

Ethnic Group: Tamil
Interview number: 2
Date: July 27, 1993
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information for "Thava"

Gender: male
Age: 37
Place of Birth: Jaffna, Sri Lanka
Religion: Catholic
Marital Status: married to Respondent 2
Occupation: temporary worker
Children: daughter, age 4

Demographic Information for "Jothi"

Gender: female
Age: 37
Place of Birth: Jaffna, Sri Lanka
Religion: Catholic
Marital Status: married to Respondent 1
Occupation: bank teller
Children: daughter, age 4

Interviewer's Comments:

I met this couple through one of my key informants who told me they are members of a low caste group. I originally arranged to interview only the wife, Jothi. However, they have a small apartment and the husband, Thava, was home so I invited him to join. They participated equally in the interview, without voicing strong differences of opinion. Thava's 25 year old, unmarried brother lives in the household but was not present for most of the interview. Presently he's working, but he plans to go to school in the fall. The couple's 4-year-old daughter was there. She is a quiet child, undemanding of attention during the time of the interview. The girl's uncle took her out to play on her tricycle for a while. The interview took place in the evening. Jothi served me an orange drink and some home-made snacks leftover from Thava's sister's wedding. The tape recording is poor quality because the couple spoke softly, especially at first. After the interview we chatted for about half an hour. They were interested in hearing about my life.

MIGRATION HISTORY/ FAMILY BACKGROUND

I: When did you come to Canada?

[Interviewer's summary: They both arrived in 1986 but through different routes. He had been working for a shipping company that went to the US in June, 1985. He stayed in the US as they had originally planned.]

Jothi: He wanted to work with the ship the whole life. I said, No way!

[Nine months after his landing in the US she came to Canada through an agent who gave her a forged visa.]

Jothi: At that time we didn't know anything about forged visas or anything like that. I came here and they said, "Your visa is not good." I didn't know. Because we were paying so much money, I thought that was for a ticket, and everything. Now everybody knows how they come. Everybody was laughing at me when I came here. "So you thought they were going to give you the real visa and let you in?" [laugh].

[Their plans to come to Canada did work out as expected.]

Jothi: Actually, we were supposed to go to Mexico. But when we went there they found that the visas had been forged. We were deported. On our way to Sri Lanka the plane landed in Montreal. So we came to Montreal.

[The original plan was for her to cross the Mexican/US border to meet her husband, and then for the two of them to cross the border into Canada. All 14 in the group of Sri Lankans led by the "agent" claimed refugee status in Montreal.]

I: What were your reasons for coming?

[Jothi had been working at a bank in Colombo in 1983. She was frightened during and after the "1983 riots," a period of intense communal violence against Tamils in which hundreds of Tamils were killed or displaced. She felt at risk because her co-workers and neighbours were predominantly Sinhalese. She went back to Jaffna, but there was no work. Thava was not directly affected by the riots because he was working outside Sri Lanka with the shipping company for 5 years. After their marriage in 1984 they decided to try to leave Sri Lanka.]

I: Who else came to Canada with you?

[Jothi travelled with 14 Sri Lankans in a group accompanied by the "agent." She did not know the others until the trip.]

I: Since you came, have you sponsored or helped others?

[Thava is the second son in a family of 6. His eldest brother is a priest, still in Sri Lanka. He helped two brothers and a sister come to Canada. His sister got married in Toronto last week. Another sister is in Sri Lanka. His father didn't want to come because of the climate. He is 65 and receiving a pension.]

[Jothi is the eldest of 6. One of her sisters is in Canada. Her mother, two sisters and brother in are still in Sri Lanka. One brother was killed in the 1983 riots.]

I: How did you help them get here?

[Thava earned money and paid an agent who brought them with illegal documents and tickets.]

I: Did they all stay with you when they arrived?

[Yes. They arrived one by one and moved out once they were married. Now all but the youngest brother is married. At age 25 they consider him too young to marry.]

Jothi: First the elder brother came. Before he got married the younger brother came. When the younger brother was here all of us got together and helped the sister to come down.

I: What other family members do you have here?

[Thava has cousins here. All came before 1990.]

I: Do you have any plans to help more family members come to Canada?

[Yes. They would like to bring Thava's sister. She is 29 and unmarried. They would also like to help Jothi's sister.]

I: Tell me about your arrival in Canada and your first experiences.

[When Jothi arrived in Montreal she called her husband in the US.]

He called one of his friends in Montreal who came and picked her up. She lived with that family for a while.]

I: Did you have many friends in Montreal? How did you know them?

[Thava knows 20-25 people in Montreal. They are from the villages in Jaffna where he grew up. He recognizes them from their names. Jothi did not know as many people when she first arrived.]

I: Have you helped friends in the same way? [yes.] Can you give an example?

Thava: One of my friends came from Sri Lanka to Canada. He called from the airport. He stayed with us too.

IDENTITY

I: By what identity do you like to think of yourselves?

[First Sri Lankan, then Tamil.]

I: Back in Sri Lanka did you see yourself differently?

Thava: Back home, so different. Provinces, villages. So we have to identify the province, and go further, the village.

I: Do Sri Lankans here still consider it important to know where you're from?

[Both replied yes, they do.]

I: Why is it important to them?

Jothi: They want to identify... If you say you're from your town, then they'll go further and ask your family name, and whereabouts... Then they'll get to know...

Thava: ...so many cultures, so many races in Jaffna.

I: Do you mean castes?

Thava: Castes, yes.

I: Is it important for people to know what caste you are?

Thava: Yes. Religion and caste.

I: Is it insulting for people to ask which caste you are from?

Jothi: They don't ask you straight. They'll ask your place and your family.

I: What do they really want to know?

Thava: Caste. Caste is the most important thing for marriage.

I: Would it be ok if I asked what caste you are?

Jothi: Sure.

I: Would you be insulted?

Thava: No.

I: What caste background do you have?

Thava: In my country the caste is divided by the person's work. Some persons cut the hair, they're a different caste. Some

persons wash the clothes, they're a different caste. Some go fishing. Some make the jewellery. So the caste is identified by the person's employment. I think the other generation is not going to ask the caste and feel the caste.

I: Are most of your friends Tamils?

[They have very few non-Tamil friends. Jothi has one friend from work who's not Tamil.]

I: Did you know your Tamil friends at home, or did you meet them here?

Thava: Ninety percent we know from back home. Ten percent are new.

I: What Sri Lankan traditions do you continue to practice here?

[They eat the same food: rice and curry. They wear the same clothes, except in wintertime. Jothi wears sari to special functions. They attend a Catholic church close to their home. Sometimes they go to a church where the service is in Tamil.]

I: Do other Sri Lankans influence your behaviour in any way?

[No.]

MARRIAGE

I: When did you get married? How old were you?

[1984, in Jaffna. They were both 28.]

I: Was it an arranged marriage?

[Yes. Jothi's parents contacted Thava's parents. Her elder sister and her mother played the largest role. Thava was at sea then. All parties agreed. The couple corresponded for one year before their wedding. They did not send photographs.]

I: Did you have similar backgrounds?

[Yes.]

I: Did you have any other proposals?

[Jothi had some other proposals but they didn't work out because of different backgrounds and for financial reasons.]

I: Did Thava's family ask for a dowry?

[No].

I: Is that unusual? Why did he not?

Jothi: It's unusual. His mom said not to ask for a dowry.

I: How did you feel about that?

Jothi: Good. We were having a hard time back at home. Everybody was asking for money for the dowry.

I: Did you get married "in the line" (in the proper order for siblings)?

[Yes, for both.]

I: When was the first time you saw each other?

Jothi: He came to my workplace [a bank in Colombo] with his friends. The other guy came first and pointed to someone else, an old man, and said, "That's Thava" [laugh] I didn't know him because I hadn't seen his picture. I said, "Okay." Then he came from behind and said, "No, it's me, I'm Thava" [laugh].

I: Was your marriage like your parents'? Was it in the same tradition?

[Yes.]

I: Do you think your daughter's marriage will be the same as yours?

Thava: We hope.

Jothi: We hope and pray.

I: Is your married life the same here as it would be back at home?

[Yes.]

I: Have you changed in any ways since coming here?

[No.]

I: Do you experience any pressures on your marriage because of living here? For example, lack of time, over-work, loss of respect.

[No. The marital problems in Canada that Thava has heard of have arisen when the man first settles in Canada and then sponsors his wife to come. She may come with the wrong expectations about life here, and false hopes about married life as well. Since he and Jothi got married in Sri Lanka and then came to Canada together, they have been able to adjust together.]

I: Do you find that many people come with false expectations?

Jothi: Almost everybody. When they come, they come with all their dreams. When they get here, only then they realize...

I: Did you also experience disappointment when you came?

Jothi: No. We had trouble back home. And we came together. My only intention was to come with him, that's all. I accepted whatever was supposed to be here.

Thava: People [from Canada] send money, video cassettes and photographs [back to Sri Lanka]. They [Sri Lankans at home] think Canada should be paradise.

Jothi: People send one son from the family to Canada, he earns and he sends the whole money to the family. They won't know how much the son is suffering here and how much he's working here. They get the money and spend it. I don't think they have any idea of what we are doing here. Back home when you go to work it's not like here. No pressure at all. Working pressure is different. When I came here [Toronto] I was working in the bank. When I was in Montreal I was working in a [garment] factory. I was crying. It was tough.

I: Are marriages here changing in any way?

[Thava said there are more love marriages here. People meet at school, at work, in the market or in the park (he said this half-jokingly). It's a different way to find a partner. Also people are marrying people of different religions, castes and

nationalities.]

I: Do you think divorce is higher here? Why is that?

Thava: Yes. Because, the problem is that Canada is an independent place. You can't say anything wrong, you can't beat, you can't threaten.

Jothi: In Canada we don't have our parents. If a person did something wrong, the parents and the grandparents can talk to them and correct them. And they can settle everything within the family. Here there is no one to advise them. They are not going to listen also here. Even if you are separated you can go on. You can get the money. Back home if you have any problem your parents will come and talk to you. They are not going to let you go like that. Here everybody is busy. Nobody wants to go and hear another person's problem and get involved in that. They are busy. They want money and they want to work. Nobody wants to care for anybody, like back home.

Thava: The other reason divorce is high is because both are working. Both are earning the same money. So they have a problem. Back home only one person goes to work and earns the money. The other person stays at home and cooks and looks after the children.

Jothi: [quickly interjects] My case was different. I was working back home [laugh].

Thava: In Canada, both have to work. Otherwise, how can you pay the rent and buy food and everything. So, both are going to work, both are earning money, both have separate bank accounts. They can separate.

I: If your sister [-in-law] was having marital problems would you be willing to talk to her husband? Would she expect you to get involved?

[Yes.]

CHILDREN

I: Would you like to have more children? How many?

Jothi: 5 or 6 [laugh], back home. Here it's hard. At least three.

I: If you had another child, would you prefer it to be a girl or a boy?

Thava: I don't care. A boy or a girl.

I: In Sri Lanka do people generally prefer girls or boys?

Thava: They like boys. Because back home they have the dowry problem. If you have 5 or 6 girls you have to save more money for their marriages.

I: What is the preference for family size?

[Average, more than six. Some families have twelve.]

I: In Canada how many children do most Tamil families prefer?

Thava: Here 2 or 3. Maximum 3.

I: Do they still care whether they have girls or boys?

Thava: Here they don't care about girls or boys, because the next generation will not have a problem with dowry. Commonly they like girls because boys have a problem in the future.

I: In what way?

Thava: Drugs. Fighting with guns and knives. Robbery.

I: Do you think it's more difficult for boys to grow up in this society?

Thava: That's true. But for children. Because Toronto and Scarborough have too much crime.

Jothi: Compared to the children who came from back home at a small age like 4 or 5, these people [Canadian-born children] are easier. Because the people who come from back home at that age, they are so easily getting those habits. When they go to school they change. You can't talk to them or anything. But the children who are born here are better than those kids. Because they know. They know this country, they know this style. The people coming from back there, the life is different. They suddenly change. They want to adapt this style and they don't know what they are doing.

I: Will your daughter grow up speaking Tamil?

[Yes. The couple speaks Tamil at home.]

I: What do you want for her in her life?

Jothi: Family life. A loving marriage.

I: What qualities do you want to see in her?

Thava: Educated.

I: Do you have any goals in mind for her?

Thava: Whatever she likes she can be.

[Presently she is taking ballet lessons. She has told them she would like to switch to Tamil classical dance instead.]

I: Thavaow would you feel if she marries a non-Tamil?

Jothi: It's ok as long as he takes care of her. I can't force her to get married to a Tamil because when she grows up I don't know what it's going to be like. As long as she has a happy life, it's okay.

Thava: We don't care if she marries a Tamil or not, as long as she marries a proper person.

I: What do you mean by "proper person"?

[He told a "true story" he read in the Toronto Sun about a daughter from a rich family. She had a masters degree from the States. "She fell in love with crime." She became involved with a man whose mother was a prostitute and whose father had a life sentence. This man was also involved in serious crime. He murdered the girl to collect her life insurance.]

Thava: She was a well-educated girl, but she couldn't find a proper person.

I: Do you think you will be able to help your daughter find a proper person?

[They feel they can help, but they can't determine what will happen. Jothi said she tries to teach her daughter by telling stories that she learned as a girl in Sri Lanka.]

I: Do you think she will date boys?

Thava: In my culture, they don't know the proper meaning for dating. Somebody thought dating means going to McDonalds or to the park to talk. Somebody else thought dating is actual sexual intercourse.

I: What kind of dating would be acceptable for her?

Jothi: Going out to talk. We expect that she should not have any sexual intercourse before she gets married.

[Thava explained that in his culture girls are expected to be virgins, but he heard that in the US girls are ashamed to be virgins. They both wanted to know if I thought this was true. I said that not all, but a majority of people are sexually active before marriage. Jothi said she thinks this is one of the reasons the divorce rate is high.]

I: If you had a son, would your expectations for him be the same as for your daughter?

Jothi: We make excuses for sons. Even back home, boys can do anything they want. I don't know why. But girls, they should stay home.

I: As parents will you take care of her differently and have different expectations for her behaviour in Canada than you would in Sri Lanka?

Thava: We have to get along in this culture, or otherwise go back to Sri Lanka.

Jothi: Here it's harder than back home. There you don't have to worry about the culture. [There are others to help take care of her, including her teachers and relatives.] Here there's nobody. If somebody sees her on the road with somebody else, nobody would come and tell me, "Your daughter is like that." Back home, they can't do anything. If anything is going on we will get to know. So we have more worries here. We don't know what is going on.

PARENTS

I: If you were at home would you be living with one of your parents?

[No, they'd live separately.]

I: Are you giving any financial support to your parents?

[Yes. This is expected because they are in Canada and because of the war.]

I: Do you expect your children to look after you when you get old?

[They expect their daughter to live with them until she gets married. Then she would go to her husband's home. She and her husband would be expected to keep his parents with them.]

RELATIVES

I: Do you have much contact with your relatives living in Canada?
On what occasions do you see them?

[Yes, at weddings, baptisms, birthdays, Christmas, New Year, long weekends, first menarche celebrations, funerals.]

I: Is there someone in your family who makes a special effort to keep everyone in contact?

[Jothi plays this role in her family because she's the eldest. She writes letters monthly and phones when someone is sick. If there's a problem, her family members come to her.]

I: Are any members of your extended family drifting away, or trying to separate themselves from the family now that they are in Canada?

[No.]

I: Is your family as close as it would be in Sri Lanka?

[Yes. Except they have less time to spend together.]

OTHER ATTITUDES/ NORMS

I: Do you have any thoughts of going back?

[No. Thava likes the political and social independence he feels in Canada, although he could not say whether this has caused him to change his behaviour in any way. He also thinks educational opportunities and political life is better here than in SL. Jothi would not like to go back because she would not know as many people.]

I: Are there things about your lives that are better here?

[They don't know.]

I: Is anything missing?

[Jothi misses her mother and sister.]

I: Have you gained anything?

Jothi: We have everything here but I miss them so much. The more you have here the more you think about them.

I: What advice would you give Tamil newcomers?

[Jothi would tell them to save money and not to spend much. Also, in Canada you can't socialize like at home.]