

Ethnic Group: Tamil
Interview number: 1
Date: July 27, 1993
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information

Gender: male
Age: 30
Place of Birth: Jaffna, Sri Lanka
Religion: Hindu
Marital Status: newly married (respondent's wife is still in Sri Lanka.)
Education: 3-year college certificate in architecture
Occupation: employed in an architecture firm
Children: none

Interviewer's Comments:

Raja lives in a duplex in Scarborough with his parents, two brothers and sister. He recently went to Sri Lanka to get married, but his new wife has not yet immigrated to Canada. When I arrived around 7pm he was talking to a male cousin on the front step. Inside his father, sister, one brother and others were watching a Blue Jays game. All of them actively follow the Blue Jays. For example, all had attended a game at the Sky Dome stadium. We did the interview outside on the steps of the house. Audible background noise on the tape includes cars, airplanes, children, neighbours, and a dog. During the interview Raja's mother and brother returned from the temple.

MIGRATION HISTORY/ FAMILY BACKGROUND

Interviewer: When did you leave Sri Lanka and when did you come to Canada?

[Interviewer's summary: Respondent left in 1983. He got financial help to study in the US. He had completed A-level education in Sri Lanka but did not get admission to a university. He came to Canada alone in 1984. His brother & sister followed in two years, another brother came the next year, and two years ago his parents arrived.]

Interviewer: Did you leave first because you are the eldest?

Respondent: That is the main reason, because people who are the eldest always face problems first.

I: What did you do in the US?

[R. spent eight months at a Brooklyn high school. It was not a positive experience. At age 20 he found New York too distracting and disorienting to continue his studies.]

R: I entered the States but I didn't continue studying there. I became as a real American. That's why I came to Canada. Someone should control my life and change the route from the bad things to the good things.

I: Who did you know in Canada when you first came?

[R.'s uncle sponsored him to come. He also knew one schoolmate. Soon he found people he knew from Sri Lanka although he hadn't known they were here.]

I: What family members do you have here?

[All of his immediate family is here: his parents, two brothers and sister and his wife who he is sponsoring to come. In addition he has one uncle, two aunts who have two and three children each, his mother's cousins and their children.]

I: How often do you see them?

[He sees his relatives quite frequently, but not regularly. Usually it is for a special reason, like a wedding. He communicates more often, at least

every month. They check up with each other over the phone. For example, his uncle might give him news that his daughter has passed an exam. But the family is not as close as it was in Sri Lanka.]

I: What is it like in Sri Lanka?

R: We were very close. Every day we met and we were involved in their life and we tried to help them. But here, I don't think so. It is not necessary to help anyone. That I can say because everyone takes care of themselves and at least the government helps them. In my home all of them are working.

I: Are you saying that people in your family help each other less because they are more independent financially?

R: Not only financially, but in some way we changed. I don't know. Because, my mother's sister, I really like her. In Sri Lanka every day I met her. She taught me in some subjects, especially in English. When I get here maybe I meet her once a year or twice a year because she is living in Montreal. Sometimes she talks to us to find out what is going on. Distance is one reason. But here we are busy. Busy. 24 hours is not enough.

I: What family members do you have back in Sri Lanka?

[Only his mother's brother is still in Sri Lanka. The rest are in Europe and India. The people in his extended family who remain in SL, especially those between 25 to 30 years old, are "participating in the Movement." He doesn't seem to count them among his living relatives since it is impossible to have contact with them and their future is extremely uncertain.]

I: How much contact do you have with relatives in Europe?

[His family is invited to weddings. If someone's parents die or anything important happens to family members overseas, they are informed. His mother's brother's son is in Switzerland. They have no contact with him. If they need to, they will get his number from someone else.]

R: We really split. We really, really split our families and relationships. I guess our next generation won't have any relationship [with their extended family members]. That's it.

I: Tell me about your arrival and first few months in Canada.

[He arrived in Ottawa in July of 1984. He couldn't get a job so after two months he went to Montreal. He worked at a health food store as a cook and at a bakery. He worked as many hours as possible: 14 to 16 hours a day if he could get the shifts. He got along well with his co-workers. These were female university students who he felt were not racist.]

I: Is it unusual for a Sri Lankan man to know how to cook?

[In Sri Lanka very few men know how to cook. They learn if they separate from their family. P.'s father and brothers don't know how to cook. R. learned how to cook in Sri Lanka when his mother became sick because he is the eldest. In Sri Lanka the family was vegetarian. Now only his father remains a vegetarian.]

IDENTITY

I: How do you see your identity? What do you call yourself?

R: Of course I am a Sri Lankan! I have Canadian citizenship but still, my way of thinking is Sri Lankan. I haven't changed to a Canadian. In my working place I forget I am a Sri Lankan. I always forget. But when I get back home I totally change as a Sri Lankan. One-hundred percent Sri Lankan. I help, I do things, I am obedient to my parents.

I: Do you also like to call yourself a Tamil?

R: I'm not that crazy. I don't want to tell that I am Tamil. Forget it. I say I'm Sri Lankan because of my way of thinking and my way of living. I'm not a stupid to fight for Tamils. Tamil means my language to

communicate with my relations and friends. I don't want to say, "Yeah, I am Tamil and I am proud," and those things. I am Hindu, [yet] I never want to push my religion to my workmates.

I: What would your other family members say about their identity? Would they see themselves first as Tamils or first as Sri Lankans?

[Sri Lankans. R. explained that since his father worked for the British navy the family tends to emphasize their Sri Lankan identity over their Tamil identity.]

I: Does coming from Jaffna play a part in how you see yourself?

R: If someone asks I say, Yeah, I am from Jaffna. But I don't think that's something special. I am also a human being with people from Ethiopia and Somalia and other places. I am not a racist.

I: How many of your friends are Sri Lankans?

[Seventy percent are Sri Lankans. Others are Canadians from different backgrounds. His best friend is his Canadian boss. He gets help from these friends and co-workers.]

I: What things do you do at home that are distinctively Sri Lankan?

[R. watches Tamil films and cultural programs, eats Sri Lankan food, except for Canadian recipes on special occasions and for lunches at work, speaks Tamil with parents and friends.]

I: Are you a practising Hindu?

[He only goes to the Temple if it is a special day and if someone needs a driver. Sometimes he goes to festivals.]

R: The Christmas, everyone celebrates here. I mean, Christmas is not Christian. Even [the tenant] in my basement, he is Jewish, he also celebrates. We also put a Christmas tree and lights. Our accountant [at work] is Jewish. She says things like "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year." She's Jewish and telling me, a Hindu. My working place party is a Christmas party. Christmas is a common celebrating day for everyone.

I: Do other Sri Lankans influence you in any way?

[R. says he sometimes faces problems with other Sri Lankans. Now he is waiting to get advice from a police officer who is also a friend and neighbour. He says he wants advice because he does not want to get involved in violence. The trouble has to do with one of his Sri Lankan neighbours.]

R: He is crazy. He made a phone call and he talked idiot things to [my brother]. He threatened me too the next day.

[The dispute stems from the neighbour's objection to R.'s family's close relationship with another family. They knew this family in Sri Lanka. They were very poor and R.'s family helped them. One member of the family was R.'s classmate. The neighbour accused R.'s classmate of being in love with his niece, of entering his home and of proposing marriage to his niece. R. says the neighbour threatened to break the man's legs. The neighbour is angry at R.'s family for continuing to be close to their family friends. R. says his accusations are not true.]

R: Now we don't want to have a close relationship with any family. If there's any reason we will meet them and talk. That's what my mother advised: don't go too close, don't go and stay at their home and talk a long time. We really spend more time with our own family, not with someone else.

I: Do you think this kind of experience is shared by many people? Do some people try to control what others can do, who they can associate with, etc.?

R: Yeah. Mostly. Not like in Sri Lanka. It's more in Sri Lanka.

[Here in Canada he thinks it is the people who don't speak English who are most susceptible to community pressures].

MARRIAGE

I: When did you get married?

[In March, 1993. His wife is still in Sri Lanka. When she comes they will either move out of the family home or take the basement apartment. He would prefer to take the basement for his wife's sake. Until she finds a job he fears she would be bored to stay home alone.]

I: Did you go to Sri Lanka to marry?

[Yes. After his wedding he only stayed one week with his wife. He came home early because the President was assassinated in May and he feared political violence against Tamils.]

I: Was yours a proposal marriage?

R: Kind of, yeah. The girl's brother is here in Canada. His wife and my mother are very good friends. At that time, my family is also here. They said, "Yeah, we are going to get [our son] married." They also want to find someone for [their sister]. They [R.'s family] saw the picture and everything. They liked her. She's a teacher.

I: Where was she from?

R: She lived in Jaffna, but not my area. She came to Colombo and I talked to her on the phone. I asked her. She saw my picture and she said, "Yeah." So I just went and married her.

I: Was everything settled by the time you went to Sri Lanka?

R: Oh yeah, mostly. Ninety percent.

I: Was there any chance that once you met her you could change your mind? [R. felt he could not change his mind, even though the arrangement was not what he initially agreed to. He had expected her to have better knowledge of English, especially since she is a teacher. He thinks he was more fluent in English when he first came than she is. He feels when she gets here she must go to school.]

I: What were you looking for in your wife?

R: A good wife. She should help me, my way of living, my future, my studying, or whatever I like. I expect lots more than the real Canadians. But I never want to control her. I don't have those kind of plans. First I told her, "If I don't like you, I kick you out. If you did those kind of bad things, then... If you don't like me, you get to tell and you get to move from me." Because, I lived in this country for ten years. My identity is totally different from the guys who live in Sri Lanka or the guys who came here new.

[He told a story of a couple who got divorced within a year because the man lied about his income and then spent all of his own and most of his wife's money.]

I: You said you were afraid to get married for a long time. What kind of things are you afraid of?

R: My whole way of living. If I lose my job, if I have a baby, how can I manage myself? Go on welfare and stand in line in a food bank?

I: Did you have any concerns about your wife?

R: She's very good. Her mentality is okay. She's a nice girl. We have a close relationship. In most ways she's exactly like me.

I: How is her family?

[He considers her family okay because they are educated. One brother works in a medical college laboratory, another is a social worker, another is in university, and her sister is a university graduate.]

R: Educated people are the same everywhere. If someone learns something, they know it around the world. They know how to adjust. If they don't

have education, they can't. They only have the knowledge from their family and their background.

I: Did you ask her family for a dowry?

[No. Because the dowry money in Sri Lankan currency is worth very little in Canada.]

I: Will you help arrange your sister's marriage?

[Yes. She's 25 and is now finishing her studies in business administration. They will look for a Sri Lankan from Toronto before someone in Sri Lanka. R.'s main concern is that their educational and professional qualifications match.]

R: At least the education! If she makes \$15/hour and the guy makes \$7/hour, how can he manage with her? I don't think so. He can't do it. I am not for that! ... [Marriage is for] the life,... not only for eating and sleeping. Also for discussing. How can I talk to an uneducated fellow? How can I share my opinion? We don't want to go with uneducated people. We want to go [with people] at least her level.

I: When some families talk about the proposal being at the right "level" they are talking about caste. What does your family think about caste?

R: We don't want to go with caste, but if someone comes to our family and the guys want a caste match, what can we do?

I: Did you care about your wife's caste?

R: No, I didn't. But, she is my caste [laughs]. These are those idiot things. Take the dowry problem also. If our sister gets married, we should give a dowry, because, otherwise people will think our sister is cheap. Okay, that's wrong. But, the thing is, the community doesn't change when it comes to Canada. The next generation will not want to go on like that. The first generation is still Sri Lankan.

I: Do your parents share your views towards caste, marriage and dowry?

[Yes. R. considers himself, his parents (especially his father) and his family "very different" from the rest of the community. For example, a proposal came for his sister from a person of a lower caste. His father agreed to it, but it fell through only when they found out the person had lied about his profession.]

I: What is it in your father's background that made him become different from the Tamil mainstream?

R: My father, he knew what's right and what's wrong because around forty years he spent with white people, British people in the British navy. He said, the white people [say] this kind of thing is bad, this is right, that's bad, this is right. This kind of thing he taught us. I played with kids like you, your skin [white] kids when my father worked for the navy when I was young.

[For R., this exposure to the British made his father able to judge what he likes and doesn't like in his own culture.]

I: What do you think about love in your marriage?

[When R. and his wife met they talked for about 8-10 hours. He told her about himself: what to do if he's upset, what he likes and doesn't like, what makes him angry, what makes him calm. He asked her to tell the same about herself. Still, he said they don't match in certain ways.]

R: For example, she wants to help her family. That's right, I don't want to say that's wrong. But the thing is, her brothers are here. They should help. They don't want to help. Why should this girl help? That's why I said, "No, you better tell your brothers." Too many things...

R: Love means, if we understand each other... All families have problems. All human beings are not the same. So, the adjustment is very important. If I lose something, I keep quiet. Sometimes she loses something and keeps quiet. That's the way. Adjustment and understanding each other. Adjustment is the meaning of love.

I: Under what circumstances would you have a divorce?

R: No. I never even thought about that. Even if I don't like something, I don't want to have a divorce. Life is an adjustment. If you have two kids and you go and divorce, the kids become abandoned. They become street kids. We have problems, but just keep quiet. That's what I really like about our culture. When they have a baby, they only live for the baby, not for themselves. They cut down their own ambitions and likes.

CHILDREN

I: How many children do you want?

R: One, maximum two.

I: Does your wife agree?

R: She said that's good. There is family planning in Sri Lanka as well. It is successful among educated people.

I: Would you prefer to have a boy or a girl?

R: It doesn't matter. Anyway, kids is kids.

I: Do you want your kids to be able to speak Tamil?

[He doesn't want to press them, but he will speak Tamil with them at home since it is the only place they will learn it.]

R: I don't want to push them. That's idiotic... The language is only for communication. I am not crazy for "That language is honey, this is heart,..."

I: What do you want for your children out of life?

R: I'll push them. No one can stop me. I'll really give a hard life for them for their education. Everyday I'll push. At least they'll sit at the table for two or three hours. They must study. Everyday I'll check their homework. Otherwise I'll kill them. They can't leave from me if they don't finish their homework. They can't sleep. If they want to sleep early, they'll try to work in the evening. The games and playing, TV--forget it! Maybe on the weekend they can sit and watch TV if they have time. But, education is important. They don't go out. I don't want to allow them to go and make gangs. I won't allow them to work as students and make 2 bucks an hour. I'll try to take them with me to go shopping. I won't allow them to go alone. Until 14 or 15, the parents should help them to go [out]. That's the time they might change their mentality as a smoker and alcoholic and rapist, they join the street kids and those kind of things. I won't allow that. That time the parents should care for them. Not only in our community, all people should care for them.

[He will reward his kids for their achievement on exams by giving gifts. He would not give gifts for Christmas or birthdays. His parents disciplined and encouraged him in this way too. His father sometimes beat him or threatened not to give him any food if his school performance was not acceptable. He is going to explain various career possibilities to his kids when they are young and tell them the income levels and types of rewards that come with each. Then he will allow them to chose.]

I: Aside from their careers, what qualities would you like to see in them?

R: High level. I don't mean they should only become doctors or engineers. My opinion is they should become very popular in the community and also in the country. But not as a politician. In some careers they can do that [become popular]. For example, in Canada, everybody should know Peter Mansbridge, everybody knows Barbara Fromm. Maybe they could write something. If the book is published they put their picture on the first page. There are many ways to be popular. Not like usual people. They should be different than everyone.

I have that kind of opinion, but for my age, I got here late. I don't have enough English background. I don't have enough money. I don't have enough subsidy. If I had those things I should become popular here. I must. I know which way to go. But still, with my quality and my poor condition, I did my maximum. But if I was born in Canada, I don't want to sit and talk to you! I don't think so. Never.

I: Would you have the same expectations for a girl as you would for a boy?
 R: The girl also, whatever she likes she can be. It's ok.

I: Have you given thought to what kind of marriages you would like them to have?

R: I don't want to be involved in that because when I was involved in my marriage my heart said something is wrong there, the proposal and those things. I said I am not the right way to get married. I don't want to push [my kids]. But I will explain to them what is the disadvantage of early sex, the disadvantage of going with different girls and how you can choose your wife. The wife means not for a few days or a few months sex, or a few months living together. No. Try to keep your wife permanently. If they go separate, that's okay. But the thing is to choose the good woman. Women are not only for sex. How long can they have that kind of life? A few months? A few years? And after? I am scared for that thing sometimes. Say, for example, if I send my daughter to college or university and she becomes pregnant. Her life will be spoiled. [Here he told a story of a girl who became pregnant at 14].

I: Would it be important to you that your children know about Sri Lanka? Culturally, should they be able to communicate?

R: No one can push that because if they are born in Canada they will become as Canadians.

I: How are things different for kids in Canada?

R: I was in the high school here, in Brooklyn. I know what will happen in the high school, how I changed. I don't want my kids to change like me. I know it was a mistake. Otherwise I would have built myself up to a Ph.D. or M.Sc. In my country there are no sex movies or sex things. When I got to New York I saw the boards and everyday I would go and pay seven dollars to watch two or three movies. Every kid, when they finish high school must stay with the parents. I was alone. No one was close to me. No one knew what I did. No one was there to explain to me what's right and what's wrong. I was alone, that's why. If I was scared that someone would see me, I would be more like a Sri Lankan.

PARENTS

[Interviewers' note: At this time R.'s mother had returned from the temple. She had quietly introduced herself to me and was sitting on the step beside her son listening to the interview.]

I: Did your parents have similar expectations and ambitions for you?

R: Oh yeah. They did, but I guess they spoiled my life. I had planned to study something else, but they pushed me and I became like this. I planned to study biology, like medicine. They pushed me into the engineering class. Mentally I was really affected. I knew that was wrong, absolutely wrong. They only controlled me, but they didn't control the others. [After he said this his mother silently got up and slipped into the house.]

I: Because you were the oldest, did you have special obligations?

R: Yeah, that's right. Yeah, yeah. In Sri Lankan families [the eldest] have no opinion. If they straighten the eldest, then everyone will follow them.

I: So all the pressure is on the eldest one to be the example for the younger ones?

R: Yeah, they have that kind of opinion, yeah.

I: Were you closer to your mother or your father?

R: Both. Some activities my father is okay, some activities my mother is okay. On average, I go with both.

I: What about for most Sri Lankan boys? Are they closer to their father or their mother?

R: That's biological. I know that, too.

I: No, I don't know...

R: The boys go with the mother, the girls go with the father. That's the real thing everywhere in the world. But we are not like that. We [boys] really like our father too, and we also like our mother. They are really good parents.

I: What makes for a good parent?

R: They teach us the good way. How to deal with people, how to deal with the society. We don't smoke, we don't drink. They explained when we were young how bad those things are. They did lots of things [for us]. And they really helped me when I went to school. As a student I didn't make any money. Every day they made food for our lunches.

I: What kind of obligations do you have towards them now?

R: I help them.

[When they were in a war-affected area he sent them money for food and helped bring them here].

R: Now that they are here, they don't have any problem. Every one or two months I take them to the family doctor for a check-up. They have everything.

I: Will you expect your children to take care of you when you're old?

R: No. Because they are born here I can't expect it. But, my parents spent one hundred percent on us because they know we are going to support them back. In my case, I don't want to spend one hundred percent [on my children]. At least thirty percent I'll save for me and my wife. When I get old I don't know what will happen. I'm going to go mostly on [life] insurance. If I die early she can get it. If anything happens to her, I can get it. If we want to live here we should change as Canadians. [If we live like Sri Lankans], maybe we are going to go a little lower. I don't want to do that. If I spend all my money on my kids... I don't want to do those kind of stupid things here in Canada. The system, the school, the classmates, those things are different.

RELATIVES

I: Earlier you said that Sri Lankan families help each other a lot. For example, you paid for your sister's education...

R: Not only for the family, but their relations, far relations and poor people.

I: Now that you're here, do you feel the same obligation towards your nieces, nephews, cousins?

R: Of course. Not only nieces and nephews, if I win the 649 I'm going to sponsor all poor kids from around the world and send money to them to give them a better life.

I: Supposing you don't win the lottery, if one of your relatives needed money, would you help?

[Yes, if he has money he should lend it to support his brother's daughter education, for example, if she needs it.]

I: Do you think that's true of most Sri Lankans?

R: Mostly. Not all, but 90 percent. My mother's brother's son entered the medical college. At that time they were very poor. My father's brother has money. He gave it to him to help his studies. No blood relation or anything, just a relation by marriage.

I: Would the same thing hold for your wife's relations?

R: Yeah. It's okay. Not only our relations, say anyone. Suppose my friend dies. If I have money, I should support his children, especially for their studies. Because studying is important for life. In Canada people study for money, but Sri Lankans make money for studies. [He reinforced this point a few times to show the intense financial struggles Sri Lankans go through to see that their children receive higher education.]

OTHER ATTITUDES AND NORMS

I: It sounds like you plan to stay in Canada permanently. Do you think you would ever go back to Sri Lanka?

R: I like Canada. But the thing is I still feel I'm living in another country.

[R. mostly fears a racist backlash by white people, especially if he becomes prosperous while the economy worsens.]

I: Would racism cause you to leave Canada?

R: I wouldn't say that. But, in the long term, my living in Canada is not guaranteed. No one knows what will happen.

I: By coming here, what did you gain and what did you lose?

R: I gained my weight! [laughs]. I lost my weather--I come from a wonderful country. And my friends, school friends. And my relations. I gained English knowledge. I have experience in a different world. I have met people from everywhere in the world here in Canada. You can watch all cultures in Canada.

R: [Canada has] more facilities. Lots more. Too much facilities is not good. Some control is important.

I: What do you mean by "facilities"? Social services, everything is too much. Salaries also. R: In my country if we have less money, we know how to control our lives with that amount of money.

I: Are you saying it's better not to make too much money? Would you say this to your kids? R: Too much money means... In Sri Lanka labourers make less money. People who have more education make more money. Here, average people have enough money.