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Official new holiday bolsters Hindu self-identity

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The 150-foot Swami Vivekananda towered auspiciously over the Divali Nagar site located on the Central Plains of Trinidad awaiting, it seemed, the start of the 1997 celebrations. In the northern part of the country, the Sanatan Dharma Maha Sabha inspired a road procession through the urban centers of the east/west corridor, culminating in a magical cultural gala at the Simbhoonath Capildeo Hindu school. The date was May 30th, 1997, when the East Indian population of Trinidad and Tobago celebrated island-wide their 152nd anniversary of the "Indian Arrival."

Under Prime Minister Basdeo Panday, the initial controversy in 1995 and anti-Indian venom aimed at the new national holiday has been mostly overcome and transformed into a new spirit of Indian cultural revival. The Spiritual Baptists, an indigenous African religious sect who have faced discrimination in the past, were also granted an official holiday, their "Spiritual Baptist Liberation Day."

A major hallmark was the predominance of youth in the cultural presentations, in a society where some have blamed

the Western media for the high degree of self-emasculatation among Indian youths and the ease with which they convert from Hinduism and Islam to Christianity. Young Indians graced the celebrations, a signal that the country's Indian cultural soul may have a future, after all.

The National Council of Indian Culture began its celebrations by planting 100 Ashoka trees. "If the environmental groups are asking us to plant trees, we might as well plant trees of Indian significance," said Doolarchan Hanooman of the Hindu Seva Sangh.

The holiday was of national significance. Trinidad's 1.2 million people are 40.3% of Indian descent and 39.6% of African descent. During the completely violence-free island-wide event, Indian leaders called upon the people to celebrate with pride, but also with the knowledge that the country in which they live is home to non-Indians as well. A number of Afro-Trinidadians joined the festivities. Indians, a number dressed in African garb, reciprocated by participating in their celebration of Emancipation Day on August 1, 1997