

Radha on sewing

My mother was brought up in a village in Kerala, South India. She married in 1937 and went to Malaysia with my father in 1938. My father was the chief clerk on a rubber estate. He was also the plantation nurse, tending to workers who presented with minor ailments. I was born in 1940. It was war time and life was very difficult. They had an underground shelter to escape bomb damage. My Mum said she would be in the middle of cooking and when the siren sounded you had to run into the shelter.

My mother was very old fashioned, she came from a village in India and she never liked modern things. She did the washing by hand. We helped, then she kept a washer woman. We sent mens' and boys' clothes to the dhobi who washed and ironed then returned the clothes to us. We washed and ironed **the women's** clothes. A servant did the shopping and went to the market. Sometimes vegetable and fish sellers came to the house. When we moved to the town, we went to the markets ourselves. We had relations nearby, but not a lot of relations. I have no relations in this country except my own family.

My mother wore sarees, but we wore western clothes as children. She had a sewing machine, and because readymade clothes were very expensive, she made our clothes. The only fabric available at the time was parachute silk, that was a nylon type of fabric. Parachute clothes are very hot but, as time went by after the war ended, things got better, and we could buy better materials.

The 1950's were not too bad. At school we just did cross stitch, but I learnt to sew in the Girl Guides. We learnt to cut simple clothes. At my classes I started with simple underwear. When I was 16 my mother sent me to a sewing mistress to learn sewing for which I got a diploma. I was forced to learn to sew, it was not done for fun. My sisters also had to go, and they were very good. When I left school, I learnt shorthand and typing and later started working in a legal office. In my early twenties I started going to embroidery classes. There was a lady with a shop who ran sewing classes and I learnt embroidery from her after work. I was there nearly three years and got a diploma.

I married my husband in 1966. We lived in Singapore for the first few years of our marriage. He was a keen trade unionist and was also involved with the Malayalee Association there – this took a lot of his time away from home. **We left to come to England in 1971. I was 30 when I came to the UK. I didn't do much sewing at this time. My husband used to say "Why do this sewing when you can take it to the tailor?" If any custom sewing was needed he would get it done in India.**

My sister did more sewing and still sews. I was taught to cook from my mother. I was forced to cook so I did not enjoy it. I started enjoying cooking when I came to London and could use my own initiative, before then, **it was a duty. My youngest sister wasn't forced to do these things and so she enjoyed them.**

My husband worked in a civilian role with the British navy in Singapore, and this way he got his British citizenship. My husband came a year before me, whilst I was pregnant with our second child. I had stayed behind with my family to have my baby so they could help me afterwards. I arrived with my 3 and half year old daughter and one 6 months old. When we came here, there were many other families who had also emigrated from Singapore whom we knew, but even then, **I didn't like the UK** when we first came, I wanted to go back home.

At first, we lived in rented flat in London. We had 2 rooms, no bathroom and only an outside toilet. The landlord put the bath in the kitchen. When the landlord and his family needed baths we had to vacate the kitchen and go to the bedroom. We had no central heating only a paraffin heater. I was beginning to get depressed with my daughter beginning to walk, and our landlord complaining about the noise all the time. It was very hard.

We were one of the first in our community to buy a house. We bought our first house for £7,500. It had three bedrooms. The house was on the market for a long time. The owners were reluctant to sell the house to non-whites, but no white family came for the property, and in the end we were allowed to look at the house. My neighbour was told "You had better sell your house as Asians are coming to live next door" but we became friends. She had three sons and I had two daughters and in the end, we could not live without each other. In fact, we took part of the fence out so our children could play together and took turns to look after **each other's** children. She wanted one of her sons to marry one of my daughters. We lived there for 14 years. It was a big house and we were very happy there - the children were happy. They began at Essex primary school. The teachers were happy with them, then they went to Little Ilford School, which was getting a bad reputation, but they did well and were happy there. One ended up a lawyer and one has a PhD. They stayed away from trouble. I helped with homework, but not much as the teaching methods were so different. Back home everything is taught by rote. Most of the time they did not need help, but we coached them a bit. We could help more with maths and English. My oldest daughter was really good at work and the teachers gave her extra coaching time after school - **you don't find this now.**

My English was good when I arrived here. I took senior Cambridge papers back at home and English exams at school. English was the national language when I was growing up, so I did not have problems with the language when I came here. At first, I worked for Ilford Films in a dark room in Ilford. I started as a temp for 6 weeks and stayed for three years. Then I applied for a civil service job in 1976. I enjoyed this. I was a shorthand typist. I had no problems at work. The people were very friendly.

My youngest daughter started me on cross stitch. She bought me a magazine with a cross stitch pattern and bought the materials. At work there was a lady who was very good at cross stitch. She did her lace for her wedding dress - her mother made the dress. In the beginning, she helped me with my cross stitch and gave me the energy to do these things - she was an inspiration to me. Everyone at work knew I did cross stitch - as soon as I finished work I did my sewing, and then another secretary started. I made my daughter's university party dress, doing all the beading - for her university ball - I did a lot of stitching for that piece.

My husband joined the Malayalee Association in the mid-1970's. I joined in the mid-1990s. I first went at weekends, for celebrations and shows I joined the **women's group** at the Malayalee Association, and we did lots of activities. I led a small cross stitch class with 6 or 7 or students. I had an exhibition of cross stitch at St Bartholomew **Church Hall on International Women's Day.** I **collected all my work together and showed it.** I had a lot of orders for my "Last Supper" cross stitch tapestry - but I did not do them as no money was offered - **even for materials.** I made one "Last Supper" for my friend and one for my daughter's mother-in-law. Now my daughter's brother-in-law has it. I did a lot of cross stitch. My husband was president of the association until his death in 2002. I returned in 2004 and became an active member. The first sewing activity was with Age Concern.

When their grant stopped, ELTA got involved and I met Sonia. She ran other classes and I started to go to them.

I learnt a lot with Sonia - her craft is out of this world. I really enjoy her sessions. I have never done this work before. Knowing Sonia has meant I went to so many different places that I did not know existed. I enjoyed teaching at the V&A and I enjoyed the project at Tate Modern. I was not going to go to the Tate, but my daughter said I must go and Rani said she would go – in the end I went all 6 days. I **don't think any other place does what Sonia does. She can draw anything and just sew it. I did birds and the Greek sirens.**

The Malayalee Association helped people do a lot of creative things. They did lots of plays every year, but I did not take part in them. I helped to organise **the children's activities**. Back home when we were young, there were no outside activities. We had to learn, learn, learn. No games. School 8 - 1 pm, sports and outside activities after 3 pm, but I never went to these. At school there was no science, but I was one of those who was selected to study science at a different school in the afternoons. Children have their freedom here. Back home in the school holidays, the boys played and the girls helped their **mothers' doing housework**. The girls did not have much freedom. In the holidays we were sent to sewing and cooking lessons and could not go out alone. More or less we were tied up - we could not even go out with friends. Here my girls went out after school. I did not limit their freedom, but they did not do things behind my back. My husband was a very lenient man, he never shouted, and he never believed in hitting the children.

I went back twice to Malaysia to visit my mother. All my brothers and sisters left; to Canada, India, Norway, USA, and only one in Bombay. We telephone each other and use WhatsApp. I've **visited all** of them. They left because of opportunities. My brother came to the UK to do A-levels and went into accountancy and got married and settled – but he has passed away. One brother did stay in Malaysia, but after he died his widow and children went to Canada. Malaysian life was better in 60's and 70's, than when I was growing up. My sister had a better life there in the 70s. Now Malaysia is a very modern country.

My husband helped around the house; I never had to do everything on my own. He took the children to school and I had a childminder looking after my children after school, and also in the school holidays. Other people were very strict with their children, especially the girls, and parents took them back to India to get married - few girls went into higher education. We were not going to do that. I trusted them. When my daughter went to Manchester University, people **used to come and tell us "You should not have let her go to study - you do not know what she is doing"**. **Both came home after university.** I was not worried about them. My daughters love my embroidery - they think it is so good. The younger one comes to all the shows.

I **can't say that my life was too bad** - I had some hiccups but nothing serious.