

Strike won't dampen festival participants' devotion

Devotees sing their way down Yonge St. despite Festival of India being forced off Centre Island

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STAFF REPORTER

Organizers for the Festival of India had to dig deeper into festival funds after several hiccups caused by the ongoing Toronto city workers' strike pushed them off Centre Island.

"This has hit us hard financially," said the festival's chairperson, Krishna Sharma yesterday. "Suddenly we had to reorganize a brand new festival in about two weeks time."

He would not provide the total expenditure, but said the festival spent between \$10,000 to \$15,000 on contracting out services it would have otherwise got from the city, on things like garbage collection, portable toilets, security and EMS.

That figure does not factor in the thousands spent on finding a new site at which to hold the event.

The festival is a Hindu celebration centred around the teachings of Lord Krishna. It is run by the Hare Krishna Centre of Toronto, a charitable organization.

Sharma said the biggest expense was paying for the private parking lot at the foot of Yonge St. and Queens Quay E., which is hosting the two-day festival. The picturesque Centre Island, which has been the 37-year-old event's usual venue for the past 20 years, went off-limits after the ferry service was cancelled because of the strike.

"When a charity loses one of its biggest partners (the city) and we're suddenly stuck with the strike and we have 40,000 people who are expecting a fully colourful festival, it puts our backs against the wall," Sharma said.

Sharma said the festivities would go ahead regardless of the strike. And that they did, with three 40-foot floats pulled by throngs of colourfully clad patrons chanting and dancing to religious-themed songs. At the parking lot, visitors were treated to a vegetarian feast.

Organizers had yet put an estimate on the number of attendees yesterday.

But participant Supriyo Gupta, 40, said all was not lost as the event still provided a mix of arts and culture, a South Asian bazaar and spiritual yoga programs.

"The Festival of India has enough colour that you could put us in a garbage dump and we would still make it



KEITH BEATY/TORONTO STAR

Sunil Bhardwaj ropes in Shyam the macaw to join thousands of people July 18, 2009 as they chanted and danced along in devotion to the Hindu god Krishna.

fun," Sharma said.

Celebrations continue today from 12 p.m. to 5 p.m.