
SriLankan Tamil Women

Resettlement in Montreal

I am a Tamil from SriLanka and have been in Montreal since October 1986. I have lived in the Eastern and Western Provinces of SriLanka. I was a secondary school teacher and was very much involved in community service and community organizing through the Catholic, Anglican and Methodist churches of SriLanka. I have been a voluntary para-counsellor for youth and women in crisis, a resource person at leadership training programs for school leavers, and a community support groups organizer for the plantation workers in the Central Province. As a consequence of the July 1983 racial violence I could not continue to live and work in Colombo (the capital city); I left the country in early 1984, hoping to return once peace was restored.

My family and I lived in South India for one year by extending a visitor's visa, and in London, England for one and a half years without a visa — and with the constant fear of being asked to leave the country. We were fortunate in being sponsored by the Anglican Diocese of Montreal as convention refugees and arrived in Montreal ten months after the sponsorship process began. In Montreal I followed the seven months French language course at COFI (Le Centre d'Orientation et de Formation des Immigrants), and spent the next three months job hunting, while doing temporary assignments through agencies.

Then I heard about the Job Development Program at Tyndale-St. George's Community Centre, a ministry of the Presbyterian and Anglican churches in Montreal. Tyndale's mandate is to work with the poor in the Little Burgundy district and to offer services

to refugees. Refugee work began in 1980 and has traditionally centered on refugees from Central America. When Karin Michnick became Refugee Director at Tyndale-St. George's in September 1987, she wanted to put more of the focus of the work on refugee women, whom she felt had much more difficulty in accessing services. She applied for grant under the Federal Government's Job Development Program. The grant funded her to hire of three women to work from January to August 1988. Two of these were refugee women, one from Somalia and myself from SriLanka; and one was a Canadian, who continued the traditional work with Central Americans. She has linked up with other organizations to work on organizing strategies to bring refugees together around issues such as refugee determination process and deportation. For the first time Tyndale-St. George began to work with refugees from Somalia and SriLanka. I was hired to develop a project among the SriLankan community in Montreal.

I set out to do a study on SriLankan refugee and immigrant women in Montreal, focusing on their lives in SriLanka, their perceptions and experiences as an ethnic group subjected to decades of discrimination and persecution by majority oppressive governments. Women in particular seem to bear the burden of integrating and adapting to life in a new country. Compared to men, women also end up spending more time with their children: it is culturally expected of a Tamil woman to take the responsibility of handing down cultural traditions and values to her chil-

BY SUDHA COOMARASAMY

dren, while the men take the responsibility of attending to the external needs of the family. Through a series of case studies based on personal interviews I explored the extent to which their life experiences in Sri Lanka influence their efforts and successes in integrating and adapting to life in Canada, especially in Montreal.

Since the success of an interview requires a basis of trust and confidence between the person interviewed and the interviewer, I took care to build this rapport. Communication between us began before the interview and was maintained for several months after the interview.

relevant details and insights into their particular problems or experiences through informal conversations before or after the more formal encounters. The interviews took two to three hours. After each interview the information recorded was read out to the interviewees to check accuracy and objectivity.

From the interviews I formed some general impressions. Most of the women had lived all or most of their lives in the same village and yet had the courage and

One of the areas I had tried to explore was the nature of the relationship between husband and wife, and parents and children, in the context of adapting to and integrating into life in a new country so different from their own. Only one woman shared her perception of her relationship with her husband; she said that being on their own without parents or relatives to provide support, they have learned to rely upon each other and have discovered that their relationship has grown and strengthened in Canada. All the other women did not answer the question: some even admitted that they have never thought about it

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The interviews helped me to make information available, to assist in making contacts with other Sri Lankan women who would be supportive and, according to various needs, to refer to appropriate organizations and Social Service groups. Before the interview was fixed, I explained the purpose of the study and the role of Tyndale-St. George's Community Centre in the study. The confidentiality of the interviews — and the fact that their interviews would be printed in the form of 'stories' using pseudonyms — was clearly explained to each of the interviewees. In a few instances, even after the initial explanation and their apparent feeling of assurance, the women re-checked with me to ensure that any information disclosed would not be communicated to Immigration Canada. Some women expressed a desire to consult their husbands before they made an appointment with me. After consulting their husbands, three women called me back to say that they did not want to participate in the case study. Occasionally, women revealed to me many

strength to start life all over again in a new, alien country. The optimism of these women amidst the limitations due to language barriers and the responsibility of looking after children and running a home amazes me. All the women seem to be looking ahead to the future, determined to provide a better life for their children and planning to help their family members who are still in Sri Lanka.

They still feel bound by their cultural traditions and do not seem to want to effect a change. The women enjoy their ability to contribute to the family income, but are quite comfortable in having a joint bank account and in being relatively dependent. Some feel oppressed by the cultural roles of their men, yet do not want to make any attempts to change the pattern. A husband who drinks heavily and beats his wife, or a husband who leaves the responsibility of caring for the children entirely to the wife, seems to evoke only a passive, fatalistic response — "It is our fate," or "This is what life has to offer to me."

before. The future of their children seem to be their focal point, almost to the exclusion of anything else.

Believing that most of the Hindus would go to the temple on Fridays, I was surprised to discover how few of them do attend temple on a regular basis. Almost all the Hindu women regularly went to St. Joseph's Oratory or to St. Anthony's Church. Even in Sri Lanka, St. Anthony's Church drew thousands of Hindus.

What follows is the information I derived from one of my ten interviews:

Twenty-seven year-old Luxmi is a Tamil Hindu woman who was born in Colombo. As her father was a Government employee, working for the Food Control Department, the family lived most of the time in Colombo. Luxmi has two elder brothers and a younger sister. One of her brothers is still in Colombo, working at the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation. He is undergoing increasing racial

discrimination at his workplace and feels that the situation is becoming unbearable. Her second brother, who left Sri Lanka in 1982, now lives in West Germany with his family. Both her parents live in their village in the North of the Island, since her father's retirement from Government service in 1978.

As a result of having to survive on only one family member's income, and of the high cost of living in a big city, Luxmi and her brothers and sisters were educated in the North. They lived with their maternal aunt and attended schools in the same village. They usually spent their school vacations in Colombo with their parents.

At the age of eighteen, Luxmi dropped out of school, not completing her first public examination in order to get married to a Christian boy of her choice. Her parents did not approve of her choice and they disowned her: this lasted only until the first child, a son, was born in 1981. Luxmi has never worked outside her home. She was able to take care of her baby and attend to everything by herself in Sri Lanka. Since her marriage she has been attending church regularly and was baptized two years ago. Luxmi recalls how her husband's family actively participated in community work through their church, but she did not get involved herself. Apart from attending church, her social life consisted of visiting relatives, and celebrating religious and Tamil festivals together with neighbours and relatives.

Luxmi's husband entered Canada through the United States in August 1986. He had been working on a ship for five years when he disembarked. On arrival in Canada he was given a Minister's Permit. Luxmi entered Canada in August 1987, with her seven year-old son and three month-old twins. She was accompanied by another Tamil and claimed refugee status on arrival. On arrival at the border, she was asked whether she knew anyone in Canada. Luxmi told the authorities that her husband was already in Canada. She was not given a list of service organizations that help refugees settle in Montreal and therefore did not know that such services were available. Some of their friends talked of such services but nobody knew who to contact.

Luxmi found it difficult to recall any particular incident that led them to take the decision to leave Sri Lanka, and to relieve the agony and tension she and her

family had gone through. The General Hospital in Jaffna came under direct shell attack by the Sri Lankan Army on the 19th of May 1987. In the early hours of that morning her twins were born amidst the shattering noise of the shell attack. A few days later, Luxmi, her seven year-old son and her few days-old twins — along with thirty-two others — took refuge in a trench shared by three homes. Luxmi also witnessed a neighbour giving birth to her firstborn in the trench. A few months later, the battered bicycle and the tattered nurse's uniform of the health visitor who gave the inoculations to Luxmi's babies were found; the engaged-to-be-married nurse was never found. Another nurse, a relative of Luxmi's husband, was beaten up by the Armed Forces weeks later. As a result of the traumatic experience she had during the delivery of her twins, and the effect of witnessing the atrocities of the Armed Forces, Luxmi suffers from nervous spasms and dryness of the mouth when she hears a sudden big noise or when she has to speak to strangers. On two occasions Luxmi had not been able to talk to her lawyer due to her nervousness. Her lawyer had stressed the importance of asking for an RSAC (Refugee Status Advisory Committee) member to be present at the inquiry.

Luxmi has been in Canada for eight months now. She and her husband do not have friends outside the Sri Lankan community. Her husband works at two places — in a factory during the day and three to four nights in a Restaurant. Another Sri Lankan family have introduced Luxmi to an evangelical group that meets every Saturday. Luxmi has been able to go to these meetings because this family provides transport. When asked what is it that she misses most in Canada, or what she

HER TWINS WERE BORN AMIDST THE SHATTERING NOISE OF THE SHELL ATTACK. A FEW DAYS LATER, LUXMI, HER SEVEN YEAR-OLD SON AND HER FEW DAYS-OLD TWINS TOOK REFUGE IN A TRENCH SHARED BY THREE HOMES.

finds most difficult to do without, Luxmi mentioned the lack of supportive family members and the language barrier. Lack of a childcare facility and the inability to speak or understand English are the two limitations that seem to most negatively affect her day-to-day life in Canada. On certain occasions when she had to do her grocery shopping, she left her infant twins with her eight year-old son. This is mainly because her husband gets home very late after two jobs. Doing two jobs makes it possible for them to meet their expenses and pay back the debt incurred in paying for their fares to come to Canada from Sri Lanka.

Luxmi's main concerns are her children. She does not even want to think of taking a course or training that would take her outside her home. She is worried that she can not help her son, who is attending a French school, with his school work because of the language problem. When asked what she would like the community to do in order to help her and women like her, she suggested a tutoring service for children whose parents are unable to help them in French. She is anxious to contribute to the family budget because one person's income is not sufficient to meet the expenses. Luxmi is also concerned about her husband's health in having to work for sixteen to twenty hours a day. She does not have the time or energy to go for language classes or any income-generating courses. Recently, another Sri Lankan in the same building volunteered to teach her to operate an overlock machine. Luxmi now goes to learn sewing after putting her twins to bed after 9:00 pm. She said that she wants to work, not only for her family's sake, but in order to send money to her parents and her sister's family in Sri Lanka (her sister's husband lost his job

due to the civil war conditions).

Luxmi and her family live in a three-and-a-half [room apartment] and are paying \$350.00 (excluding heat and water). When asked about the problems with housing, she mentioned cost, inadequate security, and communication problems with the janitor.

Luxmi and her husband want to stay in Montreal at least until their Refugee Claim is accepted. Luxmi's husband even regrets having to abandon his job on the ship, as he had completed five years of service and believes that he would have become the 3rd Engineer. Both husband and wife are very keen to educate their children. Luxmi's two brothers and her father are well-known musicians in Sri Lanka and West Germany. She has dreams

of training her sons in the same line.

Luxmi first heard of Canada when she heard others in the village talk of it as the country where many SriLankans have sought and found refuge. She had heard that Canada was safe and SriLankans need not fear being sent back. They had been warned that finding jobs would not be easy in Canada, but had made the decision to move in order to have a haven from fear, persecution and discrimination. Luxmi still feels that their expectations have been fulfilled. Even though she has to struggle in a new country where the languages spoken alienate her further, the future seems bright because her children will be safe and have an opportunity to gain a good education and lead a life free from persecution.

Determined to provide a better future for their children in Canada, hoping to help family members who are in Sri Lanka have a chance to resettle in Canada, and somewhat resigned to the cultural roles assigned to them, the ten Tamil women I interviewed seem to face the future with mixed feelings — hope, determination and fatalism. The long-term effects of living and working in a country so different from their own, with its different cultural mix and social norms, on the relationship between husband and wife, between parents and children and on the attitudes and values that influence relationships, are unknown. This causes them profound concern and anxiety.

Promises vs Nipples

(for Jane Storrier)

One summer in a lush valley
me and my best friend Jane
swam and waded the emerald green river
all one day, heat so intense
the mist lifting off white water
was smoke from our bodies,
nearly on fire.

Miles downriver we both spotted
the fallen-over tombstones,
the raw snow-coloured stone,
black fungus hovering like a cloud of gnats
above the cracks.

Climbing over the intricate iron gate
into the long sweet-smelling grass,
we saw most were deaths in childbirth, of women,
or children themselves, of smallpox.

We looked down the lengths of our bodies,
taut as archers' bows, we promised each other
we'd steer clear of husbands, sex, and children,
choose instead tranquil, professional lives.

Then we noticed our neighbour's son
on the opposite bank
in the shade of a huge willow,
its yellow leaves swinging across the grass
like scythes.

Blushes rose to our cheeks
we had been saving all school term,
in our lunch pails, in our sweater pockets.
We felt the silk of our nipples
push against our swimsuits,
we let ourselves down into the water
like muskrats, and swam underwater to him
leaving the tombstones and their stories
on this side of the river.

JAN CONN Two Poems

The Hands

Me and my middle sister, Diane, stand
side-by-side, hip pressed against hip,
shoulder-to-shoulder.

We've taken off our clothes, quickly,
a little embarrassed. I'm 34, she's 28.
We're trying to find traces of our mother's body,
passed on to ours.

We want to see if her death changed the shape
of our limbs in some subtle way,
the elbows, the knees, the wrists.

So we examine ourselves and each other
in a full-length mirror. Diane has my father's
nipples, I my mother's breasts. We both have
her dark eyes and hair.

But what we really want to see is our hands.
We hold them up in the harsh light of Manhattan,
early morning. We turn them over and over.
Both life-lines are long, no sudden unexpected
deaths.

The nails are trimmed close for practicality.
The half-moons are hidden.

There are no identifying birthmarks or features
so if either of us disappears in Guatemala
or El Salvador and the hands are all that remain,
no one will be able to say these are Conn hands
any more than they might say they are Lopez hands
or Graciliano Ramos hands.

We touch each other's fingers, briefly,
just a brush of skin.

Then we turn to examine our backs.