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INTERVIEW

A Home Away From Home

A testimony of the Tamil diaspora

Since the 1983 initiation of all-out war between the Sinhalese and Tamils, Canada has been especially accommodating to Sri Lankan refugees and now hosts some 250,000 Tamils, including immigrant Manick Senthivel. Manick recently visited the offices of Hinduism Today to share stories of life in Vancouver, his new home.

On the life left behind

I was born in 1946 in Jaffna in a small town called Karaveddi. I got a degree in engineering from the University of Sri Lanka, then worked for eight years in a mineral processing plant. I could foresee a difficult future in Sri Lanka and left in 1979 for a job in Uganda, Africa, just after the overthrow of Idi Amin. There were very few Indians there, only about four. I worked as a site engineer. After I was established, I brought my wife

and two children to join me. In 1987 we went to Canada. I sent my children to India to study in Madras. Unable to return to Sri Lanka because of the war there, my wife and I came as refugees to Canada, which at that time was accepting almost anybody. It is a good country, and after three years, I got my citizenship.

On the Vancouver Indian community

By 1991 there were about two thousand Sri Lankans in Vancouver. There were other Hindu communities as well. The North Indians had a Mahalakshmi temple. One Hare Krishna temple was very popular, and there was a Siva temple. The Sri Lankans had been going to the Sri Lakshmi temple. It was at this time during my first visit to a privately owned Murugan temple that I saw Lord Ganapati drinking milk. This was described later as the 1995 "Milk Miracle."

Most of the Sri Lankans in Canada are not rich. They do odd jobs. They came as refugees, not professionals. The North Indians immigrated a longer time ago and are well settled, mainly in business. My business partner is Indian. He came maybe twenty years ago. The Fijians are also doing well.

We have no problem with race here. Canada is a very nice place to live, especially Vancouver. I am in the construction business and deal with all the communities.

On the next generation

My children are attending university in Winnepeg and Vancouver. But I am becoming very concerned with the issue of the practice of Hinduism for them. I am not forcing them in any direction, but they are not currently following any religion.

Last year I visited Germany. There was a boy there whom I had known in Sri Lanka a long time ago. He had no education. There in Germany he was lonely and fell into bad habits. This British Christian couple came to know of him and actually took him into their home. He became a Christian. While I was there, I went to visit him. I could not even talk to him. To this day he is still a Christian totally converted. These are the things that are happening to our youth. When people come from places like Sri Lanka, and are having problems, these Christians are there to talk with them nicely. And these people start believing.

On the Education of youth

My eldest son has started asking me questions that I cannot answer. He is 25 years old and thinks our faith is complicated compared to the Christian religion. He says, "They have a Bible to read." Education is so necessary. In Sri Lanka I would go to the temple everyday with my mother and pray, but I was not taught anything. We have to educate the people. But who will do it? Most people just don't care. First we must learn. The parents must be educated first. Then we can teach the children.