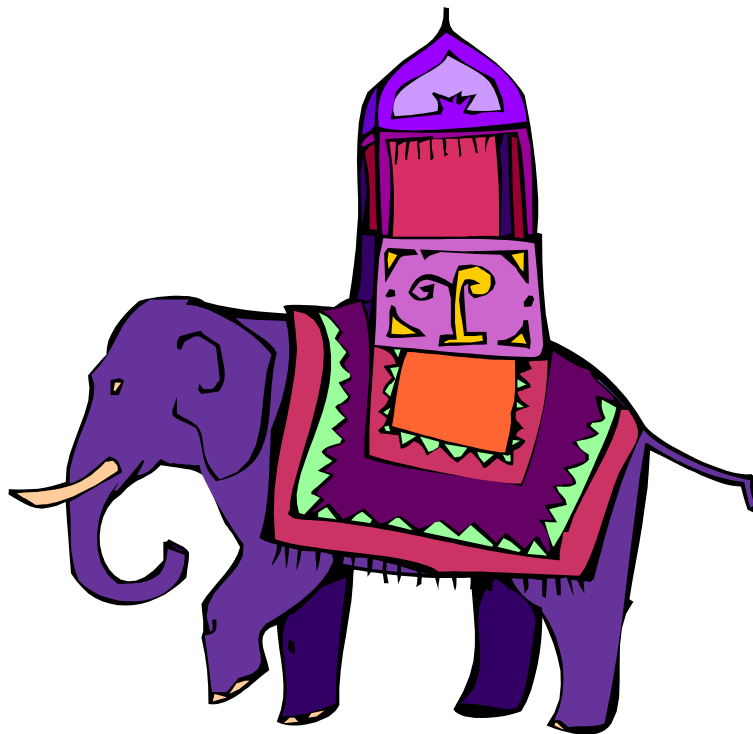


ONE COMMUNITY, MANY VOICES

THE DIVERSITY AND NEEDS OF THE

SRI LANKAN COMMUNITY IN THE CITY OF MONASH



**Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne)
Sophie Andrews
FEBRUARY 2005**

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One Community, Many Voices
The Diversity and Needs of the
Sri Lankan Community in the
City of Monash

February 2005

Design and Publication by the
Migrant Information Centre
(Eastern Melbourne) © Melbourne Australia

ISBN 1 876735 32 5

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The project "One Community, Many Voices: The Diversity and Needs of the Sri Lankan Community of Monash" would not have been possible without funding from the Monash City Council. Thank you very much to the Project Co-ordinator Judy McDougall, from the Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) for her guidance, advice and assistance.

Thanks are also extended to my field study co-ordinator, Des Cahill, for his assistance in completing this field study.

Special thanks and appreciation is given to the Sri Lankan families and community leaders for their contribution of time and thought to the project in determining the diversity of the community and identifying the needs and activities that can be implemented to meet those needs.

It is hoped that this project will be an essential step in assisting the Sri Lankan community of Monash to successfully meet their needs.

Sophie Andrews
February 2005

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) (MIC) received funding from the Monash City Council to identify the needs and to document the diversity of the Sri Lankan community in Monash. The study involved Census 2001 and settlement data analysis, a literature review, seven interviews with community leaders and three focus groups with members of the Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim Sri Lankan communities. Participants in the focus groups, 22 persons, also completed questionnaires.

The community was found to be diverse, containing families of Tamil, Sinhalese, Muslim and Burgher backgrounds. Furthermore, the majority of families had come through the skilled migration and family reunion stream, spoke good English and generally had a harmonious relationship with the wider community. Several needs and issues were identified for Sri Lankan families in the City Monash relating to employment, health, family issues, knowledge of services and social and religious needs.

Employment

Employment was identified as one of the major issues for newly arrived families from Sri Lanka. The community identified the need for employment support programs to assist them to prepare resumes, better understand Australian English and the Australian accent, and gain a better knowledge of Australian work culture. Opportunities for Australian work experience were also identified as an invaluable way of securing employment in professions by skilled migrants particularly those with overseas qualifications. In addition, unskilled women at home were also identified as a group that required assistance to gain employment.

Health

Health promotion of healthy eating and exercise as well as preventative health care was identified as an important issue particularly by the Muslim Sri Lankan community who advised that their diet could increase heart disease.

Aged care

A major issue identified by all Sri Lankan communities related to the isolation of elderly people in the home. Many older people experienced difficulties in adjusting to life in Australia, accessing public transport and were not proficient in English. Many older parents relied upon their children to meet their needs and as their children were often away from the home during the day, they were left alone in the house. The need to establish senior citizen's groups with transport for those who could not drive themselves or access public transport was identified.

Family relationships

Relationships counselling and parenting programs were identified as a major need in Sri Lankan communities. Families experiencing relationship problems are reluctant to access counselling as they do not understand how it can assist them to resolve family problems. The support provided by the extended family is often not available in Australia and many couples see separation as the only solution.

Similarly, problems can arise between parents and children and there is a belief that youth and family support services advise young people to leave home when there is conflict in the family. There is a need for the community to better understand youth and family support services and how they can assist them as well as a need for cross cultural training of service providers so they can provide culturally appropriate responses to Sri Lankan families.

Information about local services

This research indicates a general lack of knowledge within the community about services and how they can assist them, particularly those services that can assist people to secure employment, strengthen family relationships and provide health and aged care services. A major component of this project will be to plan and facilitate information forums that increase community knowledge of services that can assist them to address their needs.

Social and religious needs

The social and religious needs identified by the community included the need:

- To establish elderly citizens' groups and playgroups for mothers at home with young children
- For affordable community venues for community events within the City of Monash, and
- To establish Muslim prayer rooms in shopping centres and hospitals including the Monash Medical Centre.

The Muslim Sri Lankan community is also keen to hold community events to increase understanding of Islam and Australian Muslims to reduce negative stereotyping and prejudice within the wider community.

Future directions

Using a community development approach, the MIC will establish a working group with members of the Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim Sri Lankan communities to plan and implement projects and activities to meet the needs of the community as identified in this study. The aim of the working group will be to plan and facilitate:

- Projects and programs to meet community needs,
- Cross cultural awareness training for service providers,
- Promotional strategies for community activities planned as a result of the project,
- Partnerships with mainstream service providers where necessary,
- Funding opportunities where necessary.

INTRODUCTION

In the City of Monash, Sri Lankans form a significant and diverse, community. Despite this, very little is known by local service providers about the community, as many in the Sri Lankan population do not use local services. Sri Lankan community leaders have advised that many in the community are not aware of services in their local area and how they can help them.

The Migrant Information Centre (Eastern Melbourne) is primarily funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs to support the settlement of migrants and refugees residing in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne including the City of Monash east of the Monash Freeway. Through the provision of settlement services, the MIC has made links with service providers in the local area including schools with large populations of young people from Sri Lankan backgrounds.

Service providers in the City of Monash requested that the Migrant Information Centre provide Sri Lankan cross-cultural training so that agencies could provide culturally appropriate services to the Sri Lankan community. However, before cross-cultural training could be designed or carried out, research was required to gain better knowledge of the community, their needs and services that could better meet community needs. Therefore, a project proposal to research the needs of the community, develop and facilitate Sri Lankan cross cultural training and establish a Sri Lankan steering committee to develop and implement activities to address the needs of the committee was developed and funded by the Monash City Council Community Grants Program.

This report represents the findings of the MIC's research to identify and analyse the diversity within the Sri Lankan community, and to provide a needs analysis of the community with recommendations for further action.

Currently, although service providers are aware that there is significant diversity within the Sri Lankan community, the nature and proportions of the diversity are not widely known, and the interactions and understanding between groups in the community are not understood. This study will increase the knowledge of service providers into the cultural diversity and needs of the Sri Lankan community, as well as become the basis on which to form a working group from the Sri Lankan community to design activities to meet community needs.

METHODOLOGY

A combination of statistical data, document analysis, interviews, focus groups and surveys were used in the collection of the data.

Statistical data included Census and settlement data, which combined to give some indications as to the diversity in the City of Monash. To gain background knowledge of the topic, documents about Sri Lanka, Sri Lankan political and cultural history and as an immigrant group in Australia were analysed.

Ten consultations with members of the Sri Lankan community were conducted as part of the study. Seven interviews with community leaders from Sinhalese, Burgher, Tamil, Muslim and Sri Lankan student organisations were carried out and three focus groups were held with members of three different Sri Lankan community organisations.

Interviews were conducted with representatives from the following organisations:

- Australian Sri Lankan Welfare Guild (primarily Burgher organisation)
- Sinhala Cultural and Community Services Foundation
- SPUR - Society for Peace, Unity and Human Rights in Sri Lanka (Sinhalese society)

- Sri Lankan Student Association of Melbourne
- Tamil Australian Friendship Society
- United Sri Lankan Muslim Association of Australia
- Victorian Tamil Cultural School

The interviews were semi-structured and designed to find out information about the history of the organisations, including their reasons for being founded, the demographic of the members of the organisations and any needs the members may have expressed or that have been noted by the leaders of the organisations. The interviews gave a valuable overview of the Associations, their members and the wider Sri Lankan community of the Monash region.

Three focus groups were conducted with the following organisations:

- Six members of the Tamil Australian Friendship Society formed a Tamil focus group.
- Ten participants from SPUR formed a Sinhalese focus group.
- Six participants from the United Sri Lankan Muslim Association of Australia took part in the Muslim focus group.

Participants of the focus groups also completed confidential surveys. The surveys were designed to collect some additional demographic data on the participants, and a total of 22 surveys were collected and analysed. The survey asked questions about age, gender, origin, language, employment details and services the individual believed are required. Copies of the questions asked for the interviews, focus group discussions and the results of the surveys are attached in the Appendices.

THE SRI LANKAN COMMUNITY OF MONASH

Previous research on the diversity and settlement of the Sri Lankan community

There has been limited research conducted into Sri Lankan communities in general in Australia, and only one researcher, Siri Gamage, has published papers about Sri Lankans in Melbourne. Prior research has found the Sri Lankan community in Melbourne, which is concentrated in southeastern suburbs, including the City of Monash, to be diverse and to overall enjoy good community relations with the majority Anglo-Celtic community (Gamage, 1992).

However, Gamage notes that the "Sinhala-Tamil-Burgher divide is . . . a very real one. Therefore, before concluding that there is likely to be intense interactions among members of a given ethnic community because they belong to the same ethnic group, one needs to study in detail the complex factors and situations which direct social interaction towards many different outcomes" (Gamage, 1992, p. 16).

Bopage (2003) found that a pull factor influencing many Sri Lankans to come to Australia has been its warm climate and degree of freedom to be found here. He also notes that many Sri Lankans who settled in the 1980s found that there was good support from the community and government institutions. Community relations within the Sri Lankan community have varied, often depending on political tensions in Sri Lanka at the time.

Jupp (1995), suggests that we should "move away from elementary survey-type questionnaire to a more qualitative approach" to community research (p. 5). Furthermore, Gamage (1998) proposes that new, qualitative insights formed on the basis of new research are vital when building from earlier studies into established immigrant communities. One of the reasons for this is because there is "a shortage of community oriented research combining community interest, their involvement, insights and community ownership of the project" (p. 37).

It has been observed that unlike the United States, Australia does not tend to have many areas with predominantly minority populations, the so-called "ethnic ghettos". Rather the populations of different areas tend to be dictated along class lines (Castles & Miller, 1998). While for many migrants this means that they tend to settle in the lower-class areas, where there is cheaper housing and often high unemployment, for Sri Lankans, who enter through the skilled-migrant stream, the middle-class areas of Melbourne, including the City of Monash are where they have chosen to settle.

Prior research into the Sri Lankan community, while insightful, does not focus on the City of Monash and is not up to date. During the 20th century, political changes and upheaval in Sri Lanka and changes in Australia's immigration policy have meant that the composition of Sri Lankan immigrants arriving in Melbourne has changed significantly. Because of this, research into the Sri Lankan community in Australia must be continually updated and the limited research there is currently in this area is now not as relevant as when first conducted.

Sri Lankan political history

In order to understand the diversity of the Sri Lankan community of Monash, it is necessary to look briefly into the history of Sri Lanka, and into the Sri Lankan community in Australia in general. The island of Sri Lanka lies to the south of the Indian subcontinent. Until 1972, the nation was known as Ceylon. The population is somewhat similar to Australia (19.5 million) and the two countries enjoy a warm climate, however, Sri Lanka is substantially smaller and more tropical than Australia (SBS World Guide, 2000).

For over 1000 years, two main cultural groups, a minority of Hindu Tamils in the north and a majority of Sinhalese across the nation have lived alongside each other. From the 16th century European

colonialists – the Portuguese, the British and the Dutch – have entered Sri Lanka and left their mark. From 1815 the island came under British rule, and the official language was English.

The Sinhalese are generally Buddhist and mainly come from the south of Sri Lanka, while the Tamils are mainly Hindu and they have been positioned in the north, originally hailing from the Indian mainland. Also living in Sri Lanka are the Burghers (European and native mixed descent) and Muslims, who are considered their own ethnic group by Sri Lankans, not merely a religious group. Christians are found among all the ethnic groups except of course, the Muslims, and almost all Burghers are Christians.

The Sinhalese speak Sinhala, Tamils speak Tamil, Muslims generally speak Tamil, although some speak Sinhala. All groups speak English, generally quite well. It should be noted however that the Sri Lankan accent can sometimes be quite different to the Australian accent and Sri Lankan migrants have trouble understanding Australian English when they arrive here.

This diversity of ethnic groups, religions and languages, makes the task of determining and addressing the needs of the Sri Lankan community a challenge. Since 1983, Sri Lanka has been involved in a civil war, which has seen oppression of the Tamil minority and terrorist attacks by militant Tamil groups on the Sinhalese. These tensions have eased slightly in recent years, however relations between the two groups, even in Australia, have remained strained.

Sri Lankan migration and settlement

Sri Lankans first started arriving in Australia in the late 19th century and by 1901 there were 609 Sri Lankans in Australia (Community Information Summary, 2003). Because of the political rise of the Sinhalese majority group in 1948, many Burghers and Tamils felt threatened and wanted to emigrate. However, because of the migration restrictions at that time, mainly Burghers migrated to Australia. In 1973, the restrictions on Asian migration were relaxed and mostly Sinhalese professionals migrated at this time (Gamage, 1998). During the 1980s and 1990s, due to civil unrest between Tamils and Sinhalese, many Tamils migrated as refugees or skilled migrants, along with Sinhalese who continued to migrate. A small number of skilled Muslims also migrated at this time.

According to 2001 Census data, Victoria is the state with the largest number of Sri Lankan immigrants, with over 26,000 migrants. This is 49.6% of the total number of Sri Lankan migrants living in Australia. The largest numbers of Sri Lankan migrants have settled in the south-eastern suburbs including the City of Monash. The City of Monash includes the suburbs Ashwood, Burwood, Chadstone, Clayton, Glen Waverley, Hughesdale, Huntingdale, Mount Waverly, Mulgrave, Nottinghill, Oakleigh, Oakleigh East, Oakleigh South and Wheelers Hill. Between 2001 and 30th June 2004, there were 373 new settlers from Sri Lanka in the City of Monash.

From the 2001 Census data, there are 1475 people in the City of Monash who speak Sinhalese at home, and 1375 people who speak Tamil at home. According to the Australia-wide Sri Lankan Community Information Summary, 32.4% of people speak Sinhalese at home, 24.1% of the community speak Tamil at home, and 40.4% speak English at home.

If we assume that 2850 people speak Tamil or Sinhalese at home, making up roughly 60% of the Sri Lankan population, the other 40% (mainly Burghers) is approximately 1900 people. Including the settlers since 2001, this leads to an approximate total of 5123 people of Sri Lankan origin living in the City of Monash. It should be noted that according to the 2001 Census, 3406 Monash residents were born in Sri Lanka. However this does not include those who are of Sri Lankan origin but are born in Australia, and my estimation of 5123 people includes these people. This is a significant number, and Sri Lankans are the fourth largest immigrant group to settle in Monash since 2001, after the Chinese, Indians and Malaysians.

The types of migrants that have recently settled in the City of Monash are predominantly skilled migrants or people entering under the family migration program. Most settlers have had at least 12 years of schooling, with many having tertiary degrees including Masters and PhDs. Out of 373 new migrants since 2001, only two arrived through the humanitarian stream, all others came in the skilled or family streams. This is consistent with the general trend of Sri Lankan immigrants entering Australia.

THE NEEDS OF SRI LANKAN FAMILIES

With the exception of the Burgher community, groups within the Sri Lankan community in the City of Monash identified several needs, which are discussed in this report. These needs related to:

- Employment
- Health
- Family relationships
- Knowledge of local services
- Social and Religious needs

The Burgher community felt that their needs were generally being well met within the community. The only area of concern for them related to aged care and the isolation of frail, older people who were house bound or resident in nursing homes. This response is most likely because of their long history in Australia, with most migrants immigrating here 30 years ago or more. The fact that many of them were raised in English speaking schools, unlike later migrants, and saw themselves as more European than other Sri Lankan ethnic groups, helped them to become well integrated in Australian society.

EMPLOYMENT

During consultations, employment was identified as one of the major issues impacting on newly arrived Sri Lankan families. The employment needs that were outlined by the community were the need for help gaining suitable employment for skilled migrants, including the need for assistance and guidance in resume writing, understanding the Australian English accent and gaining local work experience.

Consultation with the Sinhalese community suggested that some non-professional Sri Lankan women may also need help and encouragement in finding some part-time work, as they are not confident and become discouraged easily when they are not immediately successful gaining employment.

1. Resume writing skills

All groups within the community, with the exception of the Burghers, identified a need for assistance and advice on how to prepare resumes that meet the needs of Australian employers. Resumes in Sri Lanka are set out differently to Australian resumes, and as a resume is often the first point of contact with a potential employer, those that do not have resume writing skills are disadvantaged in gaining employment. The community suggested the need for a seminar or handout with information on Australian resume writing, or at least information made available as to where this information can be found.

2. Assistance understanding the Australian English accent

Despite speaking English very well, and passing the English exam needed to enter Australia as a skilled migrant, Sri Lankan skilled migrants have trouble understanding Australian English because of the Australian accent. Conversely, Australians sometimes have trouble understanding new Sri Lankan migrants because of their accent.

Free English tuition is not available to newly arrived skilled migrants, as they have passed the English test to enter the country and they are considered proficient in English. The need for programs that assist newly arrived Sri Lankan skilled migrants to better understand Australian spoken English was identified as an urgent need to assist them to settle and gain professional employment.

3. Local workplace experience and employment

One of the main issues for skilled migrants seeking professional employment in their area of expertise is that employers prefer workers with local experience. Frustration was expressed in consultations that all employers want local experience, yet few employers are prepared to give them a job so they can gain the vital experience. In many professions, some foreign degrees are not as respected as local degrees, and a foreign degree with only foreign experience is often not enough to gain employment.

There is a general preconception held by Sri Lankan migrants that Australian industries want professional migrants and that there are many jobs available for migrants in Australia. The reality Sri Lankans are faced with on arrival in Australia is very different. During consultations there were stories of many professional migrants taking jobs in factories or as tram drivers and sometimes never "getting out" of the unskilled job. Australia was described at one focus group as "a wasteland of skills and experience" (See Appendix 2 – Focus group outcomes). There were also accounts of migrants who had been too proud to take an unprofessional job and eventually returned to Sri Lanka.

A solution suggested to this problem was the development of a volunteer program in co-operation with local businesses for Sri Lankan migrants to volunteer in their field of expertise to gain valuable workplace experience.

An information session can be held to increase community knowledge of employment support services for skilled migrants and professional bridging courses that can assist migrants to gain employment in Australia.

4. Assistance for unskilled women to gain employment

One need that was expressed related to assistance for women who are unskilled and have entered Australia through the family reunion stream. These women often lacked confidence in their ability to find a job and without encouragement and advice on the application process quickly gave up after a few rejections.

There is a need for information on employment support services that can assist these women to gain employment and become contributing members of the workforce.

HEALTH

Health promotion

The need for health promotion was identified as a major issue for the Muslim Sri Lankan community. The Muslim Sri Lankan diet is different to the rest of the Sri Lankan community and often contains foods that contribute to health problems such as heart disease. Health promotion about healthy diets, regular checkups and exercise would be beneficial to the Muslim Sri Lankan community, and perhaps to the Sri Lankan community in general.

Aged care

A major issue expressed by every community group, including the Burgher community, was the isolation of the elderly in the home. Many skilled migrants' parents migrated to Australia through the family reunion program and lived with their adult children and their grandchildren on arrival. The older people often faced many difficulties adjusting to life in Australia and felt very isolated in the home.

In Sri Lanka there is a tradition that once parents retire, the eldest son and his family must care for his parents and attend to all their needs regardless of whether they are frail or sick. Their son and his wife are expected to do all the housework for them, provide social and family interaction and take them to appointments. However with many Sri Lankan families in Australia, either both partners work, or there is only one car in the family, meaning that this is not possible. They often have difficulty with

the Australian accent and public transport, as they mostly cannot or do not feel comfortable driving in Australia. In many families, their children and grandchildren are out of the house all day and the older parents feel like "caged birds", as they were described at one interview. The community identified the need to establish senior citizens groups with transport services available to those without cars or drivers licenses who cannot access public transport.

Other issues raised include:

- Sri Lankan elderly find it difficult to eat Australian food, which is often what is serviced through HACC services, residential care and other aged services.
- They prefer a doctor and carer who speaks their language particularly elderly women who prefer a female doctor that speaks their language. In addition, older people revert to their original language losing English language skills as they become more frail and ill.
- Nursing homes were not considered an appropriate option.

There was an observation from one member of the community that any problems the elderly currently have will only grow with the ageing population.

FAMILY ISSUES

Family relationships

The Sri Lankan community expressed a need for the promotion and understanding of the importance and role of counselling services in the community to strengthen family relationships. Consultations revealed a cultural difference in the way counselling was viewed by Sri Lankan families. In Sri Lanka families in general are large and extended, and provide an important support network. Sri Lankan migrants in Melbourne often lack this extended family but do not see counselling as another way to gain advice and support. Rather than seeing counselling as a way of assisting people to resolve family problems, consultations with the community revealed that there was an attitude within the community that family problems should not be discussed outside the family.

There was also a view in families that seeking counselling for marriage difficulties would exacerbate rather than help the problem. Many couples with marriage problems see separation as the only option, when counselling could be able to assist them to resolve their conflict. Therefore there was a need expressed in the community to promote counselling and how it can help people as equivalent to seeing the local GP - normal and sometimes necessary.

Nevertheless, concern was expressed that counsellors would not be sensitive to culture and traditions, including the importance of family, and that in some circumstances the wrong advice could be given to the disadvantage of the family as a whole.

For example, during consultation with the Muslim community, a concern was expressed that too many young people, especially young women, who are experiencing differences with their parents are being advised to move out of home rather than working out their differences with their family. There was strong feeling within the community that advice for a child to move out of home was only appropriate in the most serious of circumstances. The group suggested that cross cultural training of youth and family support service providers was required to ensure that family mediation was considered during times of family difficulties between young people and their parents.

Community members and leaders who participated in the research were concerned about the approach and advice that would be provided to families in crisis and indicated a lack of understanding of the support that youth and family support agencies could provide.

Understanding between children and parents

Throughout the consultations, cultural conflict between children and parents was identified as a major issue. In Australia young people have more freedom during adolescence, and there is an understanding in Australian culture that once a child turns 18 they are an adult and can make their own decisions. This has not traditionally been the same in Sri Lanka. One interviewee from the community commented that Sri Lankan migrants were apprehensive in allowing their children to have freedom in case they fall in with a "bad crowd" and get involved in drugs or gangs.

There is an extra element of fear in Australia and a feeling of less control, as many families are not as familiar with the community here as they were in Sri Lanka. The children have been described as being "sandwiched" between Australian and Sri Lankan culture. Therefore, in order for parents to gain a better understanding of their children's challenges in fitting in as Sri Lankan Australians, a need was expressed for group activities with children and parents.

A representative of the Sri Lankan student community explained that many students are not interested in many of the festivals and functions that are organised by older members of the community, and their parents are therefore unhappy with them when they show no interest in participating. One possible way to address this issue would be for the youth/student Sri Lankan population to have more input into the organisation of events.

A parenting program would also be beneficial for parents to gain a better understanding of Australian culture and the pressures on their children growing up in two cultures as well as to develop strategies to assist their children in the Australian environment.

Language and culture classes for children in schools

Although this issue is outside the scope of this project, there has been a need expressed, especially in the Tamil Sri Lankan community, for Tamil to be taught as a mainstream language in at least one school in the local area. There are currently Saturday schools for Tamil students, however, this is at a time that is difficult for many families to take their children. Concerns were also raised about the level of qualifications of the teachers at the schools.

During consultations it was suggested that even one period per week would make a difference in not only teaching students to speak Tamil but also allowing Tamil students to mix and relate to each other. This is because while there can be moderate numbers of Tamil students at schools, they are often in different classes and year levels, and rarely have a chance to meet or speak Tamil together.

INFORMATION ABOUT SERVICES

Promotion of available services

Across all groups in the Sri Lankan community there has been a recurrent theme that there is a lack of information in the community about services that are available to them. Apart from Centrelink, all groups within the community consistently expressed a lack of knowledge of services and initiatives and how they can assist them. There was a suggestion that information on services could be promoted through Sri Lankan community media in Melbourne, such as community radio, community newspapers and Channel 31 - community television.

Community Education on safety and security in Australia

A need was expressed during consultations for some education into security risks and safety in Australia that were perhaps not prevalent in Sri Lanka, such as home security, phone scams and other risks.

SOCIAL AND RELIGIOUS NEEDS

Understanding Islam and Muslims in the wider community

During consultation with the Muslim Sri Lankan community, the need was revealed for greater understanding of Islam and Muslims around the world, especially those from Sri Lanka by the wider community. A concern was expressed that there are many stereotypes about Muslims prevalent in the Monash area, including that Muslims are all from the Middle East and that all Muslims support terrorists. Sri Lankan Muslim community groups in Melbourne have already attempted to educate interested non-Muslim Australians about Islam by holding seminars with speakers about Islam. It was considered that information days that have a wider appeal and with greater promotion would be beneficial.

The MIC in partnership with Young Muslims of Australia has in recent years developed a women's only event called "My Dress, My Image, My Choice" which enables women to gain a greater understanding of Islam and the Islamic dress code particularly for women. This event has been highly successful with positive feedback from participants. In addition, the Migrant Information Centre facilitated events as part of the Commonwealth Government's Living in Harmony Initiative entitled "Communities Together". This event provided an opportunity for both men and women to meet and learn about Islam and its relationship to world events and Muslims in Australia.

The Sri Lankan Muslim community has expressed enthusiasm over the possibility of holding similar events for Sri Lankan Muslims or Muslims in the Monash area in general. An activity where Muslim Sri Lankan culture, food, traditions and dress would be explored, as well as an Islamic perspective on current world events would increase understanding in the wider Monash community and help to reduce prejudice. There has also been a suggestion by the Sri Lankan Muslim community that it would be beneficial to have more books in public libraries about Islam.

Community activity venues

One of the important needs outlined by all groups was the need for affordable community venues in which to hold community events. Consistently the venues that are available in the City of Monash are not affordable to the organisations and further research and compilation of a list of affordable venues in the area is needed. The Monash City Council provides a list of venues for communities to hire on their web site.

Women's groups and/or playgroups

One need, which has been identified by the community, is the need for a playgroup to allow new mothers to meet socially. There is a feeling of isolation by new mothers and a playgroup would allow them to gain a larger support network and meet socially while their children played together. More generally participants spoke of the need for a women's group that provides an opportunity for women to meet socially.

Muslim prayer room

The Muslim community identified the need to have somewhere to pray in public places, especially during Ramadan. Important areas where there is a need for a prayer room are shopping centres, the Monash Medical Centre - as many Muslims attend the centre - and hospitals in general. It was

commented that the prayer room could be very small in size, and an example of a successful prayer room is at Tullamarine airport.

CONCLUSION

The Sri Lankan community of Monash was found to be quite extensive, including those born in Australia. The community was found to be made up of Sinhalese, Tamil, Burgher and Muslim ethnic groups, who all have either different languages or religions. It was found that most of the population of all the ethnic groups of Sri Lankan migrants was found to have entered Australia through the skilled or family reunion stream, to be well educated and generally articulate in English.

The needs of the Sri Lankan community were found predominantly to be:

- Gaining assistance to secure employment,
- Promotion and access to family support services to strengthen family relationships and prevent crisis,
- Building understanding between the Sri Lankan Muslim community and the non-Muslim community,
- Building understanding between parents and children,
- Establishing social groups for isolated elderly and mothers with young children at home, and
- Increasing community knowledge of services currently available in the local area and how they can assist them.

The needs and issues expressed by the Sri Lankan community of Monash suggest that a variety of strategies may be necessary to meet community needs. Because of the diverse, and in some cases divided, nature of the Sri Lankan community, it is advisable that the different groups of the community are flexible in working both as an overall group and as different cultural groups where appropriate.

Future directions

Using a community development approach, the MIC will establish a working group with members of the Tamil, Sinhalese and Muslim Sri Lankan communities to plan and implement projects and activities to meet the needs of the community as identified in this study. The aim of the working groups will be to plan and facilitate:

- Projects and programs to meet community needs,
- Cross cultural awareness training for service providers,
- Promotional strategies for community activities planned as a result of the project,
- Partnerships with mainstream service providers where necessary,
- Funding opportunities where necessary.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX 1 – INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Community leaders and committee members were interviewed be telephone or face to face from:

- Australian Sri Lanka Welfare Guild,
- Sinhala Cultural and Community Services Foundation,
- United Sri Lankan Muslim Association,
- Society for Peace, Unity and Human Rights in Sri Lanka (SPUR),
- Sri Lankan Student Association,
- Victoria Tamil Cultural Association, and
- Tamil Australian Friendship Association.

The questions people were asked to discuss are listed below.

Question 1 – Could you tell me about your organisation, ie. the purpose of your organisation, when it was founded, the number of members and their background etc.?

Question 2 – What issues does the community face?

Question 3: What needs do members have?

APPENDIX 2 – FOCUS GROUP OUTCOMES

1 Tamil Community – 8 participants

Date: 19th June 2004

Question 1: What are the major issues affecting Sri Lankan migrants?

Issues for new arrivals (within 2 years):

- Culture shock
- Financial issues: skilled migrants have difficulty finding jobs when they first arrive.
- Housing: Sometimes have difficulty paying the rent if they do not obtain work soon after arrival. In some instances families are not successful in securing private rental and they must stay with relatives if they have them – this leads people to feel that they are burdening their relatives.
- Community support: When they first arrive don't know anyone and sometimes it takes a while to get to know the Sri Lankan community let alone the rest of the Australian population.
- Children's education: changing to the English medium and Australian Educational System.
- Adjusting to English language: especially as the accent of people from rural areas of Sri Lanka is very hard to understand.
- Gaining employment: employers want previous experience in an Australian setting, but the only way to get that is to have a job here first.
- Skilled migrants need local experience and their degrees aren't as accepted here as a local degree is.
- Skilled migrants must do unrelated work (work that they are not trained for) ie. working in factories. They don't want to do this work but the children come first – they must provide for their children.
- New mothers are isolated in the home, they don't have a large support network they would have had in Sri Lanka
- Community does not know about all the services that are available and they often don't find out about services until they don't need them anymore.
- The community is proud and self-reliant, they don't want to approach the MIC/MRC

Issues for longer term migrants (have been here longer than 2 years)

The elderly:

- Have language issues, cannot understand the English accent.
- Have issues with dental care, wait for a long time to get adequate care
- Have transport issues, some are not medically fit to travel alone. They are often stuck in the house alone during the day and cannot do any activities because they cannot do anything.

- Elderly women often want a doctor of the same gender and preferably a Tamil speaker.
- Don't know about some centrelink services for them.
- Affordable venues to hold function nights for the Tamil associations are an issue.
- The Monash council has halls available at commercial rates which makes them inaccessible to community groups: they cannot afford them.
- Family problems: there are often issues/conflict within the family, and no one wants to go outside the family to get help because Sri Lankans are too proud (see last dot point of previous subheading) There is a large cultural gap between parents and children.

Question 2: What activities/services would you like developed to meet the needs of families?

How can newly arrived Tamil families be informed about the council services?

- Through flyers preferably written in Tamil when families first settle.
- Through Tamil Associations
- Use Tamil newspapers, radio and media. Could broadcast for half a minute? (not sure if wrote that right or if it should have been half an hour) per week.
- There are 2 Tamil newspapers – the print medium would be most effective. Especially for the elderly who are familiar with that medium. Information in Tamil would be the most useful, it is easy for the elderly and those not fluent in English to read and it makes the information and services seem more accessible.
- Information should be placed in places where there are regular community gatherings. For example in Tamil grocery shops, places of worship, language schools (information could be sent through the children), Forest Hill shopping centre.

What activities could be arranged to deal with isolation in the community?

- Would like to arrange social groups for example:
- Playgroup – must be accessible by public transport
- Women's group – must be accessible by public transport. Could be only once in 2 months or so.

How could the other issues be addressed:

- Venue issues: a list of available venues with a list of their facilities would be useful, with the possibility of finding some that do reduced rates.
- Would like a social/community worker with extensive knowledge of the Tamil or Sri Lankan community in general. Could assist with social and family problems. For example, to do successful family counselling would need someone familiar with Sri Lankan culture.

Question 3: What services currently work well?

Centrelink

Question 4: List the three highest priorities for action:

- Health
- Accessing physio, psychologist, chiropractor, dentist etc
- Transport
- Long delays at community health centre
- Surgery waiting times
- Employment and finances
- Gaining suitable (or any) employment
- Part time work for retired workers could be good to prevent boredom and isolation.
- Education
- Tamil language is not a part of mainstream schooling
- Parents are reluctant to enrol their children in weekend Tamil language school, Saturday school is at a very inconvenient time.
- There is no youth group in the Tamil community: either a sport or community group.
- Some education about youth culture for parents
- Social worker to talk to parents and children separately
- Some parents don't get out socially

2 Sinhalese community (Members of SPUR)

Date: 26th June 2004

What are the major issues affecting Sri Lankan families?

Employment:

- Skilled migrants can not gain employment in their own field because employers want local experience.
 - Nursing offers a program to gain experience locally but the group did not know of any other professions that have this program.
 - Resume styles are different in Sri Lanka compared to Australia.
 - Some migrants never find work in their field. Some medical practitioners are now working as tram drivers. They often work in factories or other unqualified work, then can not get out of that job (ie. retire as a tram driver).
 - It is easier for unskilled migrants to get a job than skilled migrants, because skilled migrants are overqualified for most positions.
 - Skilled migrants pass the English language test but cannot understand Australian English accent. They can't get work experience, no financial aid, no access to English classes to help understand the accent, financial restrictions mean they often can't afford to pay for classes.
 - Sometimes migrants will return to Sri Lanka because they have too much pride to accept an unprofessional job.
 - Unskilled workers often come with the family migration program. They often have support from friends and family as come with family reunion program, are often wives and mothers. They can find temporary jobs within a few months as they will work any job.
 - Australia described as "a wasteland of skills and experience". Australia doesn't acknowledge and support skilled workers.
 - In the 1970s it was much easier to find jobs, it is much harder to find jobs now. 20 or 30 years ago one could find skilled employment. CES (the old Centrelink) used to find a job for you, they would contact you with jobs.
- Women's issues:
- Don't know of any counselling services
 - Sri Lankans don't go for family counselling, think this means there is something seriously wrong and will lead to more problems and probably divorce.
 - Women lack guidance because they don't have an extended family in Australia. In Sri Lanka there is an extended family to counsel and give support and advice when there are family issues.
 - Compared to the Sinhalese community in Sri Lanka, Sri Lankans in Australia have a much higher divorce rate.
 - Sri Lankan families tend to see the answer to marital problems as divorce, they don't see counselling as an option. "Don't take your problems outside" one member of the focus group said.
 - The solution is to make people understand that seeing a counsellor is like seeing your doctor: that it is normal and confidential.
 - Sri Lankan migrants are reluctant because they are not used to paying for services and are not informed about what services are "out there".

Lack of knowledge of services:

- This applies to all services, there is a lack of knowledge about what services the council actually provides.
- Solutions:
 - Radio time is very limited. Only 8 am – 10 am Sunday. This is not enough time and its more about entertainment than information.

- Print: There is information in Sinhalese, but print is not as effective as radio. People do not have time to read that much.
- Elderly: 2 categories – long term residents, and those who come over with their parents.
 - Long term residents are assimilated
 - Those who come over with their parents want a Sri Lankan retirement home
 - Need social activities because all day they have no transport and must rely on their children for everything.
 - The location for social activities: local halls are very expensive and can't afford to hire halls. The last few years the price has gone up. Should be able to get a concession rate if it's a not for profit organisation.
- Young people:
 - Children are growing up in a different society to what Sri Lankan parents are used to. Parents find it hard to know the right balance between Sri Lankan and Australian culture.
 - Counselling for parents and children, to help them understand their points of view would be good.
 - Parents are scared that children will get lost, that is, lose their way and go into antisocial behaviour.
 - Children often feel like a sandwich –squashed between a very different home life and school life.
 - Sri Lankan families have extra difficulties to Australian families.
 - Sometimes fighting between parents and children can cause family breakdowns. Then counselling would be appropriate.

Question 2: What activities/services would you like developed to meet the needs of families?

- Counselling
- Distribution of information about services available.
- Seminars
- Social groups

Activities/Services for Recent Migrants (Arrived in the last 2 years)

- Skill matching service, work experience programs and support.
- Unpaid position to get work experience could be supplied by migrant skills centre.
- Information about resumes and application process made available.
- Housing: people living with family and friends can only rent if they have money (*Not sure about this point, don't think the council will give migrants money to rent a house!*)

Longer term Migrants:

- Need support for existing activities
- Need to know who the people in the council are
- Centrelink and MRC: Would be good to have a phone number to call to hear information in Sinhala (in all language options, with Sinhala as one of them).
- To have an information centre for the Sri Lankan community, preferably a Sri Lankan worker who speaks Sinhala to approach would be helpful.

Question 3: Which issues would you rate as the three highest priorities for action?

1. Finding access to an affordable community hall for the Sinhalese community
2. Education program to help new migrants gain professional employment: for example resume services, and volunteering to gain experience.
3. Information about services that are currently available made more accessible.

3 Muslim focus group (members from USMA)

Monday 27th September

What are the major issues affecting Sri Lankan families?

- Many migrants settle in other regions first and then settle here so they are already established – therefore no urgent needs.
- Religious needs:
 - There is no proper prayer centre/mosque in Monash City Area – because prayer is governed by the moon, Muslims may only know one day in advance when they need a prayer centre to hold their service.
 - Would like a community centre for youth and prayer that could be easily accessed and within a reasonable price. The centre could be multicultural, could be shared with other groups.
 - It would be good to educate people about Muslim/Sri Lankan culture, including food, in the wider Australian community.
 - It needs to be promoted that Muslims do not only come from the Middle East. Would like an event to bring together Muslim and non-Muslim communities.
 - Need a common prayer room in public places, can be used by many faiths and cultures. Must be a plain room but it can be small. Need a prayer room in the Monash Medical Centre because many Muslims go there, and hospitals in general.
 - Non-muslim youth have a very narrow view of Islam, it would be good to hold a youth function to up understanding between youth of different backgrounds.
 - There is a lack of library books available on Islam in the City of Monash.
- Family issues
 - Youth culture clash with older traditional parents. The youth embrace the Australian culture, for example "when you are 18 you are independent". This leads to family conflict.
 - Promote communication between parents and children and generate understanding about Australian culture in parents.
 - Could increase understanding through common activities, or else problem may grow in the future.
- Youth issues
 - Career development for youth would be beneficial ie. the interview process. A seminar on finding a job would be good. Everyone, not just youth, could attend the seminar.
 - Elderly – There is no support group for the elderly. The elderly are in small numbers now but may be a problem in the future.
 - Need more health awareness, including how to avoid heart disease. Sri Lankan Muslim diet in general is not very healthy.
 - Need security awareness, for example in the home. For example, not to give out information over the phone etc.
 - Would be good to have a women's group, and would be good to maybe have speakers during the women's group to educate about some of the issues.
 - Counsellors need cross-cultural training to understand about Sri Lankan Muslim culture. For example women may want some advice and want to be listened to, but don't want to be advised to leave home unless its absolutely necessary.
 - Communication – Community is not aware of local Council Initiatives. They need better communication from the Council.
 - Want to have increased awareness of USMAA in the community.

Highest priorities for action:

- Awareness: Community education about issues and services especially health and security awareness: need to target housewives.

- Awareness of Sri Lankan Muslim culture and need the wider community to have a better understanding of Islam in the City of Monash.
- Community centre.

Note: it would be good to work with the younger generation as well as the older generation.

APPENDIX 3 – QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Results of the questionnaires

As part of the study, 22 members of the Sri Lankan community, from Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese groups filled out questionnaires asking for individual information. All those surveyed had lived in Australia for 4 years or more, and consistent with the statistics, 55% of those surveyed came to Australia through the skilled migration stream, while 32% came through the family migration stream, leading to a total of 87% of people through those two streams. All speak English very well or well and most have a tertiary qualification or are currently studying. Sixty-four percent of people were employed full time. Seventy-three percent of people surveyed had two children in their house and the majority had between three and five people living in their house.

On the whole, when examining existing data about the Sri Lankan population in Australia in general, and from the 22 questionnaires, it appears that the members of the Sri Lankan community in the City of Monash are predominantly fluent in English, well educated, have fairly small families and are generally well employed. The community seems to be approximately 40% Burgher, 32% Sinhalese, 24% Tamil and 3% Muslim. It is important to note however that it is very difficult to measure exact percentages of the different groups, as many from one group speak other languages, follow different religions etc. For example, there are Sinhalese and Tamil Christians, and while most Muslims speak Tamil, some speak Sinhalese or both at home. However this information gives an approximate understanding of the diversity in the Sri Lankan community in the City of Monash.