

'WE ARE PROUD THAT INDIANS CAN FEEL AT HOME IN MELBOURNE'

THIS YEAR, DIWALI CELEBRATIONS WAS ROCKED BY THE UNEXPECTED PASSING AWAY FOR THE CONSUL GENERAL DR BEHRA. **MR ARUN SHARMA** HEADS CELEBRATE INDIA, WHICH ORGANISES THE DIWALI AT FED SQUARE. HE TALKS ABOUT HOW THE SHOW WENT ON

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JUST BEFORE THE BIG DAY we heard the news." Dr Sukhakant Behra was supposed to make an appearance on the day and the two were constantly in touch about all that had to be done.

"We were shocked. It took our breath away. On the day, we had a heavy heart. We were constantly in touch with the family and the Consulate about what could be done."

"What we did finally was to observe a minute of silence and we attributed the entire programme to him. That way we felt better. We felt he was still part of the whole celebration. That was unfortunate start to the programme."

Celebrate India holds its annual Diwali celebrations at Fed Square every year to bring the best of Indian culture to the wider Australian community to foster a great understanding between the two cultures.

"For the last four years the Consul General has always been helping us. We wanted the Indian government to send some group from India which could then tour all over Australia. Dr Behra helped us a lot in putting the request together."

Dr Behra was a very keen and involved mentor. "He wanted to know a lot of things. We were offered the consulate for the launch. Whatever we needed, we could ask him. We were doing a big initiative this year with White Ribbon Day. We thought we would be able to do something really unique this year. We wanted the Indian community to take the lead and take a pledge on the day in front of all the Victorian leaders. Unfortunately, he was not there to see it."

"When I heard the news, I was still working on the script and putting the final touches to my speech. I was cold for a long time. We could not do anything. Then, of course, we got in touch with the family and started talking about what could be done."

"We try to have something different every year. White Ribbon Day was what we had taken up this year. Apart from that, we had truly multicultural items on offer which was very different. Chinese and Salvadorian communities were involved in a big way. Their consulates were involved. Even the bazaar and the food was more multicultural than just Indian."

There was some special children's event as well this year which was greatly appreciated by the community.

"On the day itself, there were over 53,000 people who attended the festival and for the entire week, we had about 182,000 exposed to Diwali celebrations in Fed Square. We are very proud of this achievement because we work with volunteers and they put in so much hard work."

Mr Sharma also said that he got some feedback from the community about how their visiting family members felt about the event.

"We are very proud that the Indian community can feel at home here in Melbourne. Some families that were here



ONE OF THE REASONS WHY DR BEHERA WAS SO SUPPORTIVE OF THIS INITIATIVE WAS BECAUSE HE WAS A FIRM BELIEVER IN TAKING THE INDIAN CULTURE TO THE WIDER AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY

had no idea how their Diwali would be this year in Melbourne — being so far away from India. It was a great outing for them and they were so happy that they got to celebrate it this way."

One of the reasons why Dr Behra was so supportive of this initiative was because he was a firm believer in taking the Indian culture to the wider Australian community. "He had a mission of promoting the Indian culture and we were doing that while also involving and getting involve with the Australian bodies. Every year, we take up one issue and contribute something toward it. He was happy that we were touching a very important and difficult issue for the community this year with the White Ribbon Day."

His sudden death has left a great vacuum. "I think anybody that dies so suddenly when he had so many things that he had started is sad. He was not even near the peak of his life. Everything that he started is half way done. He was beginning to really feel relaxed and feel part of the community here."

He had an opinion on everything and he was very keen on advising.

"He was very proud of us when he saw Diwali celebrated at Melbourne airport. Nowhere in the world has this been done. Cricket Australia was also joining us this year and he was very happy with this. Diwali is one medium. We participate in the Moomba parade as well. Our culture is spreading and is getting accepted everywhere. He was very proud of us and so are we."

He was in sync with the mission of Celebrate India. "Our mission was that we would present the best of Indian culture so that it will help towards integration into the wider community and so they can understand us better. When we bring the best of Indian culture, people can feel proud of it, and only when we are proud of it can we integrate meaningfully."