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Published by Anonymous on Sep. 01, 1995

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Sweet Europe

Archana Dongre, Los Angeles

It's ironic, a kind of demographic revenge. The Asian nations which 200 years ago received a tide of Eurocolonists are now flooding Europe with emigrants seeking not conquest, just a safer, better life. Among them today are tens of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamils displaced by their country's twelve-year civil war. Early arrivals came mostly by plane, later ones by more hazardous means. Having gradually settled down in Europe, the community recently invited Hinduism Today publisher, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniyaswami, to visit. During the month of June, Gurudeva and two of his monks met with the large Sri Lankan communities in Germany, Denmark and Switzerland. Upon their return to the US, they shared their observations with me.

Gurudeva related that in Alaveddy village, just north of Jaffna town in Sri Lanka, his Sri Subramuniya ashram (founded in 1949) was attended daily by more than 200 children imbibing Tamil and Hindu culture in its various aspects of music, dance and religion. The ashram stopped operating abruptly in 1986, soon after the onset of civil war. Among the Sri Lankans now in Europe, thousands were once students of the ashram. Today they have mostly overcome the trauma of their displacement to a distant and different country. There are estimated to be 30,000 Sri Lankans in Germany, 17,000 in Denmark and 15,000 in Switzerland.

The situation of the Sri Lankans is different from that of most Indians who have come to the West, observed Gurudeva. The Indians left India voluntarily for foreign greener pastures. They wanted to advance educationally and economically, and some degree of westernization was built into this process. The Sri Lankans, however, did not want to be westernized, and the majority were skilled and unskilled workers. "We found that the communities were living their lives as if they were in transit at an airport, poised to go back to Sri Lanka tomorrow if the war should end," commented Gurudeva. "I explained that such wars can go on for a

very long time--such as in Ireland--and they should make the best of the situation they are in, for the sake of themselves and their children. I encouraged them to settle down, learn the local language, seek good employment and buy property. During this visit, my purpose was to urge them to help each other and especially to not neglect the new arrivals."

Presently many of the Sri Lankans are smuggled out of their country with the help of "agents," who may first take them to Russia and then illegally transport them into various European countries. Arul Selvan, 15, who until recently lived in a German refugee hotel, described his ordeal. In January, 1995, his parents paid such an agent Rs.375,000 (US\$7,600) to smuggle him out. After reaching Russia, he was put in a shipping container with several other people. There was no food, no water, and only enough room to stand, not sit or lie down. It was a miracle he reached his destination alive. Indeed 18 Sri Lankans suffocated locked in a shipping container abandoned in route in Hungary last July. According to a recently published investigative report by India Today, smuggling rings transport hundreds of people monthly into Europe, and between Europe and the UK. After reaching Berlin, Selvan requested that he be adopted by a Tamil family, and he is now happily settled.

In Berlin there are 35 hotels for refugees--mainly from Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Yugoslavia. Two of the hotels house only children 18 and younger. Mr. Velautham, a supervisor at one of these hostels, said that in the last ten years he has seen as many as 2,500 Tamil-speaking youngsters pass through. The German government takes good care of them. Each gets 900 German marks (US\$652) a month to pay for room and board and 225 marks (\$163) for pocket money, clothes, entertainment and transportation. All are given free education until 10th grade, and free vocational training thereafter. Many of the European governments offer similar excellent facilities to immigrants. Nevertheless, most hostel residents are a depressed and discouraged lot.

Gurudeva sought to enhance the community spirit amongst them. Since the children go through such emotional turmoil, he appointed kulamatas (married women) from the Tamil community to visit the youngsters once a month, take them home-cooked food and try to develop familial bonds.

A renewed interest in culture and religion has developed in the increasingly more stable adult community. They were advised to develop their identity and solidarity through building new temples, and celebrating the occasions of Divali, Thai Pongal

and Tamil New Year. The observance of these familiar rituals will keep their life flowing and not stagnating. Several new temples have been built in Germany, including one each to Lord Ganesha in Berlin and Hamm.

On June 11th, about 11,000 people, including Tamils and the local German community, joined a large chariot festival in Hamm put on by the Amman temple. The local government took notice, graciously giving permission for the parade and providing traffic control. It marked multiculturalism in big bold letters on the map of Germany. The next day Namakarana Samskara ceremonies were held at the Ganesha temple for three Europeans entering Hinduism [see photo and caption].

The Tamil communities in Germany have started 40 small schools to teach Tamil and Hindu culture and religion. There are eight Tamil language newspapers and magazines plus several radio stations owned by the Sri Lanka community.

Tamils in Denmark are both better and worse off than those in other parts of Europe. The Danes are making a concerted effort to assimilate the refugees, but turn away new arrivals. Those who have gotten entry are given intensive training in the Danish language for the first 18 months. They are able to gain permanent residence, so their status is not so uncertain as in most of Europe. Recently they established two temples and bought land for another. But initially, for lack of a facility where they could adhere to their religion, almost 2,000 converted to Christianity. Even the rest were going to Catholic churches and "worshipping the Hindu Gods there since there were no temples," said one devotee. The community in fact had been specially targeted by local evangelists. Now priests have begun conducting the ceremony of Vratyastoma to take converts back into Hinduism [see certificate right].

The Switzerland Tamils have a strong youth movement who have been instrumental in establishing several of the country's eight temples. They are a well-organized corps, each equipped with his own cellular phone as they coordinated events during Gurudeva's visit. The major event here was a large Shanti Homa, a fire ceremony at the Zurich Sivan temple to bring peace to war-torn Sri Lanka. This was conducted on the afternoon of June 18th by eight priests under the direction of Vidyananda Sharma. It was attended by over 1,000 people, including Petter Wittwer, the government representative in charge of all foreigners in Zurich, who was most impressed with the group. Here, as elsewhere, Gurudeva taught those gathered to chant "Aum" and direct positive energy to their friends

and loved ones back in Sri Lanka in a prayer for peace.

Easan Katir, who was present in Zurich, summarized Gurudeva's impact: "It was an overwhelmingly positive influence. Here was a man of God, a swami, who cares about the forsaken Sri Lankan Tamil refugees, for whom no one else in the world is offering spiritual help."