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TEMPLES

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Worship in war-torn Sri Lanka goes on

It is heartening to know that some people still put god first. Despite the ravaging of Northern Sri Lanka by the 15-year civil war, daily rituals at many Hindu temples there continue unabated. A Sri Lankan from the northern village of Alaveddy, now residing in Canada, recently told Hinduism Today that the puja shown in this 1983 photograph is still performed daily at the Kumbilavalai Ganesha temple there. The tradition of elaborate worship, including yearly chariot festivals, has never lapsed, they affirm.

For several months, beginning October 1995, residents were forced to evacuate Alaveddy and surrounding villages due to intense fighting. But the priests of Kumbilavalai, one of Sri Lanka's oldest and largest temples, held fast along with about 80 staunch (mostly elderly) devotees. They refused to abandon their Deity. The army relented, establishing the temple as the center of their base camp, encircling it with barbed wire,

calling the priests and devotees "prisoners" and forbidding them to leave. Contented, the priests continued the daily rituals.

Every morning at 5:00, devotees are still drawn to Kumbilavalai. The Deity shown here is Pancha Mukha Ganapati, the five-faced Lord Ganesha (center, the garlanded golden icon). Five priests (those in this photo are brothers) each face one of Ganesha's five faces, offer flowers while chanting Ganesha's 108 sacred names, then present a five-flamed arati, camphor lamp, to the face they are worshiping. Then all rotate clockwise to the next position and repeat the arati. This continues until all five priests have worshiped each face of Ganesha.