

Modi touches down in T&T

First Indian PM visit in over 20 years sparks joy and cultural celebration

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EMOTION and excitement exploded across the tarmac of Piarco International Airport yesterday afternoon as India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi touched down on Trinidadian soil.

It marks the first official visit by an Indian head of government in more than two decades.

The clock had just ticked passed 3.30 p.m. when Modi's private plane taxied to a halt to the strains of steel, tassa, and the orchestra of the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force, while dignitaries and invited citizens waited in anticipation. Though a few minutes elapsed before he descended the aircraft's steps with his hands clasped in the traditional namaste greeting, the warmth of his welcome was undeniable.

Clad in a royal blue sari with silver trimmings, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar-herself the first woman of Indian descent to lead the Government of Trinidad and Tobago-stood at the foot of the stairs with her Cabinet, ready to greet him with flowers.

As Modi emerged, a ripple of applause broke out, and he was led to a platform before the band. The notes of India's national anthem, 'Jana Gana Mana', and Trinidad and Tobago's own anthem blended into a unique moment of shared identity.

The Defence Force band also played 'Real Unity' by Machel Montano and Drupatee.

After briefly inspecting the honour guard-the soldiers standing ramrod straight in the heat-Modi made his way down the red carpet, shaking hands with Persad-Bissessar and meeting key Cabinet members including Attorney General John Jeremie, Minister of Homeland Security Roger Alexander, Defence Minister Wayne Sturge, and Minister of Public Utilities Barry Padarath.

'It was amazing'

It was, however, what happened next that truly won the crowd's heart.

Instead of heading straight to his vehicle, Modi veered off the red carpet to take in a cultural exhibition in which dancers and musicians from both African and Indian heritages were performing in synchronism, symbolising the melting pot that is Trinidad and Tobago.

Modi further surprised the gathering when he then walked toward the cordoned-off crowd of citizens specially selected by the Indian High Commission to meet him. One woman, still beaming afterwards, clutched her hands to her chest, saying: 'I don't want to wash my hands at all-that man's hand so soft and silky! It was amazing. I liked that he didn't just walk with the dignitaries-he came to the crowd and shook our hands and engaged with us. That showed humility.' Her friend, who wasn't lucky enough to reach the front, sighed: 'I am disappointed I didn't get to meet him. But most importantly, he came and I'm appreciative he's here. Maybe next time.'

Indeed, the visit was not just a political affair but a celebration of culture and bonds.

On the sidelines of the tarmac, the FCB Dragon Boys Tassa Band and a vibrant ensemble of African drummers, moko jumbies, Indian dancers and African dancers collaborated in a dazzling display of the twin-island's diversity.

For Nankissor Rampartaj, leader of the tassa band, the day was nothing short of magical.

'One of the greatest feelings of happiness,' he said, his face glistening from the heat and effort. 'To get the opportunity to welcome the PM of India-it is a big push forward for the people of T& T and our band. We feel proud and honoured to be representing T& T in the blazing sun-but it was worth it to see Mr Modi on our shores. We rehearsed for weeks because we knew over a billion people in India could be watching. We had to execute it properly.'

Xhaiden blown away

Even the youngest participants felt the gravity of the moment.

Nine-year-old Xhaiden Darius- who holds the title of National Junior Calypso Monarch and National Junior Chutney Soca Monarch- played the part of a 'bouquet boy' during the ceremony.

'When I first found out about it, I was like: India? Wow! My thoughts... I was blown away,' said the Savonetta Private School student said to the media as he clutched his bouquet.

'They didn't tell me why I was chosen, but I was very happy.'

After lingering for several minutes longer than scheduled to greet citizens-shaking hands, hugging some, and thanking them for coming- Modi finally made his way to the waiting fleet of vehicles, which whisked him away to the Hyatt Regency hotel in the capital city.

It was an afternoon of culture, pride, and connection, marking not just a political visit but a poignant reminder of the deep ties between the people of India and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

As one woman in the crowd summed it up, still starry-eyed: 'We just wanted to see him. He didn't disappoint.'

