

Ethnic Group: Tamil  
Interview number: 8  
Date: June 15, 1993  
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information

Gender: female  
Age: 45  
Place of Birth: Jaffna, Sri Lanka  
Religion: Hindu  
Marital Status: married  
Education: Advanced-level  
Occupation: seamstress for Scarborough company for 4 years  
Husband's occupation: engineer, salary = approx. \$35,000  
Children: twin sons, age 21; daughter, age 17

Interviewer's Comments:

The respondent, "Mano" is the mother of one of my former university classmates, "Suresh." I asked Suresh if I could interview his mother. He explained my project to her and set a time. I did not speak to his mother until I went to their home. They live in a large newly-built town house in Scarborough. They have a garage and small car. The house is well furnished and tidy. I was taken to the living room which adjoins a dining room. A polished wooden clock in the shape of Africa hangs on the dining room wall. I could see no relics from Sri Lanka.

I asked Mano if we could conduct the interview at the dining room table rather than the living room couch. She dusted the table first, and gave me a newspaper so I could write without marking the table. Suresh served me a cup of tea. I did not meet his twin brother. In the interview Suresh is the son who is mentioned for giving his mother advice and wanting to be a doctor. His twin is mentioned for his refusal to do any work around the house.

MIGRATION HISTORY/ FAMILY BACKGROUND

Interviewer: When did your family leave Sri Lanka and come to Canada?

[Interviewer summary: the family had lived in a village in Jaffna until the three children were of school age. Then they moved to the town of Jaffna so the kids could attend better schools. In 1980 the husband got an engineering contract with a Zambian mining company. There the family prospered financially. They came to Canada in 1987 when children were 15 (twin sons) and 11 (daughter) for the sake of the children's higher education.

I: Who came originally? Did others come to join them? Who is still in Sri Lanka? How much contact do you have?

[The respondent was first of her family of origin to come to Toronto. Her brother arrived in Montreal one month before. He stayed with a cousin. Within the first year another cousin came to Toronto and stayed with her family. The family was obligated to provide their home.]

Respondent: Our relatives, if they come new to Canada and we came before, they don't realize that we are draining out our resources. They come and stay in our house. We don't say no. Our society is like that. They'll say, "Oh, my sister is here, my cousin is here." It's really hard because you can't say anything to them. Back home we entertain people. If someone comes we don't have to cook the food--we have it, because we don't cook just enough for five people. If I cook at home even now I don't cook just enough for us. I'm not used to that. I always cook more. So when they come, you cannot say, "I can not afford to keep you."

That was a really hard time.

[R.'s parents, one sister and two brothers are now in Canada, as well as several extended family members.]

I: Talk about your arrival in Canada and your first experiences. Where did you settle? Who helped you? How did you support yourselves at the beginning?

R: In Zambia we had a very good life. My husband's company gave him the car, the house, the furniture, [house maids and security guards]. Even they paid for our kid's education. Expatriates are paid very well there. And it's nice weather. Of course [it was a sacrifice for us to come here], but for the kids we were prepared to do anything. We wanted them to do well in life. That's why we came here. My husband used to say we came from heaven to hell. If we lived in Zambia my children couldn't do any higher education. Back home the big goal is medicine. And the second goal is engineering. From there accountancy, and things like that. So when my son said he wanted to be a doctor I didn't want to say no. But I didn't want to send him away. He got admission to [university] with 95.3 average and he got a scholarship. The children were so bright. That's why we wanted to come here: to give them a good education.

[The family brought savings of \$10,000. They rented an apartment in Toronto, bought a TV, furniture, pots and pans, etc. Their money was gone within three months, so they went on welfare for one year until they got work permits and landed immigrant status. The strain of adjusting, financial problems and uncertainty about whether they would be allowed to stay in Canada brought on marital conflict. R. described the problems as, "minor, but sometimes terrible. My husband kept losing his temper for nothing."

#### IDENTITY

I: What identities matter most to your family? (eg. Canadian, Tamil, Sri Lankan, South Asian) Has this changed since you came to Canada?

R: I would say I'm a Sri Lankan Tamil. I'm proud to say that. I don't want to be a Canadian. That's what I tell my children. But the children want to be Canadians.

I: Who are your close friends? (SL Tamils, Canadians, others?) How much contact do you have with Sri Lankan Tamils?

[Most of her friends are Sri Lankan Tamils, plus few Canadians and others. All the Sri Lankan Tamils she mentioned are relatives. Gatherings at birthday parties were once common, but are becoming rarer. The extended family usually meets at weddings.]

I: What are your traditional cultural practises? How often do you follow them?

[R. likes to go to temple every Friday if she can. She fasts on Friday mornings. She always cooks Sri Lankan food. On Friday she observes the practice of serving vegetarian food. She wears sari and potu to the temple and to weddings.]

I: Do other Tamils affect your day to day behaviour?

R: I believe no one can change. I used to tell my son, sometimes he says that his father is so dictative. I used to tell him, "When you become a father you will also become like that because it's in your blood." Our people, they are like that, the men, the boys. They don't do a single thing at home. My daughter keeps asking me, "What's the difference? Why do I have to do and they

don't have to?" What can I say? I have no answer. Our people, the girls (pause). When I was a young girl in Sri Lanka I could not go anywhere by myself. My father would not let me. He was so strict. Only little by little we are changing. I can not practice that on my daughter.

[R. seeks advice and support about child-raising from her co-workers. She strongly rejects the advice of her male relatives (brothers and uncles), even though it is offered.]

R: Sometimes I talk at work at lunchtime. They'll ask me, "Do your children help at home?" Now they know about the way we live, so they keep telling me, "You are bringing up a child just like your husband. So that means his wife is going to suffer because she is not going to do things the way you do." So one day I asked him, "Look, you are not washing your plates, you are not doing anything at home. So if you get a wife, she might run away from you." He said, "No mother, because you are my mom I am doing that. I am not washing the dishes because you are not going to run away from me. If it is my wife I would not do that." He is very smart.

[She talked about how she takes the advice of her children seriously, particularly her sons.]

R: Now the world is changing. The kids can advise us. Their thinking is more advanced.

#### MARRIAGE

I: When did you get married? How old were you and your husband? How well did you know him?

[They married in 1970. R. was 23, her husband was 25 or 26. It was a traditional arranged marriage involving horoscopes. Her father gave a dowry of a house, jewelry and money. The couple had no unsupervised contact until after the wedding.]

R: The thali is the marriage license. If the husband dies before wife she has to take it off and put it on the coffin.

I: How much education did you both have then? Later?

[Both had finished their schooling. She had reached A-level. He was a qualified engineer with a job. It is customary that men do not marry until their careers are established.]

I: What were your occupations then? Later?

[R. had considered becoming an accountant, but in order to continue her education she had to move to another province. Her father insisted that she live with an aunt and uncle rather than in a hostel. Because she did not like the aunt, she refused to go.]

I: Is your marriage like that of your parents? If there are differences, do you think the differences are better or worse? for you? your husband?

[R.'s marriage is traditional. The non-traditional marriage is a "love match."]

R: Some people go in love. If they go like that they would not be respected those days. But now things are changing, even in Sri Lanka.

I: Would your marriage relationship be much different if you were still living in Sri Lanka? How has it changed since coming here?

R: It's the same. That's why I'm having a very hard time. Until I came to Canada we didn't have any problems. After we came to Canada we had lots of problems. Because he couldn't adjust. We had financial problems as well. For him, he always had whatever he wanted. Throughout his life he didn't have a problem at all. After coming here he had lots of stress. He couldn't bear it. He has to put it on somebody else. So I am there to receive it. And the children, they didn't like it. They just came and talked to him. "Why are you doing that?" He didn't like that. He thought the children were not respecting him, and that they wanted to take my side, and that I am teaching them something. I couldn't believe he did those things. Even now I can't believe it. Now he's changing. I think he must have realizing that he can't demand and dictate like before. Now that the world is changing and the children are growing. He has to change a bit too. The only thing is he wants to be the boss. He doesn't understand that the children are big. He can't shout at them.

I: Did you ever think about divorce? Under what circumstances would Tamils divorce? Do you know of anyone who has divorced?

R: At one stage my children told me we'll go out and live somewhere else, leaving him. I didn't want to do that. He was behaving like that, you know. When we don't listen to him, he was doing it more and more. But I said to my children, for me, I'm happy if my children do well in life. But I have to be with my husband. I'm happy if I'm with him only. I like to be with him all my life. Whether he's good or bad. Sometimes he's a little bit dominating. But that's the way he was brought up and that's the way he is. He can not change. A little bit he is changing. At least we should be happy for that.

[R. said all her Sri Lankan friends have the same problems, but they don't divorce. The main reason is that children of the divorced couple do not receive respect from the community. Her children have told her they don't care about what the community thinks.]

R: 99% of our marriages don't break. Even if the husband is a drunkard and hits the wife, she doesn't go out of the house. She just keeps crying inside the house. That's the way our lives are. Maybe 1% will break. Nowadays I'm hearing a bit. But in Sri Lanka we don't hear about divorces. Sometimes the husband keeps another lady and comes back to the wife. Even that time the wife doesn't say anything. My husband does not do that anyway.

#### CHILDREN

I: Did you have the number and sex of children you wanted?

[Yes. After the twins were born her husband wanted a daughter.]

I: Do your children speak Tamil? Do they follow Tamil customs?

[The family speaks English in the home. The children can speak Tamil, but not write. One son is asking mother to practice speaking Tamil with him. R. feels rewarded when her children go with her to the temple or to visit relatives.]

R. [regarding expectations for her children looking after their parents in their old age]: I'll be happy if they do that. But I'm not like my parents. My parents are relying on my brothers. But I don't want to be a burden to my children. I want to be on my own. And whatever we have, we will give to the children when we die.

I: What are the main things you want for your children?

R: I want them to do well in life. They have to have a good job. They should be able to handle financial problems. They have to stand on their own. I think they'll do it.]

[More of her comments were focused on her expectations for her children's marriages. She expects her sons to marry after 25 and after they find their jobs. Her daughter will marry around 22 or 23, so long as she is "a little bit mature." They plan to give her a dowry. The family has all agreed (both parents reluctantly) that the children will select their own partners.]

R: I'm not going to say anything for their wedding. What can I do? Do I have a choice? Some people, they chase their children and they beat up their children. We are not going to do that. We can not lose the children. People who hit their children for falling in love are stupid. It is not worth it to lose the children.

I: What are your expectations about dating? Are they the same for your sons and daughters?

R: For us, we don't like dating. We are not used to it. Do you think my children are not dating? I don't say anything. I don't like it, but what can I do? No choice. I told [my daughter], boys can go the way they want. They go somewhere, they stay the night and come back. It's okay. But you are not supposed to. She asks, "What's the difference? Why can't I go?" So I had to explain about everything. I told her for us, we have sex only with one person, with the husband, and that only after the marriage, not before. We are not supposed to. I told her we have to be very careful. That's all I can say. I can't go behind her and see what she is doing. I told all three of them, "I trust you," and "You have to be honest." That's all I can say.

I: How would you feel if your children married a non-Tamil?

R: I would prefer if they marry an Asian girl. I would be happier if they get married to a Sri Lankan. The only thing I worry about is they have to stick together throughout their life. I don't say the Canadians don't live together, but it's not very hard for them to split. For us it's very hard to split. We are not respected in the family. And we don't have the heart to split. I can not do that. I can make any amount of money, but I won't be happy. I don't stick to my husband because of money. I can't live without him. That's the only way I can explain it.

[R. said one of her son told her the only reason Sri Lankan marriages work is because if the husband says, "Shut up," the wife shuts up. R.'s concern is, first, that her daughters-in-law should be able to put up with her sons' demands and, second, that her sons not be so demanding that their wives "run away."]

I: Has your parenting changed since coming to Canada?

[R. considers her own style of parenting as generous, not too strict or narrow-minded, compared to other Sri Lankans. The biggest change is in their treatment of their daughter, allowing her to go out with her friends and dress as she wants.]

R: My husband doesn't want my daughter to wear mini-skirts and shorts. But he loves her so much, he can't say anything to her. He just shouts at me. I am like a drum, you see. My son keeps telling me, "Don't put up a big wall. Put up a net so that big things won't go through." [Interviewer's note: her son's advice refers to the kinds of restrictions she places on the daughter, his sister.]

R: I'm giving in a lot for her. But my daughter is very good. She understands. She has told one of my friends at work, "For

the sake of my mother I just keep quiet. I don't want to go out too often, because my dad keeps putting pressure on her."

#### PARENTS

I: Are they still living? How often do you contact them?

[Her parents live in Scarborough. The family visits them. Her husband's mother lives in Jaffna. He would like to visit her but can not because of the political situation.]

I: Are there any ways you help them? How do they help you?

[The family regularly sends money to R.'s mother-in-law. Her brothers sponsored and support her parents.]

R: We have lots of commitments. We are supposed to look after only the mother-in-law, but if you have a flexible heart you look after the others too. Some people don't. It's not a rule, but if you say no, it's not nice.

I: Is your family typical in this way? What is the typical arrangement with parents? Is it different here than in Sri Lanka?

[Sri Lankan sons are responsible for looking after their parents. They perform important functions at their parent's funeral. If they cannot, the closest male relative will fill in. R. said, "It's a matter of pride to do that." However, her husband will not go back in case he gets stuck in Sri Lanka. His duty to his own family comes first.]

#### OTHER RELATIVES

I: Siblings. Where are they living? How much contact?

[R. has two brothers and one sister in Canada. Her other four brothers live in France, Germany, England and Sri Lanka, and her other sister is in Australia. Her parents keep them in contact by occasional phone calls. Her husband's mother and three sisters are in Sri Lanka. His brother is dead, so her husband has the sole responsibility for looking after his mother. R.'s husband's nephew, whose father is deceased, has lived with the family for 6 years. He is now 20. The family has so far given \$8,000 to support him. The nephew works and sends remittances to his mother and younger siblings.]

R: I keep my brothers at length because they comment on my kids. I don't want to hear that. For me, my kid are perfect. I think my brother is stupid. He didn't do anything to help bring up my kids. He can comment when he has his own kids.

I: Extended family? nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, cousins?

R: I have lots of relatives here, and I have lots of problems also. I don't contact most of them. If I talk to them, and if I say something, it will fly around and come back to me in a different form. They just gossip--internal politics! The first wrong thing in Canada is that local telephone calls are free of charge! Sometimes I see them at weddings. Nowadays I don't invite any of them home. I have one or two cousins who are like close friends. Most of my relatives I don't associate with.

I: Is there anyone in your family who keeps everyone together?

[R. used to do that, but has stopped. One problem was lack of time to attend social occasions. Another was hurtful gossip. She also has had to face disapproval from relatives about her

parenting, her children's behaviour and her own non-adherence to Tamil customs, like not wearing potu whenever she leaves the house. Almost gleefully she told about a time she and her sister had shared some "talk" because their most self-righteous brother ("this Tamil-culture man") had brought his wife to a function wearing a tight skirt.]

I: Do your relatives expect anything from you? What?

R: No matter how much you do, they don't appreciate it. On principle, I'm telling my kids, if someone is asking for your help, go and help them. If they don't ask and you help them, after a time they will send you their boots! This is my experience. Now I want to stay out. I was trying to keep my family together, but it's not worth it.

#### ATTITUDES AND NORMS

I: What would you say are some of the main attitudes of Tamils towards the family?

[Speaking about her role as mother, she complained several times that her husband and sons did no work in the home. But she said this is typical of "our Sri Lankan men." She feels she must work for them. For example, when her son comes home late at night, "If I don't cook the food and give him, he won't eat. I can't let my child starve."]

R: Now my daughter is a vegetarian. I don't mind vegetarian food. But it is hard for me to cook vegetarian food for her and non-vegetarian for the others. One son eats very hot food, the other only takes it mild. It's really hard. And if I talk about these things they'll laugh at me. They'll say I'm crazy. But, my family, I hope that this way I'm keeping it together. If I am not doing these things I am not the mother. It's like a hostel.

R [commenting on her husband's role]: He has to look after the family. To bring in the money, the finances. That's the way.

[R.'s husband and children give all their earnings to her. She makes the budget, manages and spends the money.]

[R. believes both parent's desire to keep the children at home unites the family. R. tells her husband not to object to children's activities too strongly for fear that they will leave home.]

R: Even if we have problems, both of us love the children so much, that's the link. Some of the ways we have I think are better. The family life especially. Even if we have problems we just tolerate them. We don't go to the extent of breaking up the family.]

[R. believes crime, drug abuse and major social problems are related to family break-up.]

I: Is this changing for Tamils in Canada? How?

R: The tone of parents is changing. You can't help it. You have to change. You can't have it both ways. You can't live like a Sri Lankan and live in Canada. They children spend most of their time with the Canadians. They adapt themselves to the Canadian ways. They have to impress their friends. But I hope my children are a bit understanding.

I: Do you ever think about going back to Sri Lanka permanently?

[In the first place, R. does not want to leave her children, and they see themselves staying in Canada.]

R: I don't have any idea of going back because our country is so bad. We won't fit in there after almost 15 years. We wouldn't have any friends and we have to go and search for the relatives. We don't know anyone.]

I: If a recently married couple who just came to Canada came to you for advice what would you tell them?

[She would not give any advice to a new Sri Lankan couple.]