

Vishwa Gujarati Diwas Commemorates Poet Narmad

By ARCHANA ADALJA

August 24th, the Vishwa Gujarati Diwas honoring Gujarati language, culture, and Gujarati poet Narmad, was celebrated with literary and cultural programs globally. Speaking on the occasion, India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, a Gujarati himself, wished all Gujaratis a happy World Gujarati Day and said in his Tweeter message, "Let's make Gujaratiness meaningful with its sophistication, identity and sensitivity".

The World Gujarati Day is celebrated separately from the Gujarat Day which celebrates founding of Gujarat state, and which falls on May 1st, and it is celebrated separately from the International Mother Language Day, which falls on February 21st, and celebrates linguistic multiculturalism.

The Vishwa Gujarati Diwas, as it is named, was celebrated in the U.S. with Gujarati literary groups in New Jersey, Atlanta and Chicago holding poetry recitations and cultural programs. Many of these events were held virtually due to Covid restrictions. Australian television and Japanese newspapers reported local celebrations of the Gujarati Day.

In India, the day was celebrated with special literary and cultural programs at the universities in Surat, Ahmadabad, and other cities of Gujarat. Organizations such as the Gujarati Literary Association of Rajasthani Sammelan Education Trust, Sahitya Sarita Mumbai, Mumbai Gujarati Sangathan and many universities in Mumbai including the SNDT university which paid special tributes to the poet Narmad with panel discussions, plays and garba dances and other cultural programs. In Surat, his birthplace, Narmad's birthday was celebrated at his home which is now turned into a museum and a library.

August 24th was the birthday of the great Gujarati poet Narmadashankar Lalshankar Dave, better known as Narmad, who has been considered the father of the modern Gujarati language. A staunch and proud admirer and appreciator of Gujarati and Gujarati language, Narmad's "jay jay garvi Gujarat" has been adopted as Gujarat state's anthem. It was Narmad's idea that Gujarat lives in the mind of every Gujarati, no matter where he lives. "Jya jya vase ek Gujarati, tya tya sadakaal Gujarat" (where lives one Gujarati, that place is forever Gujarat), he wrote. And it is his birthday which is celebrated every year as the international Gujarati Narmad (August 24, 1833 – February 26, 1886) was a poet, essayist, biographer, critic, journalist, social reformist, and a lexicographer. His most precious gift to the language is the new dictionary he wrote in the midst of severe hardships. His is the first dictionary of Gujarati into Gujarati, while other Gujarati language dictionaries contained Gujarati words explained in English. Narmad's dictionary is more symbolic of his efforts to unify all the different regions of Gujarat, each of which spoke a different language with different usage, different accents and different consonants. Narmad listed all the words of all dialects with their different usages.

In keeping with Narmad's philosophy, the Vishwa

Gujarati Diwas is a day dedicated to the Gujarati language, and to Gujarati culture as well. Geographically not very large, the state of Gujarat has distinct separateness in language, food and culture within the state. If we adopt and modify the famous Gujarati quote today, we can say "boli badlay dagle dagle" (language changes at every step). So is the food different in every region, in content, texture and taste. Cultural traditions also differ and although Gujarat is one state, one would find differences from home to home. As a thinker and activist, Narmad wanted to see unity. He was averse to separatism. And wrote,

*Parvat upar thi veer purvajo
De aashish jaykar sampe saue sau jaat
Jay jay garvi Gujarat!*

*Our valiant forefathers are showering blessings
From the mountains, that we all live peacefully together and be victorious
Victory to proud Gujarat!*

As an educationist, Narmad's ideas that basic primary education is better attained in one's own language, were ahead of his times and perhaps our times too. It is only recently that the United Nation's Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has recognized the importance of mother languages in development, in maintaining cultural diversity and cohesiveness and intercultural dialogue. It was in 1999 that UNESCO proclaimed February 21st as the International Mother Language Day, and it was in 2007 that the United Nations passed a resolution about it. This was thought and written by Narmad more than a hundred years ago.

Narmad's literary contribution in terms of essays, criticism, and poems is immense and thought provoking. His was tough love. He did not write soft romantic poems. His poems all speak his vigor and tough and uplifting language. Be it "ya hom kari ne pado fateh chhe aage" (jump into the battlefield, victory is yours), or "daglu bharyu ke na hatwu na hatwu" (don't hesitate or move once you have taken a step – which means one must be firm and determined). His idea that literature should be accessible and understandable by all seems like the foundation of modern journalism. Being a social reformist and against religious extreme ideas, Narmad had believed and practiced reforms he wrote about, including widow remarriage. Long before Gandhi, he prepared Gujarat to value and uphold truth, character, tenacity, equality for all, nationality and patriotism.



Wood engraving for his publication, after an oil painting by an Indian artist.



Poet Narmad's Signature



'Narmad' at Veer Narmad South Gujarat University, Surat, Gujarat, India.

And fulfilling his dream, Gujarat has given many important contributors to the world and to India, some of them very famous - Mahatma Gandhi the political activist, Kanaiyalal Munshi the writer, educationist, and activist, Narsimh Mehta the great poet who gave us "vaishnav jan to tene re kahiye", Vikram Sarabhai the scientist, Sonal Mansingh the Odyssey dancer, Sanjeev Kumar the great actor, Alka Yagnik the popular and gifted singer, and so many more that pages would not be enough to write the names.

Unlike Gujarati Literature, Gujarati food holds a special place on people's palate. "Dhokla", "Muthiya", "Khandawi", "Undhiyu", "Puranpoli", "ganthiya" all are liked everywhere. Gujarati "chaniya-choli-odhni" have been modified to look like gorgeous modern dresses. Gujarati garba dance popularized by Bollywood films has been adopted by everyone. What passes off as garba dance in Bollywood does not carry the original movements of the original garba today when its civilized, organized, slow movement of the collective dance form is mixed with the vigorous and athletic end-of-the-day rural and tribal dance with pronounced hands-and-feet movements borrowed from Maharashtrian "lawni" and "lezim", the Punjabi "bhangra", and the Konkani fisher-folk's melodious dance. And this remix is still called the Gujarati garba dance.

Gujaratis and Gujarati culture today, seems to have been transformed into such a remix, especially in the immigrant community. Being far from homeland, the enlargement of vision and heart seems to have slowly expanded the heart so much as to bring up close and personal all Indians, and created a bonding of one "desi" community Narmad would have been proud to have seen.

Multiculturalism where all cultures preserving their individuality exist side by side seems redundant in these new times. Now seems the era of confluence or fusion of all cultures which, with interchanges, gives us a young half Indian half Russian girl performing all three sections of Kathak, - Vandana, Nritta, and Nritya – effortlessly, fusion which gives us a two year old Indian American girl speaking four different languages which includes Gujarati, her father-tongue, fusion which gives us pasta with "jeera vaghar", and fusion which makes us hold traditional Indian weddings and also cut the cake. While Gujarati Literature and language need serious life-preserving nurturing, this fusion seems to have become the new version of the Gujarati culture, a version Narmad, a free-thinking innovator, perhaps would have liked

Reviving An Interest

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The temple has become the epicenter of a lot of BCCA programs including the Diwali celebration when great artists such as Shekhar Sen, Namrata Shankar, Shubha Mudgal and others would usher in the new day with their classical raga recitations at four in the morning, informed Priti Shah. "And the surprising thing is audiences are there at that time, sitting on the ground in front of them," said Shah. An amphitheater has been added which was an open air theater. Many more people got involved as BCCA started work. "All the work that was put in was voluntary. They were all seniors in age and in their work, all artists, dignitaries of performing arts, writers,"

Shah told News India Times.

Shah said BCCA has no offices assigned for its team. Anyone can sit anywhere with their laptops. The dignitaries are such big names that their just being there, voluntarily, attracts younger upcoming artists with hopes of learning something from them," according to Shah. "People like Praveen Solanki and Siddhartha Randeria, masters of the Stage both, one being a great dramatist and the other an actor and director, just come and spend some time there. And that makes the center a cultural center with their presence by attracting younger hopeful artists," Shah explained.

The task of organizing and presenting two hundred programs is immense, and

the team is working day and night to come up with new ideas, new forms, and new concepts. BCCA has begun with voluntary artistic and creative and technical contributions. BCCA needs to create an attractive and user-friendly website, and would welcome any volunteers to take up that challenge, according to Priti Shah, who explained that most of the team has not had enough time to do that.

"This festival is now a talent spotting for good compositions and many singers, composers, and lyricists have got their big break through this platform," founder and Administrator of Cultural Activities, Lalit Shah, told News India Times. "We see a very healthy and bright future ahead for this festival, which welcomes and celebrates our Culture worldwide through the medium of internet and, of course, live events", he said.

The 2020 and 2021 online festivals are still available on the YouTube channel, as are other BCCA programs. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kw5zJhCBh5M>) and (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wNLQSn8EgIk>).

The "swarkaar sammelan" is only one of BCCA's activities. There are conversations with literary dignitaries including writers, poets and playwrights, there are classical dance performances, dance ballets, musical tributes and hard classical music performances. All of these in different languages, making the BCCA what it is, a cultural hotspot, in Shah's words.

Dr. Shrikant is said to have believed in the evolutionary nature of culture, which becomes an amalgamation of all cultures it comes in touch with, acquiring a wholly new expression. Bhavan's Cultural Center Andheri seems to be doing just that.