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on Statelessness

Oral Histories of Statelessness

Interview with Kalyani Inpakumar

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Interviewed by Jordana Silverstein

Q: Okay. So I'm Jordana Silverstein. I'm here with Kalyani Inpakumar on the 21st of September 2023. And thank you so much for chatting with me today. Kalyani, can we start with you telling me where and when you were born?

A: Okay. Thank you for giving me this opportunity. So I was born on the 28th of November 1969 in [pause] Sri Lanka, in an area called Inuvil which is in the north of the country.

Q: And what was it like there?

A: So I was born there, but I lived most of my life in the south part of the country, because my parents – my dad worked in the south part of the country. So we came to Columbo. We lived there. But we used to go to the north, which is Jaffna, every year for our holidays, to spend time with our grandparents and our extended family.

Q: So both sets of grandparents lived there?

A: Both sets of grandparents lived and our extended family, like my uncles, my aunts, some of my cousins, all lived in the north part of the island, which was the north and east, which is the – which I would like to call Tamil Eelam, was where like most of the Tamil people lived. And the south of the island is where the Sinhalese people lived. But we lived in the south part most of our lives.

Q: When you lived there, were you around other Tamil people?

A: There was a lot of Tamil people. So I went to a school that had – I can't remember how many classes per grade. About three or four classes per grade, but that one class was for Tamil people, and the rest was for the Sinhalese, because we studied in our own language, so I studied in Tamil and the rest of the people, if you're Sinhalese, they studied in Sinhalese.

Q: Right. This is the government run school, like a public school?

A: No, it was a private school.

Q: Yeah, right. And was that –

A: And English was just one subject. So it was like studying history or it was like studying maths. It was one language. It was just one lesson. But everything else, like if you studied history or science or whatever, was taught to us in Tamil. And for Sinhalese people it was taught in Sinhalese.

Q: And what did you think about doing schooling in that kind of separated way?

A: So when we were growing up, most of the class was Tamil, so all our friends were Tamil. It was what was the norm. It was what we did, you know. It wasn't anything different. My father was very different in the sense that he would encourage us to read English books and learn English quite a lot. Because he would always say that English is an international

language and you need to know that language if you're going to survive. So he always encouraged us to read English books. So I grew up reading The Secret Seven, Enid Blyton books, Nancy Drew, that kind of thing. So I just grew up reading those. So I think – yeah, so he always used to say that to us. You know, your English has to be good. He used to always encourage us. So for us to communicate with other people was easier. But I felt that we would learn – I would know Sinhalese very well, because we were surrounded by people who spoke that language. And my English was very good as well.

Q: Do Sinhalese people know Tamil at all?

A: Some of them did, but I think they were never put in a position of having to learn the language. So I don't think many people did know Tamil.

Q: And tell me more about your dad?

A: So my dad was a very – I think forward-thinking kind of a person who thought that we needed to learn English. And he got my brother out of the country even before 1983, because he could see where the country was going. And he wanted my brother to be out of the country to study in English, so that he could probably go to some other country to be able to pursue – so he was a very sort of that kind of a person. And my mum was very different. My mum was a very – she was a homemaker. She was very helpful to people, that kind of a personality that she had. So very different. My dad was very – came across as a very strong kind of a person. My mum came across as a very soft, kind person. But I think in her mind, when I look back I sort of think my mum was very strong.

Q: What was her strength?

A: Because I think she was, like I said, very helpful towards people. And also she was able to adapt to situations much easier. My dad died when I was 18. And she had to bring up myself and my older brother, who was 21 at that time. And from living in this big house with people to do everything for her, and then going to India and living in a very small house and running that house herself and everything. But she adapted. And she was not sad or not upset or anything. And she just adapted and she just carried on. And then when we came to Australia as well, and I had my mum here with me, she was somebody who would drop my daughter off at school and work at the canteen. Though her English wasn't that good.

Q: So you came out –

A: Yeah, so I jumped I think.

Q: No, no, that's fine.

A: Yeah, so we left in – my mum and myself, we left in 1983, and we went to India after the '83 pogrom where there was like huge – I don't whether you know about it? The way that a lot of the Tamil people were attacked and stuff like that. And many people died. So we left and – because my brother was already in India, because my father had already sent him there. So we moved to India as well. But my father stayed on for a little bit longer because he was working there. So he stayed on for a little bit longer there. And then he took early retirement

and then he left as well. And then he got a job in Nigeria and he went there. And my mum stayed with me for a little while and then I moved to London, and she went and stayed with my father in Nigeria. So at one point my brother was in the US, I was in the UK, and my parents were in Nigeria.

Q: How did that feel?

A: I think it was – I don't know. Thinking about it now, it was hard, because I was – how old was I? I was 16. 15, 16 when I went to London. When I left Sri Lanka I was 13. And then I went to London, I lived there for about, I don't know, two or three years. And when I came back to India and I lived with my mum because my dad got another job where he was travelling. So she couldn't stay with my dad in Nigeria. So she came back to India. And then I came to India and I stayed with her in India until I was 20. So it was always sort of back and forth, you know, in different places. There was never a place that we could settle and be.

Q: And it felt unsettled?

A: I think so. And I think it felt unsettled, it felt nothing was permanent. Like you couldn't sort of put your roots down and call it home or anything.

Q: And what took you to the UK, to London?

A: My dad's brother, brothers lived there. So my dad sent me there.

Q: Because it would be safer?

A: It would be safer because then staying in India, where we didn't have family, it would be safer to be with my uncles.

Q: Sure. Because they were going to Nigeria?

A: Because they were going to Nigeria. And then Nigeria I think they were a bit worried about the education and things like this is they thought – yeah, London will be better.

Q: And it was easy enough to get you the visa and stuff? Do you remember anything about that process?

A: Yeah, I think we got a student visa. So, yeah, went – because this, we are talking about 1986, 87. This was years ago. So I think it was – I don't remember how they got the visa or how the process –

Q: It wasn't an issue.

A: It wasn't – for me it was my parents did it. Yeah. The only time I felt things are not that settled was when I was 18 and my dad passed away in the UK, I was in India with my mum. And because we didn't have a visa at that time, so in India after a while they stopped giving you the visa. But they don't really make it hard for you, like to live there. They don't come and like pick on you or anything like that. You go to school, you just do everything that you normally do, you just don't have a visa. But when you have to leave the country, it becomes a

problem. So we had to leave the country for my dad's funeral in the UK. That's when I realised, oh, this is all these processes that we had to go through to be able to get out of the country and then come back into the country. That's when I realised that how hard it can be. So we had to go and get a report from the police saying that we were not involved in any criminal activity and it's okay for us to leave the country. And it was hard for us to get a UK visa, because we were not – we didn't have a proper visa in India. Things like that. But we did manage to get a visa and go for my dad's funeral. But then that's when I started realising, okay, there is these issues that you need to deal with.

Q: So your dad's buried in the UK?

A: He was cremated.

Q: Cremated. Of course. Yes.

A: Yeah, in the UK. So the funeral happened in the UK.

Q: The first time when you went – so to get to India, how did you get there the first time? When you left Sri Lanka?

A: So I think we – I was 13, so it was right after the 1983 pogrom, and I didn't want to go. So people went to school one day, and then the whole – everybody disappeared. All the kids like in my class, we didn't know – so some of them would have gone to Jaffna, some of them would have left the country. So this whole class of 30-odd kids, we lost touch with everybody, overnight. So I think when we left, we left on a visitor's visa to India, me and my mum. And I think we got school admission in different schools, which was hard as well, because I had to do an English test. Because in India you study in English. Like everything is in English. Whereas in Sri Lanka, everything was in Tamil. So we had to do a test to make sure that our English was good. And that's when I realised what my dad did was good, because my English was good and I was able to get into a good school. Yeah, so then – and I think after that, we were able to get a student visa, for myself. And then my mum as my carer was able to get a visa to stay as well.

But then further down the track I know that we couldn't get a student visa. That's why we didn't have a visa to leave the country. But I don't know why. I don't remember what the problem was.

Q: And do you remember how you felt going to the UK, that first time when you were going as a sort of child to go study and live with your uncle?

A: I have travelled a bit before that, because I have gone to the US to see my brother when he was there, and things. So I've travelled a bit. So it wasn't something new for me. What I found was – I mean, my uncle and aunt were really nice and I still go – treat them almost like my parents and my daughters treat them like their grandparents. But it was hard in the sense that I was 15, I was a teenager, it was a new country, new place. So it was a bit hard, to start off with. And I didn't enjoy my time there because one thing, I hate the cold. So that was one thing that I just hated. It was so cold. But I just couldn't settle down. So I was quite happy to

come back to India and live in India, because India was a little bit more like what I was used to.

Q: It felt closer to home?

A: Yeah.

Q: Did it feel like home? Or –

A: More than closer to home. It felt more like what I was used to. The culture and things. It wasn't as different as in the UK.

Q: Is there a big Tamil community in the UK?

A: There is, there is. Like I had a lot of family there. Yeah. So there is a huge Tamil community there. And I still go every few years there, just because I've got a huge family and I go to see my uncle and aunty there. But yeah, there's a huge community there.

Q: So you've still got family spread out around the world? Or –

A: All over the world. Yes, yes. The US, UK, India, Australia. Yeah, all over. If you look at the Tamil community, the diaspora is so wide.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: Because of the genocide against the Tamil people in Sri Lanka. And the ongoing genocide now, as well. So people are fleeing. Yeah.

Q: And people just kind of go wherever they can go?

A: They can go. Exactly. To escape. To be safe. Yeah.

Q: Yeah, so what brought you to Australia?

A: So I was 20, I got married, and I came here. And, yeah, that's what actually brought me here. So I've got two daughters who were born here.

Q: Is your husband also Tamil? Or –

A: Yes. So when I married and came here, so that marriage failed, so that's an ex-husband. He was Tamil. And my second husband is Tamil as well.

Q: Yeah, sure. But why Australia? I guess, what –

A: I think it's because my ex-husband settled –

Q: He wanted to come here?

A: No, he was settled here already.

Q: Ah right. Okay, sorry.

A: Yeah, so then he came and he married me, and then I came here.

Q: Right. Okay. And how did you feel about coming to Australia?

A: I think by that time I was older. I was 20. I was married. It was fine. Yeah.

Q: It just was.

A: Just was, yes. Something to some and then settle down and call the place home. I've lived here longer than I've lived in any other place on the earth. So it feels home.

Q: Yeah? You'd say Australia is home?

A: Yeah.

Q: Yeah, has Sri Lanka ever felt like home?

A: Probably before '83, it felt like, you know, didn't know any different. It was home. Felt more at home in the north and east of the country when I used to go at the end of the – like for holidays there. School holidays where my grandparents are from. Loved going there. Yes, Sri Lanka felt like home before '83, but after 1983 it was when we realised or, think that we can think that this is home, but other people might not.

Q: Can you tell me more about the time spent with your grandparents and your family in Jaffna?

A: So when I used to go – we used to get spoilt rotten there, because we used to only go there a couple of times a year, so grandparents loved having us there. We had cousins there. It was not like a big city. It was, everybody knew everybody, where we were from. So our neighbours were our relatives. You'd be able to walk down the street without having to worry about your safety or anything like that. Everybody knew everybody. So it was so safe and so nice. You know, you'd go and play at somebody's house with your cousins, and then if you're there at lunchtime you'd just have your food – your lunch there. Same way if everybody came to my grandparent's house and it was dinnertime, we'd all have dinner together. So it was really nice.

Q: And what would you eat?

A: Oooh, rice, a lot of fish, vegetables. It was always freshly cooked. It was really nice. Yeah. Nice food.

Q: Do you make those recipes now?

A: Yes! I'm actually really interested in learning food. You know, from my grandparent's kind of era, trying to sort of learn that. I love cooking, so I try and do that. Yeah. Never stays the same [laughs], but yeah.

Q: Yeah. Did your grandparents try to teach you how to cook at all?

A: No. Because I left when I was quite young, right? I haven't been back for – since I came to Australia, I haven't been back to Sri Lanka. So, no. My mum wasn't a magnificent cook, but she did become so much better towards the end of her life. So I learnt some stuff from her. But now like if I go to some people's house or people who've migrated recently and they bring their recipes and stuff, I always ask them how do you make this. And then try and make that. And I love cooking and giving it to people, giving the food to people and things. Yeah.

Q: Yeah, so has that become a good way then for you to kind of bond with recent migrants?

A: Yes. It's a very good way to bond with people, as well as I think I love cooking and giving it to people and seeing whether they love that food or not and things. And also because I find a lot of the new migrants come here without family. They don't have family here. They're either single men or women who have left their families or whatever. So sometimes it's nice for them to get home cooked food I think.

Q: Yeah. So what got you into - so you worked – this work with the Tamil Refugee Council?

A: Council. So when I first came to – I've always done activism and charity or volunteer work. When I was 18 when I was in India, I worked in an organisation called Uthavum Karangal, which is Helping Hands, which used to look after children who have been abandoned because they have polio. So I started that when I was 18. So I used to go and help them learn English, help them with their homework and things. So I've always been interested in doing something more than just my day-to-day living kind of thing. And then I came to Australia, got caught up in day-to-day mundane living, bringing up my – being married, and bringing up my daughter. And then after our marriage failed, I felt like I needed to do more.

Then I got involved in an organisation called Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation, which is TRO. Which was helping the north and east of the country with different things about – doing what was happening there with the charitable staff and rehabilitation. So I was involved in that for a few years. And then 2009, the peak of the genocide happened and I just realised that you can do rehabilitation and charitable work, but then I think you need to be active politically as well, to be able to make a difference. Just doing rehabilitation, charitable work is not going to get a lot of the answers, because you can keep building buildings, hospitals, schools, keeps getting knocked down, and then you keep building and you know, doing this stuff. And nobody's listening.

So that's what I realised in 2009. And so that's when I started trying to find a way of doing some activism and some lobbying and different kind of things. And that then – I just started doing stuff myself. Then I found that after 2009, there were a lot of people coming here by boat who needed help. And then I just started doing stuff from home. You know, little things here and there. And then I realised that it was getting bigger and bigger and I got involved with Tamil Refugee Council. Which is based in Melbourne. And so I started doing stuff in Sydney. And then it's started from just attending meetings and doing stuff, to now opening an office for Tamil Refugee Council in Sydney. Which is really good.

Q: Tell me more, what's good about it?

A: So I feel that there was never a place I felt that people could go to get help. Like any kind of help. It didn't have to be specific help. Or somewhere that they could drop by and even talk. So just a place that they could come to. There's a lot of people who are doing a lot of work, and I just felt that there needs to be an office that people could go to. So it started off with, only on Sundays we hired a room in Toongabbie, a community centre. So on Sundays we'd go there from 3 to 5, and people would drop in. So I did that for a year, and I found that that wasn't enough. Then I managed to get a lease at this place in Toongabbie, so people could drop in any time.

And then we had like little things, like a printer, a scanner. If people needed to use that. Come and have a cup of coffee, or something to eat and talk and things like that. And also, then have practical help, like helping people apply for their Medicare, helping people fill out a form, helping people get their uni cards. Or reading an email that they would have got from immigration or from a school or anything like that, that they would need help with. A lot of things like that. You know, I'd help people register their newborn child at Birth, Deaths and Marriages. I've helped people fill out forms for their school children, whatever they might have. Or TAFE. So there's no limit to what we can help people with. I always have this that I am also learning. So there might be something new that you might need. We'll learn together and try and figure it out ourselves.

So I have people who have come here as asylum seekers who are refugees who are helping me as well. So my dream is for this office to be run by refugees for refugees. So eventually for me to take sort of a less of a role, and for people to be able to help each other. Because who can help another person than a person who's gone through it themselves. Like if they had issues applying for Medicare – I haven't had issues. I'm a citizen, so I haven't had issues. But they would have had issues. So they know what the issues are more than I do. So that's my whole philosophy is for them to help each other, than anything else. Having English classes, it's going to start on Sunday. This Sunday. The teacher who's coming is coming as a volunteer. She used to teach English as a second language. She's retired. So she's coming to teach. So you know, different.

So people come and tell me, okay this is what I need to know or this is what I need. And then I try and find ways. So people have told me that their written English is good, but they need to improve on their spoken English. So this is what I'm now trying to – so different things that people might need, I'm trying to find solutions for them. But together with the refugees and the asylum seekers, they tell me what they need. And then I'll try and facilitate that with their help.

Q: So, I mean, it feels like that's doing so many things of – I guess, sort of like the community empowerment and helping people realise – like people bring their own skills –

A: Yeah, exactly.

Q: – and building community.

A: yeah.

Q: And then also navigating this kind of awful bureaucracy that is so cold and –

A: Exactly. The only thing – most of the people who have come here, most of the Tamil people who have come here have actually been part of running a country in Tamil Eelam. When we had our own country. So I think I learnt more from them than – [some tears, and a pause, and reaching for tissues]

Q: Yeah. You're right.

A: Yeah, so the only negative thing probably is the language barrier, but they have the skills. And the only positive thing I have is I have the language. So I feel that we can work together to achieve a lot, yeah.

Q: Yeah. There's so much um – yeah, I guess the effects of the violence is so vast and – yeah. Sorry.

A: Yeah. It's okay.

Q: Yeah.

A: So, yeah, I feel that most of the people have come here, like I said, have run a country. And so very well. So I think the only thing that they need is a little bit of help to improve. Sort of with their languages or whatever. And not knowing a language is not any indication of being less intelligent or being able to achieve things. So most of the people who come and help me here teach me so much.

Q: Yeah. Do you think Australia, though, treats recent refugees as though they're –

A: No, I don't. I think when I migrated or when I came here, we were treated much more, better, I think than the refugees are treated. And I think now, the way they're treated now is – some of the words, slogans that are used are so wrong. Like boat people, queue jumpers, things like that, is so wrong. So, no, I don't think – there's a lot of people don't realise the potential of people and how these the migrants, the refugees come here. They have their own businesses now. They employ other people. And they have so much to give. And on top of that, the stress of not knowing whether their life here is permanent or whether they'll be sent back. And if only they had that certainty, I feel that they would achieve much more.

And if you're here, you're not recognised as a refugee. You're on a temporary – you know, on a bridging visa. You finish year 12, you're told you can't go to university. You know, there's so much discrimination against people that it's unbelievable, really. Like people who are on the three year, five year visa before, they were not allowed to go to university. And you're stopping a whole generation of people not reaching their potential. Or whatever. You know, giving them the right to choose whatever they want to be. Which is so wrong. It's just so wrong when you say education is a basic human right for people. And then you take that right away from a person.

Q: Have you experienced discrimination and racism in Australia?

A: I've been called names when I walk down the streets, many times. Nobody's called me anything to my face. Like when I'm walking down the street, they might be driving past and they might scream something, but never like face to face. But racism doesn't have to be so

vocal or so in your face, right? Racism can be like an undertone of the way you're treated when you walk into a shop or a restaurant or things like – yeah, I have experienced that many times.

Q: And employment? Is that – have you been able to – you've had it with getting jobs? Or anything like that?

A: I must say no. Most of the time when I've gone for an interview for a job, I've got it. I don't think I have, no. I must say no. It's more so sort of like a subtle kind of thing when you walk into a restaurant or a shop or something. I find that it's a little bit more now than it was before.

Q: Right. Before, as compared to when?

A: A few years back and I feel maybe it is more so in the last maybe five, ten years than before I think.

Q: Yeah, right. What do you think has changed? Or what's caused that, do you think?

A: I think it is this perception that the government or the people in power put out about refugees coming here and taking their jobs. Or if you're a refugee and you've got brown skin, you can't speak English, you don't know what you're doing, that kind of a – sort of thing that that's put out I think than before. Because, yeah, I think that's what it is. It's because I think the country always follows what the leaders put out there. And if the leaders put out certain sort of racial kind of undertone language, the people who are sort of racist feel validated to be able to speak out more than they would – wouldn't. So I feel that that's what it is. And I think leaders should be leaders and lead us in the correct direction, not – yeah.

Q: Yeah. So you do all this amazing community work. Do you do work sort of facing the non-Tamil community? Any I guess like public advocacy or to government or anything like that?

A: Yes, yes. So I do a lot of work – like I do work within the community, but I work with other communities as well. So not just the Tamil community. So because I want to take our issues to the other communities as well and get them to understand our issues as well as understand what issues that they have. So other migrant communities as well as the – I don't know what you want to call it, but the mainstream Australian community as well. Yes.

Q: Yeah. So what other migrant communities do you work –

A: So we work with the Bangladeshis, Iranian communities, people from Cambodia. So anything, any non-English speaking background people. Try and have that kind of a connection.

Q: Yeah, that's really cool. So yeah, supporting each other and –

A: Exactly. So if they have got any functions or anything that they do, then we try and support that. And if they do that, then we try – they come to our staff and we support that. Yeah.

Q: That's great. Yeah. Is it formally structured? Like in Victoria, there's the Ethnic Community Council of Victoria and stuff. Is that – or it's more just sort of informal networks?

A: Informal networks, and you know there might be an organisation like STTARS, which is like survivors of trauma counselling. So they might have some workshop or anything, and then they'd invite all the different communities, so we get to meet them there. Or there might be like a dinner that a certain community is having for fundraising or whatever. And then we'd go for that and things like that. Yeah.

Q: And in terms – you get your funds through fundraising? Or is there –

A: Don't get any funds.

Q: You don't get any funds? [shared laughter] There's no money!

A: Very bad, because that's sort of always at the bottom of the list. So we never get any – never put out for grants or anything like that. So, yeah, I think that it's always something that we should be doing and we never do it because that's the last thing that we think about. So there's a lot of volunteers who would give their time and their energy into doing this. Like this English class, like the teacher is volunteering. People who are coming to help us run the classes. Volunteering. Things like that. So, yeah. That's one negative thing we should – yeah.

Q: It's always the hardest and the most tedious part of –

A: Exactly. There's always all these conditions that you've got to fulfil to be able to get grants and things, I just find sometimes it's just too hard.

Q: Yeah. It's part of that kind of bureaucracy, just making –

A: Exactly.

Q: It's harder than it's worth.

A: Yeah. So like, I'm lucky for this office. A person – a company came forward and they're paying the rent. So we get things like that instead of actually filling out forms and getting – yeah. So that people help out like that.

Q: Yeah, cool. And do you have any connections with the local Indigenous community at all?

A: Yeah. So when we have any rallies or anything, we try and always have Welcome to Country done by a First Nations person. We always acknowledge the atrocities that were committed against the First Nations people. We have a very close bond with them because they are – we feel that genocide was, you know, perpetrated against them, same as it was against us in Sri Lanka. So, yeah, we have a very close bond with them.

Q: Yeah. So that bond based on those interconnected histories and present.

A: Exactly. Histories. Exactly.

Q: To jump around a little bit, so when you came to Australia, so you came on a partner visa?

A: Yes.

Q: And that was pretty easy to get at that time?

A: Yes, it was easy. We married. So it was easy to get.

Q: Yeah. And so what year was it that you came to Australia? Do you remember?

A: 1990. 33 years ago.

Q: So the 90s – so did a lot of Tamil people come in the late 80s, early 90s?

A: So I think a lot of people did come, during that time, but I don't know how many. Do you mind getting me a glass of water? Sorry.

Q: No, you're right. I can pause it. Okay. So we were saying about Tamils coming in the late 80s, early 90s.

A: Yeah, I think – I'm not sure how many people, but at that time it was mostly by plane. But it was after 2009 I think most people came by boat.

Q: Yeah. And when did you become a citizen of Australia?

A: I don't know. Maybe three, four years after I came. As soon as I could.

Q: Yeah? You were keen to?

A: I was keen to. I was keen to get rid of my Sri Lankan passport and get an Australian passport. Yeah, so as soon as I could.

Q: Why –

A: Why was because I think I was not wanted, I felt, by Sri Lanka. So I just wanted – and I felt that Australia so embraced us – me. So I just want to get rid of my Sri Lankan passport and just get the Australian passport as soon as I could.

Q: Was there a sense that you could also reject Sri Lanka in that move?

A: Yes, it was like, you know when people ask me where are you from, I hate saying I'm from Sri Lanka. But if I say I'm from Tamil Eelam, people are like, where is that? And it's not in the map. So it is hard. So I have to end up saying I'm from Sri Lanka, but I'm from the north and east and I'm a Tamil. Yeah. So it was rejecting the Sri Lankan – yeah.

Q: So when you tell people you're from Tamil Eelam, or when you say that to yourself, what does that mean to you?

A: When I say I'm from Tamil Eelam, I feel a sense of pride. I think, yeah, I feel proud.

Q: Proud of what?

A: Proud of being Tamil, being part of that part of the world. Being proud that we actually achieved something.

Q: Yeah. What was the something? Sorry. I'm here prodding [shared laugh]. What was the something?

A: So something was, we had our own country. Which was run for years. It had a strong history. It treated women with utmost respect. We had equal rights. Women had equal rights. They were part of the whole decision making process. They were part of everything. Yeah. So I think it was almost like a country that other countries should look at and follow. That's what I feel.

Q: And is there like sort of physical land that you feel connected to as well?

A: Yeah, the north and east of the country is our land. Tamil Eelam is our land. Yeah. And I feel, if I can go back, that's where I'll go back to.

Q: But you haven't been back since you came to Australia?

A: No, no. So I haven't been back for 33 years. Both my children have never been to Sri Lanka. The reason is the activism that we do, it's not safe for us to go.

Q: The activism you do in Australia?

A: In Australia. It's not safe. And my daughters, especially my second daughter, she's very active and very vocal, so I don't think it's safe for us to go to Sri Lanka. So we've never been.

Q: How does that feel to not be able to go?

A: I think it's very hard because I would love to take Renuga and Sahana, both my children, to the north and east and show them where we used to go for holidays, and this is the kind of life we lived, or things. It's really hard. Not being able to go back.

Q: And do they want to go? They would have liked to?

A: Mmmm, I think I think they would love to go. So I've taken them to India and shown them where, you know, certain parts of my life in India was. But yeah, never Sri Lanka.

Q: Do you have a sense of – do you feel a sense of sort of one day we'll be able to go? One day, we'll be free and we'll be able to go?

A: [Pause] [sigh]

Q: Sorry.

A: Probably – I don't know. I try not to think about that.

Q: Yeah. Fair enough. Yeah. Sorry.

A: No, no. Because I feel – before 2009, if you had asked me that question, I would have probably said yes. Definitely. But now I don't know.

Q: Yeah, in talking to people, I really – in this project, there's just such a sense of I guess how much is lost by the creation of these nation states.

A: Yeah.

Q: These countries that exclude and include – yeah. I don't know if that like –

A: Yeah. I sort of feel that things will change only if certain countries – so-called superpowers – think that they can get something by helping us. So until that happens, we don't know when that's going to happen, until that happens, and probably – yeah. Because I don't think that anybody is going to help us because it's the right thing to do. Because it's a proper thing to do, because there was a genocide, so we need to acknowledge that we need to do stuff. I don't think that's how the world works. It is only if the political climate or the economic climate is conducive for these countries to help. You know, for the truth to come out. That's when the truth will come out. It's not because it's the right thing.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah, that's what I feel.

Q: Yeah. That's depressing.

A: Yeah, it is.

Q: But it's true. It's very true.

A: It is.

Q: Yeah.

A: I just – yeah. It is. It's depressing, but I think we need to not get depressed by it. But we need to keep fighting and keep saying and doing the right things ourselves so that when the time is conducive, we are ready for it. That's how I feel. Because if we sort of think, oh god, it's never going to happen. What am I going to do? It's not going to make a difference, when the time is right, we won't be ready. So I think we need to be ready. We need to build. In this time, we need to build ourselves, build our community, build whatever we need to do. Be ready when the time is conducive. Then we are ready for it.

Q: Yeah. So that's the work that you do now?

A: That's all – yeah.

Q: That's very much the work – like that's how you think about the work you're doing?

A: Yeah, yeah. Because we can't sort of think it's never going to happen. We don't know when, but when it does happen, we need to be ready for it.

Q: Yeah, yeah. And you said that Australia – you felt embraced by Australia. What were the signs of that? How did that feel?

A: I don't know. I felt that we were welcomed here. We were able to study whatever we wanted to study. We were able to do whatever we want to do. You know, I get a job. Do whatever we want to do. It was not based on the fact whether you spoke a certain language or belong to a certain ethnic group.

Q: So sort of a sense of freedom and a sense of you can decide for yourself what you want to do?

A: You can achieve whatever you want to achieve, yeah. It's really up to you what you want to do. That kind of a thing, yeah.

Q: Yeah. And so Australia feels like home now?

A: Yes. For me, Australia does feel like home. Yeah.

Q: Is it Sydney feels like home? Like in terms of a physicality of it, or a place?

A: Physicality of it, Sydney, Wentworthville, well, feels like home. Yeah. I love being in the western suburbs. I love being close to – if I feel like some Tamil food to be able to drive five minutes and go and grab that. And then being part of all the different cultures. Like, you know, from where I live I can drive in any direction, 10 or 15 minutes. If I feel like Lebanese food, I can just go down. If I feel like Vietnamese kind of food, go to Cabramatta, which is just 15 minutes. So it's for me, everything is close by. And I love being able to do that. If I feel like Greek food – anything. I feel like Italian food. Anything I feel like. And for me, for each culture, the food represents a lot for me. I love food. So it represents a lot for me. So I love trying – like yesterday I went to Auburn and I was able to have Pakistani food. So a different – you know, being able to go to – from where I live 15, 20 minutes anywhere and you can sort of – yeah.

Q: And it's food as like a genuine way into other communities -

A: Exactly. Exactly.

Q: And to engage with people.

A: Engage with – yeah. But I don't like using the word multicultural.

Q: I was going to – yeah? Why not?

A: I try and avoid that word.

Q: Tell me more.

A: Because I don't know, that word is so sort of used so loosely and so sort of flippantly. That what does it mean, multicultural? What does it mean? Yeah. So multicultural, you have different cultures. But is everybody embracing all the different cultures and their values? Are you, you know, open minded enough to understand and accept different cultures? So I don't like using that word, multicultural. Yeah, because for me, it doesn't mean anything really.

Q: And yeah, so often it can mean just eating other people's food, but doing nothing more than that.

A: Exactly.

Q: But you are talking about a very different relationship with food.

A: Exactly. And then I think it's used by the government a lot to try and explain things. You know 'we are a multicultural country'. Okay. Are you? Why are we having such a huge debate about the yes vote? You know, what are the words that are being used by people who are debating these things? What does it mean if you can't even acknowledge what happened to the First Nations people. What's the point in saying it's a multicultural country? You know, so those are the questions that I ask when I use that word.

Q: Yeah. How would you frame the kind of society you'd like to live in, in Australia?

A: I would like to live in a society that's very tolerant of each other. Understand different cultures. Acknowledge what happened to the First Nations people in a proper way. Teach their history in our schools. But not have like a token every meeting. Everything you acknowledge, do acknowledgement country, but do you do it properly? Do you use the correct words? The correct terminology, is that used? And yeah, like you have to really teach the children how to understand different cultures and be tolerant of different cultures and different ways of life. Yeah, I think that's the kind of society I would like to live in. And not to look down on anybody because they look different, they eat different food, they dress differently. Not dictate what people should wear, not wear, which is very important. If it's okay for certain people to wear certain clothes, why is it not okay for some people not to wear it, if that's what makes them happy?

So things like that, I think – yeah, I think tolerance is – and understanding of each others and accepting that some things that happened in the past is very wrong. We need to acknowledge that for us to be able to move forward. But there has to be acknowledgement, before anything can happen I feel. And I feel that one day we're going to look back on this era, this time, and feel ashamed of the way the refugees are treated. So I feel that – yeah, I honestly feel that.

Q: On the clothes, do you think about – do you at times wear Tamil clothes in public? Are there times –

A: Yeah, yeah. I try and wear saree all the time. For any functions, anything. When I used to – when I have my normal life, my work life, if people ask me to wear formal clothes, I wear saree. For me, that's formal. Yeah, I always, I always wear saree. Any excuse really to wear one.

Q: Do you do religious things, at all?

A: Not very religious.

Q: Not very religious?

A: Not a very religious person. I do go to the temple. But I'm not a very religious person. For me, religion is helping others. I believe in karma a lot. You do good, good comes to you. Good thoughts. The amount of time that I would go and pray to god in a temple, I'd rather help another person in that time. That's my religion. I do do certain rituals or whatever you would want to call it. Just so that – I don't know, but they're not religious as such.

Q: What are they?

A: Like if it's a new year, I would cook certain foods. I would have people come over home. For breakfast or something I would – so I have certain rituals that I do that I think is important. Like on the 1st of January, I have a lot of people come over and I have a huge breakfast at home. We do a huge Christmas party at home. Every year a huge Christmas party where I have 70-80 people come home. So there are certain rituals I would do, but they're not religious-based. Like having Christmas is not a religious kind of thing, something that – a get-together of everybody home, yeah.

Q: So it's about more Tamil culture and – do you think? Or it's –

A: No.

Q: It's about something else?

A: More than culture, I think it's about a ritual that I would like to continue. Like, you know, when I'm – if I become a grandmother or something like that, all my grandkids come for that. You know, something that – okay Christmas, it's at Kalyani's place. You know, that kind of thing. So everybody knows, okay, we'll be there. So 1st of January, okay, breakfast will be there. That kind of a thing. So something like that. But it's never sort of in front of a idol praying or anything.

Q: Yeah. So your home is a real sort of community hub, is it?

A: Yeah. I like it to be. I like to think so. Yeah.

Q: Did you get that from your parents, do you think? Or family? Or is that just something you've wanted, you came up for yourself?

A: I think actually when I was growing up, I wanted it to be like that, but it never was because we lived in the south of the country and away from our community. So we didn't have a lot of family around us. So I always sort of felt that this was something that I would like my home to be like. I want to have a lot of children, because it was just me and my brother and I thought it would be nice to have like five, six children. But then reality hits you when it's time for you to have kids and you realise, I don't think so. So I always like – not all

of the time, but I like having people around me. A huge community of people around me. Yeah.

Q: And so does your brother live in Sydney?

A: Yes he does, he does. Yes.

Q: And are you close?

A: Yeah, yeah. He lives about. 10 minutes away from him.

Q: Do you see each other a lot?

A: Yeah, we try and see – it's not as easy as – you know, he's got children and, yeah, so busy. But we do try and see each other as much as we can.

Q: And do your kids and his kids get along well?

A: Yes, yes. There's a huge age difference between my children and my brother's. But they're cousins. Yeah, they do get along.

Q: And I guess – do you think of yourself as stateless? Have you thought in the past – or what's your relationship I guess with statelessness?

A: My definition of statelessness was before, that you didn't have a passport and you never registered your birth in a country. But I think after speaking and thinking about it, statelessness is where you can reject a country as well, because the country didn't treat you well. Or they committed genocide against your people. So for me, statelessness now I think is you rejecting the country as well, and feeling that you don't belong in that country. You might be living in that country, but you don't feel safe, or you don't feel that you belong there. So I think for you to feel a sense of belonging you have to feel a sense of safeness, and there's a safety around you and being able to – people accepting your culture or your way of life as well. And if those things aren't accepted, then you don't belong there. And if you don't belong, then you're stateless, I think.

Q: Is that safety, it's physical safety or an emotional safety, or?

A: I think the basic is physical safety, and then emotional as well, I think, yeah. Emotional safety as well. And physical I think is a very real kind of safety that you would feel. Being able to speak what you feel like or – you know, and then being able to wear your traditional clothes. Things like that, I think is important.

Q: So Tamil traditional clothes are different to Sinhalese traditional clothes?

A: Yes, so Tamil – the saree, they wear the saree, but in a different way. Different language, different religion as well. But I must say they're not – the issue Tamil people had is not against the Sinhalese people. It was the government. They're the people who I think created the issues with a lot of the decisions that were made. Political decisions that they made is the problem. Like making a standardisation which meant that you had to, in certain parts of the

island, you had to get certain marks to be able to get into the university. Whereas other parts of the island you get less marks. So the north and east was discriminated against that. Then Singh Only Act, where you had to know Sinhalese to be able to have jobs in the government, and the division where if you're Tamil, you learnt Tamil, if you're Sinhalese, you learnt Sinhalese. And all these different things that were put in place. That created the problem, I think.

Q: Yeah. And which also I get that difference between the freedom and the kind of – yeah, you don't have choices about what you can do and you can't.

A: Exactly.

Q: You're restricted in what your options are. And it's that kind of restrictive versus – yeah. It's really powerful.

A: Yeah, yeah. And also being – I think by restricting and not letting people study – Well, it happens here too now, because with the refugees, if you're on a certain visa, you can't study. Which is wrong. You know, the children should be able to study. It doesn't matter. And, you know, until you're deemed a refugee or not, shouldn't stop you from being able to have an education. That shouldn't be the criteria for whether you can go to university or not. The criteria is whether you want to be able to study or not. So I think that's wrong. The fundamental right of a person not being able to study is wrong.

Q: And so when people ask you where you're from and you have to say – they sort of force you to say Sri Lanka, and I guess when you're engaging with bureaucracy and applying for things or applying for citizenship, and having to navigate those kinds of questions around where are you from and putting it on a form, how does that feel?

A: I don't like doing it, but then I have no choice. I have to do it. Because even when you're trying to explain to people where you're from or whatever, you end up saying you're from Sri Lanka. Because people don't understand when you say you're from Tamil Eelam. You know, where is that? So – well, some people do ask you where is Sri Lanka, but then at least you can sort of show it in the map and say, “Oh, it's that little island right – you know, at the bottom of India.” Yeah, it's not a good feeling.

Q: Do you remember – did you have a citizenship ceremony?

A: Yes, I did.

Q: Do you remember what happened at the ceremony?

A: I do remember, but it was just a normal ceremony. I was very happy to be able to get that citizenship certificate and to be able to apply and get an Australian passport. Yeah, it was a really nice feeling to be able to do that. Yeah. Like, I could have applied for dual citizenship. I could have got Sri Lankan citizenship as well as Australian, and never for a second did I think that I want to do that. I never did that.

Q: Yeah, right. You wanted to give up the Sri Lankan –

A: Yeah, yeah. Didn't want it.

Q: Yeah, sure.

A: I'll get a dual citizenship when we get Tamil Eelam.

Q: Do you remember what you wore to the ceremony?

A: I remember wearing black suit, a pants and a top. Yeah, yeah. I've started embracing sarees and stuff I think later on in my life. Not towards the early years of my life. It was harder to get sarees and stuff at that time in Australia. Like it's very different life, you know, 30 years ago. Couldn't get Indian, Sri Lankan food, couldn't get – you know, it was very different to what it is now. So, yeah, at that time – and then travel wasn't as easy as it is now, right? 30 years ago, to be able to go to India and quickly get some sarees and come whatever. Whereas now the world's so much smaller. So I think I started – I used to wear sarees all the time, but not like for ceremonies like that. I would now. But at that age, when I was like – how old was I? 24-25, probably not.

Q: Yeah. I guess, you're young and still figuring out how you fit in.

A: Exactly. And I'm so I'm astonished by 24, 25 year olds, how much they know and then seem to know what they want now. To how much what I thought I wanted then.

Q: Yeah, it's astonishing, yeah.

A: It is. It is.

Q: And so now the sarees that you wear, mostly you get them when you're in India and you bring them back?

A: Yeah. And there are shops here and there are people here who sell it, that I get it from them as well. But I do go to India quite often because I've managed to reconnect with my schoolmates from Sri Lanka. So what we do is we try and meet every couple of years in India, because we are from all over the world. We sort of escaped to Australia, UK, US, different parts of the world. And there are still friends that I went to school with in Sri Lanka.

Q: Wow.

A: So they find it hard to get a visa to go to European countries or other countries. So India is a easier place for everybody to come. So we try and meet in India every couple of years.

Q: Wow

A: Yeah. So these are friends that I went to school with when I was in kindergarten.

Q: Wow.

A: Yeah.

Q: Oh, so from your when you lived in the north?

A: Yes, Sri Lanka.

Q: Yeah, right.

A: Yeah. So we try and catch up. So there's a group of us

Q: How did you all find each other?

A: Facebook. Yeah, so –

Q: That's amazing.

A: – connected with one person about 15 years ago. And then little by little we just started connecting with people. And I think we found everybody in our class.

Q: That's amazing.

A: Yeah. So not everybody can come, but most of them do.

Q: Yeah, wow. So you all meet up. And how do those gatherings feel?

A: It feels wonderful. Just feels like you're back in – you know, school again. It's wonderful.

Q: That's really special.

A: Yeah, it is.

Q: And then again you see the layers of bureaucracy and states that you're all separated and it's hard to get the –

A: Exactly.

Q: – visas to come back together.

A: Exactly. So we don't go to Sri Lanka to meet because some people can't go back there, I can't go. And other people. So India is the safest and best place for us to meet. So we meet in India.

Q: Yeah. Wow Yeah. Gosh, that's really moving. Yeah, it's lovely. Do you know, are there other – do you have other people you've met since who do similar things? That have a similar –

A: Yeah, I think a lot of my generation or younger or older people connect with their schoolmates, because I think if you go to a school in a country and you live there, then you don't appreciate, I feel. But when you then are divided because of whatever – all these things that happened in your life, having reunions and meeting and everything means a little bit more. I think much more to people. So a lot of people do that.

Q: It sort of feels – or I wonder if it feels like you all kind of embody Tamil Eelam by meeting up together?

A: Yeah, we definitely do, like when we meet up. But I think it's also the fact that we were never probably able to have a proper farewell when we left. Sort of '83 happened. One day we went to school the next day. Like we didn't know where people went. There was no Facebook, there was no social media for us to be able to connect. There's no mobile phones or anything, so not able to connect with people, right? So I think that's one of the things. And then if you find people my age, a lot of the women my age, we all married very young. In our 20s, I feel. And I feel the reason was the parents just wanted the girls to be settled quickly because there's so much uncertainty, so they felt that if the daughters were settled, then half the problem's sort of solved for them. Yeah, if you look at a lot of my friends, we got married very young.

Q: Right. And overseas, like getting away from the region.

A: Yeah, yeah.

Q: Did many move to countries still within – like, more nearby countries? Or it's mostly going to the US, Europe, Australia.

A: Yeah, I think mostly the Western countries, yeah.

Q: Why do you think that is?

A: I think they already had probably somebody there, maybe, who had gone there to study. So they would have probably gone there for studies, for opportunities. Like 13 they were finished their, you know, Year 8 at that time and then they would probably have gone to India or somewhere to finish their higher studies. They would go overseas and then just settle there. I think that was the reason why I think more than anything else.

Q: Yeah, sure. And so what did you study when you went to university? Did you go to university?

A: No, I didn't. I went to – when I was in England I went – did London O levels. That's what I did there. And then I came back to India and did my London A levels in India. And then I got married.

Q: Yep. And then you work in a paid employment now?

A: Yes.

Q: Have you always worked in paid employment?

A: Yes, always. When I came, six months I went to TAFE. Did a very basic course there. And then after six months did sort of like a placement for about a month, three, four weeks. And then I got a job. And then I've always worked full time, even when my kids were born, I had six months off maternity leave and then went back full time. Yeah. Always worked.

Q: Why? That was something you wanted to do?

A: I think it was something that I had to do, because we came here with nothing, really. And then we had to establish ourselves, mortgage, bills. So it was always – yeah, had to work.

Q: And what sort of work have you done?

A: So I've always worked for like a financial company.

Q: And you've enjoyed the work? Or it's just work?

A: I think it's more like I always say that that pays for my food for my stomach. And the other advocacy work that I do feeds my soul. So those are two separate things.

Q: Yeah, it makes sense. And going back to your citizenship ceremony briefly, did you have a celebration afterwards?

A: No, I didn't. I was very happy. I still remember it being a happy occasion, but I don't remember having a celebration though.

Q: Yeah. It just wasn't a thing that was done? Or this was sort of before –

A: No, it wasn't a thing. Yeah.

Q: – that was the thing that you would do?

A: Yeah, it was just at a council office. We just had the ceremony there, and personally, I wasn't going through a good time at that time, I think. So I was just happy to have the certificate and be called Australian. To be able to apply for an Australian passport I think was the main thing.

Q: Yeah. So how did it feel the first time you used that passport?

A: Very happy. Still I'm very happy to be – yeah, like when I look at my passport and – like very happy, yeah.

Q: Yeah, it's that that particular document holds a lot of meaning?

A: A lot of meaning, yeah.

Q: Can you say more about that?

A: I think it's because – a sense of belonging, a sense of pride that you belong to a place, that you're accepted there. I think all that kind of thing. And I know we say a lot of things that Australia is doing is wrong. You know, with the refugees, with the First Nations people, countries like UK following the offshore processing that Australia set up and things like that. We do say that, but then, those are decisions that are being made by politicians who – I don't know. I know they're elected by us, by the people, but then I don't know whether people really understand what the certain politicians stand for when they get elected. Because not everything is said. And not everything is out in the media. Sometimes people feel that if it doesn't affect me personally, it's not going to affect you, but then down the track, every decision affects everybody, I feel. So, yeah.

Q: And, yeah, regardless of all that sort of awfulness, there's still –

A: Still the feeling of –

Q: – that feeling of a passport.

A: Yes. If I was younger, I would probably get into politics.

Q: Yeah?

A: I don't know. Because I sort of feel that a lot of decisions are made – and if all the good people, all the people who feel so strongly about the right thing avoid getting into politics because they feel that it's such a horrible place to be, then it's going to be run by horrible people. But I don't know.

Q: Do you think of yourself as a community leader?

A: I hate that word.

Q: Why?

A: I don't like being called a leader because I think it's an elected position. It's not something that we should call ourselves or others should call you. I don't see myself as a community leader. And I hate when people call themselves one, because I don't think it's – it's not something that you can call yourself. And who gives you the right to call yourself a leader? I don't think – yeah. And not one person's contribution to community is more valuable than another person. A person might be in the kitchen, cooking for 50 people, and giving them their contribution, is as valuable as a person who's standing on a podium and giving a speech, I feel. So I don't think you can put value on a person's contribution to community by things like that. That if you can speak and you're in front of a mic and you're talking, you are valued more than a person who doesn't have that ability, but has a different ability to help people.

Q: And you try to do all of those kinds of things? Cook for people, and – do you speak, do you speak at rallies? And do you speak –

A: I do speak. I try and avoid it, but I do speak if I'm asked to speak. I cook because I love cooking. I love creating. And especially all our recipes, our Tamil recipes, I love cooking. I cook other stuff as well. I cook Italian food and things like that as well at home. But I love cooking. It's not like a community thing that I do. But it's something that I love doing. I just love cooking – when I have time, I just love to cook.

Q: Yeah. Something you also said about kind of the ways we carry our identity or our sense of self in our bodies. And we talked about clothes, but I also wonder about things like jewellery or makeup, or are those kinds of expressions at all of your Tamil-ness? Or –

A: Yeah, I love wearing ethnic kind of earrings. And makeup, I don't know. But I do wear like the – when I wear Tamil clothes, I try to – everything about me is very Tamil. Like the pottu, the dot I wear, the footwear I wear, the earrings and everything. But I don't wear it

when I wear Western clothes. Makeup and stuff, I think my makeup is the same, if I wear a saree or if I wear Western clothes. Yeah, there's no difference.

Q: Does your sense of belonging – do you feel it in your body? Do you feel differently when you're in different places? Like does your body feel different when you're in India versus when you're in Australia?

A: Yeah. When I go to India, I do feel different, because people can tell that I'm not from India. Because of the way I dress or the way I speak, that I've come from overseas. So, yeah, it's different. And then because it's really sad, but because you go from here, you have money when you go there. So the kind of life, the kind of holidays that you go to and the way you spend your money and everything is very different to people who are struggling there. So sometimes there's a sense of guilt. But, yeah.

Q: Yeah, the class feels very different.

A: Very different there, whereas here you sort of feel everybody's sort of the same kind of. I don't feel that here. Because I feel that wherever I go, I'm just like everybody else, kind of a feeling.

Q: Yeah. So you feel that sense of home – yeah, that feels much more – I guess what you said, home here than in India

A: Yeah.

Q: And your difference there feels more marked than it does here.

A: Yes, yes

Q: Yeah, I guess yes, you've lived here for the longest that you've – yeah.

A: Yes, 33 years here. Yeah.

Q: And have you always lived around this area?

A: Yeah, I've been living here – 22, 23 years, in the same house.

Q: In the same house?

A: Yeah. So, yeah, 10 years before that, probably – like Auburn. Always in the west. Yeah. But in that particular place the longest.

Q: When you first arrived, there was a house for you to move into? Or you had to get a house?

A: There was a house, yeah.

Q: There was a house? And did you like that house? Or was it –

A: It was a unit. Yeah. I just feel the house that I'm living in at the moment is my permanent home. The one that I've been there for that long, I just feel – I don't know. It's close to everything and lived there and sort of built it the way I want it to be and things like that. So I'm quite happy there. Very contented.

Q: Yeah. And you imagine living there –

A: For the rest of my life. Yes.

Q: And so who do you live there with?

A: So at the moment my husband, and my younger daughter. My older daughter is married and so she's moved out.

Q: Oh, wonderful. When did she get married?

A: About a year and a half ago. Almost two years I think now. Yeah.

Q: And was that a happy occasion?

A: Yes. So she's in the UK at the moment with her husband. They moved there eight, nine months ago to see the world. So go there, live there for two years in the UK, so that they're closer to Europe so they can travel and have a look at the world and stuff. So she's moved there with her husband. So she'll be back in another year and a bit.

Q: How does it feel with her overseas?

A: I'm very happy for her. Yeah. The fact that she's doing what she wants to do. And then look, you know, see the world and – yeah. I'm not one of those mothers that is very sort of, oh, my God, don't go, I'll miss you. I'm not one of them. I'm happy for them to be able to go and see whatever they want to see and do whatever they want to do.

Q: Yeah, so that sense of freedom, like watching your kids have that freedom is also important?

A: Exactly, exactly. To be able to make that decision and do that. Because I don't think my generation of Tamil people had that opportunity. Because we didn't have anything to fall back on. We had to look after ourselves. We came to a new country. Like we could not suddenly say, well, I'm going to go overseas and look – you know. Because we didn't have anything to fall back on. But as our children luckily are able to do that, like my daughter is able to go overseas, see the world, and then come back and, you know, start her life because she's got the parents who are able to, you know, back – if she doesn't get a job for six months that she's still got somebody to look after her. Which we didn't have. Which I think is such a good thing for them to be able to do that.

Q: Yeah. And so you brought your mum – your mum didn't come out at the same time as you? She came out later?

A: No. So I brought her over as a parent. And she lived with me for a few years. How many? Maybe six, seven years she lived with me, and then she had a brain aneurysm and she passed away.

Q: Do you remember picking her up at the airport and what that was like?

A: Yeah. So we were very happy. And yeah, it was really nice, because my daughter, my older daughter was just two at that time. So it was really nice to have her.

Q: Yeah, that's great. And how did you meet your current husband? Your husband now? Sorry that was weird phrasing. Your husband.

A: So I met him in one of the charity stuff that we do.

Q: And so you still do that work together?

A: He doesn't do as much, but he is very supportive of what I do. Yeah.

Q: And so where do you see your future going? What do you see for you into the future?

A: Retiring and doing this advocacy stuff maybe more, full-time. Travelling, maybe. I love travelling. Yeah. That's it. Travelling, more of this, and – yeah.

Q: And if you do have grandchildren, what sort of relationship do you want them to have with Tamil-ness or Tamil Eelam?

A: A very close relationship, I think. So we have National Heroes Day in November every year. So I just make sure that I go to that and I make sure that my children, both my daughters, go to that. And that's something that I would want them to continue doing. So yeah, so very close relationship I think, yeah.

Q: What happens on that day? What do you do?

A: That's the day we commemorate all the heroes who fought.

Q: Yeah, sure. Do you share your story much with other people?

A: Parts of it probably, not much. Not much, yeah, not really. Not a lot. Yeah, not too much, no.

Q: Because there just isn't the space to talk about it, or?

A: Yeah, there's never been a space, and never a reason to really – I mean, there might be certain parts of it I might have said for whatever reason, but never sort of sat down and talked about it in length with anybody. Not because I don't want to. There was no reason to do it, yeah.

Q: Do you talk – when you get together with other Tamil people, do you talk about Tamil –

A: I'm very good at compartmentalising my life. So I have different types of friends. Friends from different backgrounds, friends from different walks. So I'm very good at talking and behaving according to that thing. Because sometimes I find that my political views are not accepted or maybe not something that they have, so I don't impose it on them. So when I go out for dinner with some people, I will not talk anything about politics. It will be about movies or music or the book I read or whatever. And then there will be people that I go out for dinners who are very politically minded and things and I would talk about that. So it depends on who I'm with, what I talk about. Yeah. Everybody knows my views, but I just don't talk about it all the time.

Q: And when you're with other Tamil people, do you share memories of life in Tamil Eelam?

A: Yeah, of course. And I love hearing – because when Tamil Eelam was formed, or when it was there, I was not in Sri Lanka at that time. So I love hearing stories about people who have lived in that era there and what they did and what the life was like there and things like that. I love hearing stories from people. So yeah, it's always nice to hear stories.

Q: Yeah. And do you find that people want to share the stories?

A: Yes. Yeah, they really want us to share the stories.

Q: Is it – do you think there's a comfort in sharing these kinds of stories?

A: I think there's a comfort and then they feel comfortable with me to be able to do that. And if they find somebody who appreciates the kind of life that they had, then they're happy to share it. And then they always talk with pride, you know, of what it was like.

Q: Do you find that too, that you feel more comfortable with people when they have an interest in you?

A: Yeah, yeah, definitely. Definitely I do. But I think I've learned to realise that my whole life cannot be activism, and my whole life cannot be advocacy. Because I'll get burnt out and I'll stop doing stuff in two years. I need to have an outlet as well, because it can be very intense emotionally and very draining. So I think I need a balance of both. And I don't think it's a bad thing being able to compartmentalise either. Because it sort of feeds different parts of your body and your soul and your mind, I think. And I'm a believer that one person cannot fulfil everything in your life, right? So it's the same thing. You need to have different avenues and different types of friends to be able to sort of do things.

Q: Yeah. So what are your outlets? What other things do you like to do?

A: I love watching movies. Cooking, watching movies. Love going out and like eating, meeting people, travelling. I love travelling. So those are my things. Yeah. I'm always planning my next trip. So I love doing that. So those are my sort of times away.

Q: So given all of your experiences of migration and citizenship and the state, what do you think – do you think you've learnt anything and what would that be about sort of humanity and the role of citizenship in a person's life? And what sort of thoughts do you have around citizenship?

A: I think it's very important to feel – to have a citizenship, because it gives you a sense of belonging, to be able to put down your roots. I think it's very important. I think that's very important. Because when things are temporary, it's very hard for you to put down roots and to build, be part of the community, be a person who can contribute to the community. Because you just don't feel that sense of permanency, I think. So I think it's very, very important to be able to – I think as social beings, it's important to feel that sense of belonging, in a family, in a community, in a country. So I think it's very important. Like I think when you go to a school even, to be felt like part of a group, it's important, isn't it? Like when you're growing up, belonging to a group. So just imagine you don't belong to a country, you know, where do you belong? I think it must be – yeah, I think it's very important.

Q: What do you think justice for statelessness would look like?

A: Justice for statelessness would be people – if they were born in a country, I think they should be given citizenship. I think it's just simple as that. If you were born – just because your parents were refugees or – and you were born in a country, if you're not given citizenship, I don't think – I think if you're born in a country, you should be given citizenship. Yeah, I think it's just simple as that.

Q: So I guess, the question is sort of, what would ending statelessness look like, do you think?

A: Ending statelessness would be – I think people need to first figure out why are there refugees. Why do people leave a country. It's because they don't feel safe in that country. That is something that needs to be addressed, instead of saying don't come. We need to figure out why are they leaving. And not think about the economical side of things or things like that. But, you know, why are they leaving? Why are they actually leaving that country? What is wrong? What's happening to those people? What can we do to help them build their lives in their own country? I don't think anybody wants to leave their country. They're leaving because they can't stay there. So I think that would be one of the first things that they need to do. And then if people have left and – you become stateless because you probably, I don't know, been born in a country because your parents didn't have citizenship in that country maybe, that's why – one of the reasons probably. But if you're born in that country, I think you should be given citizenship. So I think that will stop statelessness, wouldn't it? Like if a child is born in Australia, give them citizenship. And give them all the rights to study and be part of this country to contribute to this country. I think that will stop statelessness.

Q: So when your daughters were born and became Australian citizens, was that something you had in mind? And something you thought about?

A: Not really because I was a citizen. And just automatically they become citizens, right? But yeah, I don't think they would probably think how valuable being Australian really is, because they don't know anything else, right? So, yeah, I never thought of it.

Q: Yeah. Do you think of yourself as a migrant? Is that a category that feels sort of useful or relevant?

A: Not really. I never really thought of it like that. When people ask me where are you from, then I think about it. But until then it really— or if people sometimes might be surprised that I can speak English properly, and ask “Oh, when did you come? Your English is really good.” Or, you know, things like that, that's when I start thinking. Yeah.

Q: So it's that sort of external someone is putting that label onto you?

A: Label onto me. Until then I don't think of myself as a migrant or anything like that. No. Yeah, it's when people put that label on me. Yeah.

Q: What sort of labels would you put on yourself?

A: A strong woman. A person who speaks their mind. Who likes to make a difference to other people's lives maybe. What else can I think of? That's it. But not a migrant.

Q: Yeah, they're lovely labels. They're great things.

A: Maybe that's something I'm aspiring to be, but those are things that I sort of think of, yeah.

Q: That's great.

A: It's weird because now, more so after I've started going grey and stopped dyeing my hair, people are putting more labels on me than they did before, I find.

Q: Like what?

A: Like probably somebody who is not that worried about the way they look, or a person – you know, these different labels keep popping up. Then again, there are other people who think that it's such a good thing that you're doing it, but there's always two sides to anything you do, right?

Q: Yeah. So you find everyone's like putting it all their own meanings onto your hair?

A: Exactly. What they feel, on you. Yeah.

Q: And why did you stop dying your hair?

A: I think I was like dying my hair for 20-odd years. I started going grey quite young. And I've been wanting to do that for a long time. So I waited till my older daughter got married and I was like, okay, I want to stop dying my hair because health-wise it's not good and I'm quite happy to go grey, you know? Grey hair doesn't define me. But my younger daughter was like, “No, no, it'll make you look old. Please don't. Please don't.” And all these kind of things. But she was somebody who would always say you have to look after your health, you have to eat healthy. You have to go to the gym. So I turned around one day and said, “Okay, you asked me to do all these healthy things. But you're expecting me to put all these chemicals on my head? That's very close to my brain. So do you think that's fair?” And she was like, “Yeah, that's true. Okay, you can stop doing it.” So that's when I stopped. [laughs]

Q: And what did she think of it now?

A: She loves it. She loves it, yeah. She thinks of it as something as a statement. Something that, you know, projects strength and things like that as well.

Q: Have your friends also stopped dying their hair?

A: No. Nobody has.

Q: You're the first one?

A: It's very weird because my auntie still dyes her hair, so she's got jet black hair and I've got grey hair. But yeah, no, nobody has. But they always say that, "Oh, wish we could do it." But I think each person has to make that decision when it's right for them. You know, for each person it's a different time in their life, when they're ready to do whatever. It doesn't matter. Yeah, yeah.

Q: Is there anything else you think I've missed?

A: I think we've had a long –

Q: We've been talking for a long time.

A: – time, yes.

Q: We've been going for a long time.

A: Yes, no, nothing. Yeah.

Q: Thank you so much. I've learnt so much, and I've really enjoyed talking with you.

A: Thank you.

Q: I'm so grateful for you sharing –

A: Oh, thank you very much.

Q: – so much. Yeah, so many insights and wisdom. It's really –

A: I hope it was a good conversation for you.

Q: It really was. Thank you. Yeah, I hope it was a good conversation for you too.

A: It was, it was.

Q: Wonderful.

A: Thank you.

Q: Thank you. I'll press stop now.

A: Okay.