreign aid was a key goal. Although SARACHCHANDRA abhorred diplomats who made a vulgar display of personal wealth, especially those from poor countries, he also knew that "from a practical point of view you can't get aid by showing your poverty." He did his best. But even maintaining a posture of graceful dignity was difficult given the limited funds provided.

SARACHCHANDRA used his experiences as ambassador as the basis of his novel, *With the Begging Bowl*. The title plays on the image of a Buddhist monk to portray his protagonist's plight—a characteristic SARACHCHANDRA touch. He shows Sri Lankan civil servants posted abroad, making do on meager salaries in one of the most expensive cities in the world. The novel's main character, Ambassador Keerthiratne—like SARACHCHANDRA himself—is not a career man, but a former monk and university lecturer, who meets obstructions at every turn from his suspicious career staff. The latter are consumed with petty intrigues and with schemes to exploit their posting abroad to make a "financial killing." With little money, and frustrated, they prey upon each other. In one scene, SARACHCHANDRA describes a staff party at the ambassador's residence during which the unhappy band of expatriate Sri Lankans momentarily lose themselves in the camaraderie of singing a familiar song from home. As they do so, one of them slips into the kitchen to steal food for the next day's meal.

With the Begging Bowl, although funny, is not a humorous story. Undermined by his subordinates and completely at sea in the hypocrisy of diplomacy, Keerthiratne suffers a breakdown. This permits

a scheming career man, wholly undeserving but with the right connections, to supplant him.

Addressing the question of fact and fiction in such writing, SARACHCHANDRA says: "When a person writes a novel, it's difficult to distinguish between how much of it is fiction and how much of it is fact. If you ask me, I may not know myself."

In 1977 Mrs. Bandaranaike's government fell, and SARACHCHANDRA's stint as ambassador ended. By this time his leave from the university had also run out. From Paris he and his family moved to Hawaii, where he was offered a position as research professor at the East-West Center for two years. There he wrote most of *With the Begging Bowl*, although it was not published until 1986.

When he returned to Sri Lanka in 1979, he carried on much as before. Despite bouts of ill health and failing eyesight, his output remained prodigious. He continued to teach his specialties as an emeritus professor until civil disturbances forced the closure of universities in recent years. He produced new insights into Buddhism, folk art, and culture; completed his memoirs; and wrote short stories and articles for the popular press, all in Sinhalese. He also rewrote in English his two earlier Sinhalese novels: *Foam upon the Stream* and *Curfew and a Full Moon* (1978). The latter was originally published in 1975 and depicts the dramatic 'political upheaval of the early 1970s on the Peradeniya university campus. Its hero is a professor of anthropology, a sincere man who reluctantly and unwittingly becomes involved as youthful militants confront insecure university authorities and briefly take up arms. In his novels and short stories, SARACHCHANDRA writes in a leisurely simple style without literary elaborations—very much unlike the refined, poetic language of his plays.

SARACHCHANDRA's plays have continued to attract and hold audiences. He has written three new ones in the past ten years—more than twenty-five altogether. And he has responded to demands for revivals of old favorites. (*Maname*, to date, has been performed more than three thousand times!) SARACHCHANDRA has no rival as Sri Lanka's national dramatist. In 1981 both his own university and the University of Jaffna awarded him honorary degrees, and in 1983 he was given the Kumaran Asan World Prize by the State of Kerala, India.

SARACHCHANDRA's critical views on the condition of Sri Lankan society have not mellowed. If anything, they have become stronger as problems of socioeconomic inequality in the country have been neglected and as ethnic strife, crime, and violence have increasingly

overtaken society. In an outspoken book in Sinhalese in the early 1980s, ironically titled *The Righteous Society* after a pompous government slogan, SARACHCHANDRA attacked corruption in government ranks and what he perceived as the nation's headlong decline in culture and moral values. He also expressed these views on the public platform and, on one well-publicized occasion, was physically assaulted while doing so.

Director of the Sarvodaya Research Institute since 1987, he and like-minded colleagues have been examining the perilous condition of Sri Lanka's social fabric. "By and large, we see a great deterioration in culture, education, and the economy, and a tendency in constitutional government to move toward dictatorship," he says. The crisis of Sri Lanka is not simply political. At heart it is a crisis of values. Greed feeds the moral rot. "The greed for money," he says, "is the cause of all the crime, all the corruption, and almost completely the cause of the decline of morality." SARACHCHANDRA traces the degradation of Sri Lanka's Buddhist-based civilization to colonial rule. His country suffered Portuguese, Dutch, and English occupiers in turn, from the sixteenth to the mid-twentieth century. Its modern political leaders have, by and large, failed to draw upon traditional values to restore integrity to national life. Meanwhile as he sees it, the consumer culture of the West is rapidly overwhelming Sri Lankan society. This is fostered by the modern media, which regales its viewers with mindless entertainment devoid of artistic quality and moral substance. SARACHCHANDRA says despairingly: "The young are not encouraged to read. They are glued to their TV sets, and local TV provides programs of very poor artistic quality. There are practically no school libraries." What is more: "Books have become far more expensive than people can afford because the government increases the price of paper every year. As a result many bookstores are closed."

To SARACHCHANDRA, Sri Lanka's moral decline is intimately connected to its cultural decline. This is why artists and intellectuals, as well as the government, must play a part in arresting it. Government should first of all set a proper example. It cannot speak of a "righteous society," he reminds his fellow citizens, unless it, too, is prepared to act in a righteous way.

Moreover, he believes, government should help foster a dialogue with cultural leaders, including intellectuals, artists, and Buddhist monks, and should take a hand in fostering the arts. To do so without interfering with the freedom of the artist, he favors a nonpolitical council of "people who represent the highest values of the culture" (like the Academie Francaise but unlike Sri Lanka's highly politicized Arts Council) to oversee state patronage of the arts. "We have to make

a terrific effort to resuscitate a culture battered by colonialism," he says; "we cannot leave art to the tender mercies of the marketplace."

As a creative person himself, SARACHCHANDRA believes that revitalizing Sri Lanka's classical Buddhist tradition is a key to ending his country's moral drift. Yet he does not adhere to any dogmatic set of rights and wrongs. Rather, he believes, the tradition itself can provide a kind of cultural cohesiveness and confidence within which the moral dilemmas of modern life can be resolved.

Something of his deeper hopes can be seen in this passage from the program notes for his play *Vessantara* of 1980:

I have chosen to dramatize this story afresh because I feel it to be singularly relevant to today, when we are witnessing rapid changes in our society which threaten traditional values. At a time when self-interest and hedonism are being recommended as values that would lead our country to prosperity, it is good to remind ourselves that the values that our culture has held in esteem over the centuries are the exact opposite of these. The figure of Vessantara personifies these values as perhaps no other character in Buddhist legend. . . . The ideal that Vessantara attempts to achieve is that of the submersion of one's personal love and attachments in the universal goal of the love of humanity.

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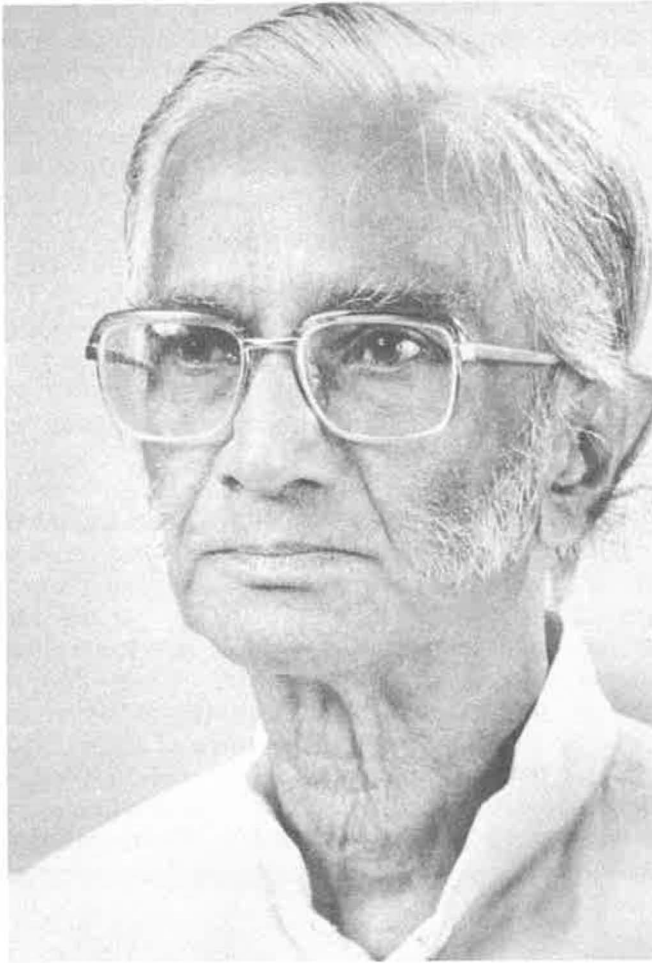
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