

# HAND holds Hindu Heritage Month event

— The Hindu Affinity Network of Durham (HAND) brought students, educators, community leaders, and elected officials together at Pickering High School on November 29 for its second annual Hindu Heritage Month celebration, an event rooted in inclusive education, cultural recognition, and student voice within the Durham District School Board.

The Hindu Affinity Network of Durham held its second annual Hindu Heritage Month event on November 29 at Pickering High School in Ajax. The goals and objectives of HAND are to formalise and celebrate inclusive learning experiences relating to history, heritage, culture, and Way of Life including Hindu traditions.

This extends both to Hindu students attending DDSB and in partnership with others, both in DDSB schools and in the community in Durham Region. This collaborative approach highlights excellence, and gives voice to Hindu students throughout the DDSB as supported by educators and senior leaders of the Board.

The annual celebration of HAND stemmed from the recognition of Hindu Heritage Month, initially acknowledged in Ontario and subsequently across Canada.

This celebration was led by Community Co-Chair Cecil Ramnauth and DDSB Co-Chair Sabrina Brijmohan, and supported by educators and community leaders. HAND was formally established by the Durham District School Board (DDSB) in early 2023 as part of their anti-oppression strategy lead by Sean McCormack.

The anti-oppression strategy is designed to foster belonging for Hindu students by integrating classroom education and celebrating the rich diversity of the Hindu Way of Life. This educational approach includes a variety of Hindu traditions and festivals such as Diwali, traditional attire, worship practices, music, song and dance, as well as instruments such as the sitar.

It also features elements of fashion, cuisine, face painting, and henna, providing students with a comprehensive cultural appreciation and experience.

The event was carefully organised and executed by Brijmohan and Ramnauth, with volunteer coordination led by local Educators

and the team of Mukesh Mishra. Attendees included elected representatives from all three levels of government, DDSB Trustee Donna Edwards, senior DDSB leadership including Director Camille Williams-Taylor and Anti-Oppression Lead Sean McCormack.

The ceremony began with remarks from Director Camille Williams-Taylor, followed by the symbolic lighting of diyas by students and DDSB's senior leadership. Current and former educators, along with DDSB senior leaders, were invited on stage to engage in the Guru Vandana ritual, a Hindu tradition honouring teachers with tikka, mala, and artie to express gratitude with humility and love.

The event showcased a lively array of student performances from all grade levels, featuring talents from schools across the Region.

Notably, a 12-year-old sitar player, Tanya Hariharan from Terry Fox Public School in Pickering, performed Canada's National Anthem.

The venue was styled to simulate a bazaar setting, with vendor stalls offering cultural wear, adornments, educational literature, complimentary finger food and chai tea, and a photo booth highlighting heritage games such as cricket and chess that evoked the values of culture and tradition.

The event featured speeches from DDSB Trustee Donna Edwards, DDSB Director Camille Williams-Taylor, MPP Rob Cerjanec, MP Juanita Nathan, Pickering Mayor Kevin Ashe, and Ajax Regional Councillor Marilyn Crawford. MPP Peter Bethlenfalvy and MP Jennifer McKelvie sent greetings.

Each speaker provided valuable insights and strong support for the celebration, emphasising the importance of HAND in sharing and educating young minds, and its role in promoting educational outcomes for students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

HAND later expressed its sincere gratitude to Pickering High School for hosting the celebration. Special thanks were extended to all volunteers, performers, community supporters, and the generous sponsors namely Ajax Crematorium and Visitation Centre, Hindu Forum Canada, and Shiv Bansal Team Century 21, whose unshakable support and contributions remain vital to the ongoing success and development of HAND.



Group leaders at HAND's celebration of Hindu Heritage Month in Durham (above); in photos, guests, educators, and students at the November 29 event



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