

[Divali Flame Shines Brightly In Trinidad & Tobago](#)

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President Opens Week-Long Festival of Lights 300,000 Celebrate Amid an Island Hindu Renaissance

Bhairo, D.S.; Kathiresan, Sadhaka Jothi Divali (or Deepavali) is among the most widely celebrated festivals in Hinduism. Around the planet at least 5 billion miniature lamps flame into life during Divali. Each individual flame sheds a faint light, but the collective total (if all were gathered together in one place) would shine into deep space. Divali celebrates, as do many Hindu festivals, the protection afforded by the great Gods and devas to humanity from the negative beings (asuras). These asuras are capable of mischievously interfering with man's affairs. Divali also celebrates the wondrous, all-pervasive light shining as a facet of each soul and the dispersion of dark ignorance by that light.

In countries such as Trinidad, Guyana, Fiji, Mauritius, South Africa, Nigeria and Australia where Hindus have migrated over the past 1[?] centuries, Divali is an annual highlight, a pinnacle of religious and cultural celebration that may last a week or more. In many of these countries it is a national holiday. One such country is Trinidad & Tobago (which lies just 20 miles off the coast of Venezuela), a nation of one million, 37% of whom are Hindus from North India. While Columbus was looking for the East Indies he discovered the Americas. Ironically, if he were to return today he would find East Indians in the West Indies.

Trinidadians and Tobagonians have just celebrated the biggest and most successful Hindu festival ever—a peak for an ongoing Hindu revival in that nation. The week-long Divali Nagar was officially opened on October 19 by the President of the Republic, Noor Hassanali, at the Center City Mall in Chaguanas. The atmosphere was sparkling with innumerable lights (deyas), worship, music, singing, dancing and rejoicing. The cultural highlight was the Calakendra Ramayan Ballet from New Delhi. It was estimated that some 300,000 people have attended the week's festivities.

The success of the festival was attributed to several factors: 1) a growing interest and involvement in their religion by Hindus of Trinidad and Tobago (T & T), especially the youth who have utilized their potentials as an innovation machine for future development of their everlasting cultural pattern, 2) a new government that has encouraged and given tangible support to the cultural-religious life of their countrymen, 3) a growing sense of harmony and cooperation not only among Hindus, but among all of Trinidad's various communities, and 4) continuing efforts by Hans Hanoomansingh, genial organizer and dedicated promoter of Hinduism.

Attending the celebrations and giving a key address was Basdeo Panday, Minister of External affairs who has the distinction of being the first Hindu minister ever to serve in a T & T government. His appointment was a momentous breakthrough for Trinidadian Hindus and a sign of new and happier times.

Panday, a dedicated Hindu himself and a noted musician and performer at festivals, initiated his political life last year with a bang when he refused to swear into office on the Christian Bible and demanded instead his own holy book, the Bhagavad Gita. The ceremony was held up for half an hour while attendants scrambled to find a copy of the scripture.

In an interview with Hinduism Today, Panday explained that "T & T is a pluralistic society, a quilt of many races, cultures, creeds. Hindus had heretofore felt alienated from the political and social processes of society. Leaders had effectively divided the people from each other in an effort to gain and hold political power. Lately, however, thanks to more illumined political leadership, these barriers are breaking down and Hindus are becoming more and more overtly involved."

Panday glories in this trend and appreciates Divali's impact for peace and harmony. This holiday is a joyous expression of Hindu solidarity as Hindus of all sects worship and celebrate together. Even people of other faiths come in significant numbers to join in. In fact, Trinidadians of all origins and persuasions participate in the preparations and organization for Divali as well as other Hindu festivals. Observers report that of late there are virtually no inter-racial or inter-religious tensions in T & T.

"This demonstrates to the world that we can live together on a basis of equality

and mutual respect. Divali was symbolic of the unity which is natural among our people. I am proud of them, being a fine example to the rest of the world, avoiding the kind of turmoil we are all too familiar with. We're not perfect, but we're working on it..."

Panday was "extremely pleased" with the success of this year's Divali celebration, "better than ever...a tremendous job!" When asked for the secret of this festival's growing success, he said "Harmony. The realization of our motto 'One Love, One Peace.'"

Outside of Chaguanas, Divali was celebrated flamboyantly in other parts of the islands. In a typical village, Lahoo's Road Penal, youths of all faiths joined Hindus freely in a traditional local celebration. They lighted the entire main junction of the village with deyas placed on bamboo strips arched over the junction.

Trinidadians are reputed for their sense of celebration, festival, joyousness and hospitality which quickly "makes the stranger feel at home." The island republic boasts of tranquility, ideal weather, magnificent beaches, and...hundreds of temples. Some suggest it is a perfect place for pilgrimage, and an ideal place to celebrate Divali next year!