About Dr. SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda: Historian, art historian and writer on occasion, Dr. SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda has lectured in the USA, UK, India and Sri Lanka. His 1st book was A Travellers History of India (UK, USA, 1994), a sweeping survey of Indian culture and history, now in its 4th edition worldwide, has been translated into Chinese and Russian. He is also the author of three major works on the art and culture of Sri Lanka. One of the few non combatants to have been allowed into the war zone during the final stages of the Eelam War, several of his pieces have been published in the international and national press and in military journals. He has also lectured in warfare and international relations at venues such as Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst (RAMAS), UK and USI, New Delhi.

Dr. Tammita-Delgoda is currently a Visiting Lecturer in South Asian Studies at the Bandaranaike Centre of International Studies (BCIS).

Interviewer: Dr. Sharad K Soni

Soni: I am Sharad K Soni teaching at School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi and currently part of an Oral History project on China Studies in South Asia. I have great pleasure of talking to you today on the theme of “China and Sri Lanka” as a part of our project. First of all please tell us something about your background?

Tammita-Delgoda: My name is SinhaRaja Tammita-Delgoda. I am a son of an army officer and I was educated in the United Kingdom. My first degree was in history, my Master of Arts was in Medieval European Literature and Society and my PhD was in the History of British India in the 18th century from King’s college, London. At that time I was asked by my supervisor, Professor Peter Marshall, the famous Indian scholar on British India, if I would rather like to do anything about Sri Lanka. I said, no because we are small islanders with an island mentality. The Sri Lankan elite know a lot about the UK and America but they have very little understanding of the cultural history of South Asia. Sometimes we feel that we do not belong to South Asia as we do not understand any of the South Asian languages which are spoken, such as Hindi and Urdu. So, at that time I said that I would like to learn more about South Asia as I can. When I came back, I
studied about Sri Lanka and strangely enough tried to acquire the knowledge of South Asia by spending time in Aligarh Muslim University, JNU, Baroda and various cities all over India and Pakistan. This has enriched my understanding of Sri Lanka’s own art and culture, its place in the world and the future that it must seek. So, in many ways, my study in India has enriched my understanding of my own country and my view of the world, as you can see, I have even written a travel book on India, A Traveller’s History of India (1994). Currently, I am a Senior Lecturer at the Bandaranaike Centre of International Studies, Colombo, Sri Lanka, and my area of research focuses on the Indian Ocean, China and India, Terrorism and Warfare.

Soni: Could you please explain how did China Studies in Sri Lanka develop?

Tammita-Delgoda: China studies in Sri Lanka are developing as a knee-jerk reaction. I think it became critical in the closing stages of the Elam war. We have been a west leaning country for a long time but we have a long friendship with China ever since the Rubber-Rice pact concluded in 1952. However, in 1987, 1989 and in the 1980s there was also a loosening of relations but the the Eelam War and the reaction of the west completely changed our orientation. And as the President said, India is a relative, but China is a friend. Now just paraphrase putting that into realpolitik and you will find, relatives sometimes you cannot get away from, a friend you can stand as far away as you like The underlying reality today is that everything which is now Chinese was offered to India first: the Colombo port was offered to India they said no, Hambantota was offered to India they said no, Hambantota was even offered to the Americans they said no. Now our culture is quite unique in many ways, because we see the world totally differently. We have the highest per capita consumption of alcohol in the world. It’s a different world in many ways. When you are fighting a life and death struggle for a homeland, I think a lot of things change. We do not get lectures from China What is important to bear in mind is that the Hambantota project and Chinese assistance were on the cards in the Kumaranatunga administration. It is not something that has come up recently. Today the Chinese built Nelum Pokuna cultural centre dominates the heart of Colombo. It was commissioned during the Kumaranatunga.. China studies was practised by few Ambassadors and Sinologists but the main initiative has come from the President and his immediate family. It is very significant that General Fonseka was on a visit to China at the time of the last stages of Eelam War. I have been studying and teaching South Asian relations and I have been inside Eelam War, one of the few noncombatants who were allowed in,
we were very much aware of the fact that there was an undercurrent, I am not speaking officially, that it was China’s assistance which helped India to help us. That I think is the origin of China studies.

**Soni:** Is there any particular institution or department in the university, which conducts research on China studies in Sri Lanka?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** It is something which has been realized that how vital it is for our future. The Chinese ambassador gave a quotation when somebody asked her, why have you been so generous to Sri Lanka? And she said, *why don’t you ask all your other friends who have been so generous to you?* She meant to say that here we are helping you right and we don’t see strings attached, we do not see people trying to unravel our past, we do not see our national flag being burnt, and now our our pilgrims and our priests being attacked, behind the platitudes those are the realities which are in the minds of many of the people who represent our country.

**Soni:** So, you mean to say that China studies are still in the beginning stage and it will take some time to become a full-fledged centre?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** It is in the beginning stage. The Bandaranaike Centre for International Studies was initially supported by the Chinese. What we find is that it is only now with Hambantota and Colombo and various other projects that China now is the largest donor and the third largest trading partner. At an incipient level there is a strong consciousness of the value of China. But it is also interesting that if you look at the visits made by the head of the State, you will find there have been several visits to China by the President of Sri Lanka, three times at least. There has never been a reciprocal visit where leading Chinese statesmen found time to visit at par. Also if you look at the statistics for Sri Lankan-Chinese military exchanges, it is very limited because our culture is different, our languages are different. But after the LTTE War every second Army officer has in the back of his mind the underlined issue which no body is speaking about.

**Soni:** What about the Tibetan issue?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** We are small islanders, we do not think very far. We just think about our immediate borders. When we look across we see Tamil Nadu and we see Delhi. We have very
important visitors from Delhi and we know how much Sri Lanka matters because all your finest diplomats have been sent straight from Beijing. They are Mr Menon, Mrs Nirupama Rao, and others who all came to Beijing-Colombo, Colombo-Beijing. So we know how much Sri Lanka matters. I think Sri Lanka’s future will depend a great deal on its relationship with India. I mean, we are being assailed for finishing at terrible cost, the civil war which basically most people in Sri Lanka feel would not have happened without sponsorship by certain parties. What I feel may be at the back of people’s mind is a feeling that India has now very close relationship with the United States which sponsored this resolution. I am not speaking for the establishment rather I am speaking in many ways for the middle classes, the armed forces who are the middle classes, civil servants and these are the people who come to the BCIS, because they are all matured people and students. There is a quotation in my paper from a BCIS student who works in a government department. So this is a ground opinion from the middle class of Sri Lanka, not from the political hierarchy.

About the Tibetan issue as part of China studies I would say it is actually very interesting because you know ours is also a Buddhist country. The Dalai Lama would be the nearest thing that we have to a Buddhist leader. Buddhism is very important in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is the only Buddhist nation which has never invited the Dalai Lama, it won't go anywhere near the Dalai Lama. Is n’t that interesting?

**Soni:** Do you imply that Sri Lanka has a role to play between India and China?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** We have very good relations with the Chinese and they trust us and we trust them, that is perhaps an indirect answer. I would not go where I do not know. At the same time, you see Chinese are building deep sea water ports everywhere, that’s a huge amount of money. What if we have an administration change, the Chinese are as worried as the Indians. What if this government falls and you have the United National Party(UNP) who is seen to be anchored with the west and then all of sudden this massive investment would become meaningless. We have our Foreign Minister, our President and Prime Minister visiting China. The number of their visits to China is manyfold but they are even meeting lesser officials at the state level in order to attract Chinese investment and that will show you the level to which we are trying to cultivate Chinese investment. But at the same time, we have every other investment project and it is the President’s declared intention to do business with everybody. All of these projects have come from China by
default and this is something that the Indian foreign policy has not helped. For me it is characterized by two phrases which I have so often heard Indians use, one is “big brother” and the other is “backyard.” The younger brother will always have to do what big brother says and big brother will always expect the younger to do as he says. The other phrase I have heard so often is “Sri Lanka is our backyard.” Well this suggest that India and Indians feel that they can always wander into Sri Lanka whenever they wish and do whatever they want, because ultimately it is part of their own property.

Imagine, if you get used to hearing that, what you will feel, when you are a sovereign nation which has had its own history and culture for over 2,500 years. We know China has a UN Security Council veto but we do not know where India will go basically.

**Soni:** Last year on 15-17 May 2011, Sri Lankan Foreign Minister, Prof. G L Peiris visited India and he was very conscious of India’s concerns over China’s growing influence in the Indian Ocean region and he assured New Delhi that it would not allow any country to use its soil to lunch hostile action against any country. What’s your opinion about this?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** I think Foreign Minister is absolutely right. That is Sri Lanka’s consistent policy. We have asserted our sovereignty and I do not think it is going to go any further. That way I think the political speech is very much a reflection of the reality. I want to quote something about the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). It is very interesting that the SCO was initially founded for Central Asia only and it has not allowed any country outside the region to get membership. India, Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia, however, were granted only observer status. During 2009 this little island in the Indian Ocean which is nowhere near Central Asia was awarded Dialogue Partner status. This is a very significant gesture. Dialogue Partner, quotes Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “is a state or an organization that shares the goals and principles of the SCO and wishes to establish relations of equal mutually beneficial partnership with the Organization.” In 2001, SCO members signed the Shanghai Convention on combating terrorism, separatism and extremism which stipulates that “there is a need to fight against these three evils” and dialogue partner also entitles you to call another in self defence.”

**Soni:** In your opinion, what should be done to develop Chinese Studies in Sri Lanka?
Tammita-Delgoda: For us, it is a vital manifestation of our national interest and I think, depending on India’s role, it may or may not take off. India feels that it has has a critical role to play in the evolution of Sri Lankan-Chinese relationship. However this relationship has already been created, fostered and encouraged. But how China’s relationship with Sri Lanka revolves is entirely up to India. This is the hard reality and it is the one which Indian strategists are already worrying about. Also look at the military exchanges, we are a counter insurgency army and there is very little we can learn from the PLA. But at the same time there is an element of trust and reliability which I think is missing in the Sri Lanka-Indian relationship. Obviously, I am not speaking for the administration, this is an underlying reality which almost everybody else will feel and I think it is a reality which India has to take a note of it.

Soni: Coming to the economic point of view, what’s your comment on increasing economic relations between China and Sri Lanka, like you said, China is the largest investor and largest donor in Sri Lanka? Do you foresee that in the coming years the economic relationship will go up?

Tammita-Delgoda: It will have to grow simply because the location of Hambantota is for the oil fleet and remember that Chinese offered to do a survey free of charge. But they built coal power station in Norocholai and they won the contract for the expansion of the Colombo port. It is a clear reflection of China’s commercial interest in the country and I think once you build a deep sea water port, you have to follow it up with lots of other things and Chinese do not throw money around. What is so appealing to us is again quoting from the Chinese ambassador in Sri Lanka, “relationships between countries are based on mutual respect. If developed countries continue to act as both players and referees they will soon be out of date.” I would add another quotation to that, “China has never sought expansion and hegemony even in its heydays when it accounted for 30% world power.”

Soni: What about the Chinese business interest in Sri Lanka?

Tammita-Delgoda: We are trying to attract as much investments as we can but it is interesting that it is only the Chinese business investment which is attracting so much attention. I think that is the reflection more of geo-strategic realities than it is of Sri Lanka. But a bunker port bunker and terminal, an airport and express way are vital things and you know, if you build a house for
me, I am always going to turn to you. The Hambantota port represents one of many infrastructure projects. New roads and power plants are being built by the Japanese, Iranians, Indians, Saudi Arabian, and the critical fact is that immediately after the war, the government cancelled a Chinese ammunition shipment worth $200 million. So, it does not lend credence to believe that Sri Lanka’s long term obligations will turn into a military dependence. When arms were needed anymore we cancelled it. Now this cancellation indeed could lead to a decline in Sri Lanka’s seeking Chinese arms exports. That is a fact which no one has talked about. We talk about deepening links. What I would like to leave you to think about is the principal factor which will determine Sri Lanka’s relationship with China vis a vis India that I see as the result of all, especially the experience of the Ellamore. We have the T 56 Chinese equipment of the AK 47. Now India had a problem with supplying vital equipment when we vitally needed.

**Soni:** What about the students? Are they interested in going to China when you compare with India for further studies, higher education?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** There is one major factor. China is a source of fascination and it seems to be anti-western. Sri Lanka is a country which is being hammered by the west and most of us find it quite repellent. No one likes to be accused of genocide. I am a Sri Lankan, imagine if you say that to me how do I feel. Yet, China is seen to stand up to the west. We have become a country of middle classes and the elite, of course, will always be pro-western because they are the creation of the west. India’s elite is a creation of India, they speak English, speak their own languages, know their dance, their origin, their culture, their history, literature etc. Our elite do not know their languages, their culture, their dance; their idea of classical music is western classical music. That is why I said, policy is the symptomatic of the underlying factors which are the general feelings in the students. They love the idea of going to China. India is known for having superb educational institutions. It is easier because of English and it is closer and one thing which has worked for India is the fact that since we destroyed our educational system by the introduction of Sinhala only, a lot of our best people come to India to be educated and a lot of our new emerging elite are educated in India. So, that is one huge advantage that India has which it can still play. If you form personal relationships you can go round roadblocks and for us Delhi is the critical posting for Sri Lanka. Indian education is superb. It has tremendous potential which is still not projected as widely as it could be. At the top level is the JNU in Delhi which is
a world class institution. I have seen European Professors being dismantled by research students here and I always recommend that the best department is the School of International Studies in JNU. It’s an advantage which India has not yet played or even projected. People come by default. India is cheaper than the west and educational standards at the top are better, parents feel happier. I encourage all my students to go to India. Of course the latest happenings in Tamil Nadu will send signals which could change all that.

**Soni:** As regards tourism, are many Chinese tourists coming to Sri Lanka?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** Not yet. We have made cultural breakthrough simply because this is something in the process of happening. Whether it happens or not will be determined by the future. Once it is happened, it is done. Remember the Chinese do not always mix so easily, as President Kenneth Kaunda commented we have 10,000 Chinese in East Africa building the rail road but there was not one African Chinese child. So, still India has a huge head start which it has squandered. It is a question of regional versus national but also it is a question of perception. In the newspapers it was featured that there was an instruction from Mr. Krishna to Prof. G. L. Peres. You never have Chinese ambassador giving an instruction. So, what kind of impact will the two countries will make? One gives instructions even today; the other one says we will support you. How long will China support Sri Lanka if it is pressurized? All that remains to be answered.

**Soni:** China has been able to make good relations or cultivate good relations with South Asian countries except India. I mean, India has a very different kind of relationship with China if you compare its relations in today’s scenario with Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and also Maldives to a small extent. I would like to ask, how successful has China’s Look South policy been in comparison to India’s Look East policy?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** Fascinating question, what an interesting man you are! China will not tolerate the things that India tolerates. I mean, India is far more accommodating power. China will not tolerate anything that is a threat to its internal security- Tibet, Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia. PLA is an internal army for internal control and that is why they think that Himalayas is not an issue and it is not going to fight a war there. The PLA is not trained for external confrontation but Indian army is. China has fought a war with Korea and it has a very bad military hostility
with Vietnam, but these are China’s inner lines of control and on those lines it is far less accommodating than India. China’s foreign policy is very clear, its white papers are very clear in comparison to India. I do not see in India that consensus, clarity and the determination to achieve objectives the way I see in China. The Chinese white paper is actually a document which forms policy but in India no such things are evident and that is a major hurdle that India has to overcome. As you asked I think, Chinese policy has indeed been successful in comparison to policy that India has been pursuing.

**Soni:** As a historian how do you see the future of China Studies in Sri Lanka?

**Tammita-Delgoda:** I myself have started looking at the subject only recently and many of my thoughts have been shaped by my students. One of them, Ms. Chulani Attanayake has just published a groundbreaking study book *China in Sri Lanka* (Lambert, 2013) which has had a strong influence on my own thinking and I feel that many of my thoughts may be hers. Another one of my students has completed her thesis on the future of the Indian ocean. The title of her thesis is “Sri Lanka: Centre Stage of the 21st century” because Sri Lanka is right in the middle of the Indian Ocean. For me it is clear that China studies is vital to our commercial interest, it is the only thing that can keep the United States and the European Union at a bay. So, strategically and economically it also vital to our interest. Therefore it has to be studied.

We are aware, how significant the Indian Ocean is to China and to India. We have opportunities and challenges because both India and China are here and so we have options. If there is a convergence of options it is in our interest. China perhaps we know and we know a lot about India. We have the Indian Cultural Centre started by Mr. Shiv Shankar Menon. Many years ago when he was in Sri Lanka, he visited us and we discussed the fact that the British Cultural Centre and American Cultural Centre occupied the central positions. Immediately he took the decision of founding the Indian Cultural Centre which is now one the premier players in Colombo’s intellectual middle class circles, and that is where those with Indian educational links can go. But there is no Indian study centre. I think is a major foreign policy mission.) There is now an Indian studies Centre at University of Colombo. China, at the moment, does not need one because its bank is rolling us. In both cases, I think, there are steps forward which each country could take, that is something that I feel is lacking. ( Now a Confucian Studies Centre at University of Kelaniya)
Soni: Exactly, there must be an Indian Study Centre in Sri Lanka?

Tammita-Delgoda: Yes, because we do not speak same language. In Bangladesh there is Bengali, in Pakistan- Urdu and Hindi, in Nepal- Hindi and Nepalese, in Sri Lanka- Tamil yes, but 80% speak Sinhala. If you see my presentation one of the students writes in his thesis, Indian investment and interest is only concentrated in north and the east. That’s true, what kind of message do you think it will send. Everyone writes about India is losing Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka does not want to go with anybody, because it is not in our interest. Yet, imagine there is no centre for Indian studies, that is a colossal statement do not you think so? In a culture which is linked with India there is a need to do comparative archaeology, to do comparative history. All that. I would say, come to our University and set up a centre for Indian studies. There is now an Indian studies Centre at University of Colombo

Soni: But you know the Universities in Sri Lanka can also take initiatives to establish the Centre for Indian Studies like in India our university (JNU) did by establishing Area Studies Centres?

Tammita-Delgoda: They will not go to take such initiatives because Sri Lankans are small islanders. Occasionally, there are people who see bigger pictures but then they have to be given that exposures, and it is a two-way process. There is no need for an inward looking culture to look outward. Now you see it will make us look outward for the first time. Indian studies will come, Chinese studies will come. We never needed it before, we never thought about it.

Soni: Do you mean to say that a strong thinking is going on now to have a Centre for Indian Studies in Sri Lanka?

Tammita-Delgoda: It has started. But with institutions like yours and conversations like these, the social interactions not the conferences will help much. What we need to have is the people-to-people contact. We do not have a common language with the Chinese, we have a common language with the Indians and that is a massive advantage. In Sri Lanka, Buddhism has much influence on every society, be it Christians, Hindus, Muslims. They would not show you what they think. You know Sri Lankans are always quietest even in the conferences they do not say anything, they just listen and smile politely. In that way, I think India is misreading Sri Lanka because it is not within its cultural orbit like Pakistan Bangladesh and Nepal because our way of looking at the world is slightly different and you won’t see it. What could be hugely productive
would be an Indian Centre for Buddhist Studies because Sri Lanka takes Buddhism very seriously. Even in my personal experience I was able to teach the first course in Sri Lankan art and architecture in the USA because I knew India and I could see the differences in reinterpretation, styles and forms. I could not teach without knowing India.

This relationship could have great implications for the future of India’s relationship in South Asia because now Sri Lanka I think will be more critical than Pakistan and Bangladesh because of its location. May be we are at the center point of the Indian Ocean. We have not realized it yet, but we are already playing it. Every advantage which is offered to India is now balanced by an offer to China. I think, it is important to note that Sri Lanka is certainly not about to became a fiefdom of China.

Soni: What’s more you would like to add?

Tammita-Delgoda: I would also add that if Geneva goes against us, India will not gain, not politically in the country, in the villages, in the temples and because this is highly literate society, 98% of the people read books, they read articles and that is something that will affect the future. The opposition has no future in Sri Lanka because it is seen as anti-national not amongst the elites which live in the city but amongst the 75% of the Sri Lankans who live in villages. We all come from villages and we all know that there is a different way of thinking. Who joins the Indian army, where the jawans come from? They all come from the villages and are prepared to die for the country. Intellectuals think in shades of grey but black and white is actually important to keep the country together. The Chinese think in terms of black and white that, I think, is my reading of Chinese history and its current policy. Cooperation with India, I think, is as important as with China. India will be superpower because in long term it can sustain itself, but it cannot emerge as a superpower until it is firmly secured in its own neighbourhood like the United States. Remember the United States never had to face any challenges in its immediate hemisphere. India has challenges from Himalayas, in the northwest apart from having deep problematic relationship with Bangladesh. We talk about South Asian brotherhood but the realities for India are challenging. In its own neighbourhood it must be surrounded by complete freedom, trust and confidence. And that trust, confidence and freedom will depend largely on India. There are things, which India cannot do but a lot will depend on India. We have provincial administrative
councils in Sri Lanka because of India, but Sri Lanka is too small a country for provincial councils. So, a lot of what has happened in Sri Lanka including China is India’s doing. I am just portraying a personal reflection, but it is also a reflection of the broad engagement with a rural society. The future is in India’s hands. Though Beijing is my interest among the countries to visit, I like to come to India, and that is the difference you can see.

Soni: Thank you very much for sharing your viewpoints.