

Ethnic Group: Tamil
Interview number: 6
Date: July 3, 1993
Place: Toronto

Demographic Information for "Joseph"

Gender: male
Age: 31
Place of Birth: Jaffna, Sri Lanka
Religion: Catholic
Marital Status: newly married to "Donna"
Education: advanced-level
Occupation: photo lab employee, editor of Tamil-language newspaper, circulation: 2,000 copies
Children: none

Interviewer's Comments:

I conducted the interview in the couple's apartment in a high-rises in St. James' Town. They keep a small picture of Jesus with a child on their door. The two-bedroom apartment is neat, clean and simple. The living room is furnished with two new-looking, but inexpensive couches, a coffee table, TV and VCR, wall clock and a weight bench. The top of the TV, coffee table and dining table are decorated with silk flower arrangements that Donna made for their wedding. I sat on one couch. The couple sat close together on the couch adjacent to me.

The couple was married one month ago. They are the same age and religion, and both completed A-level education. They showed affection for one other by frequently smiling and laughing together. The joyful quality of their interaction continued throughout the interview, even when speaking about painful past experiences. Donna is unwaged. She assists Joseph with producing the newspaper.

The interview took place in the early evening and lasted almost 2 hours. Donna served me a cold drink in a fancy crystal glass on a small tray with a napkin. The telephone rang several times and she answered. The interview ended when two male friends of Joseph's dropped in. I stayed for a short while so Donna could show me her wedding albums. She served me and the other guests a cup of tea, very much sweetened with sugar. During the interview she showed me her thali, the make-up powder for making a potu (small dot women wear on the forehead), and some paper garlands from Sri Lanka which she likes to wear in her hair. Donna was shy to speak because of the standard of her English. Most of the replies are by Joseph.

MIGRATION HISTORY

Interviewer: When did you leave Sri Lanka and come to Canada? Why did you leave and how did you get here?

[Interviewer's summary: Joseph comes from a village of 16,000 in Jaffna. He left in January 1985 to escape the increasing military activity by the army and rebel groups. Since he was unemployed at the time, he was in danger of being arrested by the army on the suspicion that he belonged to a terrorist group. Other youths were being pressured to join the growing militant movement. His parents encouraged him to leave. He went to Germany because it was the "easiest place to go at that time. Everybody in Jaffna knows that." His cousin arranged his ticket. In Germany he lived with his sister and her family. He had no work and saw no future for himself. After 1-1/2 years he left Germany for Canada via Norway. He got himself a passport from an unknown person from Mauritius, and had it forged for the trip. He considers himself

fortunate not to be caught and deported.]

Joseph: I was lucky. That's what I always tell people. I'm a Catholic, so I always pray to Madonna. I always tell people that she is the one helping me wherever I go.

[When Joseph landed in Montreal he claimed refugee status. He did not know anyone in Canada, but in the airport he had met a Sri Lankan who came the day before and was staying with a relative. This man offered to help him and gave him a place to stay. The next day Joseph went to the Hindu temple in Montreal to see if he could find someone he knew. There he happened to meet his "closest friend" from back home. He stayed with this friend for six months and worked in a warehouse. He and the friend came to Toronto in 1987.]

[Donna comes from Kandy (central Sri Lanka). She left in 1986 for Singapore in order to escape an arranged marriage to her cousin. She was told she would be given work as a nurse in Singapore, but she ended up becoming a housemaid and working in factories on weekends. She also became well known as a writer and poet. Two of her books were published. She and Joseph met through her writing, and his newspaper publishing. They courted with letters and phone calls. Joseph proposed to her by phone in December, 1990. They married in Toronto last month. Joseph could not sponsor her as a spouse because he did not receive landed immigrant status until recently (after a 7 year wait). He tried to bring her through an agent using forged documents. The first agent disappeared with \$5,000. The next one was successful in bringing her to Canada. Donna arrived in Toronto one year ago (summer 1992) following a route from Sri Lanka to Singapore to Bangkok and finally to the US. She made a refugee claim at the Canadian border.]

I: What other family members are here? Are you considering sponsoring anyone?

[Both Joseph and Donna come from families of 8 with 4 boys and 4 girls. Joseph's cousin-brother (father's brother's son) has been living with him since 1989. He has some distant relatives here with whom he is not close. Three of Joseph's sisters are in Europe -- England, Germany and France. One brother is in Germany. The rest are in Sri Lanka. He would have liked to sponsor one sister who is now a widow, who had a "disastrous marriage" and has a child, but she is ineligible. He is considering sponsoring his father from Colombo.]

[Donna's uncle (her father's elder brother) lives in Toronto with his family. She mentioned her female cousin in this family. Donna would like to see her ailing mother, but the mother does not want to come to Canada and leave behind other family members.]

IDENTITY AND CULTURE MAINTENANCE

I: What identities matter most to you? How are you known to other people?

[For Joseph, Sri Lankan Tamil is okay, but he reacted strongly against the label Jaffna Tamil: "I can't stand those things!" Joseph explained that people from Jaffna will know a lot about his social background once they know which village he is from. The more "caste-conscious" they are, the more they are interested in this information.]

R: I know people who will ask you which part of the town you are from. The conversation begins, "Are you from Sri Lanka?" I say, "Yes." "Which part?" I say, "Jaffna." "Which part of Jaffna?" I say, "[my village]." "Which part of [the

village]?" I say, "This place." The reason they are asking is they want to find out who I am. That basically means caste. I'm from an oppressed caste, in that point of view. All of us are Catholics. The reason was, at that time, our people were in the lowest class in the Sri Lankan Tamil community. We were working in the fields and things like that. At one time there were riots. The Catholic priests were the ones who helped us. That's why all the people converted to Christianity in our village. That's in the beginning of the century. Mostly people call me like that. (laughs) [i.e. identify him according to his low caste, Catholic origins.]

[Joseph's father was a farmer. At one point the family lived in a small palm thatch "hut". This was built on disputed land and neighbours burned it down, leaving the children temporarily homeless. Joseph's name is also significant to his family background. His paternal grandfather changed the family name to that of a Soviet leader. Other male members of the family took the names of Soviet communist leaders such as Stalin and Lenin. Joseph explained that when the Communist party came to Jaffna they recruited members of oppressed castes. Joseph's uncles and grandfathers got involved with them, "because they were oppressed, not because of a love of communism." Joseph has many friends in Toronto who are not concerned about caste origins, although some people still are. As for him, he doesn't ask about caste: "Who cares!"]

[Donna's family background is high caste and upper class. However, because she is an "Indian Tamil" she faces discrimination from "Jaffna Tamils."

Joseph (explaining on behalf of Donna): The people from the north don't like the people from the middle of the country. They always say they are from India and you can not believe [Note: he may mean "trust"] these people.

[Donna's ancestors were business people, not plantation workers. Donna grew up on the wealthy estate of her grandfather. He was a very strict patriarch. He would not allow the family to let the [low caste] laundry man set foot in the house. She could not play with children from lower castes. The children could not address the laundry man as "uncle" [as they would call other adults]. Her father was a veterinary surgeon and worked on an irrigation project.]

I: Who are your friends?

[Most of the couple's friends are writers. Many live overseas, e.g. in France, Germany and Norway. Joseph has a close friend in Montreal. He remains in contact with his old classmates. All of their friends are Sri Lankan except for a few Ethiopians that Joseph knows at his workplace, a photo lab. They keep in touch with friends by phone. They tease each other about talking over the phone too much. During the interview the friend from France called.]

I: What traditional Tamil practices do you keep?

R: The main things are cooking and speaking Tamil to each other. Also talking on the phone (jokingly).

[Both are Catholic, and attend church every week. Donna sings in the choir. The service is conducted in Tamil. Joseph estimates there are more than 5,000 Tamil Catholics in Toronto. The weekly attendance at the downtown church is about 75. In Scarborough it is about 300, except for festival days which bring thousands. Joseph likes older Tamil music. Neither like to watch Tamil videos although they are very popular. They read Tamil literature and current events extensively.]

I: Do other Tamils influence your behaviour?

[Joseph said he doesn't care much about customs.]

[Donna said women try to influence and impress each other by the amount of jewelry and the quality of saris they wear. She likes to wear only one gold chain whereas some women wear up to 24 at a time. She also felt others were judging her by the size and number of gold sovereigns on her thali (the gold matrimonial necklace given by husband), as some people asked her about this at the wedding. "They say we are not rich." But she said she doesn't care.]

MARRIAGE

I: What kind of marriage partner did you expect?

[Neither had expected the kind of marriage they got. Joseph spoke openly about his previous girlfriend (a Hindu woman from Jaffna living in Sri Lanka), who broke off with him and has since married a Tamil man living in Scarborough, who is a friend of his] Joseph (explaining how he decided to marry Donna): What I thought was, if I am supposed to marry I am not going to get married by a proposed marriage, the way we people do, like my parents find a partner for me and they send her to here--that's not the way I wanted to marry. The reason is I wouldn't have any chance to talk to her. And the workload I have, the methodology I have, that's very, very different from that of the regular Tamil people. So I write off that. Then I thought if I am supposed to find a girl here then the caste problem arises. If you go and talk to a guy, and find a girl that you think you would like to marry, they would find out which caste I am from. They would say, you are from a low caste. And there would be a lot of problems with that. So I thought of all the options at that time. And I thought she would be a good partner for me. Most of my life I take risks. (laughs)

[Donna was frightened of marriage since she was a child. She witnessed her aunt (mother's sister) having labour pains. She also saw a neighbour running into the street to escape her husband's attacks. Once her father got drunk and assaulted her mother. From her childhood she told her mother she wanted to become a nun. She got involved in church work. By age 17 or 18 the idea of becoming a nun also became frightening. Donna's mother wanted her to marry her cousin (mother's brother's son). By this arrangement she would be able to stay close to her family of origin and look after her mother. Her uncle came to their house to see her. As Joseph explained, this is typically the first step in the arranged marriage.]

R (explaining on behalf of Donna): If somebody wants to get their son to marry somebody, the parents of the son goes to the house of the girl. They will talk about the deal. At that time she will be wearing all her nice clothes and she will come around like in a fashion parade. (both laugh)

[When Joseph proposed, Donna asked about his finances. He said he has 2 denim jeans and a \$10,000 debt.]

R: Mostly I see people boasting about what they are doing. Actually they don't tell the woman what they are really doing. When the woman comes and finds out, then they start having problems.

[The couple lived together but didn't marry for a year after Donna came because they were hoping that Joseph's brother, a priest, would be able to come from Jaffna to say the mass at the wedding.]

CHILDREN

I: How many children do you hope to have?

[Joseph said he wouldn't mind having 8 children if he were still in Sri Lanka. Here he thinks 3 would be enough: 2 boys and 1 girl. Donna said she agrees with him.]

I: What are your ideas on bringing up your children?

R: In both of our cases, especially in my case. I was brought up in a family in which we were so close. Our elders taught the right things about what to do and what not to do. In my village our family was one of the few families in which all the children completed high school. My father, even though he was not that rich, he always wanted us to go to school. He would go to any lengths to get us to school.

[Joseph's grandmother sold some of her gold bangles to allow him to go to one of the more prestigious Catholic schools in Jaffna. Joseph would place the same emphasis on education for his children.]

R: I would let them know how the bad times are. I would tell them what kind of bad times we are coming from. The best thing the parents can do is teach their children to make the right judgement.

I: Would you like your children to go to Sri Lanka? What would you like them to know about Sri Lanka?

R: It would be hard for them to adjust in Sri Lanka if they were born here. At least they could see the background we have, what kind of people we were, what kind of living conditions we had.

I: What kind of marriages would you expect for your children? What about marriage to a non-Tamil?

R: They have their own choices. You can not tell them you have to marry your sister's daughter, or whatever. (laughter) I always tell people that we should be prepared for the worst. So it doesn't matter. Even myself, in the Jaffna tradition it is very unusual for a man to marry a woman from Kandy, and people look down on you when you get married to those people. So in my case I have done the strange thing. So I can not oppose my son doing the strange thing too.

FAMILY INFLUENCES

I: How did you come to have such an unorthodox perspective towards marriage and other things?

[Joseph is youngest of 8 children. His parents split up and got back together about six times. After his birth, his mother left to live with her mother. When the kids were grown she came back but was never on good terms with her husband.]

R: My father was drinking too much and he's an abuser. But he's a nice man. But in the Canadian sense he would be in the jail for about 25 years! (laughter) But we love him so much. He's a very nice person. The reason [for his abuse] is we were not that much privileged. We were farmers.

[Joseph was raised by his grandfather's brother, a teacher with 6 children of his own. This "grandfather" became his mentor. "He always thinks in a different way." His grandfather encouraged him to read. Joseph said his whole family tends to be unorthodox.]

R: In our villages it is very unusual for people to love and get

married. Mostly it is arranged marriage. And people get married in a line [note: he means starting from the eldest to the youngest].

[In his family, out of 8 children, only one sister got married by a proposed marriage. The rest had love marriages (except one brother who is a priest), and not in the proper order. "My father did not say anything."]

R: My family always encouraged us to do things like that. They don't say anything. The reason is the elders, fathers, mothers, grandparents, always believe in our judgement. They always think we will do the right thing.

[Joseph believes his family is also very different from others in Jaffna in that they joke with each other, even children with elders. He emphasized that they are very close.]