

Ethnic Group: Tamil  
Interview number: 3  
Date: August 11, 1993  
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information

Gender: female  
Age: 33  
Place of Birth: Jaffna, Sri Lanka  
Religion: Hindu  
Marital Status: married  
Education: bachelor of arts  
Occupation: full-time parent, formerly worked in banking  
Children: son, age 3

Interviewer's Comments:

Vaani lives in a townhouse in Scarborough with her husband, son and husband's nephew. I met her through a one of my key informant's friends who had studied with her at Jaffna University in the early eighties. She had been President of a student women's committee. She worked to help shy female students adjust to university. She published books and helped them participate in student life.

When I first spoke to Vaani, she asked if I know anyone who could help her get a job at a bank. She is trying to return to work after being at home with her child for three years. When I visited she had just bought a numerical type keyboard so she could improve her speed.

Vaani is much younger than her brothers and sisters. Unlike many Sri Lankan families, her elder siblings did not become involved in or provide much material support for her marriage and family life either in Sri Lanka or Canada. One brother and sister immigrated after her, but they are not close. She did not explain why her siblings did not help her, except that they were involved in their own lives.

Vanni is Hindu and her husband is Catholic. She showed me their shrine in a small alcove in the wall of their living room. It had a crucifix and two pictures of Jesus, as well as three pictures and a statue of different Hindu deities decorated with paper garlands.

I arrived at 10 in the morning. The TV was on. Vanni turned it off and we did the interview at the kitchen table. Her son played quietly close to us. He made no demands of his mother at all while I was present. The living room and kitchen both had large framed pictures of tigers, possibly indicating the family's support for the LTTE. Several family members have suffered violence and terror from the Sri Lankan army. I left several minutes after noon. She apologized several times for not serving me lunch.

MIGRATION HISTORY/ FAMILY BACKGROUND

I: When did you leave Sri Lanka/ when did you come to Canada?

[Interviewer's summary: R. came directly in 1986]

I: Who came with you?

[She came alone.]

I: Did you know anyone here at that time?

[She had a few friends from Sri Lanka. They were distant

relatives and friends from university and high school. They helped her find a place to stay.]

I: Did you sponsor anyone to come?

[No. It took her too long (5 or 6 years) to get Landed Immigrant status. She changed addresses and the officials sent her papers to the old address. Finally her member of parliament helped her. Since she got them (1991) she has not helped anyone else to immigrate.]

I: What were your reasons for coming?

R: I was the youngest in me family and I had some difficulties. I couldn't find a job. And when I was in the university they always killed people when they searched for the Tigers and everybody. I had a problem with the Sri Lankan army also. There were so many young girls... So that's why my mom asked me to go somewhere, anywhere. Then I came. I thought this would be a good country for me to learn more things and for the future, when I have babies.

I: Did you consider going to any other country?

R: No. I liked to come here because my friends told me the immigration people liked Sri Lankans at that time and it's the best country to live. Because this is a colony. So many immigrants live here. And they help immigrants.

I: What were your first few months in Canada like?

R: I had a bit of a hard time because everything was new. Especially the weather. My friends went to work so I didn't bother them. I couldn't ask them to come with me everywhere. So I had a map with me. I tried to find my way. Then I built up my life.

I: Who did you live with?

R: One of my friends found a place for me. I lived for a couple of days with them. Then they found another place, safe for me because I was a young girl. I couldn't live with them because of our culture you know. They had a small room [in a two bedroom apartment]. There was one family, and one person [also] lived there. So he gave the room for me. Then I found another place because it was hard for them. I couldn't bother them all the time. So I went to live with a family in a townhouse and payed rent. [My friends] introduced me.

I: As an unmarried woman how did you feel?

R: It was very hard, you know. It was hard to go alone.

I: How did you support yourself at the beginning?

R: I applied for welfare. After a few months I got a job. I went to school at a private school and I learned data processing. I got a job from the temporary agencies. At that time it was okay to find a job. I didn't have any problem.

I: Did you find the Sri Lankan community helpful and supportive?

R: My friends helped me find a place. I didn't depend on them all the time. I told them I wanted to study and they showed me the school. I asked other friends for advice: "Which course is useful to get a job in Canada?" I went to the [employment] agency to register. After a few days they called me to work in a bank.

## IDENTITY

I: How do you see your identity?

R: When people ask me where I am from I just say Sri Lanka. Sometimes they ask me which part, meaning Sri Lankan Tamil or Sinhalese. Most of my friends know me so they wouldn't ask the question. Sri Lankans know who is Tamil and Sinhalese. If a Sri Lankan Tamil doesn't know me and we start to talk, they will ask which village I'm from and how long I have been there. Most of my friends are from my place, my school and the university. I don't have any other Sri Lankan friends from far away like Colombo and other parts of Sri Lanka. At work I am the only Sri Lankan.

I: Do you have any non-Sri Lankan friends?

[Jamaican, Canadian]

I: Which of your family members are here now?

[One brother and sister. Husband's brother and nephew (husband's sister's son). Friends from home town and classmates from the university. Most of her cohort are here.]

I: How often do you get together with them?

[Brother lives in outside of Toronto. They have little contact. Sister is downtown. Sees her about once a month.]

R: My husband has a lot of friends. Bachelors. Sometimes they come here and I cook for them. We invite them all the time.

I: At home what do you do to maintain your culture?

[She speaks Tamil. Teaches her son Tamil so that he can communicate with older Sri Lankans, and so that when he goes back to Sri Lanka he will be able to make friends. She dresses in a Sri Lankan way (pottu, nose-ring, sari).]

I: Do you wear a thali [marriage necklace]?

R: I don't have thali because I didn't celebrate my wedding that way. I didn't spend too much money. If you go out, the thieves and all those strange people..., it is dangerous for you. Back home it's different, but here... I don't believe in that. If you love the person and you get married, if it's legal it's legal. It depends on your mind and your feelings. That [thali] is for other people, to show that you are married or not married. We just went to City Hall and got registered. I didn't even take a picture... Because my life was very hard. I was the youngest one. I got support from my family but not much, because my mother was very old. My brothers and sisters got married before me a long time ago. They didn't support me very well. So, I was so sad. I didn't have a very good background. I came alone here and I found my husband. That is why I always thank the god. Because it is difficult to find a partner for yourself. My culture is different because when you get married to someone you found yourself, if you have any problem, like divorce or whatever the reason, nobody will help you and you can't get another marriage. So, I have a nice husband and he is very good. He is a very understanding person. So I helped myself. I helped my mother. I always sent her money. But she died last year. I still have a brother who is not married. I always help him and send him money, whatever I can. But I don't have the money now. I'm not married [she meant to say "working"] and there's only one income and the mortgage.

I: Do you cook and eat Sri Lankan food at home?

[Yes, rice and curry which they eat with the hand. She has also learned to make Chinese and Italian food from the TV.]

I: What religious practices do you follow?

[She is Hindu. She does not eat meat on Fridays. Occasionally goes to the temple.]

R: Even in Sri Lanka I didn't go to the temple very often. I don't believe that because there are so many people and they can control your mind. Whenever I feel like it I go, but most of the time I pray by myself here in the morning and evenings at home.

[Her husband is a Christian. Her son also has been baptised as a Christian, but she intends to teach him about Hinduism.]

R: I prefer [to raise him as] both, but he is a Christian now. I don't want to mix him. I don't want to make any trouble for him in the future. If I mix him he won't know which way to go. He knows all the gods' names.

[They celebrate all the Christian and Hindu festivals. They don't celebrate birthdays in a grand way. Her husband takes part in the Hindu festivals. He is the offspring of an inter-religious marriage. His sisters-in-law are Hindus, but they changed their religion when they married his brothers. He did not ask R. to change her religion.]

R: He is an understanding person. His father asked me to change. But my husband told him, "Why should she change just because she got married. If she wants she could, but I don't want to force her to change her religion." Most of the time these [inter-religious] marriages have a hard time. The Christians never change their culture, and want the Hindus to change. Most of the time the marriages break for reasons like this.

[After four years of marriage a priest came to their house to ask her to have a Christian wedding. Her husband told him, no, it's too late, and he did not want to force her.]

R: They always spend too much money for the ceremony. The thali is not cheap. It's \$10,000 or \$15,000, and they ask for a dowry and donation. The bride has to pay the money for the ceremony and the groom has to buy the thali. They still follow the tradition here. Most of the girls are 30 or 35 years and they are not married now because they do not have enough money.

I: Do other Sri Lankans influence your behaviour in any way?

R: No. I think when you come to Canada or somewhere else, you must change some things. For example, at the working place you can not wear an everyday sari. It might make a problem. In some places they don't like it. If you are different everybody will come and ask you. Like in a bank, or where you deal with the public. So you have to follow the instructions or the uniforms. Otherwise it's going to be a problem. Otherwise you have to stay home. This is my policy.

[She is careful to avoid having her clothes smell like spices. She believes one of her friends did not get a job because she refused to wear deodorant.]

[She finds there is less social control by Sri Lankans in Canada than in Sri Lanka.]

#### MARRIAGE

I: When did you marry?

[1986, a few months after she came. She already had a job by that

time.]

I: Was it a love match or a proposal marriage? How did it work?

[A love match. He was a friend of a friend. No one introduced them formally as potential partners.]

R: We loved each other... We talked to each other. He told me what kind of person he likes. I thought he was a nice person. He told his sister back home. She phoned to his family. He told them he was going to get married. They knew me because they asked some students who were at university. He sent my picture. So then they said yes.

I: When you were a girl, did you ever think you would have a love match?

R: I didn't think about marriage when I was young. Because I thought I didn't want to get married. I had a problem, and I didn't know what to do. No support or anything. I thought I wanted to get a good job so I could help my family, I mean my mother, since she was alone back at home. Then I met a nice person, so after I changed my mind.

I: How did you meet him?

R: At my friend's place. He always came there. Sometimes I visited there. They introduced me as their batch mate. We started to talk. Not on one day, but gradually.

I: Did he ask you to marry him?

R: Not to marry. He asked me if I had any friends and what kind of person I like. I told him I don't have any idea, I don't have any friends and I am not thinking about marrying. He was interested in me because I was alone, and my background, and nobody supporting me. That's why he was thinking about marrying, because that's the way he can help me. He's a nice person. He has a nice family. And he was very angry with my family, like my brother and sisters. One day he told me he thought, "I don't have any sister, so maybe I could help her." He was so angry when he heard about me, that I came alone. Because normally the Sri Lankans are shy and they don't send the girls alone. Then he started to ask me why I came here. Because the other boys were starting to talk about me: "Why did she come alone?" Sometimes they were thinking that I am a bad person, like... That's why he was so angry and he started saying, "Which way can I help her?"

I: Normally boys do not get married until all their sisters are settled and they try to help their sisters marry, true?

R: Yes. Normally they don't marry like I did, because I came by myself.

I: What were people thinking of you?

R: They don't believe, maybe, why I have so many friends, or why I came alone, what is the reason I am in Canada, who is supporting me, how I can live alone. Especially a girl.

I: Do they assume you are having relations with men?

R: Sometimes they do. They can start to think of why I came alone. Our people, most of them, don't think of their own problems, but they always talk about somebody else. Especially when they see someone like me. They start gossiping. When I go somewhere they will say, "She is the one who is living alone." I also started worrying and sometimes I cried, because I have brothers and sisters, but nobody is helping me.

I: Why didn't they help you?

R: I don't know. I didn't get a job in Sri Lanka because it was hard to get at that time. And then the problem [ethnic conflict] started. I didn't have enough money. They had to think about their own family and things.

I: How old were you and your husband when you married?

[She 26, he 28.]

I: Why did you prefer to get married in the end, because when you were young you didn't want to marry?

R: That was because of my situation. I liked to get married, but I didn't know. Because I already had a problem. Then I thought if I don't get a nice person, it's going to be a problem.

I: Would your marriage have worked as a proposal marriage?

R: No. This is a love marriage. I don't believe in proposal marriage. It's forced marriage. You don't know. Sometimes it works out, sometimes not. It depends on the family situation. Sometimes [a girl] would like to marry a certain person. But if they are asking too much money, the girl's parents will ask her to marry someone else. They don't care about the girl or boy. The main reason is the money (girl's dowry, boy's occupation). After they get married their married life is not satisfying.

I: How did your family respond to your husband?

R: I told them. I wrote a letter, but nobody replied to me. I think they thought that when I left the country nobody would be involved with me. Even my sister, they don't help me. Still sometimes I speak to them. When I invited them to my son's birthday, they didn't show up. The first time I introduced my husband to my brother he just ignored him. He said he didn't have time to talk to him. That's why I don't talk to him.

I: Was it important for you to get approval or advice from anyone about your marriage?

R: No. I decided myself to get married, then I informed them. My mother is okay because she likes me very much and she knows that whatever I do is good for me. I didn't wait for anyone else's opinion.

I: Was it an appropriate time for him to marry?

[Yes, two younger brothers were waiting for him to marry.]

I: Was he getting other proposals?

[He was getting proposals, but like her, marriage was problematic. He got into trouble with the army when he was working in the library. He knows karate. One day the army caught him under suspicion that he supported the Tamil militants. He thought the army was going to shoot him, so he beat up some soldiers. Someone advised him to leave Sri Lanka. He came in 1985. He wasn't thinking of marriage.]

I: What was his education background?

[He did not go to university, but worked in a hotel and library. Now he's working as an auto mechanic.]

I: Did he check into your past history?

R: He knows me and he trusted me. I didn't lie about anything. If you lie to someone, they will talk to other people... If you suspect anything then you go to someone else and check. If you can't trust the person you are going to marry, why marry them?

I: Would your type of marriage have been possible if you were both living in Sri Lanka?

[Yes, these days.]

I: Would your married life (how you get along, your roles as husband, wife, father, mother) be at all different if you were in Sri Lanka?

[The same.]

I: Is it the same as your parent's generation?

[Yes.]

I: What do you think makes for a good marriage?

R: I think we must understand each other. I believe my husband and I trust him. He tells me everything and I tell him everything. We don't have a hiding problem. That's the way we treat each other. He's a nice person. Like me, he's different too. Because most of the Sri Lankans don't help the wife to cook. The husband goes to the sitting room and watches TV. Most of them don't help. They think the wife has to do certain things and they don't want to get involved. But he helps with everything. If I go to work we come home together and cook together. Even when I had my baby I didn't have anyone to help me. He helped me. And he doesn't control anything. He doesn't tell me, "You do this and do that." So that is the way I'm lucky. It's very hard to get a nice person. I always hear from my friends about problems they have.

I: Do you know any Sri Lankan couples who have had a divorce?

R: No, they are okay. They have the usual problems, like he doesn't help. Or when they get a proposal marriage and they don't know each other. The wife comes from Sri Lanka and she is so shy. We can't tell them, but if they come and ask us... They use us as an example. It's been almost seven years now and we still don't have any problems.

#### CHILDREN

I: Do you want to have any more children?

[She would like a second, preferably a daughter, but so long as it's a healthy child she'll be happy.]

I: Do you teach your son about Sri Lanka?

R: Yes, we show him photos... I would like to raise my son in my culture, but if he doesn't want to, I can't force him. I can tell him, "This is the way I was brought up and the way I want you to grow," but it's up to him.

I: What kinds of things do you want for your son in his life?

R: It's hard to say, but I'd like him to be an educated person. If he could he should help other people. And a nice person. Someone who doesn't make trouble for other people.

I: What kinds of qualities would you like to see in him? What should his character be like?

R: As a good person who does not make trouble. I don't know what else. I can't expect more than that.

I: If you had a girl, what qualities would you like to see in her?

R: A nice person. Not too many friends. Not like a Canadian who has so many relationship-friends.

I: Do you mean boy-friends?

R: Yes.

I: She should have none?

R: Not none. If she wants she could have one.

I: When your son is older do you think he will have girlfriends? And would you allow it?

R: Yes. If he wants.

I: What kinds of things would you tell him? Or advice would you give him?

R: If he likes somebody I would do everything to make him more comfortable and support him to get married.

I: Would you put any restrictions on him?

R: No. Because I am teaching him as a young boy what are the right things and what are the wrong things, so when he becomes an adult he knows what to do. So after I won't need to use any control on him when he's a teenager around 17, 18 years. Until then I can tell him and teach him whatever, the right things and wrong things, and this is the time to go to school and study this and that. I will ask his opinion too. Like which way he wants to study, like computer courses or business management, or whatever. We have to assume that that time will not be like us. So we have to give more chances to him to learn more things and have more choices. I didn't have any choice when I was young, so I can't tell him, "You have to do this." I can't control him. We have to give him a good chance to make a decision... The only thing I need from him is to be an educated person.

I: Do you expect him to go to university?

R: University or college, it doesn't matter. But I need him to learn, not only from the books, but to learn more things from other people. Not [just] at university or college, he has to meet more people and he has to understand the feelings of other people. More practical, not a theoretical experience. And he must visit more places.

I: To learn about the world first-hand?

R: Exactly.

I: If you were in Sri Lanka would you be raising him in the same way?

R: Yes. Because the world is growing fast. We must give them more chance. Like an elastic we can't stay stiff. We have to be more flexible.

I: How do you expect him to treat you as his mother?

R: I don't want to depend on him, but I do support him. If I don't have anything, or I'm ill, if he could, I expect him to help me. When he is a child I do certain things for him. So if I get



older, if he could--I don't want to force him in the end--but then I would expect him to do something for me.

I: How should he treat his father?

R: The same as me. My husband is also different, like me. He doesn't expect anything from his son or daughter.

#### PARENTS

I: The only parent you have still living is your father-in-law. Do you help him at all?

R: Yes.

I: In general, how do Sri Lankans expect children to treat their parents?

R: They have respect.

I: Is a new couple usually closer to the boy's parents or the girl's parents?

R: It depends on the situation. Most of the time, if they have more daughters, they stay with them. If they have only sons, they don't have a choice. It depends on the financial situation. When they have more money, everybody wants to stay with them. If they don't have money, nobody wants them. So it all depends. When the couple goes to work, then the mother or father looks after the child in the home. Here they have the senior citizen's apartment, but in Sri Lanka it's not like that.

I: What are Sri Lankans in Canada doing with their old folks?

R: They live with the children. The children look after the parents.

#### RELATIVES

I: I know that in Sri Lanka people consider it a duty to help certain of their relatives in certain ways. When your brothers and sisters did not help you to get married, did people look down on them?

R: Yes.

I: Somehow it affected your reputation too because you came here alone...?

R: Yes.

I: Does your situation with your family continue to be hurtful?

R: Sometimes I think about it, but most of the time I feel alone. So I don't think that I have any sisters and brothers. That way I feel more comfortable. Otherwise it's more hurtful. I don't tell anybody about my situation because nobody can do anything. When I tell my history it just makes me more troubled.

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

[R. has 2 brothers and a sister still in Sri Lanka. Her husband comes from a family of seven children. Only he, his brother and his sister's son are in Canada.]

I: Is your husband helping any members of his family?

R: They don't need any help because they are all working. They

are okay. Now we can't help anyone because of our financial situation. We are having a tough time here.

I: Is your nephew (husband's sister's son) living with you?

R: Yes. He doesn't have a father. He was an engineer and the army shot him. He's going to college this September.

#### ATTITUDES AND NORMS

I: Do you ever think about going back?

R: Yes. We would like to go back.

I: Where would you settle?

[Preferably Jaffna or Vauniya (her husband's place).]

I: Do you still have people back home who you would like to be close to?

R: Yes, my sister and friends. It doesn't matter. I always depend on myself. I don't depend on my friends or relatives.

I: Why do you want to go back?

R: I think most of the people want to go back. Because of the weather. We have more convenience there because we were born in that country. I don't blame it here [in Canada] because we have free education and so many free programs.

I: In what way would your life be better in Sri Lanka? And what's good about Canada?

R: If there was no trouble then I would go back. If there is trouble I will stay here for the safety. I also like Canada too because it is my country. You can go to school and take a diploma course and you can find a job. That's good and more people are helping.