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War, among the harshest and most unforgiving of human experiences, is all too frequently fueled by religious rivalry. Yet all the religions, in their own context, apart from conflict-ridden encounters, are a source of solace, assurance and spiritual safety to millions caught innocently in the hostilities. One extraordinary example of the human spirit reaching beyond the ephemeral toward the eternal happens each year at Nallur's Kandaswamy Kovil. There, only a few miles from battlefields where the Sri Lanka war is being waged, Hindus gathered by the thousands in August to worship Lord Karttikeya at Jaffna's foremost temple. The temple's 25-day annual festival is the country's biggest Hindu celebration. Even Jaffna Tamils in other parts of the world observe this time. Religious fervor was strong despite the bitter, ten-year secessionist struggle by the Tamils, who are mostly Hindus, against the majority Singhalese, who are mostly Buddhist. The war has claimed 18,000 lives since 1983.

Devotees thronged to the temple from miles around, creating massive traffic jams of bicycles and the few vehicles able to run on the kerosene/vegetable oil mix used in place of unavailable gasoline or diesel. The Tigers-who run Jaffna's civil administration-provided traffic control. Many devotees carry kavadi, a penance-provoking practice. A kavadi is a decorated arch with two milk pots to be offered in the worship. Many carriers also pierce their body with small silver spears or hooks. Rolling around the temple on the hot sand is also a common austerity.

Fifty temple priests conduct different activities on each of the 25 days, beginning with the flag raising through a series of very elaborate chariot processions to the final "water cutting" ceremony to immerse the deities and mark the festival's end.

Nallur is the best run temple in Sri Lanka. Pujas are always on time to the minute, and temple grounds and buildings are immaculate. Many Hindu and even Muslim saints are associated with this temple. Nallur has so far escaped the bombings that

have destroyed many Hindu temples. It has been held for centuries in sacred trust by a single mudaliar (kshatriya) family.

Jaffna has had no electricity since 1990. Many goods, such as batteries, candles and even toys and chocolates, are prohibited from import. The Sri Lanka government sends three shiploads of food weekly to the North. It is given out for free at refugee camps, or sold at reduced rates at government stores. However, it is not enough. Food remains scarce, and prices of ordinary commodities are 20 times that of Colombo, if available at all.

In January of 1994 it was estimated only 450,000 remained in Jaffna of the pre-war, 1981 population of 831,000. Four hundred people daily leave the North through Vavunia military checkpoint; only 200 return. From the Colombo airport, 200 Tamils fly to other countries while only 75 return each day. Government officials estimate 125,000 have fled to India, and more than 200,000 to the West.

The high-spirited devotees were ecstatic at the end of Nallur's annual festival. While the ravages and bombs of war have taken lives, homes, businesses and even damaged many temples, faith and the enduring hope it provides has not been destroyed.