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Mathur, Rakesh

A Wall of Cultural Stereotypes Fall as Actors, Artists, Dancers and Musicians Present the Soul of India

The inauguration of the festival of India in September by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl and India Minister Rao proved to be very timely for Germany. The circumstances in the country are similar to the social and political scene preceding Great Britain's first festival of India nine years ago. In 1982, Britain was witnessing an ever-growing movement of racially motivated attacks on foreigners by the "skinheads." Any foreigners, including Hindus, who looked like "Paki Bashi" (Pakistanis) were abused or mugged in the street. The new ruling conservative party had done little to combat the growing racial prejudice. The festival of India celebrations all over England for one year not only showed the Britishers what Indian culture wealth was, but also gave expatriate Indians a sense of pride. The spiritual vacuum which had manifested in the street violence in England was filled by the Indian cultural programs.

Similarly, German society at the moment is going through a political-social transformation. Since the fall of the Berlin wall and the reunification of Germany, auslanders - foreigners - are being abused and attacked in their refugee camps and inner city dwellings. Anjali Gupta, a Hindu activist in Berlin told me that the German skinheads and neo-Nazis have increased racist violence and racist murders in the country. "This they have done against the background of the immigration and refugee policies and laws of the German government, which have served to legitimize the equally racist behavior of the population."

At the inauguration Indian Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao said, "The festival

of India is a cultural presentation dedicated to the people of Germany and a manifestation of the warmth and the affection which we have for the German people. We are particularly happy that the festival will be the first such presentation in Germany. It will help in furthering the spirit of cooperation and friendship."

Germans were the first ones - much before the British intellectuals - to translate Sanskrit texts into European languages. The first German Dravidologist was Bartholomaens Ziegenbalg in the early 18th century. He collected material for a Tamil dictionary, wrote a Tamil grammar in Latin and had it published in 1716 in Halle. After carrying out sufficient research into the religion, customs and manners of the people of South India, he wrote that the more he became acquainted with Hindu religious teachings the more he was fascinated by them. He remarked, "this wisdom contained in the Hindu scriptures matched that of Aristotle."

Mr. Madhvan, the Indian ambassador to Germany, found the festival celebrations amid mammoth budget cuts in India quite taxing. The publicity budget was minimal and in spite of sending out free invitations, the attendance for the programs was dominated by the expatriate Indians in the capital of Bonn.

But gradually, in other parts of Germany, programs of performing arts started drawing huge audiences. Ratan Thiyam's directed Leela was one of the major highlights. Leela, subtitled as "Game of the Gods," had simple stage decor and started with the composition of Thyagaraja on nagaswaram in Adi Tala and Kaikavasi Raga. It was followed by Kathak dance by Birju Maharaj and his disciples - Kumudini Lakhia, Maulik Shah, Saswati Sen and other dancers from Kathak Kendra. Some of India's top musicians and dancers are participating in the festival.

Mr. Narasimha Rao dedicated the festival to the memory of Rajiv Gandhi - it was during Gandhi's talks in Bonn three years ago that the idea of the festival was born - as he and Mr. Kohl jointly lit a large traditional brass oil lamp to mark the inauguration.

On the second day of his visit to Germany, Mr. Rao tried to convince German government officials and industrialists that recent reforms in the Indian economy, though in keeping with policies enunciated in the past, were sweeping, and that

"we have left the past behind." The western media reported that the straight-talking prime minister was much appreciated by the ever practical Germans (although some of his remarks caused a stir in India). The business seminar ended with a Bharata Natyam dance recital by Chandrika Sundararaman. While introducing her elegant movements, she explained that the dance is a "yoga in itself which projects an amazingly equal measure of beauty and strength, of the slow and the fast, or pure dance and mime."

Similar sentiments were expressed by Birju Maharaj who explained the origin of Kathak to HINDUISM TODAY in the most picturesque German town of Baden Baden. In an exclusive interview with HINDUISM TODAY he said, "Kathak's origin are in the dance of Shiva and Shakti. Three important beats of Kathak dancing are ta which means Lord Shiva; Thei is the feminine 'lasya' which is Goddess Laxmi and that is the creation, the animate objects in the world." Birju Maharaj is a pioneer in reviving Kathak dance to its original glory in the post-independence India. He even made composition on Kumar Sambhava, a classic by Kalidasa which tells the story of Shiva and Parvati.

In Munich, Doris Schneider who learned Kathak in India, will soon be starting a Kathak center with the help of Amrit Stein. Stein had been for years experimenting with yoga and movement.

As for the folk arts, various programs were held in open-air spaces in Berlin, Stuttgart, Bonn, K[?]hn, Darmstadt, Hamburg and Chemnitz (previously known as Karl Marx Platz).

Mr. Dipankar Sinha Roy, who has been running Bhartiya Kala Kendra in Hamburg for the last 40 years, sounded a bit disappointed with the unattractive way of celebrating. He says that the Hindu values should be displayed with more refinement than the bureaucratic manner which is so obvious in this festival. Mrs. Amita Malik, a senior columnist on the culture finds the festival a great success where for the first time, the Indo-German link is not confined to the elite. People from the street could join in with the melody and rhythms of Rajasthani singing "where the joy of living makes you forget all differences." The festival continues for one year.

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