A Colorful Past, An Uncertain Future
Category : June 1989
Published by Anonymous on Jun. 01, 1989

A Colorful Past, An Uncertain Future

Malaysia's Malacca Chetties - some say these colorful people are a dying breed. Is this true? Ask them and you'll hear a resounding, "No!"

HINDUISM TODAY'S traveling corespondent, Sadhaka Jothi Kathiresan, visited Malacca (pronounced Ma-la-KUH) in February and was fascinated with this small but distinctive group of Hindus whose ancestors worshipped in the ancient Siva temples of South India. He arranged an interview with one Chetty, and twelve showed up. They were bright, happy and enthusiastic, frequently laughing, especially al themselves - and even at their own racial mixture, which has become a significant aspect of their uniqueness. Their good-natured self-confidence betrayed unexpected signs of life for a dying breed. Is their tradition truly threatened with extinction'? They say, "no."

"We want to bring back our own culture," says Tegarajah, an elder in the Malacca Chetty community. "I can't speak a word of Tamil, bin our children are going to Tamil schools. We celebrate many Hindu festivals, and we carry' the kavadi.

Our weddings, for instance, are just the same [as in ancient times] except that our older ladies often attend in baju panjang (Malaysian dress), instead of the sari - and sometimes with the Sanbol linpang (Malaysian head dress). And the older men often wear the jubar (Malaysian sarong)."

The Malacca Chetties are not of the Chettiar caste (one of India's traditional Vaishya or business castes) as their name might indicate. It was because they were once a community of traders that they came to be known as the Malacca Chetties or "traders of Malacca," a coastal city about 140 miles northwest of Singapore. In their heyday they were a wealthy and sizeable community. But time has not been kind. Today, their community comprises only 32 families numbering a total of

about 355 people. It is believed that there are another 300-odd Chetties living outside Malacca, but they are better educated and have chosen (for the most part) to break their ties with the Malacca community and their Hindu heritage.

Modern-day Chetties of Malacca are generally poor. Although many of them still own the land of their ancestors, few work as farmers. Most have taken up clerical jobs and government positions instead. Years of inter-marriage have produced an interesting mix of Chinese, Malay and Indian races. A beautiful golden-skinned people of handsome appearance has emerged as a result. They joke among themselves that often even Asian Indians cannot recognize them as ethnic sons and daughters of mother India. Besides their racial constitution, their style of dress remains their primary distinction, especially among the older generation who prefer the local Malaysian apparel to the more traditional Hindu sari for women and verthi for men.

Previous media coverage suggested that the Chetties are experiencing problems interrelating with the rest of the local Tamil community because of their inability to speak the language. However, Tegarajah told HINDUISM TODAY they experience no such barrier and that, in fact, their relationship with the rest of the Tamil community is very positive, especially now that the Chetty children are learning Tamil in school.

Malacca was founded in the 1400's by a Hindu prince named Parameswara. Although Parameswara embraced Islam during his rule, he gave many Hindus influential positions in his court. At that time South Indian, Tamil-speaking Hindus were coming to Malacca as prosperous traders from India. They were marrying local Malay and Chinese women, giving them Hindu names and teaching them their customs. However, the wives retained the Malay language, and the children - who spent more time with their mothers than their fathers - learned Malay rather than Tamil. The Malaccan Hindu community grew wealthy due to the lucrative trade business but suffered the loss of their Tamil language and culture from simple lack of practice. When Malacca came under the tough Dutch rule, many new trading restrictions forced the Chetties into farming and a far less exotic lifestyle.

Although the Chetties were originally Saivite Hindus, they have lost consciousness of this through rime. As a group, they do not honor any one guru lineage, and there is currently no clear system of religious or spiritual teaching available to them. They are not even sure what part of South India they are from. Priests passing

through Malaysia or hired on a short-term basis for specific ceremonies or festivals are their only source of spiritual advice. Yet, they demonstrate such a genuine openness and willingness to discover more about Hinduism that the Malaysian government is providing funding for such education to occur.

In the beginning, the Chetties primarily worshipped Goddess Amman. Even today, Amman worship is strong among the Chetties. The Goddess Amman began to share the spiritual limelight only in the 1960's when a temple priest suggested that the Chetties should intensify their Ganesha worship and begin to worship Lord Muruga as well.

One of the older and more important Hindu temples in and around Malacca is a Ganesha temple. The Sri Poyatha Venayagar Moorthi Temple was built in the 19th century on land given to the Chetties by the Dutch. Today, it is still the property of the Chetties and is their central place of worship. The Kailasanathar Temple is the only exclusively Saivite temple in the area and features the murthis of Lord Ganesha, Lord Muruga and Lord Siva. The once-present Amman murthi has been removed.

Covering an area of 365 square miles, Malacca is located on the Western Coast of Peninsular Malaysia facing the straits of Malacca about 80 miles from Kuala Lumpur. Malacca - at one time a fort - has always been at a strategic location on the Malacca straits, because it controls all of the traffic going to Southeast Asia from India and Europe. The Portuguese, the Dutch and the English took turns controlling the area until Malaysia obtained her independence in 1957, and Malacca was handed over to its first local governor. Each rule left its mark, and today this charming town is filled with relics too big to be housed by any museum. Some remnants date back 500 years. On one street, Buddhist, Chinese and Hindu temples exist side by side. The future? The Chetties of Malacca see themselves growing from about 300 people to about 600 within the next ten years. Although they concede that not all of their youth show interest in preserving the Chetty traditions, they place their full faith in the ones that do.

Says Tegarajah: "The youth are helping us. The youth are really hard-working. You can really depend on them. The younger generation is taking over." The Malacca Chetties are not vanishing. Although dispersion and intermarriage have taken their toll, these vibrant people view themselves as thriving survivors. They are happy. They see the challenges of the future not as the dim foreboding of a perilous

demise but as a unique opportunity for improvement and growth.

Article copyright Himalayan Academy.