Saving Our Culture in Turbulent Times
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MY TURN

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Born in beautiful Sri Lanka to Hindu parents, I was fortunate to live very close to the famous Nallur Kandaswamy Temple in Jaffna.

In July, 1983, riots erupted island-wide, and thousands of Tamils were killed by Sinhales rioters. The murder, looting and arson were condemned worldwide. This was the beginning of an exodus of refugees to many countries.

As a result, one can see Tamil places of worship, shops, food outlets, newspapers and TV programs in many places in the world. World cities such as Toronto, Paris and London have adjusted themselves to accommodate this sudden explosion of a new culture. In just six years the Sri Lankan population in Metro Toronto has grown 600 percent and is still burgeoning.

I was fortunate to enter Canada with my family, as I already had two brothers and a sister here. But not everyone in Sri

Lanka was able to escape the continuing agony. We encountered many difficulties. Our children were unable to speak English fluently. There was then only one place of worship--for Lord Ganesha--in a mobile trailer in a lonely spot outside of town. Everything was new to us. The Canadian cold winter was not a pleasant experience, but determination and worship of God helped us tremendously. We had to go in sub-zero temperatures and tread through knee-deep snow to pray at the Richmond Hill Ganesha Temple.

Back home in Jaffna, people are living in a bygone era with no electricity, no communication, no water supply and little food. There is no medicine, no hospital facilities, no freedom of movement. Peace is not in sight. We exchange correspondence only, and that takes several months. In every letter comes disheartening news of known and related peoples' demise due to bombing or shelling. We learn of food shortages, skyrocketing prices and the urgent need for cash, as the economy is at a standstill. Amidst all the killing and mayhem, religion and culture have not been forgotten but, on the other hand, are waxing stronger. Our Hindu belief is that during periods of calamity God worship is the only solace that will bring peace to the mind and soul.

Tamils, wherever they go, fortunately take their culture and Hindu philosophy with them. Even so, there are a few black sheep who have hugged the Western style, have lost respect for the elders and the law of the land. Freedom comes with a price, and here in Canada it is sometimes abused by a few, and the shame has to be borne by the rest of the community. Some are suffering from culture shock, others from stress.

Our newcomers to the West should not grasp the Western style of "live today and die tomorrow with no regrets." Instead, they should learn to live for their spiritual upliftment. They should observe age-old Hindu traditions and guide their children to follow the same, to lead a meaningful life, with due respect to parents, guru and God. We have among us today highly experienced teachers and other professional Tamils, and our youngsters in universities are shining, which is an encouraging sign.

If we do not build up our culture, all our efforts in having built temples and even our language itself will be forgotten by the next generation, and our children will blame us for our failure to guide them.

We hope and pray that on this 125th birth anniversary of His Greatness, Siva Yogaswami, our prayers will be answered.

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