

Ethnic Group: Tamil
Interview number: 4
Date: August 13, 1993
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information

Gender: female
Age: 36
Place of Birth: Eastern Province, Sri Lanka
Religion: Hindu
Marital Status: married
Education: Bachelor of Arts
Occupation: formerly a teacher, now works in vegetable factory
Children: son, age 7

Interviewer's Comments:

Thevi was a university classmate of a friend of one of my "key informants." When I first called to ask her for an interview she was reluctant. She felt her English was not good enough. She offered to introduce me to someone else who she felt would have more to say, such as her nephew. I had to convince her that it was her I really wanted to talk to. Finally she agreed. She seemed trusting and fond of my informant's friend.

The day we were to do the interview she called in great distress. About one hour ago that morning she had learned her niece and niece's husband in Sri Lanka had disappeared. She heard this from the Tamil news broadcast in Toronto. They had been missing for five days. She told me without a doubt they had been kidnapped by the LTTE. The couple had been married for only four months. The husband was a local official. Thevi was crying as she told me she had just seen the couple's photo album. She said that in the past the LTTE had kidnapped a member of the family and demanded a ransom. This time she was very worried that the couple might have been killed because five days is a long time to have heard nothing in the case of a kidnapping. Thevi had not been able to phone the family in Sri Lanka because all the phone lines were busy. She had been phoning other friends and family members in Toronto to inform them. Our phone conversation lasted about 20 minutes. I said I would call later in the week to ask what had happened.

I called two days later. This time Thevi was elated. The couple had both been released from the LTTE. She had heard the news only hours before I called. She was on the phone with someone else telling them the good news when she received my call. She asked me to call in 15 minutes. When I called back one hour later she was still talking to the same person. Her niece had been released two days ago and instructed to return with a ransom. The niece took 15,000 rupees back to the LTTE. They sent her away saying she should bring Rs.100,000. The next day they released her husband unconditionally. Thevi believed the top levels of the LTTE had commanded the local arm of the militants to release him. The family was overjoyed that the couple had come back safely and that they had not had to pay a fortune. Thevi said they still feel very unsafe. The release is not a guarantee of their future safety. She said the family's prominence was helpful because the LTTE faced public pressures to end the kidnapping.

This phone call was about 20 minutes as well. Thevi had visitors and other phone calls to make, all in connection with the news of her niece's release. I arranged another date for an interview. Thevi wanted me to come for a meal. She works long hours, and overtime on Fridays. On the weekend she was going to a birthday party for a one-year old. We decided to meet on Friday evening because it is the day Hindus eat vegetarian and I am vegetarian.

The day before the interview Thevi called to ask if we could change the time. She also informed me she and her husband were about to pick up Thevi's friend. The friend had had a serious fight with her husband that day and he had told her to leave the home with their child. The friend had called Thevi and wept on the phone. Thevi was not sure what to do. Her nephew said there might be a point when they should call the police. Her husband disagreed, saying they should not call the police because it is a family affair. Thevi's husband called her friend's husband at his workplace. Thevi and her husband decided to take the friend and her child into their home for a while. Thevi seemed concerned about her friend's troubles, but very happy that she could offer some help. I asked if it was still okay for me to come the next day. Thevi said, "Of course."

I arrived at the time we agreed to, but Thevi told me later it was too early. By Sri Lankan convention, I should have come about half an hour or so later. Thevi had not been home from work very long and at that moment the family was having a large freezer moved into their kitchen. I briefly met one of her nephews and another Sri Lankan man who may have been an employee of her husband. Thevi's husband opened his own store only two weeks ago--a Tamil grocery and fish market. The freezer was for fish from the store.

Nevertheless, Thevi received me enthusiastically. I was shown the living room couch to sit on. There were four children in the small two-storey condominium at that time: Thevi's son and her friend's son, who were both 7, and twin girls, daughters of another friend of Thevi, who were 11. The children entertained me while Thevi and her friend worked in the kitchen. The children were not shy. The twins had the idea I was from Germany. All the children had once been to Germany. They wanted to know what countries I had visited, and they told me the same for themselves. They also asked me what was my favourite subject in school. They like social studies and math. I asked them what hobbies and sports they do. Thevi's son is taking guitar lessons. He played "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" on his child's size guitar. The girls said they enjoy all types of sports. They spoke Tamil to their parents and English to each other.

The women were affectionate towards their children, often stroking them, never scolding or controlling their play. The girls were playing with a water-filled balloon on the couch sitting beside me. It burst and got them and the couch wet. They went to change while Thevi mopped up the water, pointing out to me the paint marks her son had made under the cushions of the couch. She said she doesn't mind because when he's older she'll be able to remember him at that stage of childhood.

The condominium was amply furnished. There was a large china cabinet with partial place settings for 12 on display. There was South East Asian art on the wall. Thevi mentioned she would like to have a dishwasher.

One of the girls served me orange pop in a goblet carried on a tray. After a while Thevi came and chatted. Then we went out to the patio to do the interview. I suggested outside because the children were inside and it was quieter, but as soon as we went out the children followed. They were content to play on their own as long as they were close to the adults. They were not at all demanding, although their play was vigorous and sometimes disruptive of what the adults were doing.

The interview was interrupted when Thevi decided to make coffee for me. This she served in a china coffee pot and cup and saucer with sugar and warm milk. We were interrupted again when Thevi's friend, the twin's mother came to visit. We stopped the tape recorder while they visited a while in Tamil. The interview

digressed when I asked Thevi about Tamil customs around menstruation and the differences in Tamil inheritance practices in different regions of Sri Lanka.

Finally, Thevi's 29-year-old brother-in-law returned from work at 8:30pm. We ended the interview abruptly. Thevi went to work on the meal while I spoke to her brother-in-law. He then went to take a shower. I went back to being entertained by the children who were now playing cards. They were surprised I knew how to play Fish and Crazy Eights as they thought those were Sri Lankan games.

The children had already eaten a supper of hot dogs. I ate with Thevi, her two friends and her nephew. The meal was rice, four Sri Lankan vegetable curries, dahl and sodhi, a gravy of coconut milk. Thevi was worried that the curries were too spicy-hot for me so she also put yogurt on the table for me, but the food not too hot and no one took the yogurt. Thevi served me first, then her brother-in-law, then her friends, while one friend served her. We all ate with our right hand. Conversation was in Tamil except when I spoke to the nephew. Thevi's friends had helped prepare the meal. The left-over food stayed on the table for her husband and another nephew. When I finished Thevi asked if I wanted a finger bowl. Instead I went to the sink and washed. This met with her approval. The others did the same.

I went back to the couch and was served ice cream while I talked to the nephew some more. Around 10:30 we left for Thevi's husband's new store. It is very new and with a large attractive sign. Besides fish, it sells Sri Lankan groceries (rice, beans and lentils, vegetables unavailable in most stores, spices, curry pastes and imported drinks), as well as almost 150 Tamil videos. Thevi's husband left his work at the store to drive me home. His wife and son came along for the ride.

About a week later, Thevi called to say that her friend with marital problems was now home. The friend's husband had come to take her and their son back. The husband thanked Thevi for giving his wife and the child a place to stay. Thevi's friend called Thevi to say that the crisis had passed and marital relations were now better.

MIGRATION HISTORY/ FAMILY BACKGROUND

I: When did you leave Sri Lanka and when did you come to Canada?

[Interviewer's summary: She went to Germany from 1985 to 1987 to join her husband who had been there for a year. Their son was born in Germany in 1986. They flew to South America, stayed a month and then came to Canada via Mexico in January, 1988.]

I: Aside from your husband, did you know other people in Germany?

[A lot of people, Sri Lankans and Germans. Her brother came in 1986. Her cousin and niece's husband were there too. Her son has a German god-mother whom he calls "grandma".]

I: Why did your husband go to Germany?

R: Because of the problem. At that time the army found the young boys and would shoot them and things like that. So my family decided to send the young boys out.

[They went to Germany because it was the easiest place to get a visa.]

I: When did you decide to come to Canada?

R: Everybody wanted to come to Canada. There's so much freedom. The same time... In 1985 a lot of people came to Canada and we thought why don't we go. Because the kids born in Germany do not get citizenship. That's why everybody talked about Canada.

I: Did you know anyone in Canada at that time?

R: My friend. Our village relations. They talked to us about coming to Sri Lanka [I think she meant to say "Canada."].

I: Where are most of your family members now living?

[Everybody still lives in the village where she grew up. Her husband is from the same village. He is her cousin (mother's brother's son).]

R: Because there is not too much problem now. We only have a problem from our terrorists. Not everybody. Only people with money. Now the problem is with our terrorists.

I: Do you have relatives in Canada?

[Her brother-in-law and two nephews live with them.]

I: Did anyone help or sponsor you to come?

[No. They came themselves after earning some money in Germany.]

I: Tell me about your first few months in Canada.

[She said she had a terrible time the first while. She had to face the Canadian winter right away. Her son picked up diarrhea in Mexico.]

I: In those first weeks did anyone give you any help?

[Friends who had been with them in Germany helped them very much. They picked them up at the airport, and gave them a place to stay, rent-free and meals, for two weeks. Then they started paying rent.]

I: Since then have you helped other people in the same way?

R: Oh yeah, I helped a lot of people, but not from their airport. They came illegally through Niagara Falls, so we went there and picked them up. Most people are coming illegally.

IDENTITY

I: Tell me about your identity. How do you think of yourself?

R: Sri Lankan and Tamil.
[She always speaks Tamil to her son. She's encouraging him to learn to write Tamil. She tells him as he grows up he always has to say he's a Sri Lankan Tamil boy. He takes an interest in learning Tamil and he can even sing Tamil songs.]

I: Are most of your friends Tamil?

[Most are Sri Lankan Tamil, others are Indian (speak Hindi) and Sinhalese.]

I: What other groups do Sri Lankan Tamils tend to be closest to?

R: For me, when I was in [my village] I stayed in a Sinhala family's house. That's why for me there is no difference between Tamils and Sinhalese. Most of the people don't like to communicate with the Sinhalese. Here I have two or three Sinhalese friends.

I: Does anyone ever criticize you for having Sinhalese friends?

R: Here, nobody, because everybody likes to have friends. But in Sri Lanka I would have a problem. When I was in [my village] I took a Muslim girl to our place. That time there was a very big problem. Very bad things happened [to the Muslims]. When they came in the bus, the Tamil people stopped the bus in a Muslim town. They took them off the bus and cut and killed them. That time I took one Muslim girl into my home. This was my stance. She was in grade 10. She came and she was very scared. The terrorists didn't like me keeping this girl. That time I was very angry with these boys (Tamil expression for militants). One time a group came and said, "Leave the girl go to her place, because it's not good if you keep her in your home." I said, "This is my stand. She doesn't know what happened. She is a human being. Don't hurt her like that." She was crying and so scared.
[Now the girl is in university. Thevi helped support her through her studies because her family is poor.]

I: What kinds of Tamil things do you do at home?

[She helps edit her nephew's work. He's a Tamil writer and poet. She prepares Sri Lankan food at home. She loves having people in her home. A friend of hers has 11 people in her home: three couples, with at least one child each. They prefer to live that way, although finance is also a factor encouraging doubling of households. When there are a lot of people in the home she feels like it is Sri Lanka. She invites guests for the evening meal on Fridays. They enjoy eating together, sitting on the floor and watching a Tamil film. She has disliked being alone with only her son since her husband and nephews started working at the grocery store, so she invites other women to come with their children every day.]

I: Back in Sri Lanka do whole families eat together?

[Her own family ate together (parents with children, men with women) whenever they could. Some wives eat after their husbands. Her grandmother followed this tradition.]

I: Besides being vegetarian on Fridays what other Hindu practices do you keep?

[Thevi wears a sari to the temple, showers before going to the temple and doesn't eat meat before going to the temple (although she admitted to violating this rule once). She doesn't go to the temple during her five days of menstruation. After having a baby she did not go to the temple for one month. She said in some parts of Sri Lanka women are not permitted to go to the temple for one month after a son is born and three months after having a daughter. She observes the Hindu festivals.]

I: Tell me about what happens when a girl gets her first period.

[She is confined in the house for one month. In Sri Lanka it might be more than one month. In Canada she has a friend whose daughter "attained age" and four months later they came to visit for dinner, but they still did not bring their daughter. If the girl is going to school then the family keeps her at home for seven or nine days, then lets her go to school only. She said in Jaffna the rules are more strict than in the Eastern Province. There the girls have to stay within an area bounded by a charcoal line.]

When Thevi attained age she had to stay in the same room for two weeks. Then she could go to school. She felt a little afraid because she was the one who first saw her blood. This is considered a bad sign. According to tradition, it is better if someone else first sees her blood. Only her mother and auntie

saw her during that time. She gave her clothes to the laundry man. Afterwards she got a nice dress. Sometimes the family organizes a large celebration. Her oldest sister had one, but since she has four other sisters, the family couldn't afford to hold the celebration for all of them.]

MARRIAGE

I: When did you marry?

R: 1983.

I: Was it a proposal marriage?

[Of the five sisters, four had love matches. Thevi's youngest sister died of poisoning just after she completed university in 1988.]

I: Did your parents approve of these love marriages?

[Because of the political problems, they knew it would be difficult to arrange marriages, so they allowed it. Thevi married with a small traditional ceremony in 1983, but she did not register the marriage until 1985 in Germany.]

I: When did you meet your husband?

[They knew each other from childhood, grew up very close, like brother and sister. He was the one who wanted to marry her. He suggested they marry when she was 15. She just wanted to concentrate on her studies. She thought he was being "silly" then. Their romantic relationship started after she finished university in 1982. He completed a liberal arts degree at a private university.]

I: Were you the same age?

[He was one year younger. This is not the norm. Most women are younger than their husbands. He was 25, she 26.]

I: Were both your parents accepting of the marriage?

R: Oh yeah. We're the same family.

I: Did your parents give him a dowry?

[No. The dowry tradition is different in the East than it is in Jaffna. Like her sisters, she got a house and jewelry. These days people in the East are giving larger dowries. It is more difficult for women to find husbands.]

I: What do you think about divorce?

R: Nobody in my family has had a divorce. But I don't know. If somebody is not happy in the family, getting divorced is good. If there are always problems and problems, it is not nice. If we would be happier going separate ways, I would go. If my husband bothered me all the time, I wouldn't like it. But my husband is very nice. He is very innocent and very good. But I know a lot of friends who have a problem. Divorce is good.

I: How do your friends handle their marital problems?

R: You know, Sri Lankan people don't like to get divorced. They are scared about the background [family reputation]...What their friends will say, what people will say... that their family is not good... They keep it as an inside-the-house problem. To people looking from the outside, it is nice. Like that a lot of

families keep going. A lot of my friends have problems, but what to do? They have kids. They think it's a problem to divorce. But now I read in the paper that the divorce percentage for Sri Lankans is going up. Here, not in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka it is different because only among the educated people the women can work. Other people are living under their husbands. Here everybody has freedom. Everybody can work or get money from welfare.

I: If things were really bad for you and you decided to get a divorce would you ever re-marry?

R: Divorce and re-marrying, I have never heard of here and Sri Lanka too. Maybe the man would re-marry. But the ladies don't like to. She thinks about her mother or sister. If she has an unmarried sister her re-marriage is not good for her sister. They are concerned about the family having a problem. Maybe inside they would like to, I don't know.

I: Is it the same for widows?

R: Most widows don't re-marry.
[She has a friend from grade 13 whose husband was killed by the Indian army in 1986. They had two children then, aged 2 and 3. Now they are in Canada. She is still unmarried.]

CHILDREN

I: Would you like to have more children?

R: In Canada, no way! I would like one girl. If I was in Sri Lanka I would like, because the kids would look after my mother and all that. I had a lot of problems in Germany because there was nobody to help. In Canada I have help because all my friends are here. Here everybody says have another baby.

I: What are the main things you want for your son? What are your dreams and hopes for him?

R: Oh, I dream a lot. I would like him to study and have a good job. I talk to him about that all the time. He doesn't like to study but he is scared to say that to me. When I ask, "What do you want to be?" he says a doctor or an engineer, because he knows that's what I like. Since my husband has been going away [to work at the store], he said last week, "I don't want to study. I want to look after the store." But I hope he is going to be good and study.

I: What kind of character do you want him to have?

R: I would like him to be like my husband. He is very innocent and friendly with everybody, no fighting, keeping friends.

I: When he gets older would you expect him to have a girlfriend?

R: I have no problem with that.

I: Even in Sri Lanka?

R: Oh yeah, no problem. For me, if he likes he can do anything. But they have to have a good character. If he speaks with one girl, it is not good to speak with any other girl. Otherwise it's okay. If he wants to go with a girl, or marry any girl, it's okay.

[Interview ended when Thevi's brother-in-law arrived.]