

Ethnic Group: Tamil
Interview number: 10
Date: July 7, 1993
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information

Gender: male
Age: 57
Place of Birth: Malaysia
Religion: Hindu
Marital Status: married
Education:
Occupation: translator for an international Sri Lankan Tamil agency
Children: two sons, ages 17, 22

Interviewer's Comments:

One of my key informants gave me the name of this family. The husband, "Ranjan" answered my call. I explained the nature of the study and asked to interview either him or his wife. He consulted with her briefly and then told me he would do it. The following week on an afternoon, I met him at the office of the international Tamil organization where he works. It was his choice to meet there, although I had suggested meeting at his home.

The office is a house on a quiet residential street. Four Tamil men, ranging in age from their 20s to 50s, were talking on the veranda and in the doorway when I arrived. I asked to see R. and was ushered in to a waiting-room/living room. I heard someone calling "Master R! A white lady is here to see you." R. promptly came downstairs to meet me. He first seated himself on a sofa adjacent to mine but I asked if we could conduct the interview in a more private place. He took me to a small, air-conditioned computer room where the door is normally closed. Different people interrupted the interview at least half a dozen times, dropping off translations, looking for a stamp, bringing us Cokes, giving R. messages, and so on. Once there was a call for him from Montreal.

The room was set up with three computers with templates for the Tamil alphabet. One computer was on, displaying the mast-head of the organization's newspaper in Tamil language. A drafting table and small desk were also crowded into the room. One wall had a large, glossy poster of Kittu. (Kittu was a prominent militant leader who died in 1992 from a self-detoned explosion immediately after the Indian Army intercepted his boat. R. told me that 8,000 Tamils held a demonstration in Toronto against the Indian government following Kittu's death.) The opposite wall had a large calendar with a picture of a live tiger. The back of the door had a poster for Ontario apples.

The Tamil organization R. works for has headquarters in London and branches throughout Europe and North America including Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Winnipeg. R. estimates there are 150,000 Tamils in Europe and 70,000 in Toronto. The main activity of the Toronto office is publication of a free fortnightly Tamil-language paper, which has a circulation of 16,000 in Canada and 8,000 in Europe. According to R., the goals of the paper and the organization are to help Tamils preserve their culture and language, to encourage Tamil cultural associations, to keep Tamils conscious of what is happening in Sri Lanka, and to raise money for use in Sri Lanka. He stressed that preventing Tamils from being absorbed into the dominant culture is the main purpose.

THE ASSOCIATION'S PURPOSE OF PRESERVING TAMIL CULTURE:

R: For us, the family unit is a very close and rigid unit. Say, respect for elders and affection. I mean responsibility within the family is greater than that here. Especially now when you

look at our youngsters coming up here. They feel that they are more free. They have freedom here. So, they try to break the family bindings. So, we try to see that that bondage is preserved.

[R. gave the example of his own son to emphasize his concern about loss of culture through exposure to Canadian life.]

R: He has not been brought up in our way. Whatever he has seen, whatever he has learned is only within the family unit. Now when he goes to university he comes home and says to me: "Dad you are still in the old centuries, you are all uncivilized people." He tries to tell me that what he picks up from the students there, those are the new ideas, and... I mean, which is actually contradicting our culture, our values. Because I would not like him to take an independent view without him consulting me. Say for example, I will not approve of him going and marrying some girl or bringing a girlfriend. Now he may be 22, according to Canadian law and all this, you are free to bring home a girlfriend and say, "Dad, this is my girlfriend." But I can't take up that! And no Tamil parent will be able to take up that because we are not used to that.

[Another concern is that the behaviour of Tamil women in Canada is changing.]

R: Tamil ladies don't drink and smoke. You may find one in a thousand smoking. Last time when I was here, someone was complaining that Sri Lankan ladies have started drinking in Toronto when they go to birthday parties and wedding parties. One chap was abusing me over the phone saying "What are you people doing? You say you are preserving Tamil culture. Why can't you do something to stop all this?" I said, "What can we do?"

MIGRATION HISTORY

I: When did you leave Sri Lanka? When did you come to Canada? Why did you leave? How did you come?

[R. was born in Malaysia where his father worked as a civil servant. At age 12 his family went back to his parent's village in the Jaffna Peninsula. He married in 1964 and left Sri Lanka in 1969 to spend the next 2 decades in Africa. He worked as a teacher in various African countries. All the while he regularly visited Sri Lanka on holidays. Starting in 1977 he became involved in international Tamil organizations.]

R: In 1977 we had riots [in Sri Lanka]. After the riots, especially we who were abroad were trying to collect money, and trying to bring consciousness among the Tamil people. Although what we did did not contribute to the armed struggle at that time, at least we wanted to bring an awakening of the Tamil people abroad.

[On his visit in 1981 he was interrogated by the Sri Lankan security forces and accused of taking part in raising money for anti-government activities. The next time he attempted to visit, in 1984, he was refused entry at the airport. The family came to Canada in 1988 for better job security for himself and education for his sons. If not for his sons, he thinks he would have taken his chances and tried to go back to Sri Lanka because of his ideological commitments.]

I: What other family members were already in Canada? Have any come since? Do you have plans to sponsor anyone?

[R.'s youngest brother's family has been in Toronto since 1986. The rest of his family members are in Sri Lanka. He has some

distant relatives in Canada. They have no plans to sponsor since they don't have enough money and their relatives are not eligible.]

I: Talk about your arrival in Canada and your first experiences. Who helped you? How did you support yourselves?

[The family landed in Montreal and claimed refugee status. A church organization helped them by providing winter clothing, beds and blankets.]

R: We didn't feel that we were in a strange country, struggling for existence. We didn't feel that way.

[They left Montreal for Toronto in 1992 because: "After 1991 departments in Montreal, were more French type. They refused to serve us in English. We found that not very palatable."]

[Presently one son is at university, the other is in high school. His wife is an intake worker for another Tamil agency. For his organization he coordinates 50 volunteers and translates news items.]

IDENTITY

I: What label do you give to your identity?

[R. answered "Canadian Tamil" but then added:]

R: Personally speaking, I don't like to be called a Canadian Tamil, because I like to go back. But my son always says that "Appa, we are all Canadian Tamils." I get this idea from him. He is more integrated. He says that he is a Canadian Tamil. My wife is also 54 years. So it's different for us to adjust or to imbibe these new ideas, these Canadian ideas. Once this problem [the ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka] settles I think both of us would like to go back.

I: Do your children also plan to go back? Do they speak Tamil?

R: That's a problem. Because they may not be able to fit into the society there. They can't read Tamil but they can speak Tamil at home. I always insist that we speak Tamil. Most of us are slowly losing our identity. My children can speak, but they don't write. And they don't have that interest. I tried to create that interest, but, now my younger son says, "Appa, it's a waste of time."

I: What Tamil cultural traditions do you keep?

[The family always celebrates all the Hindu festivals such as Deepavali, New Year and Thaipungal. On Fridays they are eat vegetarian meals. They don't eat meat on Thursdays also because R.'s wife has prayer meetings on that day. She is a devotee of an Indian saint. The family goes to the temple about once a month. Every Friday they have a prayer at home in a special corner of one room which is set aside as a small shrine. R. does not wear shoes inside, a cultural practice based on cleanliness. R.'s wife wears a sari and potu. Since she works in a Tamil society this is not problematic. When they lived in Montreal she did not wear a sari at her factory job.]

MARRIAGE

I: How old were you when you married?

[R. was 28, his wife 26. Ideally he should have been about 25, and she 18-20, he said. He said he was not sure why he married late.]

R: I don't know. Maybe it was because I had three sisters. My elder sister got married, second sister got married. The third sister, we had to see that she got settled. So, I waited for her.

[In some cases the timing of a brother's wedding may also be delayed to see that his sister has enough money for her dowry.]

R: The person who my sister is going to marry may demand say \$50,000. [My family] may not have the money. But I may try to get this as dowry from the girl whom I am going to marry, take this money and settle my sister. Then I have to wait because usually we don't do two weddings in the same house in one year.

I: Did you have a traditional marriage?

[R. had an arranged marriage that would not have been much different from his parents' marriage. His wife is a second cousin. She was from the same village. Her house was only about 150 yards from his own. R. said people prefer to arrange marriages between relatives living in the village. Traditionally, the girl's family approaches the boy's family. R.'s wife's parents had already approached his parents when he was in grade 12.]

R: As soon as they know that there is a chance they put some feelers saying that they are interested in getting your daughter or getting your son.

[R. said the first time he saw his wife was on the day of their registration. The registration and wedding dates were determined by astrology. The registration is always on a separate date before the wedding.]

R: Before the registration we negotiate and come to a settlement about the dowry. On the day of registration--whether we are getting a dowry in cash, land, house or whatever--all this [has been] settled. [A separate registration date] came into importance to avoid this type of thing [disputes] at the marriage ceremony. Because I may have promised to give 10,000 rupees or 10,000 dollars, but at that time I may not have the cash. I may have thought that I could borrow some from here, and I could get some from there, and they would have promised, so I would have said, okay, I'll give 10,000. But then, at the time of marriage, if the money is not there, then you do not know whether the marriage will take place or not! So people found it more convenient to have the registration and settle all this, so that the marriage is peaceful.

I: Why did your wife's family consider you an appropriate match?

[R.'s chief reason was his family background. His father was a non-drinker. He was the eighth child in the family to marry, and all his brothers and sisters were doing well. In his village at that time his family was well respected. His father was "more or less like a village chief" to whom people came for advice.]

I: Are you and your wife from the same caste?

R: Oh sure! We would never marry from another caste! Not only marry from another caste, say now if one of my brothers or one of my brother's children married a girl from another caste, that black mark comes to me also. Someone of good family standing may not be prepared to give his daughter to me, even with all my family history. He may say that my brother married a fisherman's daughter.

[R. is of the Vellala caste, the highest of the caste hierarchy].

I: What was the dowry your wife's family gave you?

[R. proudly said his father did not ask for a dowry for any of his 5 sons. But the family gave a dowry for three girls. R. explained that not asking for a dowry is very unusual. The main reason for not taking one was that four of the five brothers married relatives. Only the brother in Canada married outside the village, but to a Vellala woman from Jaffna.]

I: Is your married life any different here than it would have been in Sri Lanka?

R: Though I have been living abroad for such a long time, I think I always lived in the same way that we lived in Sri Lanka. We live in the Sri Lankan way.

I: Have you ever thought of getting a divorce? Or do you know of anyone who has had a divorce?

[R. would not consider getting divorced. He said divorces are unheard of in Sri Lanka. In Toronto he does not think there are any divorces.]

R: But we get cases of one Tamil boy running after another man's wife, the wife running after another man. Of these things, we have heard about ten or twelve cases. I don't think it has ended in divorce.

[He said usually couples separate rather than divorce. A divorce would only occur if the man wanted to re-marry.]

R: Back at home we never like to get a divorce because if I get a divorce, usually the sympathy is with the lady. My wife may have one-hundred-and-one faults, but still the village folk, my relations, even my parents and my brothers and sisters will always sympathize with her and say there is something wrong with me. I lose my respect with the society. To maintain my respect and to have some standing in the society, I will just prolong [the marriage]. Though the family life may not be that happy, but still, we live for the society. There will be a stage where you just live for the society or for the children, though we may be at loggerheads.

[R. explained more about divorce and re-marriage later in the interview. A male divorcee can re-marry, "but the girl can never think of marriage."]

R: Even if she registers and then for some reason they don't marry, to get a re-marriage is a problem. It's a black mark on her.

[This is the case even though she has not yet had any sexual contact with her would-have-been husband. It is because people will suspect her family was not forthcoming with their promise of a dowry.]

I: What happens to single women in your society?

[Her reputation depends on her economic status. Female teachers or doctors are "considered okay." "Other professionals, they may not have that much respect from the society."]

CHILDREN

I: Did you have the number and sex of children you wanted?

R: The number of children was not any concern, but I wanted a daughter. Because in our society, the parents always live with their daughters, even if she is married.

[This is why a house is often given for the daughter's dowry. For example, R.'s father had three daughters. The eldest daughter was given the house where the children were brought up. The second and third daughters had houses built within the same compound.]

I: Do you expect your sons to look after you in your old age?

R: We never expect our sons to look after us. It's only the daughters. Sons usually give us the financial support. According to our traditions we would not like our daughter-in-law to help us, to cook for us, or to do this or that. The daughter can't provide us with all that we want because she is relying on her husband. We don't like her to bring in her husband's money. So the son has to provide the financial help and the daughter will provide the physical help.

I: What are your expectations about your sons' marriages?

R: From my elder son's views, I won't be surprised if he brings some girl and says he's going to marry her. At least I expect him to marry a Tamil girl who has been brought up our society and culture, not from somewhere else. You find that among our Tamils, the rate of divorce, getting independence... Whenever we go to the Ministry [of Citizenship and Culture] here, there, anywhere, they say, "Your association seems to be a male-dominated Association." That's what they say in Canada, "Equal rights, this..." I mean, fine, okay. But, when you just see a Tamil couple walking, you will not see the lady walking abreast with the husband. She is always one step back. It is the husband who leads. But that doesn't mean that we don't give the women their rights. In fact, all major decisions are taken by the women.

[Here R. gave the example of the wife's role in the dowry negotiations. The men will do the actual negotiating, but if the deal is not satisfactory, the wife will privately draw her husband aside and tell him what he should agree to.]

R: The only thing is that she doesn't appear to play a dominant role. Even in my house, in certain things my wife will merely say "Appa!" Then I will follow her into the kitchen or into the bedroom and then she will say, "Why are you committing yourself like that? Don't commit yourself." In public she will never confront [her husband]. And she will never like to show other people that she is the decision-maker. This happens in every Tamil home. The decision-maker is the wife. But she doesn't appear to be the decision-maker.

[R. explained that not only does a wife have decision-making power within the home, her reputation depends on the extent to which she can control her husband's behaviour.]

R: For example, suppose I am persuaded to join a group of friends drinking beer, even if I am only sipping Coke, and suppose one of my neighbours sees me in this gathering. My wife is responsible for my behaviour. It won't reflect on me. They will come and tell her, "Look, why are you allowing your husband to go there? He is in bad company." They will not come and tell me that I am in bad company. They will tell her. She is to be blamed. If I go on like this and then, when it comes to a divorce the same people will say, "She was trying, but he didn't listen to her. He is a really incorrigible fellow."

I: Do you expect your sons to be sexually experienced before they are married?

R: So far I have no reason to think that he would have had some sexual experience. I used to monitor their movements. I find that he has no such girlfriends.

I: What kind of relationship do you have with your sons?

[R. said he differs from most Sri Lankan families in that he was "more or less" a friend to his children. He played board games with them when they were young. In an average Sri Lankan home it is uncommon for parents to play with children. Typically the mother is closer to her children than the father. And daughters tend to be close to their father, while sons are close to their mother. R. explained how communication in the family is channeled from the children through the mother to the father.]

R: For example, if my son is going to marry someone, if he has made his own decision, he will not come and tell me straight. He will first put it to the mother, convince the mother, and see that it is through her that I get the information. Then it is her responsibility to see that the approval is given.

I: Would you take any steps towards arranging your sons' marriages?

[R. said he would not, but his wife might.]

R: Usually marriages are made through the ladies. Even in my wife's case, her parents did not approach my father first. It's her mother who will put the feeler to my mother first. If the signs are encouraging, then in the mean time, my mother has already dropped word to my father about this. So my father is aware of it but he pretends he doesn't know. In the same way, my wife's mother also says to her husband, "So-and-so has a son, and his son is good, people say he is good, so why don't we..." She will put it as though she is making a suggestion and he will not know that she has already got the feeler from my mother.

[R.'s wife thinks their elder son will agree to an arranged marriage. At least, she thinks she can convince him. However R. tells her she is over-confident.]

R: If you are prepared for the worst then you won't get disappointed. I have more confidence and trust in my younger son. He is my pet. The elder son is my wife's pet.

PARENTS

I: Do you have any obligations towards your parents?

[Usually it is the son's duty is to support them. In R.'s case, his father was drawing a pension, so it wasn't necessary to send money. Now both sets of parents are dead.]

RELATIVES

I: Do you keep in contact with your relatives?

R: Say for example, if there is any wedding--even among distant relatives, or even among people from the village, they may not be relatives but those who have known us from childhood--weddings or deaths or anything, whether it is a joyful event or a sad event, they always make it a point to inform us. And we also try to send them a gift of ten dollars, just to say that we are with them. That way we try to keep in touch.

[The circle that R. tries to keep in touch with includes the 500 families from his village.]

R: Any event that takes place among that 500 families, I see that I write to them personal notes. Just to show that [I am] concerned. Our social lives are very closely knit. We don't want to break out of that.

I: Does anyone in your family play a special role in keeping you in contact?

R: My [eldest] sister is the nucleus. She lives at my parent's house. My father had a certain say in the village. None of the sons are there. Now she is the only one representing my father. The village people make it a point to inform her and she has to inform us.

[Likewise, if his sister has news from R. such as a marriage of one of his sons, she must inform everyone in the village. If she overlooks someone, he will be offended. "They take it as their right to know." Being a teacher, a respected profession, is an advantage. She teaches in a school established by her father.]

FAMILY INFLUENCES

I: What influenced you to take up your line of work which is so concerned with preserving Tamil culture?

[R.'s father was very much concerned with transmission of culture. He built a Hindu temple in Malaka, Malaysia. While they lived there he saw that his children got Tamil language lessons. He insisted that his sons wear versti (cultural dress for men), which he brought from India. In Sri Lanka, R.'s father was a member of a Tamil political party which, "represented the traditional values of our people. R. says his father was not biased against caste. For example, in 1962, he allowed his daughter to teach in a school where low caste children were studying rather than send her to a school outside the village.]

R: We were not prejudiced. When I was in grade twelve I even played football on a low caste team.

[R.'s mother was more conservative than his father. She was more sensitive to the objections from other high caste people in the village. Because his father permitted his children to have such contact with low caste people, R. says, "We were broad-minded for the society at that time."]