

Interview

with

Vasanth Muthukumarana

April 24, 1999

by Amy Weil

The Southern Oral History Program
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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ASIAN VOICES

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INTERVIEWEE: Vasantha Muthukumarana
INTERVIEWER: Amy Weil

(START OF TAPE 5, SIDE A)

AMY WEIL: This is an interview for Asian Voices on April 24, 1999, of Vasantha Muthukumarana-- terrible pronunciation!-- and his wife, Deepa, and their daughter. Ahm.. and this is a test to make sure we can hear the tape. [recorder is turned off and on]

So, the first question that we're going to be talking about is some background about what it was like growing up at home, and what your community was like-, there. So can you tell us a little bit about-, just how you grew up and what the neighborhood was like, things that you think are important for us to know about, at home in Sri Lanka?

VASANTHA MUTHUKUMARANA: Yeah. [pause] Most of the time I have been-, remained in the city-, that's Colombo. Actually for-, part of my life-, some part of my life I lived in a suburb of Colombo, but the rest was-, the city. And, also the schools that I have been to-, right through-out-, the schools that were-, in Colombo. So, it's been a sort of-, an environment, I mean-, sort of city type environment that I have been living in right through-out. And-, [pause] [recorder is switched off and on].

AW: Who was living in your house when you were growing up?

VM: Yeah. I have, other than my parents, I have three sisters. I am the second in my family. One elder sister and two younger sisters. So, actually my father died-, about twenty one years ago. So, since that time, I mean, it has been the rest of us there.

AW: Then you were the only man in house for a long time.

VM: Yes.

AW: That must have been hard when you were small, twenty one years ago.

VM: Yeah. That was twenty one years ago.

AW: Was he ill, or was it an accident?

VM: No, in fact, he got heart attack. He had heart trouble. Nineteen seventy three, first heart attack and five years later he got a very severe heart attack.

AW: My father died from a heart attack also.

VM: Oh, did he?

AW: Yeah. About eleven years ago.

VM: Okay.

AW: It's a sudden thing. Not like someone is sick or--. It gets hard-, it must have been hard for your mother. At least in many families in Sri Lanka a woman isn't out working, supporting the family.

VM: Yeah. It was hard--.

AW: Yeah.

VM: Yeah, it was hard, but fortunately, in a way, I mean-, for my mother-, all the children were sort of-, quite grown up, and (), and my younger sister was grade eleven or twelve at that time when my father died, so in a way, I mean, the children were not too small when he died, so--.

AW: She didn't have to watch, have someone watch them.

VM: But then on the other hand, sort of, only my elder sister was doing a job a that time, so considering that it was a little hard and also that – I don't know if you'll be

asking this question later on, but that played a role in my decision to-, sort of, delayed to come abroad for further studies.

AW: So you had been considering that even before your father became sick and died?

VM: Not really. Just after I finished my college degree at the university, I could have, sort of, come over here, I mean, based on the examination--.

AW: Smart young man! [laughter]

VM: I don't--. Not really about that, but I mean, just that-, because there were a lot of people who just after finishing their B.SC., they applied and all of them were-, most of them were successful in coming. But I wanted to delay that for a few years because of-, I wanted to stay at home for some time.

AW: And give support to your mom, huh? Did she wanted you to wind up choosing to go and do a job, or did she not want to--?

VM: No, actually--. Really I--. Although I could have, if I wanted to, I mean, although-, I could have come to-, the United States ()-, I mean, there were some others who went to Australia and pakistan. But really, at that time I didn't even think of going abroad. And finally it was my mother who, sort of, tried to persuade me to apply, and to-, go and do a-, do higher studies ().

AW: Why did she want you to go?

VM: I think she felt--, I mean, later on I also realized I mean, why this would have been the case because usually--, [pause]—I don't know if this is true for all the other countries, but in Sri Lanka it's usually better to have a higher education in terms of finding-, getting a good job or-, at least continuing to working in the same field. So--.

AW: She had high hopes for you.

VM: Ah, yeah. So-, in fact, I still remember this-, she's the one who went to the-, US Information Agency to get the form for applying for the TOEFL exam. Because-, up to that point, I mean, I have been sort of, keep on postponing, even to I mean, apply--.

AW: Huh.

VM: For the exam, and finally she thought I'm-, that she thought probably I might not ever apply unless some initiative is taken.

AW: Huh.

VM: So she-, she went actually by bus to the-- we didn't have a car-- by bus to the US Information Agency for the TOEFL exam, and--.

AW: Dedicated mother! The buses are crowded, right? I see. So, was she pressing your sisters to go also, or only you?

VM: No. Because I'm the only person who-, did a science degree in my family. All my other sisters, actually they've gone to accountancy, after reaching high school.

AW: Huh! So it was thought to be important for the science-, scientists to do the higher degree elsewhere than for accountancy, because that's actually not a university degree in Sri Lanka, right? I know, my brother-, my brother-in-law is an accountant, and I think he did an accountancy program. So it isn't like you can do graduate work in accountancy.

VM: No. Accountancy was-, I don't know how it's now, but at that time, it wasn't taught as a separate subject in university in Sri Lanka, and, for science-, I mean, those who did science, it was relatively easier to come abroad for other degrees, like GRE and

TOEFL. At least at that time, we were-, we had-, at the time we finished our bachelor's degree--.

AW: What was you degree in? Which--. Which science?

VM: In chemistry. My B.Sc. was in chemistry.

AW: Ah-hah. Chemistry link! And did you do that in Colombo?

VM: Yeah. I studied in university of--.

AW: So were you able to stay at home, or you were in university then?

VM: No. after I finished my degree, for one year-, actually those-, for those who do a specialty in a subject, usually we can do a temporary job at the university for one year. So I was at the university after I finished my studies for one year just as a teaching assistant. We call it assistant lecturer over there, so--. And so, then-, after that I worked at an institute called Atomic Energy Authority-, for three years, it was during that time that I started applying for university.

AW: And were you living at home while you were doing all the various kinds of work?

VM: No, I was living at home. I was living at home. In fact, at the same time I got another job offer-, for research institute called () er... twenty five miles away from Colombo, but still I wanted to stay at home.

AW: So how did you get--? Did you take that job or decided not to take that job because it was too far?

VM: Yeah. Yeah.

AW: What a good son! [laughter] So, what about in the immediate neighborhood where you lived? Did a lot of your friends continue to live with their families? Did you know your neighbors pretty well, where you lived?

VM: Oh yes, we knew our neighbors fairly well. Especially among the children who were same ages as we are-, around the same age that-, but we used to meet very often-, meet to go and play-, games like cricket and--. [laughter]

AW: Uh-huh. () So did they also continue to stay as they got their advanced degrees and lived nearby so that that community continued, when they were young adults like you were? Were they still living-, and you were still getting to spend time together?

VM: No, later on--. I know-, I mean-, I had a friend who did engineering. After he finished his engineering degree, he-, he went to-, I think in-, institute in Thailand, to pursue further higher studies.

AW: So, you weren't the first, or the only person to think of going away?

VM: No. In fact, actually-, in our-, in the batch-, which I studied chemistry at the university, I was one of the last people to go abroad, to do a higher degree. I mean-, I finished my degree in 1980, and I know in 1981 there are about four/five people-, four/five students in the same batch who went-, who came to United States.

AW: Hmm....

VM: That's why I earlier said, I mean, it was not too difficult to come abroad to pursue higher studies. At least at that time, I don't know how it is now, and then in the following year there was some others who left and I was the one before the last person

who came abroad-, from the batch, which studied chemistry. There were twelve students in that batch and out of that twelve students, eleven came abroad--.

AW: Wow!

VM: Only one remained in Sri Lanka to-, do some work.

AW: You said that was in 1980. That makes me think that maybe people were also leaving because it was a difficult-, political situation. Was it hard to continue to go to studies? Because, I know a little later than that the university kept closing, right, because of issues about the violence?

VM: Yeah. But--. Yeah. That, actually-, the-, sort of-, worst part of violence started in 1983.

AW: SO those two--?

VM: So it was before that-, that--. I don't think it was really because of violence situation that--.

AW: People left?

VM: Yeah

AW: That's interesting. So what other things did you do for fun when you were growing up and-, and kind of as a young adult there, were there things that-, where you were a member of groups, or sporting--? You said-, you mentioned the cricket. Did you do that regularly with your friends? Was that like an every day, non-school, non-work activity?

VM: Not really every day. Most of the time it was on the weekend. But-, I mean for-, myself-, I used to really enjoy going to see cricket matches-, played between schools or clubs, and also-, another-, one of my favorite sports was the rugby football.

AW: Ah.....?

VM: Just to go and see. So, almost every weekend I was-, most of the time occupied--.

AW: At sports? That's neat.

VM: Yeah. Trying to either see some or game or-, or participate in some game.

AW: Was the religion life in Sri Lanka an important part of your growing up?

VM: Yes. Although I wouldn't call myself a religious person-, but, sort of , in a way, my mother is-, quite religious. So-, and occasionally we used to go to these Buddhist temples. But on a day to day life, I don't know that I could call myself a very-, religious person.

AW: That's also the way the temples—at least in my understanding of the temples—it's not that that necessarily forms a very tightly-knit community. It seems more like an individual-, kind of experience. It isn't like everybody goes in and at a given time together.

VM: Yes.

AW: And gathers-, like some of the other religious ()--.

VM: Yes. It's not like that.

AW: Church starts at a given time.

VM: And it's no special day that we get to go. And one very important reason was that we got to go was, the temple was very close by to our house—less than a hundred yards from our house. So, just crossing the road and--.

AW: So that may have something to do with whether you do things like that here. Because I'm sure there isn't one close by here. So, maybe when we talk about what it's like here, we can think about that subject.

VM: Yeah.

AW: Right. There's no temple out there. So what did you think it would be like to move here? When your mother was getting you the forms, did you have expectations, or, hesitations about coming to the United States?

VM: That was mixed. I mean, I--. Yeah, I also realized by that time that it was time for me to go for higher studies. Although, just after finishing my degree, I wasn't interested, but later on I began to realize, I mean, it could be really good to have a higher degree other than the B.Sc. But then, on the other hand, I wasn't too keen to leave Sri Lanka also, so it was, sort of, mixed feelings at that time.

AW: How did you get impressions about United States when you were growing up?

VM: Oh! While I was in Sri Lanka?

AW: Yes. How did you have an idea of what it might be like?

VM: Er..... Really, I had no idea--, er..... about-, how United States is, but I know-, I mean-, er.... sort of-, education facilities over here, especially for higher studies are really great-, that-, I mean, there are so many universities over here--, and-, it would be-, really good to study over here. And also in England--.

AW: But so much more focussed on opportunities for your work than thinking what your day might be like--.

VM: Oh, yeah! Yeah. That was-, actually-, that-, I would-, I would say, I mean, that was the only reason I wanted to go abroad-, just--.

AW: For the work reasons?

AW: Yes, I know. In 1980, probably, there was no TV in Sri Lanka, right? So it was like you'll be seeing pictures all the time of-. Maybe a little earlier than that. The TV was just coming, so it wasn't like you were constantly exposed to () what it's gonna be like when you get to this place.

VM: Yes. Exactly! I think in nineteen eighty, we had TV, because I remember Princess Diana's and Charles's wedding being shown on TV. [to wife] Was it in nineteen eighty one? Yeah, somewhere around that time, but it was just a little before that we got TV.

AW: So it's very close, right? So, it isn't like your entire childhood you grew up knowing exactly what it would look like, even where you were going. It seems amazing to me to go to a place where you really can't have the sense of what it's going to be like.

VM: Yeah.

AW: It seems scary to me.

VM: Yeah. Yeah.

AW: So--. It is a big deal.

VM: But--. But-, I knew, I mean, this wasn't going to be a country that we will have to live in a scary place or anything. It's not like, I mean, some other countries that we hear of violence and so on, so-, that wasn't really bothering me.

AW: I guess, I even-, just mean, like the industrialization, and I'm colored by having Aravinda tell me about how he got off the plane with his little suitcase from Sri

Lanka when he was coming here for college. And, you know, everywhere he turned around there were these huge paved roads, and cars just going much faster than he had ever seen a car going before.

VM: Oh, it--.

AW: It's very, sort of, simple things that if you had been able to see pictures, you would not be surprised by that, but that was just one level of all the things that were-, very different than he could have imagined.

VM: Yeah. I mean, that-, I also--.

AW: Those kind of things--.

VM: I mean that-, when I saw the high-rises-, after getting down at the airport, and-, yeah! Those were amazing, quite different from what I would have expected --.

AW: I mean-, and-, I don't know-, that particular thing may not be that important, but it's just basic things that are just different, that you can't possibly -, expect. So I just wondered, do you remember your trip? Was it a big deal, to go on the long trip to come here-, with your-, suitcase in your hand?

VM: Oh yes! In fact-, it was. There's a very interesting story. I-, I traveled with another person, who came to study at the same university that I was going to go to. That was at the Bowling Green State University in Ohio.

AW: Uh-huh.

VM: The first university I came to. And-, we had to-, it was a long journey, and as you know-, and then-, I got some of my college notes-, with me-, in case they were going to be useful-, in studies here. And that was in a separate bag-, and er....-, when I-, when we-, had to-, change planes at JFK-, er..... this particular bag hadn't arrived. But-, the

other bags were there for me to-, because we had, actually, pick up our bags to load it to the next plane. But this particular bag hadn't come-, arrived-, at the airport and, because it had my notes-, it was quite valuable to me. So, I was-, trying to-, locate this bag and we had only about one and a half hour before the next plane-, and-, couldn't-, get the bag and in the meantime, we missed the flight!

AW: Oh--.

VM: And this was during the-, during my first trip ever abroad. I hadn't been to any other country.

AW: And-, no sleep by that point. You're totally exhausted.

VM: Yeah.

AW: Oh--. Oh!

VM: And then-, at the airline counter-, they made arrangements to-, for us to-, take another plane. Ahm.. And that was supposed to go to--. Yeah. That actually, instead of going to Ohio, it went through Pittsburgh. And when we got Pittsburgh, the connecting flight to Ohio had already left. So, they-, put up us-, put us up-, at a-, airport hotel--.

AW: Hunh..

VM: And--. Then the following morning, only when we had to go and--. It was a, sort of, adventurous-, trip.

AW: But did you find the bag?

VM: No. I didn't find the bag, but-, after going to Bowling Green-, about a day or two after that, they had sent that to the address.

AW: So did you ever use the notes? Were they helpful?

VM: No. Not very much. I used the a little. But not very much, actually.

AW: So I can imagine it would be--. I've carried things like that, where you think it's such an important thing, and it's somehow a personal, important thing. If that's missing everything is all set off. Even if you never use it when you finally get there.

VM: Oh, yeah.

AW: Oh! That's a traumatic trip!

VM: Oh, yeah.

AW: And also took longer, I guess, if you're waiting for the next plane, when you're delayed, you must've been so tired.

VM: Yeah. And also, we had to get-, get back the next day, actually--.

AW: So did people help you when you arrived, to get oriented?

VM: Yes. There some other Sri Lankans living-, rather studying-, at the same university, who had come the previous year. They were not really in my batch at the University of Colombo, but I mean, we used to know-, they were in a different batch, still we used to know, and-, students from other batches. So-, they-, they came to airport and then-, brought us to town and helped us to find an apartment, and--.

AW: So that's nice. The community sometimes did extend actually back from there.

VM: Oh, yes.

AW: They weren't people you knew well.

VM: Oh, yeah.

AW: Did you spend much time with them as you were there longer? Were those the people you spent a lot of time with, when you were at the university?

VM: Yeah. Actually, my plans-, I had to change my plans a little bit, because I was at Bowling Green only for one semester. At the same time, I got a-, got admission to a university in Canada--.

AW: Hunh?

VM: So--. So I decided that I'll go to Canada to-, study over there, so I didn't get much time to-, spend with the Sri Lankans at Bowling Green.

AW: So you were doing an undergraduate or graduate degree--.

VM: No. I finished my-, I did my undergraduate at Colombo, and then came for graduate studies over here.

AW: So in chemistry at Bowling Green?

VM: Chemistry at Bowling Green. But, as I told you, I did only one semester, and went to study still chemistry at University of Alberta in Edmonton.

AW: So what was that like? Is that where you stayed for a long time?

VM: That's where I did my Masters, and--.

AW: Uh-huh. Were there a lot of people from Sri Lanka at that university also?

VM: There were--.

AW: Because in Canada they're a very big population.

VM: Yes. In fact, there were two of my friends who were in the same batch at Colombo--.

AW: Uh-huh.

VM: So, over there I was a little more-, I mean-, a little more-, I had, sort of, friends who-, whom I knew for a longer time.

AW: So that was a real-, real good for you. Did you spend much time with them compared to other people in Canada?

VM: Hmmm.....[pause] Yes, I would think so, because sometimes when we-, in the evenings--. Most of the time it would be a Friday, on weekends-, like-, meeting in their houses, or, you know, going out--.

AW: So did you all know how to cook?

VM: Yes.

AW: The delicious foods?

VM: We didn't know really, but we had to learn.

AW: So were you able to--.

VM: back in Sri Lanka I didn't know-, to really cook, but there was no option. I had to learn it somehow.

AW: So, you could recreate the recipes? I think that you might have been able to get spices in Canada, right? Because there were other people who would be interested in buying them.

VM: Yes. And also, when I came abroad, I brought some spices along with me, but there were-, some-, Indian shops.

AW: Right. So what was the reaction of the people in Canada to you all? Did you spend a lot of time with the indigenous Canadians, or--?

VM: Not really, actually. Except in the lab--. Except in the lab, and--, and that time, I didn't-, I don't know whether it's-, partly due to work or-, most likely I would say, because all of us were very busy, we were following classes, and so-, once we go home—except on weekends—we have to, I mean, catch up on our work and--. So, other than-,

Canadians whom I knew in the lab and in the department, there wasn't very much interaction. But, I mean, there were two-, two Canadian friends with whom I interacted-, er.... To some extent, like once or twice we went to play golf, and there was another--.

AW: Oh, golf! A new sport!

VM: Yeah. Although that was the first time I held a golf stick--.

AW: huh?

VM: And-, I played-, er.... Some-, tennis. I'm a very bad tennis player but I was trying to learn some tennis at that time. Then, another friend and-, also-, with the same person I used to sometime-, play chess. So, I used to have some interaction, but I mean not-, not with a-, whole lot of Canadians.

AW: So were you able to still play cricket or rugby?

VM: Er... Yeah. In fact, cricket-, I--. One summer actually I went to play with some-, a-, sort of a club, like organization in cricket, and-, there was some Canadians and some others from different countries, like-, there was also an Australian, some west-Indians, and one Sri Lankan also--.

AW: A lot of people who play cricket. So what do you think, then were you missing about home, or were you feeling happy about being in Canada?

VM: [pause] Er... Yeah. I would say-, most of the time I miss home-, even now. But could be because we-, we have to get involved with work. So, I mean, that's not much time to be thinking about-, thinking too much about back home also. Er....

[pause] Er.... In terms of-, enjoying things-, I mean, there wasn't anything special that I enjoyed, other than--, what I really did.

AW: So when you think of missing home, what is that, is that people or a place, or-, events?

VM: People also--. Yeah, events! Like-, maybe sometimes, I mean, when you-, sort of come to think of the place-, I used to live and-, I mean, how I used to do this, that and, maybe, sometimes go to-, some event or, sometimes with friends and after work--, because I was working for three years in Sri Lanka, and actually some days even on weekdays-, whenever we felt like we used to gather about three-four-, of my friends in a group who used to-, maybe just go and spend some time. Just watch a film or--, like that that have some--.

AW: So, sort of, the easiness of being able to do that with people you know?

VM: Yeah. Yeah, exactly!

AW: So how did you--? Did you keep up with those friends still?

VM: Not really--.

AW: The friends that were there--.

VM: No. In fact, I lost touch-, contact-, of them. I know, one-, one has gone to Australia, so after that I don't know--.

AW: So, as you lived here longer, have you found any people that you enjoy being with in the same kind of way, or-, is it hard to find those kind of people?

VM: You mean here, or--?

AW: Uh-huh.

VM: Yeah. It's-, a sort situation became different, because after-, when I got married, and the-, you know, we have our daughter, so--. Really after work, I mean, I don't think of going to any other place but-, other than coming home and-, trying to

spend some time with them. Because as it is, I don't think I don't spend enough time with them--.

VM: I just--.

AW: So how did you get from Canada to here? I guess I'm skipping ahead of the story.

VM: Yeah. Canada I finished my Masters, and at that time I was trying to see-, sort of a program. I really wanted to switch over to biochemistry from chemistry, so I was-, looking at some graduate programs which would have biochemistry programs, but I preferably wanted to have it () chemistry department, because I was a person with chemistry background and so-, then-, this program at University of Oklahoma-, that--., some of the research projects seemed to be interesting, so I applied to work there as well-, some of the universities, so I got to come to Oklahoma and then-, pursued my graduate studies for the Ph.D. over there.

AW: So were there Sri Lankans in Oklahoma also?

VM: Very few. Actually-, they have only two or three--.. Yeah, they have three families, that's all. Compared to, I mean Canada--. Canada they have a--.

AW: Lots and lots of people. So, at that point you weren't yet married. Is that right?

VM: No. No, I wasn't married.

AW: So, what was life like, there? Did you have a group of friends?

VM: Er.....

AW: Too much working to do much?

VM: No. Two-, two of my friends -, I knew-, back at university of Colombo. So we were very close. In fact, one of them was a very good friend of mine, and his wife also I knew back in Sri Lanka. And another person I got to know after I came to Oklahoma-- he studied at university of Peraynia there.

AW: Yeah. Beautiful place!

VM: It's a very beautiful place.

AW: The most beautiful campus I think I've ever been to.

VM: Is it? Oh-. Yeah. It's really a nice--. In fact, sometimes I feel it would have been better if I had studied over there at university of Peradynia.

AW: That's where Aravinda's mother got her degree.

VM: Who's--?

AW: Aravinda's mother. She got her English degree there.

VM:. Oh, Is it--?

AW: And his uncle and aunt are in faculty there, so I've spent a lot of time at the university campus.

VM: Oh, yeah, is it? Okay. Yeah, it's really nice. In fact I-, as a whole, I like Kandy quite a lot.

AW: Slightly cooler weather.

VM: Oh, yeah. [laughter]

AW: That's nice. Even though you--, there you are in Oklahoma, you wind up actually being with people you really know and like a lot.

VM: Yea, but--. Yeah. I reached my--. Only just a few.

AW: So, was that lonesome?

VM: Yeah. I- I would say so. It was-, lonesome. But, I would say so, I mean, some friends here, who were in the lab and also in the department. But outside that, not really any friends. But occasionally I mean, we used to again go and play some-, tennis with some of the friends who were Americans, I mean. They were not Sri Lankans--.

AW: Were they interested in where you came from? Did you tell them a lot of stories of your growing up, or was that not a big part of your friendship?

VM: Mmmmm.... [pause] That's a--. There were a few friends who asked me about some details about Sri Lanka--. Er..... But I-, I don't know, I mean, how much-, how much really interested they were.

AW: Did they try your ethnic food? Were you able to cook for them something delicious from home?

VM: Yeah. There were two-, two of them, who used to--. Sometimes, I mean, we used to meet at our apartment, and I used to--.

AW: Make some curries! Mmmmm.... That's neat. So, did you know Deepa then, or no?

VM: Deepa I had known-, er..... back in Sri Lanka, for a short time, because actually, when she was studying at institute of chemistry, I was teaching assistant there--.

AW: I was thinking there was a chemistry connection going on there. Right?

VM: Short time, there. So, I knew her-, a while back--.

AW: So were you keeping in touch, through all your different moves, or not really?

VM: Not really. Occasionally, we used to, but not-, not-, not on a regular basis.

AW: So, how did you come to be married? When you're spending all this time in the United, how did you--? Was it arranged with your families, or--?

VM: Er..... Sort of partly, but-, it's a-, yeah, since I knew-, knew her also, I mean, it's lot of-, I wouldn't say it's a real proposal type marriage, or arranged type marriage, but I knew her before I came, so--. When it came to, I mean-, the final decision, we knew each other, and--.

AW: So that was while you were in Oklahoma then?

VM: Yes. Yeah, while I was in Oklahoma.

AW: So did you come and make a visit, thinking it was it was time to-, decide about this question, or--?

VM. Yeah. Yeah, so that's when I went to Sri Lanka, in 1990, so--. Get married there.

AW: So, were you looking forward to his coming?

DEEPA: Yeah.

AW: Had you been thinking of marrying him from then?

DM: Yeah. From that time I was interested in getting married. I was working for some time, and studying, too. And thinking of-, time to get married.

AW: So was it between the two of you, or between your two families? Or a little of both?

DM: It's a--.

VM: A little of both. Yeah.

DM: My uncle-, his wife, is a family friend of theirs. So, she was the person who was interested in-, bringing us together.

AW: I see.

DM: It was a good match for me and for him.

AW: Uh-huh. So, the families were pretty happy with-, the two of you getting together? Did you have your horoscopes matched?

VM: No. [laughter]

AW: Did it play a factor for you that he was living in the United States? Was that good or bad, or--?

DM: I want-, I like him. I worked in the same field as-, enjoying and working. I thought it would be nice to come. I didn't think that I would come and immediately stay here.

AW: Uh-huh.

DM: I thought I would come for some time--. To see the country.

AW: Somewhat like a visit.

DM: An experience, yes.

AW: Hunh! So, were you envisioning that she was coming to visit, and you were both going to go back together? Was that--?

VM: Back to Sri Lanka?

AW: Yeah.

VM: Yeah, actually that was my plan-, when I was-, doing my Ph.D.-. er... at least during my time-, stay at Oklahoma, I was planning to go back and finish, but-, er.... After I finished I thought maybe-, it's a good idea to-, do a-, post-doctorate, because I mean, might as well take up that chance to--.

AW: Right. Go further.

VM: A few years experience of post-doctorate-, er... work. But then, I mean, things--. It was, sort of a-, it became rather hard to take a-, real decision, because-, now

she-, Shamin was born in nineteen ninety-one--. And-, after that we-, we-, we began to, I mean, think about her future also. So, I mean--, because we know, I mean-, the-, could be nice to-, for ther to get an education over here.

AW: Sure.

VM: In the United States, and-, so the decision became really hard. Although, I wanted to go back. I mean, I couldn't-, sort of-, base my decision just on that and I had to, sort of, consider her future also.

AW: Right.

VM: So--.

AW: So what did you think of that? Were you--? Were you disappointed in thinking that you might wind up staying here longer?

DM: But after-, she was born, I too thought it would be better for her to study here.

AW: What was it like for you, because your husband always talks about how he's so focussed on his work and this is really the biggest part of his life and then you're here, and you don't have that to do all day? I guess at the very beginning, you must have been pregnant with her, almost? But then you're suddenly here by yourself, pregnant with this future baby in a strange place.

DM: Yeah. I was very lonesome, because I miss my family a lot at that time.

AW: Sure.

DM: And the few friends we had. It was difficult-, in the beginning--.

AW: Must have been home sick.

DM: Everything went smooth on my-, pregnancy, so--. [pause] Not much--.

AW: Did you have some help once she was born? Did people come and--?

DM: No. My mother couldn't come. I didn't have anybody from home.

AW: Aye!! That's unusual, right?

VM: Yeah, that's unusual.

AW: It's very different from Sri Lanka.

VM: I know a lot of-, our friends-, I mean, when the wife is going to have a baby, one of their parents will visit--.

AW: certainly there! Right. Well, so there you were in Oklahoma! With this tiny baby!

DM: Yeah.

AW: That's wild. So how long did you live there before you moved here? Just a couple of years?

VM: In Oklahoma?

AW: Yeah. How big did she get to be in Oklahoma?

VM: When we left Oklahoma, she was--.

DM: Two years and--.

VM: Two and a half years. About two and a half years.

AW: So, what was it like moving here? You're a little family, instead of a graduate student living with other friends. Was that a different experience getting to know Chapel Hill, than the other places you've been?

VM: Chapel Hill--. Yeah, when I compare Oklahoma and the town-, it's called Norman. It's not very different from Chapel Hill. It's-, both are-, university towns. And-, so-, except, I mean, the surroundings, like-, it's prettier in Chapel Hill than in

Norman. Norman--. But other than that, I mean, more or less the same surroundings--.

Rather, I mean, the university town at-, rather it's the same here.

AW: And in terms of Sri Lankan community?

VM: There are ().

AW: It seems like there are a lot of people here.

VM: Yeah. There are more Sri Lankans here. In Chapel Hill-, actually--. Also, when I moved to Chapel Hill, I didn't know. When I was in Oklahoma, it happens that a friend of mine who was at Colombo-- not in the same batch-- was doing a post-doc here and that's Lalit--.

AW: Hunh!

VM: Lalit Pereira. Yeah. I meet him at the university.

AW: So, even though it's such a small country, there's always a link somewhere, in any small place you go to. Someone nice who you know is there to help.

VM: Yeah. Yeah.

AW: That's amazing, isn't it?

VM: Yeah. And also, when I came here, I got to know that a-, a person who was at Bowling Green who had come there the same year I came, he-, he was also working here. That's Asoka.

AW: Hunh? Uh-huh. Yeah, yeah!

VM: For you -, (). So-, so, there were two of them whom I knew.

AW: That's amazing. So, in your social life here, I guess it's a little different, because you have your daughter, do you spend time mostly with Sri Lankans, or also with American that you've met in other ways?

VM: Mostly it's Sri Lankans. It's-, it's-, because-, I will say, I mean-, I-, I didn't get an opportunity to interact with-, er.... Most Americans--. For one reason is-, I mean, other than working in the lab-, just after-, we come over here, and then-, maybe with some neighbors, I mean. Although sometime we-, we meet neighbors at the playground and--. But, there of course, I mean, it's just a-, for that short time. If you meet at the playground--.

AW: No special plan afterwards, to meet again.

VM: Yeah.

AW: So, do you know the people who live on each side?

VM: Er... no, for this block, actually, we don't, because we have moved recently, but in-, block-, I mean, previously we knew quite a number of neighbors.

AW: Did you exchange back and forth? I mean, maybe sometimes watching each other's children, or--?

DM: Hmm... children. They come to play at the playground, and they get together for () parties--.

VM: Yeah, parties

AW: And is that all the children in her class, or is really more like the Sri Lankan other kids--?

DM: () all the children ()

VM: Oh, you mean-, about-, school--?

AW: No, I was just thinking in general, or even at home, like people playing, or you socializing with people who have kids the same age.

VM: Oh, no. Yeah, they are, of course, I mean-, then-, they will invite her to their kids' birthday parties and sometimes there are no Sri Lankans other than us. So, like that, I mean, we have some interaction.

AW: Are the people curious about what Sri Lanka is like? Do they ever ask you questions, or--?

VM: No. I don't know whether anyone in that block asked. No, I don't thin--.

DM: () one-, lady who was brought up in India one parent was Indian-, she used to make friends with us a lot. And she used to talk of Sri Lanka and India ().

AW: Is it different getting to know people who have some kind of a common background like that? Maybe you feel differently with her than some of the other parents of other kids?

DM: A little bit more comfortable than with someone totally different.

VM: But then-, I mean-, when we were living in the previous apartment, there was-, in one apartment there were, I think, about four-, students who were studying in the university. They were very friendly with us, and we used to-, in fact whenever-, er... they meet us and we talk and-, and now-- because you asked the question whether anyone interested in knowing about Sri Lanka, I think there were-, yeah, there were two of them who really asked a lot off questions about Sri Lanka, and wanted to know about-, I mean--.

AW: What kind of things do you think it's important that people know? I mean, this is a very hard question. Are there things that it's important that somebody who has

never been to Sri Lanka know about what it-, what it means to be from Sri Lanka. Do you think about that kind of questions?

VM: What's that? Can you repeat that question?

AW: If there's something--. Would it be enjoying the food, or-, a feeling about home, or nature, or-, I mean, I can think of lots of things that they're important to me about being a part of-, kind of being somewhere in an adoptive way. I just wonder, are there things that-, that you think make you distant from people that are different because you got to be in Sri Lanka when you were growing up, or is that really not-, something that happens?

VM: It means, from our side, or the other side?

AW: Yeah. If there's something special about having been there, that's hard to communicate to people who haven't been there.

VM: No, I wouldn't say it's--. Actually, I wouldn't consider--.

(END OF TAPE 5, SIDE A)

(START OF TAPE 5, SIDE B)

VM: Yeah. I don't think that-, it's hard for us to communicate with others, based on certain facts, but it's probably a matter of time that we-, could find-, we could find time to, sort of, get to know others well and probably I mean, they also must be having the same problems. Er... I mean, those whom I know from the workplace, I mean, they-, they communicate very well, so it's not--. I don't know what to say whether it's a cultural difference, or whether it's-, you know-, just I mean that, some don't take, sort of, too much time to get to know each other--.

AW: I guess maybe another way of asking the question is that are there things that you tell your daughter about where she's-, where you're from, that are important things that you want her to know about her background.

VM: Not really. I mean, we haven't told her anything, except I mean, maybe, a little bit about our religion. That's all. Other than that, sort of, we haven't tried to emphasize anything else.

AW: So, are you able to take her to religious gatherings here?

VM: No. That's-, no religious gathering here. Sometimes, I mean, we-, just-, show her some pictures of-, some-, that will relate to some--, idea and explain--.

AW: What's her reaction to that? Like, is she interested to hear more, or does it seem confusing to her.

VM: Right now, we don't-, we're not trying to, sort of, teach her too much, but like when she's taking it-, alright.

AW: Okay. So, do you think-, you think she'll see herself more as a US person, or as Sri Lankan person? How do you think she'll identify herself as she grows up?

VM: Er... That's very difficult to say at this point. I don't--.

DM: She's a Sri Lankan American.

AW: Does she know the language from home?

VM: No.

DM: She understands it-, doesn't speak.

AW: Ha... So you can't say secrets in that language! [laughter]

VM: Yeah. Actually, we try. In fact, we have tried at some points teach her the language, but-, she knows a few words but, in terms of talking, I mean-, getting on a conversation, it's not possible for her to do that.

AW: So are there any people in your family back home who can she speak to, on account of that? Does everybody speak English in your families?

VM/DM: Yes, yes.

AW: So there's no problem with her being able to talk to them?

VM: No.

DM: In fact she write letter to her cousin.

AW: Hah!. She's not met some of them, right?

DM: No, not yet. Only by picture.

AW: So do you have plans for going there to visit, or if you plan to go to visit will it be to go back there?

VM: No, no. Actually, we would-, try to visit and-, right now, like, I told you before, we would like stay here. Because considering all the factors, especially the situation, so--.

AW: Some more work and education kind of factors?

VM: Yeah. Yeah.

AW: Do you think there are things that could make you go back anyway, short of not getting your green card? [pause] Could you decide to go back anyway for some other reason?

VM: Even that time in-, sometimes-, sort of, it depends on how long we have to wait for-, to --. But the situation is (). It's going to take a long time while we get this sorted out. Well, () then things can change. But again, right now I would say, it's a very difficult decision to make, because-, er... sometimes we feel it once we go back, I mean, for some reason if she-, daughter cannot adapt to the situation-, because right now I mean, she's studying in English, she doesn't know very much to speak our language, and for some reason if she cannot adapt and the, if we can't come back over here then, that will be-, we are going to feel very guilty about that, so--.

AW: Right.

VM: And so--.

AW: Hah!. So now it's really even more for her than for you in some ways?

VM: Yes. Oh yes. Oh, yes! Now we have to-, base most of our-, decisions based on her, I mean, make most of our decision--.

AW: Very important person there. That small one in the middle. [laughter] So, how do you feel, are you hoping that it'll work out to stay here for a long time? Because that wasn't the original plan when you got married, right?

DM: Yeah.

AW: Is it better to stay here now, or-, still wish to be back home?

DM: Sometimes when I think of the family, I wish I was there. But then again, when I think of her-, future, I think it will be better-, stay here.

AW: So where is home these days?

VM: Where is home? In my mind it's Sri Lanka.

AW: For you? [pause] What about *you*? [laughter] Where can it be? [pause] So, no question about that? So then, you are making your physical home here right now?

VM: Yeah.

AW: Is it so?

VM: It's still--.

AW: At least--. [interrupted by VM]

VM: It's difficult to--.

AW: Keep going!

VM: Sorry!

AW: No.

VM: Yeah, it's difficult to, I mean, forget the-, about the old times--.

AW: Sure. [pause] Such a beautiful place, too!

AW: I'm trying to see what else I'm supposed to ask you. I see. Do you think that either of you has changed as a person by coming here?

VM: Maybe. [to DM] You want to answer that?

DM: Nothing, basically. We're the same--.

VM: Yea--.

AW: With all the cultural influences, and the TV and all that stuff-, no big change?

VM: No. Actually on my part--. No, I--. On my part there's no difference at all, I mean-, I have stayed for quite some time abroad, and I don't think my-, sort of-, opinions have changed at all. It's been the same--.

AW: How did you maintain that?

VM: That I don't know, I mean, I don't make a special effort to-, sort of, maintain that, but maybe it's just coming like that--.

AW: I can imagine that some of the values of that sort of, mainstream US Culture are fairly different than Sri Lanka. Do you embrace any of those that you didn't before? Do you want a huge car?

VM: No. [laughter] Yeah. [pause]

AW: Does she want things that seem more like mainstream US things than like the way that two of you grew up? Does she ask for lots of things ()?

VM: No, not really. At this point she has-, she doesn't, sort of, ask for any special things. Even when she goes to a shop, she doesn't--. She doesn't tell us that she would like to have this and so on. And also, we-, sort of, we sometimes-, I mean, not about asking for things, but even in terms of what she-, watches on TV, we try to limit the type of programs she watches-, we won't let her just sit in front of the TV and let her watch the whole time and so on.

AW: So, what would you want her to avoid, say--?

VM: For one thing, I mean-, er....we don't like her to watch TV for too long--.

AW: Uh huh.

VM: Like, four-five hours per day or something like that. And also, at this point I mean, because she's small we would like to avoid watching some of the scary programs which may not be very suitable for children.

AW: So you really keep an eye on her.

VM: Oh, yeah!.

DM: Yeah.

AW: So, would you want to be working outside the house? That might make you not as able to keep quite as close an eye on those kinds of things. Have you been thinking of doing that as you stay here longer?

DM: I would like to go out and work. And I will think of part-time, like-, when she's home, so that I could be back with her.

AW: Is there something in particular that you're thinking of trying to do? Or--?

DM: I have-, I have not got a fixed idea yet.

AW: Uh-huh. But, what do you feel about her going to work if she could?

VM: Oh, not at all. I would really like her to go and work. Don't know, I mean, maybe some-, some might be thinking that we are really conservative because she's staying at home, and so on, but that's not the reason. Because especially I mean-, I mean, when she was growing up, she-, she liked to be at home and look after her and at least to some extent, because even when she goes to school I mean, she's out at two fifteen, and so after that-, instead of sending her out to-, some-, after-school or anything, I think she preferred to--. But I really-, I would really like her to go and work because sometimes I

feel pretty bad that she maybe getting bored. But right now, even if she wants to work, she cannot do that because of the type of visa we have. And also, the type of visa we have right now, a spouse is not allowed to work--.

AW: What do you do now that she's in school all day long?

DM: I keep the house going--.

AW: Which is why it's clean! [laughter]

DM: Cooking a lot. I like to read also.

AW: Do you read authors from all over, or-, more from--?

DM: Just fiction. I go to the library with her.

AW: Uh-huh.

DM: And get some novels--.

AW: What's your latest book that you've read?

DM: I have-, I was reading some from Frank G. Slaughter's book--.

AW: Hunh!

DM: I like reading--.

AW: Hunh! So what would be an ideal community for you and your family in the Chapel Hill/Carrboro area? What things could be done to make the community nicer? Are there things--?

VM: Er.... Yeah, the--. No, I don't think there's any problem with the community. So, it's-, there's nothing really I can say about trying to make it nicer. Because, I mean, I think-, each one has their own way of-, thinking and-, making friends, so that's really--. And on top of that, we are also not very outgoing people. So-, now for example, in my case-, er... I don't go out of my way to make friends. Maybe if someone-, if I feel that

okay, someone is-, er... friendly, and maybe we can make a friendship, then I will be happy, but otherwise I mean, sort of, if I feel maybe-, a person doesn't really want to interact with-, er.. me, I don't really make a special effort to--. So, that's really-, I mean-, there's no problem with the community here. I wouldn't say that they're unfriendly or anything, so it's just the way--.

AW: So, in some ways, your community is right here in this room. I mean, for you all, it may be enough that your community is your family. [pause] In some ways--. With occasional visits from people who are outside?

VM: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Exactly!

AW: So, I mean, that's an interesting question about the South-Asian community, is there such a thing as a whole? I mean, is it important for you to interact with people from Pakistan, Bhutan, or-, Nepal, or is it really just fine to be your own family unit, with occasional interactions with other people?

VM: Yeah. That's the way, sort of, we are right now. But, I would definitely like to I mean, interact with people from other countries. That would, I mean, be really nice. But for one thing is, the time factor, and we don't get much of a chance. But on the other hand, right now we don't anyone from another community-, like, I mean, I don't know anyone from Pakistan or-, Nepal or anyone--.

AW: Maybe that's one special thing that will get to come out of this--.

VM: Oh yeah. It will--.

AW: The interviewers have come to know each other, a whole number of people from those places that didn't know each other before.

VM: Yeah, it would be--.

AW: In the community forum that you meet some of those people.

VM: And also, once I get to know, I mean, I would really like to interact with them. I don't like to sort of, stay away from--. Once I get to know someone, I would like to really--, interact, because-, sort of---.

AW: But it makes-, it's an interesting about the hypotheses if there are any about this project is, is their community should be discussing, because in fact, you may not actually know people, how can you be in a community if you have never known the people who are in your community? That's an interesting point about this. [to herself] What else can I ask you? [pause] Do you have any difficulties in your daily life, that relate to these kind of issues?

VM: No. I haven't, sort of, come across-, any-, any sort of difficulties. And-, sort of-, in future, even if I come across any difficulties-, I would just like to ignore them. I mean, I don't think-, but up to now, there haven't been any--.

AW: What about for you, or for your daughter? Do you think she has encountered anything that you would construe as to be racist, or is that something that you've ever run into?

DM: No, not up to this point. She also mixes well with all the other kids. She doesn't seem to mind that she's different or anything.

AW: And for you also?

DM: Yeah. Fine, comfortable.

VM: Yeah, up to this point we haven't experienced any.

AW: Are there anything that you would like to tell the people who're going to be hearing this tape about yourselves that I haven't asked you about?

VM: About ourselves?

AW: Uh-huh. Or about these issues of questions of community in-, in Carrboro and Chapel Hill as opposed to in Sri Lanka.

VM: Nothing really, except that, I mean, if there are opportunities for different communities to interact, we would really like to be involved in that-, like, I mean getting to know some family from another country, or one or more families-, things like that, but-, I mean, other than--. Nothing, really.

AW: Okay. Well, thank you so much for all your time and thoughts.

DM: Thank you so much.

VM: Thank you--.

AW: I'm gonna turn this off--. [recorder is turned off]

(END OF INTERVIEW)