

Ethnic Group: Tamil
Interview number: 9
Date: July 18, 1993
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information

Gender: female
Age: 50
Place of Birth: Colombo, Sri Lanka
Religion: Hindu
Marital Status: widow
Education: Advanced-level, plus various training programs
Occupation: gemologist, bridal dressing
Children: three sons, ages: 26, 21, 14

Interviewer's Comments:

I met Vijaya through one of my "community experts." She came to Canada after she was widowed. Now she lives alone in a small duplex. A male cousin lives in an apartment downstairs from her. She has a physical disability from a childhood illness which prevents her from going out, although she is relatively mobile in her own home. She is a devout Hindu and keeps several statues of the various deities in her home. Presently she is studying computers. Her dining room table was piled with books and papers. Otherwise her house was neat and well furnished. She is 50, but she refers to herself as an "elderly person." I also noticed a newspaper for Toronto Seniors on an end-table. While I was there she received at least three phone calls from a cousin asking if she wanted to go to the temple or come for lunch.

I. MIGRATION HISTORY/ FAMILY BACKGROUND

I: When did you leave Sri Lanka and why?

[R. and family left Colombo for India in 1983 as a result of the communal riots.]

R: My son was a senior scout and a leader of a particular group also. Some people who came to loot the house saw his senior scout uniform and couldn't distinguish it from the police uniform. They told the [military officials] that we had Tigers in the house and that we had unauthorized uniforms. So, when the house burned we had to jump over and our Muslim neighbours gave us shelter. The second or third day, my husband was a heart case. I had to send him to a safer area. My elder son and I stayed in the Muslim house. The third day the police were informed there were Tigers in the house and they came, about 25 or 30 of them, with helmets and guns, and they surrounded the house. They wanted the Tigers. There were no Tigers! Our neighbours' kids too had come into the house. Fortunately there was one police who was able to talk a little English because my Sinhalese is not up to that standard. I said my son goes to [prominent Catholic school] and he is a senior scout. I also said my uncle is a [local political official], so I mentioned his name. That had an impact. We were asked to get into the jeep and go to the police station. Then our neighbour shouted and said they were trying to get so-and-so. And on second thought they [the police] asked me to get out. I said, "I am not going to get out without my son." So they had to put him out. All these things happened which made us leave. I felt the boys were not safe there.

[The family went to India and found a school for their sons. R.'s husband, an export crop specialist, found a job. He had taken one year no-pay leave from his job in Colombo. R. had worked as a hair dresser and a gemologist. Since the children were doing well in India and Sri Lanka continued to be

politically unstable, they decided to stay. After 2-1/2 years R.'s husband got a job offer from a company in Malaysia. Around the same time her elder son got a scholarship to study in the US. The family stayed in Malaysia for about 4 years.]

R: We were very happy in Malaysia. It's a very nice country. It has the Eastern culture and the Western comforts. Everybody is quite conscious of their culture and they take part in that. You get very nice houses. There are at least two cars for one house. You can get servants. The climate is good. (laughs) But unfortunately one fine day, like any other day, he went to work and had a heart attack and died at work. That was a real, real turning point in my life. I didn't know what to do.

[She did not want to go back to Sri Lanka because of her sons, so she took them to England. After a couple of months she decided to come to Canada alone. Her husband's brother's family lives in Canada, but all her relatives are in England: "My sisters, my mother, my neices, my cousins, name it, they were all there." The family opposed her decision to come to Canada.]

R: They were dead, dead against me coming over. None of them wanted me to come over. This decision to come to Canada was entirely mine. But I don't regret.

[She decided to come to Canada because of the services provided for people with disabilities.]

R: As long as transport is given, you can do anything, like any other person. You are no more a disabled person. Once we come inside, we are normal. Especially to people like us who are living alone, it's very important. How long can you go on getting help from others? To a certain point your relatives will do it, but not always. So I'm able to carry on here. Hats off to Canada. I'm more patriotic about Canada than I am about my own country.

I: When did you come to Canada, and what did you do at first?

[R. came in December, 1989. She started learning accounting and keyboarding. She soon got a job as a gemologist with a diamond company. She lived with her brother-in-law (husband's brother).]

I: Who else did you know in Canada? Did they help you in any way?

[R. had a cousin and a couple of friends. They called, but they were in a "shaky situation," so they couldn't help much. Her brother-in-law's family helped her the most. The brother-in-law's family of four was also sharing their house with his sister and her family of four, as well as with R. She moved out after one year into her own apartment. She wanted to be on her own. However, she knew three families in her apartment building.]

I: Was it your sons' decision to stay in England? What are they doing now?

R: I was compelled to leave them there. I couldn't get the visa for them. Also, the fact that I was coming to a new country, my mother in England, she felt that I can not look after myself.

[The eldest son is still studying in United States. The second studied business management and now wants to go back to school. The youngest is preparing for his O-levels. R. has sponsored the youngest, and he will be coming in September. She can not sponsor the second son until she has a job. It is very important to her to bring them. She says she misses them terribly.]

I: Do you have any family members back in Sri Lanka?

[R. has a brother with whom she has no contact and a sister to whom she writes and telephones.]

II. IDENTITY

I: Do you think of yourself as a Canadian or a Sri Lankan, a Tamil or something else?

R: I consider myself as a Sri Lankan Canadian, not as a fully Canadianized person.

I: What kind of identities do your sons have?

R: My younger son who is 14 is more British I think. Even my second son who is 21, he loves England. I don't think any of them will ever go to Sri Lanka. My elder guy, he loves the States. He still has his Sri Lankan ways a little bit, but he doesn't have a single Sri Lankan friend where he lives.

I: Do you have many Sri Lankan friends?

R: I do have lots of them. I do bridal dressing so I have to be in contact with Sri Lankans. That's very important. My children can do that, but not me.

I: Do you have non-Sri Lankan friends? How did you come to know them?

R: Yes. I know them through [charitable agency]. I am a volunteer worker there. And where I was working before, but not many. But here, [the computer training program], I have met good friends.

I: What kinds of Tamil traditions and practices do you keep?

[Religious activities are important to R. She goes to the temple when she's offered transportation. She's Hindu and is a devotee of a living Hindu saint in India. She told a long story about the saint: One of her friends was facing criminal charges and a maximum prison term of eight years because of allegations by her co-workers in a day care centre that she had mistreated some children. Her lawyer recommend she plead guilty but she refused. She prayed to the saint and saw a vision. The courtroom was packed with devotees of this saint. The judge ruled that she was not guilty. R. exclaimed: "No one would ever believe it!" Meanwhile this devotee had been writing a book about the saint. Within three days of the verdict she published it.]

R: I'm quite proud of my culture. I had a cultural pageant. First they said fashion show, but anyway I made it a cultural pageant to show them how our people back home a few decades back dressed in different ways. That is because of the different jobs or profession they chose. Like a farmer will be different from a man who goes out fishing.

I: Does it depend on the caste?

R: It depends on the caste and that became the caste system. But I strongly, strongly don't believe in the caste system and I think it has to be eradicated. I hate that.

[R. cooks Sri Lankan food, but she doesn't usually have time. She considers cooking for one person a waste of time.]

III. MARRIAGE

I: When did you marry and how old were you?

[R. married in 1966 at age of 23. Her husband was 28.]

I: Was it an arranged marriage?

[No. R.'s husband had been her physics tutor. He was Catholic and she Hindu.]

R: So there was a bit of a stir in my family because...(pause). My brother, who is a doctor now, when he was in medical school, he fell in love with a Catholic girl and got married. It is very, very, very common here in Canada for people to get married when are going to school. But in Sri Lanka it never happens, not even 0.0001 percent I should say of people get married when they are still going to school. They finish their schooling and they get married. Supposing there is a marriage coming while they are in school, that's it. They give up. My brother continued and they had a baby. I really don't know, but that particular family, they were very religious, fanatics I should say. They broke my brother's marriage. I don't know whether I'm right to say that but everybody back home knows what happened. The church wanted her to leave, and when she left there were bouquets sent to her to congratulate her. I always thought churches had to put two people together, not to separate them. So when I fell in love with a person who was also Catholic, my mother, oh, I had to hear so much from her! But I was rather determined and my mom said, "Ok, go ahead, but if anything happens you are not coming back to me."

I: How did your husband's family react?

R: They also didn't like it at the beginning. But, my husband being the eldest--. We were brought up in the city. He was brought up in Jaffna. There the parents brainwash the children that they have to look after their younger brothers and sisters. So my husband always felt that he should look after his eldest sister, who was not married. So he said, I cannot get married until my sister gets married. She was already 29, 30, and it's so tough to find a man. It had to be a proposed marriage. So I said okay, and we got engaged. Two months after we got engaged her marriage was fixed.

I: Even though you don't believe in caste, were you and your husband of the same caste?

R: Yes. But he comes from the islands [off the Jaffna peninsula]. We people who are on the land, we really look down on the people from the islands. But we never talk like that. If my mother or my sisters had said something bad, I would have had a lot to say, and I wouldn't have spoken to them again. They know I am very strong in my ways.

I: Are there sub-divisions of castes?

R: Even you find that one village--north, south, east, west-- people who are north feel they are more proud than the southerners.

[She told a story of how her family was among the first in Colombo to allow a low caste servant to come into their house, but her mother would not allow him in the kitchen. However, when the servant was sick, her mother would feed him. They received a lot of criticism for this.]

R: People, especially educated types, have changed their views regarding caste. By and by, now it's dying.

I: How much education did you have?

[Her husband had graduated from university. He was tutoring several people, including the prime minister's daughter. After R.'s tuition class was completed he went to Russia for further schooling.]

I: How did you get to know each other?

R: My mother was a very strict lady. Of course during the tuition we got to know each other, but we never went out. I was very scared of my mother. As soon as tuition was over, he had to go off to Russia. I told him he couldn't write any letters to me because my mother would kill me. The famous thing there is they write to a friend and the friend passes the letter on to you. It so happened that girl was in love with him too. She wouldn't give me the letters. When there was no response, he knew there was something going wrong. So I thought, let us see what is happening. In the meantime my mother smelled it. He came home. My mother asked me. I said, "Yes." She said, "You can't do it." There was a guy opposite our house. He liked me. I said, "No way." He was a Hindu. He had no responsibilities. He also had gone to Russia. They said, "What's the difference?" What they look at is their status, their job, their religion. But for me the man counts! But I was quite determined.

I: Did your husband's family ask for a dowry from your family?

[Her husband's family was quite poor. His mother died of a snake bite just before he sat for his O-level exams. He took on the responsibility of looking after the family's financial future. His uncle took him to a good school in Jaffna and promised that he would see him through university.]

R: For them it was like betting on a winning horse, he was so clever. Then they brainwash him and it is engrained in their minds that they have to give a dowry to their sister to get the sister married. The sister was so ordinary. She didn't go to work. Her mother died, so she quit school early and started cooking to look after the other five children. They all felt very bad for this sister. The sister was getting old.

[R.'s husband had many marriage proposals which included a dowry and an additional "donation" which could be used for his sister's dowry. Because of this need, R. gave her entire savings of 25,000 Rupees for her husband's sister's dowry. She is proud of this but she has kept it a secret from her relatives.]

I: You see a lot of weddings since you are a bridal dresser. How are they changing compared to back in Sri Lanka?

R: Where the ceremony and culture is concerned, they try to adhere to everything! I should say there are certain things which we can't do in Canada and they are still trying to do them. Like inviting people. Back at home we would invite 500, 600, 800 people. They are still inviting like 400, 500 people. Having a wedding back there is cheaper. Here it is \$15 per head at least. It is so much money they are throwing!

The girls and the boys have changed a lot! I can quote you some interesting things, which I can't believe I just heard! I knew the groom's party. He got married to a pretty girl. He used to bring that girl here. It was a very big wedding. Now I hear they are separated. These things that we never hear of! It was partly the girl's mother's involvement. It's very unusual of a Sri Lankan girl to do such a thing. Because this girl was very pretty, it must have gone to her head. But this boy was also so silly. I don't know what happened. Such things we never hear of in Sri Lanka!

Another one happened. That boy was here for about nineteen years, the girl I knew in Sri Lanka. I dressed her for the engagement. The girl's party went to India to buy the sari, to

print the invitations. Such a big, grand wedding it was going to be! Sunday, the father, mother and the girl came with the engagement photographs and showed me. Wednesday, I hear it is broken. They got a letter from the boy's mother to say the marriage is off. Why? No real reasons given! Later I hear the girl is not up to their level. But I can't see what level they are talking!

I: Are people who are getting married here still concerned with caste?

R: Some, yeah. Now I talk so big about caste, but I'll tell you, I am a hypocrite. If my son was going to say yes to a proposed marriage and if they bring a girl from a real low caste, I would think twice. But I tell other people, we have come so many miles away, it doesn't matter.

I: Are most of the marriages here proposed?

R: There are quite a few arranged ones, but there are a few love marriages too.

[She thinks there are more here than in Sri Lanka, but even in Sri Lanka it is changing].

R: My brother-in-law told [my niece] the other day, "Whatever is said and done, you must get married to a Sri Lankan boy." Now, she goes to [University]. She asked, "Why?" They said, "Of course you have to because of our culture, blah, blah, and all that. And see for how many years we are married." She said, "That's the whole trouble. Even if you don't like each other you carry on because you are a Sri Lankan couple. But why should you suffer? If you don't like that man or the man doesn't like the woman, you separate." So they are starting to think like the Canadians. But I don't blame them because they are Canadian by day and Sri Lankan by night. I feel very sorry for the young children because they are confused and they don't know who they are. They like to imitate the Western ways. Externally they are changing. They are like the Canadians, they dress very well, their hair is short. Internally we have not changed because we had been in Sri Lankan for so long. But for them, why wouldn't they change? If I were they, I would also change.

I: What is the last thing that will change in the young people?

R: Probably, I only hope, is the attachment they have for their parents. Here I find after 16, 18, 20 years the [Canadian] girls and the boys leave their homes and they find a room or an apartment. I only hope that will not happen. That they will stay with their parents for as long as they can.

I: Have you ever thought about re-marrying?

R: No. Now I'm 50. I have my set ways. I lived with my husband for 23 years. I got to know him when I was 19. I didn't know any other man in my life. We accepted the other person's ways. It was so easy to get along. But now if I get married to someone, he would be horrid! If he doesn't like my ways--. I can never imagine another person. It scares me. And my children come first. My husband would hammer them and I would just sit and laugh. But if another man comes and touches them, I just can't bear it. I will think he is ill-treating them. I am very generous and liberal in my ways. Once my children come over, I will try to give them whatever my husband would if he were still alive. What if another man comes and doesn't say yes to it?

I'm happy as I am really. I only want a man to pay the mortgage, to shovel the snow, to cut the grass, to put the garbage out. Why would I need a person? For financial help. For a little bit of physical help. But I think if I have the

money I can pay for that.

IV. CHILDREN

I: What expectations do you have for their marriages.

R: The ideal thing would be for them to marry a Sri Lankan girl. Probably a Hindu. But now as time goes by and I talk to people my own age, my classmates, they said, "You can't be that hard. You have to change. They are boys and they are on their own." Now I feel that if they get married to any girl, but a nice girl, a very simple girl.

I: Would you try to arrange their marriages for them?

R: I tried. One was a very nice girl. She is at the [University]. She does Karnatic music but when she goes out to a dance she dresses like a Canadian. They are people who can adjust. And at home, they have two boys and two girls. They have given the freedom, but they are firm in certain ways. And they liked me a lot. I liked not only the girls, but the boys and the parents. But my son said no. Anyway, my children are not going to listen to me. They are going to get married to whomever they want. They have already told me.

I: Do your sons speak Tamil?

[The oldest is fluent. The second stumbles, but is okay. The youngest prefers to speak English.]

I: Do you think your sons have girlfriends?

R: Yes.

I: How do you feel about that?

R: I want them to get married. I always say I want grandchildren soon. But they can't change me into an American or a Canadian over night. My eldest son had a girlfriend. I was quite surprised. My son was an ideal son among all our relations. My mother was here when we heard it. Our first reaction was, "What would other people think?" Fortunately or unfortunately that didn't work out.

At this stage, if he comes across a nice girl, I might say yes. I'm unfair by him because he's the eldest and he is such a nice person. I'm trying to get everything ideal for him. When it comes to his younger brothers I'll give in.

[When her second son informed her that he had a girlfriend he told his mom the girlfriend is just like her. This prompted R. to comment on the affection between mothers and sons in Tamil culture.]

R: I don't know how it is in the Western world, the boys in Sri Lanka, whatever's said and done, they are towards their mother. And the girls are towards the father. It is a universal thing, I think, but it is manifested so obviously in our ways.

I: What kind of qualities do you want to see in your sons?

R: I don't know if you consider education as a quality. For us Sri Lankan Tamils, education comes first. Otherwise, I would like them to be humble. Whatever heights they rise to, they have to be humble. They have to respect the elders. Honest. Kind to their family, their wife and children.

I: What do you want for them out of life?

R: I want them to be happy. Nice family. Children. Give me grandchildren. Every mother hopes for this.

I: Do you think parenting is different for Sri Lankans living in Canada?

[R. explained that Sri Lankan parents in Canada tend to be more lenient in the way they allow their children to dress and in allowing them to go out. However, she would divide Sri Lankans into two categories, those from villages and those from the capital city, Colombo. Children from the city are familiar with temptation. They know how to regulate their own behaviour. They have had experience with accepting and setting limits. Those from villages have usually experienced their parent's tight control. Once in Canada, if they are given some freedom, they go to excess. They try to be "more Canadian than the Canadians." It is much harder for them and their parents to adjust.]

V. PARENTS

I: Did you have any duties or obligations towards your parents when you were growing up and do you now?

R: My father died when I was 17. My mother never expected anything from us. Very unusual. Very unusual. The parents back at home expected a lot from their sons. Financial, physical help, any sort of help. They feel that they have that right over their sons. But the daughters, once they get married, they don't have any [obligations to their parents]. But, with my brother, my mother said, "As long as you study, become a doctor, you earn for yourself, don't give us anything." I think it's wrong. When we grew up it was each one for ourselves. I feel that there was no feeling for each other in our family. Financially we were okay. But I could see my mother's sister next door. They were not in a good position, but they feel so much for each other. Families that are not so well-to-do, they are more united.

[R. described how her mother was strict and sometimes hit her, even at the age of 21. She joked that in Sri Lanka you can't dial 911.]

I: Did you have any obligations to your husband's parents?

[R. had obligations, not only to her husband's parents, but also to his siblings. They agreed to support her husband's brother through university. He lived with them while he studied. This is the brother-in-law who is now in Canada. They have a good relationship.]

R: But when the younger sister got married, they needed the dowry. So, they had the other two brothers. What I felt was we gave dowry for the elder girl. And we educated the younger boy after our marriage. And for a short time we were sending money monthly. I felt it was nothing but fair for the two boys to get together and give a dowry for the one sister. But the sister expected something from us. At that point we said no. This is what happens there. They expect a lot from the brothers.

VI. RELATIVES

I: Do you think the expectations and obligations that Tamils have for their families decrease when they come to Canada?

R: It depends. Some families are still doing it.

[She told of a boy in Canada who gave a dowry for his sister and paid for her wedding, including the jewelry, the sari and other

wedding expenses, to the point where he had no cash to pay her for her bridal dressing services.]

I: Is there one person in your family who tries to keep everyone in the extended family in contact?

[R.'s mother tries. R.'s female cousin also plays this role. Her children are married. Her husband is with an international agency, so she travels a lot. When she is in Canada or England she has a get-together and invites all the relatives.]

I: Does your family consider it important to keep in contact?

[R.'s cousin from Australia drew up a family tree and sent it to all the relatives. Because her grandfather married twice and had ten children she has a large extended family which is dispersed through Canada, England and Australia. R. did not even know some of the names on the tree. "That was a good thing to keep us updated with our relatives, to see how many kids they have and all that. She did a great job!"]

VII. OTHER ATTITUDES/ NORMS

I: What kind of advice do you give the brides who you dress?

[With most brides she only talks about things pertaining to the wedding. But if a bride is close to her she will give advice.]

R: Especially if it is an inter-religious marriage. I would hear that the parents are not happy. I would say, "I too got married to a person who was not of my own religion. But still I was so happy. We would have fought about so many other things--every day is not a bed of roses--but nothing where religion is concerned."

[Other advice she gives them is to keep their money in a joint account, to consider his relatives as hers, to trust each other, not to lie and not to fight over small matters.]

R: Never, ever lie to him. Love is based on trust. Where there is no trust the foundation is not there. The whole castle you build is going to topple. Trust is basic.

I: Are you seeing more inter-religious marriages here?

R: Yes.

I: What about inter-caste marriages?

R: When it comes to caste we don't talk about it. Of course my relatives know what I am. Supposing you were talking about caste and I belong to a low caste, my feelings would be so different. I would be angry that you asked me that question. Or sometimes, others would be open and say what they feel about it. When a girl comes I would never ask about caste. I don't even ask who is the man she is marrying. It is not fair.

I: Do you see many inter-racial marriages?

[Her neice is married to a white Canadian. R. considers him "very nice."]