The Tamil Diaspora
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SRI LANKANS

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When hundreds of thousands of Sri Lankans were driven from their homeland by civil war, Gurudeva guided their lives in new nations

In 1983 massive racial riots broke out between the Tamil Hindus and the Buddhist Singhalese in Sri Lanka ultimately causing an exodus of 700,000 Tamils. They fled their ancestral homes and took refuge in India, Canada, America, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Africa, Australia, New Zealand, England and France. They did not go entirely unprepared, for by divine grace Gurudeva had traveled throughout the Hindu areas of Sri Lanka only months before. His message to "stand strong for Hinduism" would fortify them in the trying times ahead.

Tens of thousands left each year. The life was not easy. The reading of newspapers and listening to the news of your homeland at warÃunsure if your friends and family would be alive tomorrowÃtook its toll. Gurudeva worked hard to establish contact with as many refugees as possible, offering hope, solace and inspiration.

Strangers in strange lands, the Tamils appreciated Gurudeva's commanding presence, traditional ways and clear guidance. He enjoined them to become contributing members of their new countries. He gave insights into integration, citizenship, public relations and more. He urged each group to start a temple, saying that the culture and religion comes from the worship and they need temples close by to preserve their heritage and pass it on to their children.

During Gurudeva's visit to Denmark and Switzerland in 1995, he summarized the message he gave since 1983. "Your karmas brought you to this country, and you have more opportunities here than if you went to the University of Colombo. Educate your children, learn the local language and settle down. When permanent peace comes to Sri Lanka, then you can go back." He taught them ways to endear themselves to the local community. "I think we all appreciate what the governments have done. There are many ways we can pay back. One way is to smile at everybody you meet. You smile, and then they smile, and pretty soon the whole country is smiling just because you smiled. To be happy yourself, you have to make someone else happy." Everywhere he encouraged them to pray for peace by chanting Aum and sending energy to loved ones still in Sri Lanka.

In Berlin, "He visited a boys' refugee house in 1995, talked with the officials and saw to their material needs," said Mrs. Puvanesam Veeragathiyar. "He then met with a group of mothers and told us that what was lacking in these boys' lives was a mother's love. He encouraged us to invite the boys and other refugees to our home for meals and make them feel part of our family. Most of us are still doing this today."

Gurudeva helped in other ways, too. M. Sri Sivanathan, 46, in Denmark said, "In 1993 I realized the serious problem of conversion to Christianity in Denmark among the Tamils. When Gurudeva visited here in 1995, he told us to be strong and proud of our religion and culture. Since then, conversion went way down. A lot of Tamils that had been going to church came back to Hinduism." Gurudeva reintroduced to the communities and priests the ancient vratyastoma ceremony to officially welcome wayward Hindus back into the fold.

In Switzerland, a government official came to a

Tamil gathering in honor of Gurudeva. He was worried about the influx of Sri Lankan refugees to his country. But after meeting Gurudeva, seeing that the community had a strong spiritual leader, he relaxed his concerns.

Gurudeva's connection with Sri Lanka dates back to 1948, when he journeyed there to find his guru. He was initiated in 1949, and with Yogaswami's blessings founded the Sri Subramuniya Ashram in Alaveddy. As successor to Yogaswami, who passed away in 1964, Gurudeva became the hereditary guru of the Sri Lankan Tamils. In 1982, Gurudeva started another religious school, the Sri Subramuniya Kottam, in Kopay, Sri Lanka. These schools helped create a cultural and religious foundation for the young Tamils who later scattered across the globe. Over 800 students attended the schools each year. Some became leaders in their communities.

Suresh Dhanumalayan, 34, now living in Vancouver with his family, said, "Since I was 14, I have been involved in Gurudeva's mission. When I entered university, I volunteered as a teacher at

Gurudeva's school. I am now passing on to my children the Hindu pride and teachings I learned from Gurudeva's schools years ago."

Many tell of the special magic held by Gurudeva's business cards and photos. M. Elangovan, 26, of Italy said, "In 1990, when I was 14, I left Sri Lanka in a fishing boat to India. The only picture I had in my wallet was Gurudeva's. That picture helped me through difficult times. Even today I have the same picture in my wallet. Gurudeva has always been with me, helping and guiding me." Others reported easily passing through military checkpoints after showing Gurudeva's picture.

Regularly, Gurudeva spoke to the diaspora communities by phone, usually at their local temples, giving advice and inspiration. He also gave live interviews, translated into Tamil, on radio programs in Canada and Europe, answering many questions. Radio stations rebroadcasted his Internet talks, and newspapers published his messages translated into Tamil. Gurudeva inspired communities in Denmark, Germany and Norway to publish Saivite Hindu Religion, a course

for children. He encouraged temples to create religious homes for the elderly within walking distance of the temples. Hinduism Today had an immense impact, connecting Sri Lankan Tamils all over the globe, and through the "Publisher's Desk" page, he conveyed the teachings and news of their homeland religionÃSaivite HinduismÃas it applies to the modern world.

"Gurudeva was not only our spiritual guide," said Thiru Satkunendran of Toronto, Canada, "but also a highly respected mentor, for both the young and old suffering from 'culture shock.' Every occasion that I met Gurudeva, he was keen to know of progress made towards peace in Sri Lanka. He was always prepared to offer his services as mediator. Such is the love of this great guru towards the island and people, where he found his satguru, Yogaswami. We are certain that he is working for peace even now, from the inner world. It is no coincidence that a ceasefire has been declared and peace talks are about to begin."

In 1997, Gurudeva sent an 18-inch-tall, solid bronze, gold-plated Yogaswami statue on a world

tour. At each city he is worshiped at local temples and homes. The icon carries Yogaswami's presence, like the parade Deity of a temple. Since then, Yogaswami has traveled through numerous countries and is currently in Germany. Gurudeva said that, from the inner worlds, Yogaswami is helping each family and individual with their problems and concerns. His presence is exposing the children to Yogaswami and his philosophical songs, called Natchintanai. Many have had intense visions of Yogaswami during his visits. "When Yogaswami's world tour culminates in Sri Lanka," said Gurudeva, "there ought to be permanent peace in Sri Lanka."