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## Hundreds of candles light up East River in sunset Hindu celebration

August 5, 2019 Jimin Kim



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Just before the sun set on Saturday evening, hundreds of people gathered at the DUMBO's Pebble Beach to send brightly colored candle-lit lamps afloat on the East River.

The Aarti Hindu Lamp Ceremony, held annually in Brooklyn, is historically tied to a Hindu ritual meant to honor rivers as a source of life and peace. Participants painted their own lamps, made from palm leaves and steam-pressed into the shape of bowls, with vivid red and orange dyes made from dried roots and flowers.

The idea is that the candle placed in the bowl symbolizes the soul, and its placement on the river represents the link between the inner and outer worlds. In India, where the tradition originated, some perform the ritual daily — at dawn and dusk — at the banks of the Ganges River.

Aeilushi Mistry of Bay Ridge founded the local rendition of the ceremony in 2013. Attendance started at 250 and has shot up since. Mistry was born and raised in Gujarat, India, and immigrated to the U.S. in 2001. She is a professional Indian classical dancer and folk artist affiliated with Brooklyn Arts Council's Arts in Education and Folk Arts Program. In her day job, she works for the nonprofit Barrier Free Living, which helps survivors of domestic violence with disabilities.





Aeilushi Mistry. Eagle photo by Jimin Kim

For Mistry, the ceremony is both a way to spread positivity and commemorate her upbringing.

“This is a tradition that has been continuing in India for generations with our Vedas, with our practices of Hinduism,” she said. “I’m just a vessel, carrying those traditions and culture with me as much as I can. Those ceremonies are to help and heal.”

This year’s ceremony was particularly emotional for Mistry. Her husband, Paulom Mistry, passed away June 1 after giving a musical performance in India. Paulom, a drummer, organized the lamp ceremonies alongside Mistry.

“The art has helped me heal and cope with this big loss in my journey,” she said. “Today, I’m feeling really strong seeing what is happening and how much support I have from not just friends, family, but the community in Brooklyn Bridge Park.”

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One of those friends, Laura Alvarado of Flatbush, has been to the ceremony three times. She blew a conch shell from Mexico to start the ceremony. It was the same conch Paulom used to blow every year to kick off the festivities.



Laura Alvarado. Eagle photo by Jimin Kim

“I miss him,” Alvarado said of Paulom. “It’s very special for me. What I’m thinking when I blow my conch is connecting with him and saying, “Thank you Paulom for



everything he shared for me.' He was a great, great artist and a very kindly person."

Participants at a nearby table brushed messages onto the lamps with red and orange Indian paints. They lit the cotton-wicked miniature candles, made of ghee, before setting them onto the river.



Eagle photo by Jimin Kim

Tashi Haskin of Crown Heights painted a sunflower onto her lamp before placing it on the water. This year is her second at the event.

"I just think it's a very beautiful ceremony to see people put their lamps, especially when they're lit and they have the candle, to watch them flow down the river. It's very peaceful. There's something about it that's very soothing."





Eagle photo by Jimin Kim

Brooklyn Arts Council folk artist and Crown Heights resident Cheryl Thomas played a wooden balaphone and water drums made of calabash, a tropical tree. She filled the drums with water from the East River. Thomas had introduced the two instruments to Paulom, and they quickly became some of his favorites.

“The sounds are just so unique and in playing them, I see Paulom’s face in front of me smiling as he’s listening to it, as he did when he came by my space the first time to hear them,” said Thomas.

Following tradition, at dusk, participants prepared to float their lamps in the East River. Although the lamps were made of biodegradable materials, the Brooklyn Bridge Park Conservancy’s kayakers were ready to collect the lamps from the water after letting them drift for a while. Ceremony volunteers would deposit the lamps washed up onshore into recycling bins.





Eagle photo by Jimin Kim

Aeilushi prepared to float her lamp in the water by praying and holding incense candles. This year, the ceremony felt different to her. In years past, Paulom would be right nearby her, playing his drums.

“I couldn’t go into the water,” she said. “It was very, very emotional for me [this year], because every time he would be playing drums at the river or helping me at the river. Those moments — I was visualizing them.

“My friend picked it up from where I was and said, ‘Do you want me to lead from here?’ I trusted her. As soon as she placed my lamp into the water, East River accepted my prayers.”

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