Irish Embrace Hinduism's Healing Heart
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Culture

Irish Embrace Hinduism's Healing Heart

India's dazzling arts, joyous festivals, sundry foods and inclusive attitudes are changing the conversation in Northern Ireland's conflict-weary community

Emigrant Hindus are often changed by the countries they move to. But, as recounted in this story, imported Hindu culture and values may also offer a productive approach to resolving local quarrels. By Mary Taylor, Belfast

On a sunny sunday in april, 2009, I wandered down Belfast's Ormeau Road to St. George's Market, where I witnessed the impossible. Politicians from opposite extremes mingled merrily with people from diverse communities, and with each other. All were clearly having lots of fun. How did that happen? A new UN peace initiative? No, this one was arranged by Northern Ireland's Hindus.

This remarkable event was a Vaisakhi celebration organized by the Indian Community Centre on April 19. The day has multiple significance: it's the beginning of the New Year in various regions of India, the beginning of planting season and the Sikh New Year, to mention a few. But how were the locals going to get their tongues around Vaisakhi, or alternative names such as Maha Vishuba Sankranti or Naba Barsha? "They might have thought it was too Indian, and stayed away," explained Ashok Sharma, ICC Chair. So, "Festival of India" it was, and nearly five thousand people took part.

The renowned London Sitar Ensemble set the mood, and VIP guests from London's Indian High Commission graced the occasion, as Belfast's formerly warring tribes explored an enticing, multicultural array of arts and crafts, clothing, jewelry, statues, books, therapies and foods. Men, women and children tried on Indian clothing, keen to be photographed in their dazzling outfits. Visitors lingered over their choices: coffees and teas in dozens of varieties, Nepalese shawls in soft woven

wool, Spanish paella, French, Italian and Irish cheeses, handmade bead necklaces. An Ayurvedic stall offered herbal remedies, beauty treatments and massage. Even tours to India were on offer. Tempted by the delicious aromas, and thankful to find a seat in the crowded market, I enjoyed a delicious masala dosa and a cup of lassi. ICC's happy Hindus were chatting merrily with everyone--and this encouraged even the most taciturn locals to talk to one another. Most of the time we all had to yell above the music--but that just made things more relaxed.

Cultural performances filled the afternoon. Beginning and ending with Indian dance, it was quite a mix: Irish and African folk, Indian classical music, hip-hop, Bollywood melodies, Punjabi Bhangra and even a cheerleading team. The wealth of sights and sounds paused only for the politicians to perform. Artistry was evident here, too. Jeffrey Donaldson, of the Democratic Unionist Party, shared a platform with Sinn Fein's Gerry Kelly. "Diversity is enriching our lives," declared Donaldson. "We want an intercultural society," agreed Kelly. In the middle of a Hindu party, the two junior ministers of the Northern Ireland Assembly together announced funding of us$1.5 million to support the integration of minority ethnic communities, with $66,000 going to the event's organizers, the Indian Community Centre.

Lord Mayor, Tom Hartley, spoke warmly of the Indian Community Centre. "We are much richer as a city for what they contribute, both in a social and a cultural sense. They help us to be an open and tolerant city." Politicians from all the main parties wandered freely among the people. Taking care of everyone was Inspector Jeremy Adams, Hate Crime head for the Police Service of Northern Ireland. Northern Irish people, in his view, had become "a lot more culturally aware, and a large majority respect diversity." But, he said, "small numbers don't respect diversity." Many people present, including Alasdair McDonnell, MP, expressed horror at a recent racist attack on four Hungarian women.

"Ani-mates" stallholder Paula Wynburne, of European parentage, said she was no longer conscious of looking different. In the past, she said, "Ireland was very insular, and it was quite racist." Paula welcomed the presence of Hinduism and other religions, "because it is not good for Northern Ireland to have just Catholics and Protestants." Fran and Tony had a Spanish food stall, La Terreta. "Indian people are good guys. I like them," said Fran. What does he think about Hinduism? "I am not a religious man. No politics, no religion."

"Hinduism is not only a religion, it is something fundamental about human beings,"

offered Hardev Sirpal, importer for Legendary Overseas. "Indian culture is so vast and diverse. Hindus will meet with and work with everybody. We have many Gods because there are so many nice people."

It was a colorful affair. Not just the performers, but all members of the Indian Community Centre had dressed in their New Year's best. Ashok Sharma wore a deep grey-blue and silver kurta, with a red scarf. Vinod Tandon blended East and West by wearing an Indian collarless shirt with a crisp lounge suit. Anil Gautam, chairman of ICC's senior citizens' club, was particularly stylish in long kurta, churidar and dupatta, all in embroidered cream damask. Ladies on the events committee were resplendent in matching red and cream sarees, matching bindi dots, sparkly bangles and an array of pearls and pendants sufficient to outdo Mayor Hartley's gold chain of office. The politicians, along with Lord Diljit Rana who welcomed them, were conservative in their suits and ties, until ICC's ladies garlanded them with smart red Indian scarves. But the dancers put the rest in the shade.

Bhangra is traditionally a men's dance; in the Punjab, it is always performed on Vaisakhi. The male troupe Virsa Punjab, resplendent in royal blue, gold and violet, performed a stunning shika folk dance. Another vigorous display was given by the Belfast Hip Hop Academy. Cheerleading group Sandy Row Falcons displayed the gymnastic talents of Belfast's sporty girls. In contrast, the Indian classical ladies were exquisitely delicate. Amy Patel, in a rich golden yellow pleated blouse with a deep blue satin skirt, performed classical Kathak dances. Danisha Kazi, her pink, green and gold pleats draped prettily throughout her intricate movements, performed Bharata Natyam dance, including a special, beautiful and sacred dance dedicated to Lord Krishna.

Indian Community Centre

ICC, the organization behind the event, is based in North Belfast. North Indian settlers established the Centre in 1979 "to glorify the hallowed name of our Lord and celebrate our Hindu identity." Although grants are available for integration (i.e., for a minority to establish an identity within the larger community), the Centre runs on donations, taking no government funding. Resident priest Krishnan Gopi Sharma is highly qualified in Vedic studies and Sanskrit. The North Indian style worship in the Centre's temple begins with Gayatri Mantra and ends with Shanti Mantra. Ashok Sharma explained: "Shanti Mantra is a prayer for everyone and everything. It is

chanted every day at the end of every prayer, both here in the temple and in people's homes."

Diversity is reflected in the temple's range of Deities, which include Vishnu, Lakshmi, Krishna, Radha, Durga, Siva, Parvati, Ganesha, Rama, Sita, Lakshman and Hanuman. Cultural activities--arts, history, socializing--enliven the rooms surrounding the temple. Original features, including stained-glass windows, reflect the building's Methodist origins. Visitors are surprised to meet a religious community that is inclusive but not proselytizing. Catholics, Protestants and others are encouraged to share in the goodness of Indian culture, without being asked to adopt it as their own. It is a useful example in a region with a painful history of religious and political division.

On March 25, 2009, the ICC hosted the Wednesday Club from Castlerock, near Coleraine, County Antrim, a senior citizens' group, which includes both Protestants and Catholics. Ashok Sharma has had plenty of practice introducing Indian culture and religion to Northern Irish people. Addressing a common puzzlement about Hinduism's many Deities raised by a guest, he joked: "If one God doesn't listen to me, I'll worship another one." More seriously, he said the Bhagavad Gita's message is a universal one: stand up for your rights and protect the weaker members of society. Durga's many arms, he explained, portray Her many powers. Office manager Bidit Dey added that Durga is the Mother, which led into the topic of women's place in Hinduism. In reply to a question about arranged marriages, Sharma explained this is not the same as forced marriage. "We call it the unity of two families."

After the talk, the Wednesday Club heartily enjoyed a vegetarian lunch, despite Northern Ireland's entrenched carnivorous habits. Then Bidit Dey invited all the visitors into the temple. The women accepted. The men were less enthusiastic, but appreciated that nobody here was trying to persuade them to change their religion. "Indians have mixed in well," said Owen Moody. "They don't try to put their views down your throat." Owen Caulfield and Harold Woodend were impressed with how long Indian culture has been going on, and believed it had contributed greatly to Northern Ireland. Caulfield approved of ICC's preservation of Indian culture. "All cultures should be preserved," he concluded.

Historical Parallels

How have incoming Indians managed to engage with Northern Ireland so meaningfully? Like India, Ireland struggled against a colonial power, and suffered a painful partition. The Republic of Ireland gained independence without the North, which remained part of the UK. The 1921 partition was on a smaller scale than that of India and Pakistan, but with similar results. However, while Gandhi's struggle for freedom was a pacifist one, the Provisional IRA, and its political wing Sinn Fein, embraced peaceful means only recently.

The Indian Community Centre and Temple is located in Sinn Fein MLA Gerry Kelly's North Belfast constituency. After the formal speeches at Festival of India, Kelly strolled among the crowd, wearing a tilak, and confessed he knows nothing about Hinduism. "But I know nothing about Catholicism either," he grinned. Though many people associate the Irish republicanism of Sinn Fein with Catholics, it is a secular political party.

Kelly does know about Gandhi's leadership in the Indian struggle against British rule. Relating this to the Irish conflict, he noted that Gandhi's methods were not the only means to independence. Nevertheless, peaceful methods prevailed in Northern Ireland in 1998, with significant political reward to the extreme political parties. Perhaps Kelly had inadvertently been influenced by his Hindu constituents. Ramesh Chada, who has lived in Northern Ireland for fifty years, explained: "We live by a set of morals that include peaceful means, and we hope this example will spread to all the Northern Irish communities."

Hindus did not escape violent attack during "The Troubles," as the long-running conflict was called. Ashok Sharma's own restaurant, Archana, on Belfast's Dublin Road, was bombed nine times. Rajni Sharma was a schoolgirl when her father's retail store, Shukla's, was targeted. Rajni was in the shop with her cousin Ashok when a man placed a bag near the checkout, shouting, "There's a bomb in it." Rajni escaped through a back exit, while young Ashok bravely picked up the bag and moved it outside the front door.

Hindu values are seeping gradually into the Northern Irish consciousness. The ancient term sampav is close in meaning to religious tolerance, Punjabi women at ICC explained, and its literal meaning is "same attitude." A similar concept, "parity of esteem," emerged in the nineties and was instrumental in Northern Ireland's

peace process.

ArtsEkta

Over the years, the Indian community has grown more diverse, and ICC is no longer the only game in town. Ramesh Chada explained, "Until ten years ago, 95% of Indians here were from the Punjab." Then South Indian students and professionals started to arrive, followed by Indians from a variety of regions and backgrounds. ArtsEkta, a multicultural group which celebrates diversity, began when young modernizers, Nisha Tandon, Mukesh Sharma and others, split from ICC around five years ago. The group emphasizes the arts rather than traditional religious activities. "So," I asked Nisha, "are you religious or not?" She replied that she does not feel the need to worship in temples or to fast, but she prays daily. Her favorite prayers? The Gayatri Mantra and and Satyameva Jayate, Indian's national motto, which means "Truth alone Triumphs."

ArtsEkta will hold its third annual Belfast Mela this summer. This year saw their first Holi celebration on March 15. Thousands of adults and children, a variety of ethnic minorities as well as the white majority, all came together to cavort with colored powders. The event included many stalls displaying foods and crafts from a wide range of cultures. Multicultural music and dance performances provided energizing entertainment. Hundreds joined in the colored powder frenzy, and almost everyone joined in the dancing. Only two days later, this capable and energetic arts group led the St. Patrick's Day parade through Belfast's city center, dressed in Indian costume and showing off a fine-looking cycle-rickshaw.

The Hindu Impact on Ireland

Diversity, for many people, means little more than asserting their own rights. Hinduism's entry into the public domain and its intercultural work has transformed Northern Ireland's inward focus on two communities, the Protestants and the Catholics. Local Hindus, by engaging meaningfully with cultural difference, have demonstrated a better way of life to their Christian neighbors during thirty years of conflict and beyond.

Brian Lambkin, founding director of the Centre for Migration Studies in Omagh, praised the Festival of India as "a substantial expression of the rest of the world in the center of Belfast" which "broadens people's perspective and alters how the local community sees newcomers." The Indian community's role has been as "a means of integration and peace outside the political process," declared Duncan Morrow, director of Northern Ireland's Community Relations Council. "A non-white, non-Christian minority with a generosity of spirit created different conversations around difference, which fed back into conversations around sectarianism." Referring to the Indian community's outreach work, he added, "They engaged people on a totally different basis. They provided relief from a deadlocked sectarian strife." And the result? "Celebrating diversity became possible." PIpi

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