

Indian Mega mela in heart of Sydney

When I first came to Sydney in end of March 2004, my main experiences of staying abroad so far had been in youth hostels while preparing for firangi exams as a student, and the food consisted mainly of lots of Maggi Packets taken from India or whatever was available in the familiar McDonald's or Pizza Hut joints on an Indian student budget. So coming to Sydney was more than a pleasant experience with an Indian restaurant in practically every block. And when I discovered that the Australians in Sydney not only knew the term, but that some of them actually cooked "Butter Chicken" at home, I knew this was the place to be if you had to have a home away from home.

And then a few months later I heard that there would be an Indian fair in Sydney on occasion of Independence Day. So along we went to Olympic Park for the India Australia Fair 2004, thinking that we might get some more Indian food. But what we saw was beyond our wildest expectations in Sydney - a huge and typically Indian mela complete with a camel ride! Now this was as Indian as an Indian mela could be even for someone coming from Delhi. You could easily close your eyes and visualize yourself anywhere in India and it would be hard to tell the difference. There were the familiar Hindi film songs belted out by some Indo-Australian singers, a fashion show with Indian dresses, lots of Indian food (the Woodland dosas were a great hit, with huge serpentine queues in front of the stall), some spiritual jamboree and what is most typical of India - lots and lots and lots of crowds. What is more, the crowds were just as colorful and varied and a wee bit chaotic like in any Indian city (I later learned that more than 10,000 people had attended this fair) And in the great Indian tradition of "sab chalta hai", there were a group of ISKCON devotees singing and dancing and drum-beating to their own tune in ever enlarging circles, utterly oblivious to another musical program on the stage.

There was lots of India centric business with air ticket deals, insurance, taxes, immigration, the familiar crafts, clothes, spices and my favorite - an Indian beauty parlor makeshift stall, doing "eyebrow threading" on spot. And the importance of the event was evident from the fact that the Premier, no less, was there to grace the occasion. And of course there can be nothing Indian without a touch of Bollywood. And so the stalls selling Indian film DVDs did brisk business. As proof we saw an Australian woman on the train back home with some 10-12 Indian DVDs and very proud of the cheap bargain she got on Shahrukh Khan and Aishwarya Rai.

Now, it was all fun for someone attending it the first time and not knowing the effort that went into making this event possible. But apart from the fun and frolic, I believe that this fair was significant for many other reasons. For one it was one of the few large-scale festivals abroad to celebrate our Independence Day rather than our familiar religious festivals. The fact that we were all there to celebrate our being Indians or of Indian heritage was what made it so special and so big. Very often I have seen that even in small cities abroad, we want to make subgroup Indian associations, emphasizing all sorts of differences amongst ourselves, but it was heart warming to see that this was a mega show put up by the United Indian associations Inc. This is the only way to go if we want to be taken seriously outside our own country. One of our greatest strength (and perhaps our greatest weakness for that matter) is our huge numbers and we need to have such united associations to be fully aware of that strength.

I really admire the foresight of people like Dr. S Orekondy (and I am proud of the fact that many of them were doctors like me) who conceptualized and then materialized this association and this fest. I am sure this association, the festival and hopefully India as a country will only get stronger by the day. And I really do feel that it is through such associations that we can also do a lot more to help our own country without getting embroiled in politics. There were some people in these festival collecting donations for a tragedy in India. If a donation of Rupees 1.1 million by a single individual, albeit a megastar, can save 42 farmer families from suicide in Andhra Pradesh, imagine how many more would we be able to save if we could just donate say a dollar per person per year for whatever cause in India we feel for.

I may not be here the next year to witness this great festival but attending this mela will always be one of the high points of my stay in Sydney. Habitual net-surfers would have read this quote before - Hu Shih, former Ambassador of China to USA had said "India conquered and dominated China culturally for 20 centuries without ever having to send a single soldier across her border!" I hope this festival will go a long way in showcasing the great Indian culture in Australia.



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