

Ethnic Group: Tamil  
Interview number: 5  
Date: July 25, 1993  
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information

Gender: male  
Age: 50  
Place of Birth: Jaffna, Sri Lanka  
Religion: Hindu  
Marital Status: married  
Education: BA  
Occupation: formerly a university lecturer and high school teacher, now works as a security guard  
Wife's occupation: machine operator on an assembly line  
Children: two daughters, ages 16 and 20

Interviewer's Comments:

Bala is respectfully addressed as "Bala Master" because of his former position as a teacher in Sri Lanka. His family lives in a medium-sized duplex in Markham. They have a few pictures of Hindu deities attractively displayed on the walls. Bala came to the nearest bus stop to meet me. It was a Sunday afternoon. He was friendly and pleased to be interviewed. We did the interview at the dining room table.

His 16 year old daughter was watching TV when I came in. Her father told her to turn it off and participate with us in the interview. She preferred to sit on a sofa where she could see and hear us but not be compelled to participate fully. From time to time she added her comments.

After the interview the father and daughter switched places. I did not use the tape recorder while talking to the daughter. She told me how much she enjoys her multi-cultural high school because there are other students like her. Her parents expect her to come home right after school. She appreciates that her peers understand why she does not go out with them. This summer she cooks at home in the mornings and works in a fast food restaurant afternoons. We talked about her plans for going to university. She would like to do social work or psychology. She said she has not given any thought to her future marriage or boyfriends. She is concentrating on her studies and grades.

MIGRATION HISTORY/ FAMILY BACKGROUND

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

[Interviewer's summary: 1985. R. came directly to Montreal.]

I: What were your reasons for leaving?

Respondent: I was a teacher for 18 years. After the communal riots started, psychologically and work-wise I was affected. I thought of leaving due to the conflicts in my mind. A lot of things happened in my life. That's why I came to Canada--to live peacefully.

I: Where were you living in Sri Lanka?

[R. was born in Jaffna. He went to the central region for his studies from 1964-1968. Worked as a lecturer at the university in 1970 for one year, then taught high school in the central region until coming to Canada.]

I: Do you know how to speak Sinhala? Did you teach in English or

Tamil?

[R. speaks a little Sinhala. He loves Sinhalese music and films. He studied and taught in Tamil. Most of his English he learned after coming to Canada. His students were mostly the children of Tamil estate workers.]

I: Why did you chose Canada?

R: I was affected for many years in Sri Lanka, so I wanted to live the rest of my life very peacefully. I studied, before I came, about many countries. Canada is a very good country for immigrants. It's very peaceful and there are no political problems and there are good opportunities to live.

I: How did you get to know about Canada?

R: From the books, from the papers, from my friends, relatives, many kinds of ways. His friend who was here wrote a letter recommending Canada.

I: Who from your family came first?

[R. came to Montreal in 1985 as a refugee. He stayed for 2 years, trying to learning French and working in a factory. He wasn't satisfied with his French ability or his job prospects so he moved to Toronto. After getting Landed Immigrant status in 1987 he went back to Sri Lanka to sponsor his family. They came to Colombo and got visas for Canada in 1988.]

I: Where do your other family members live?

[R. said he has lots of relatives in Canada. He mentioned his wife's sister, and his nephew and niece. R.'s mother, 2 sisters and 3 brothers are in Sri Lanka. His wife's older sister and brother are in Sri Lanka and another brother is in the UK.]

I: Tell about your first few months in Canada. Who helped you?

[R. got help from an agent in Sri Lanka to get here, using his own passport and a false visa. In Montreal friends gave him a place to stay and cooked for him.]

I: Do you have plans to sponsor more people to come?

R: They wouldn't like to come because all of them are settled down with children. They want to stay in Sri Lanka.

I: How much contact do you have with them?

[He writes letters occasionally, sends messages by telegram and talks to them on the phone whenever they are in Colombo.]

I: Are you close to your relatives in Toronto?

R: Very close. Everyday we contact them. It's a 5 or 10 minute drive. They all live in Scarborough. We get together for birthdays, weddings, funerals, many occasions. Sometimes they call me for lunch or whatever. Sometimes we get together to go to the beach or for a barbecue party. Mostly we talk on the phone.

#### IDENTITY

I: What is your identity? Do you call yourself a Canadian, a Sri Lankan, a Tamil...?

R: I am a citizen. So I am very proud to be a Canadian. At the same time, everybody knows that I am a Tamil. At the same time I

can say I am a Tamil too. But I am a Canadian citizen right now.

Daughter: I would say that Canadian would come first, so Canadian-Sri Lankan?

I: Do you prefer to say Canadian-Sri Lankan rather than Canadian-Tamil?

Daughter: Isn't that the same thing?

[Father interjected that she should say what she prefers and give a proper answer.]

Daughter: I don't know.

R: I prefer Canadian-Sri Lankan. Because I mixed with the Sinhalese group and got along with all Sri Lankans. It depends on the time and the chances [to associate with different groups]. Now that more Tamils are here we have a good chance to go to the temples and libraries. The Tamils are growing here. When I came here there were only one or two shops, but now there are hundreds of shops. So automatically we are creating a society of Sri Lankan Tamils. It can not be avoided. Automatically its name comes to us too.

I: What is the background of most of your friends?

R: Most are Tamils. A few are Sinhalese.

I: What Sri Lankan cultural practises do you maintain here?

Daughter: We cook Sri Lankan food. We watch Sri Lankan movies. We dress like Sri Lankans when we go to Sri Lankan parties. Mostly we try to maintain Sri Lankan culture when we come home, but when I go to school it's different. I'm like how everyone else is.

R: We have to do [these practices] because wherever we go we meet Sri Lankan Tamils. We can't go beyond that. We have to keep our culture here too. We have to wear our own dress and we have to cook our food.

I: What about religious practises?

[The family goes to Hindu temples every couple weeks. They are vegetarians on Fridays. They observe the special days and festivals according to the calendar. The rituals take place at the temple but sometimes they do them in their house.]

I: What else does your family do that's different than the Canadian-born?

Daughter: We spend more time with the family rather than with friends. After school I come home and I'm with my parents. Even when we go out we go with our cousins and our parents, not with our friends.

I: Do you speak Tamil at home?

R: Yes. My children are studying in English medium. I have to speak Tamil to them, otherwise they will forget their Tamil. I have to preserve my culture and language. That's very important.

I: Are there any ways that other Tamils affect your behaviour?

R: Some Sri Lankans don't like our culture and they change. Sometimes even though they're Hindus they go to church. Some couples, the wife may be Christian and the husband may be Hindu. They have a problem of where to go and what to do. That's why

they change.

I: Other people are changing, but what about you? Do you feel any pressure to change or to stay Sri Lankan?

R: No. But, because they have come from far away and they want to get together and grow our culture here. There's more unity on that basis. There are certain Tamil organizations, Tamil Eelam Society and World Tamil movement. Every week they celebrate some cultural events, dance, music and lots of Sri Lankan activities. Everybody gets together and watch and they create the culture here. Its easy to maintain.

I: Is it important to you that these activities are happening?

R: It's not actually important but some people have no recreations at home. That's why they go to the festivals.

I: Do you feel that your family has adjusted to life here?

R: Yes.

I: What was that process like? What changes did you have to go through before you felt you had adjusted?

R: It's a good question, a very deep question. I have to think.

I: What kinds of things did you miss from back at home?

R: Not only me, everybody who leaves their own country faces these things. My birthplace, my mother, my friends, my scenic beauty, my weather--a lot of things I missed from my country. But at the same time, step by step I forget and I liked this country, and I developed my knowledge and I live peacefully. Now this is my home.

I: As you were adjusting, do you remember noticing what is different here when it comes to your day to day life?

R: Here it's a systematic life. Time is very important. And my wife never worked in Sri Lanka, but she's working now. She also changed a lot! She had to learn telephone answering techniques, and the timetable, how to go out and behave, how to move with the people, how to answer, many things she learned after she came here. At the time she was at home she didn't know what to do. She never lived... She was like a family member and my wife, that's it. But here she's my partner. She's helping me in many ways. That's why I'm very happy.

I: Did you have to change in any way when your wife started working?

R: Me? Yeah! I have to do a lot of work at home.

Daughter: [giggling] Cooking.

MB: You mean housework?

R: Yeah, I am doing housework because when she goes to work I have to cook.

Daughter: [contradicting her dad] Not really housework, but backyard work, work on the car...

R: [ignoring his daughter] Housework, backyard work, work in the garage, cleaning, the laundry, cooking and many things I have to do. In Sri Lanka I never did like that but here I have to do.

I: How did you feel about taking on this work?

R: I was very happy, because I understood the situation. We need money to maintain the family. I'm very happy. Without doing like this we can not live here. Now I'm mixing with this culture. We changed a lot. Everybody.

I: It sounds like you had a rather easy time?

R: [chuckles]

Daughter: I guess it wasn't that hard because now there are more Sri Lankans here. We didn't really change a lot. Like in the school I go to, 75 percent are Indians. It's like our culture too. Now there are people with different backgrounds. Each of them have their own culture. They understand ours and we understand theirs. We didn't really change. I don't feel like that. I feel like how I was back there.

R: Yes. Only the language has changed. Most immigrants have the same cultural background too. Wherever we go there are Indians and Punjabis... Many people like Sri Lankans. And people from South America, many people.

I: Are you saying you get support from other immigrants because you know they are going through the same things?

R. and Daughter: Yeah, yeah.

#### MARRIAGE

I: When did you get married?

R: I got married in 1970 when I was in university. After I come to my home town my father-in-law came to my house and told me he has a daughter, and to come and see her and if I like, I can marry her. I went with him and I saw my wife. I liked her and... Actually it's an arranged marriage. They gave me some dowry money. I used that money to buy a small house.

I: How old were you then?

[He was 27, she 24.]

I: Was that an appropriate age?

R: Yes. Because in Sri Lanka they think there should be 4 or 5 years age difference between the husband and wife.

I: Was it the right time in your life to get married?

[His sisters all married shortly before he did. He would not marry before they were "settled." He was the only one in the family left to marry. He wanted to marry before age 30, "because after 30, 35 years you can not be happy in the family life." He felt it is better to marry young.]

I: How did your father-in-law get to know about you?

R: There are some brokers who do arranged marriages. They knew me and they told my father-in-law, "There's a person who's graduated and he's a good person, why can't you go and meet him." In Sri Lanka there are brokers whose full time job is to investigate each and every family. This broker got to know about me very well.

I: What information did the broker give the family?

R: He's a graduate, he's earning well, he's a good person, he's suitable for your daughter.

I: What was your wife's family looking for in you?

R: They prefer my educational background, my family background and my habits. Habits means not drinking and smoking.

I: What were you looking for when you went to see her?

R: At that time they told me she would be a good partner and she would help me, whatever my ambitions and my views. Mostly in Sri Lanka [men] prefer [their bride] to be a good housewife. But after I came here I changed.

I: Now what do you want from your wife?

R: Now, mostly financial and help in other outside work. Not only in the house but beyond the house too, in society. More responsibility than my house.

I: Did anyone go with you to see your wife for the first time?

R: Yeah. We can't go alone. I had to go with my sister, my father, my mother and my relatives. Because in Sri Lanka, when the marriage is arranged it's a society problem. You can't go and marry direct away. You have to go with the society. It's very important. Otherwise the society won't allow you to be there.

I: What education did your wife have then?

R: A-level

I: Where was she from?

[Another village about 7-8 km away from his village.]

I: Did you come often to Jaffna to visit her before you were married?

[Their wedding took place one year after the marriage was arranged because R. was waiting for his sister to marry. He visited on vacations.]

I: How long did it take from the time you first saw her until you made up your mind to marry her?

R: Two to three days.

I: How long was it before your registration? (legal marriage)

[4 months. The Hindu wedding was 8 months after the registration.]

I: When a couple is registered and legally married can they live together before the wedding?

R: No. You have to wait until the thali celebration. That is an important thing in Hindu culture. Even if the registration is over she is not your wife socially. Socially, she is only accepted as your wife after the thali ceremony.

I: Were you allowed to see her alone?

R: Yes, I was. But ten, fifteen years back nobody would be allowed before the thali wedding.

I: Was your marriage different from your parents' marriage?

R: I don't remember my parents' marriage [laugh]. It was very much the same. But most marriages in Sri Lanka are arranged to very close relatives. [cross cousins] Most people believe in the horoscope. That is a major problem. The horoscope should be matching, otherwise they won't accept the marriage. Some families

have to chose more than 100 families until the bride and groom's horoscope matches.

I: Did your wife's family look into your horoscope as well?

[R. did not have a horoscope. His father did not have one written for him and he does not believe in it. His father was a social reformer.]

R: As soon as I saw her I trusted and I liked her and I got married.

I: Did her family give you a dowry?

[They gave approximately Rs. 20,000.]

R: It was helpful at that time because as a teacher at the beginning stage, I gave my money for my sister's wedding. This is some kind of a reciprocal arrangement. As an earning person I had to give to my sister. I didn't have money at that time. So this girl's party gave me some money to establish our life. This money was in my wife's name. I couldn't touch that. After we got married I built a house in her village. I lived with them. That's something they liked.

I: Does it often happen that the dowry stays on the woman's side and the man will move to be near his wife's family?

R: This happens in mostly Jaffna. The girls have more money. There is more demand for the gents to stay with them.

I: Would you call your marriage typical?

R: Yes.

I: Are the marriages among Sri Lankans in Canada just as typical?

R: Yes. The weddings are the same. Some people even look at their horoscopes. And there are temples. They still preserve their culture.

Daughter: But there are more love marriages here.

R: Even in Jaffna there are love marriages and here there are arranged marriages. I can not say which one is more.

I: Is caste a factor in marriages?

R: Yeah, that is a very big problem in Jaffna. Even here too. Because they believe in the caste system and they don't like to marry different castes. Even if they [other caste members] are rich and educated, they don't want to marry among their caste... Everybody believes their caste is most valuable and other castes are lower than their caste. This is really a curse in Jaffna.

I: What do you think of that?

R: It's very bad. But they believe. What shall we do? They believe it is their right. It's an unacceptable thing, but... Our culture is a traditional one. The ancestors gave their culture to other groups. It automatically comes into our society. So still they preserve the system.

I: Was caste a factor in your marriage?

[They are both from the same caste.]

I: Back then would you have considered marrying outside of your caste?

R: Even if I did not think I had to..., even if I liked or loved I could not marry because I wanted the rest of my life to be peaceful. If I loved one girl and if we got married, after marriage definitely it would be a problem. If they got to know that, the girl's party would come and give some trouble to me. It will affect my whole life and even my children. That's why I was afraid to fall in love at that time. Inter-caste marriage is very, very rare. Less than 1% in Jaffna. I remember that people fell into very much trouble, and some people killed each other. I remember many stories. When one girl fell in love with another caste, that party came and killed her. And sometimes the girl's party killed that boy. Because of that fear, nobody is willing to mix. If you know the caste it is very difficult to get married in Jaffna. It is a very dangerous problem still.

I: Is it different here in Canada?

R: Here also they are importing the same culture. They are importing the caste roots, the dowry system and everything. Because the same village people are here, they know that these people belong to this caste. Even if they fly thousands of miles away, they don't change their minds. Even if they are educated they still believe in it.

I: There are more people like you who don't believe in caste. So, are there any groups who are trying to change the caste system?

R: There are no groups here. [The existing groups] still believe in caste. So who's going to build a cat? These people, when they form a society, only upper caste people are there. They don't want to mix with lower castes. They want to earn money and to live a very peaceful life. That's it. They are all profitable. They don't want these caste altercations. This is a very important point. In India, I heard many Sri Lankans started inter-caste marriages, but it was a failure, utterly a failure.

I: What do you think might change the caste system?

[R. doesn't know. Placing it in the charter of rights, and other legal measures won't work. He thinks through education people might change their minds, but it's very hard.]

I: Sometimes people don't want to talk to me about caste, but you are talking freely...?

R: Because I know! Sometimes people thought I am a lower caste in my society. I faced many problems in my country. Sure!

I: What kinds of restrictions did you have?

R: I could not marry the other side because they think my caste is lower. I could not go to the school and teach there. The upper caste children can not accept the lower caste children to sit beside them. The lower caste children have to sit at the back. Even me, I sat in the last bench because of my caste. I learned a lot about this caste system. Every inch, every road is named after a particular caste. You can not even go and bring the water from a well because that may belong to the Vellala upper caste. The society has a problem. In the government jobs there is a problem because the upper caste people occupy the good positions in Jaffna. Even names show the caste.

I: Does your name reveal your caste?

[R.'s name is not identifiable with caste, but his father's name was.]

R: When the registrars wrote their names they automatically changed it to the caste names. They had the right at that time.

Even if you told a good name they still made small changes. You can easily find out from the birth certificates. Now we have stopped writing the profession on the birth certificate because people believe that from the profession they can tell the caste.

I: How do people know another person's caste these days if you can no longer tell from the name or the occupation?

R: When two Sri Lankans meet each other they ask which area you are from. Certain areas belong to a typical caste in Jaffna. Their family friends here know that this guy comes from a typical caste. So, they won't go to his wedding. They won't go to his party. They just want to live among themselves. They are talking mostly about caste.

I: Would your married life be different if you were in SL?

[R. doesn't think so.]

I: Have you ever thought about getting a divorce?

R: Divorce is very, very difficult. If you want a divorce, your relatives automatically come and advise you not to do it. There are some barriers to doing that. If I have a problem with my wife, my wife's party will come and advise me not to do that. My parents and my brothers will also come and tell me not to do it. Because this is a social problem. If you have a divorce it is very hard to marry again.

I: Suppose a couple in Canada does not have people who can come and intervene in their problems?

R: I heard that many Sri Lankan families have thought of divorce because of some misunderstandings and financial problems, and sometimes the ladies go to work... a stressful life. They are having family difficulties but still they don't get a divorce.

#### CHILDREN

I: Did you want to have more than two children?

[R. wanted only 2 because of his financial situation.]

I: What are the main things you want for them in their lives?

[The eldest daughter went to college and now works as an accountant. When she said she did not want to go to university, R. agreed. She is engaged to a boy she met in school who also happens to be a distant relative. R. thinks the boy's father is his second cousin, but is not sure. The wedding will be in Sri Lanka, at the boy's parent's home. They will settle down in Canada. It was a love marriage because the couple made the decision to marry.]

I: What qualities do you want to see in your daughters?

[He would like them to do social work. This was his ideal since he was young. He worked for a non-profit agency in Montreal for 2 years. He does not want them to be motivated by money. Even so, he does not challenge his daughter's decision to do accounting.]

I: Do your daughters have boyfriends?

[The eldest has had only one boyfriend, who she is marrying.]

R: My youngest daughter doesn't. Only at the classroom level she speaks [to boys]. That's it. But not like dating and the Canadian system. No. We don't allow it. It would affect her whole life. We don't allow that. It will create a cycle.

According to our culture she has to marry only one person... have sexual relations with only one. That is very important. Otherwise it will affect her psychology.

I: How would you feel if your daughter married a non-Sri Lankan?

[R. sees no problem. He trusts her to find a "good person."]

I: What kind of person do you see as a good person for your daughter to marry?

R: educated, trustworthy, good habits, good in the family

I: What makes you a good husband and father?

R: Mutual understanding, trust, telling each other about small things. If you press your wife to be lower than you, you will not achieve a good life. So, I give all the freedom and good learning habits to my wife.

I: As a parent are you different here than you would be in SL?

R: Here I give more freedom. [Daughter agrees]. In Sri Lanka the parents are always pressing their daughters to be more obedient. There, an elder brother will sit at one level and a younger brother will sit at a lower level. Sometimes even the sitting arrangement... [is hierarchical]. You can not speak in front of elders. Whether they are correct or not, you have to obey.

I: Do your daughters ever challenge you?

R: Yes, sometimes. They discuss everything.

I: Did you have this type of relationship with your father?

R: No. That period was different. We changed a lot. After I came to Canada, even my school children, their educational background is different.

#### PARENTS

I: Your mother is the only parent still alive. What kinds of duties do you have towards her?

[His mother is sick. She lives with his sister. R. sends money but has no telephone contact. He can't do much.]

I: Do Sri Lankan parents expect their children to do anything for them when they are old?

R: Yeah, in Jaffna most parents only expect financial help. After the riots the prices have gone up and there are no jobs. They depend on their children. Since I am the son and I am here, I can send some money to them and they live happily on that basis.

I: Would they expect the same from a daughter?

R: It depends on her earnings

I: Do you have expectations from your daughters as to how they will treat you in your old age?

R: I don't expect much. It's not in my hands, but I would like them to live close to me or live together in the same house. I don't want to live alone in this country.

I: What arrangements are Sri Lankans making for their seniors?

R: There's a senior's association. Most elderly people live with their children.

I: Have you observed any differences in how Sri Lankans treat elderly people in Canada?

R: I have to agree that this younger generation does not realize their elders' problems. They don't treat them very well. They just ignore them. Because they think that they are right and they don't like these people, their habits and their dress. Because their educational background is different. We have a very open life in Sri Lanka. When they come here they have to live in a small apartment. They don't know what to do. They have language problems. They can't go to their neighbours' and talk. They have to watch TV. Twenty-four hours of watching TV won't help them because they can't understand the language. They usually watch Tamil films at home. Tamil films do nothing for your mind or purity. They have spoiled our society.

#### RELATIVES

I: How much do your relatives expect from you?

R: As one of the educated people in society, they depend on me. [He helps them fill out forms, accompanies them to immigration interviews, does translation for their appointments with welfare, doctors, etc.]

R: And advice. When they do anything, they call and ask me. I have to tell them do this and do that. I am trying to help them be a good person.

I: To how many relatives do these obligations extend?

R: About 40 or 50 families are here. Some are very close relatives, some are far relatives. We know they are among our caste. On that basis we are relatives.

I: What is your reputation with them?

R: They think I am a teacher from Sri Lanka. And I am very innocent. And I am a very truthful person. I don't smoke and I don't drink. Back home I studied at university. Even here I had a good position in a non-profit association. And I don't do any bad things in my society. So everyone calls me Master.

I: What would happen if you said, "No I can't help you"?

R: I don't say that I can't do that. If I don't have time I explain my situation and try to find someone else to help them. But most of the time I help them. I have to do it. This is my duty. I am always thinking about my society's upliftment.

#### OTHER ATTITUDES

I: Do you think you will go back to Sri Lanka?

R: I don't think so. I want to be here until my death. Sometime I may go back as a visitor.

I: Will your children go back?

R: No. They want to be here because they have studied here. Their knowledge and everything is suitable for Canada. They can not go and work there.

I: How does your wife feel about going back?

R: She wants to be here because of the children. Even if she wanted to go there, how could she because my children are here. And we all are Canadian citizens.

I: Comparing your life to what it was in Sri Lanka do you think that anything is missing?

[He misses speaking Tamil. He was a good teacher and a good orator. If he was still there he would have a good position as an educational officer. He would have been very influential in the society. Rather than work for social change in Sri Lanka, he has been trying to change himself in Canada.]

I: What did you gain in coming here?

[His daughters education and opportunities to work here. A politically peaceful life.]

R: We live here because of the peace. Otherwise everybody wants to be in their own country, even if they are poor.

[He has experienced great financial pressures here. Before coming to Canada he didn't know what was a mortgage. He doesn't like the fact that he will have to work until his death.]

I: Supposing a couple just arrived from Sri Lanka. What advice would you give them?

R: They have to live according to the Canadian system. And they have to spend their money very systematically. They should not cheat the government. They should earn money and live peacefully.