

# Erry a visionary & a strong community leader

AMAR ERRY: DECEMBER 31, 1938 – JANUARY 17, 2021

By Adit Kumar

The Toronto Arya Samaj/Hindu community has lost a towering stalwart whose hallmark was fostering unity and togetherness. On Sunday January 17, 2021, Shri Amar Erry passed away after being ill for some time. The City of Markham, where he lived, in recognition of his lifelong contribution as a spiritual and cultural leader, lowered its flag at half-mast as a mark of respect to him. The Vedic Cultural Centre and Arya Samaj Mandir at 14th Avenue, Markham, Ontario where he worshipped and served as its President, also lowered its flags to honour their fallen hero.

Shri Amar Erry was well known beyond his place of abode, and the news of his passing elicited heartfelt tributes and encomiums from near and far. On account of the Covid-19 restrictions, virtual prayer meetings were held in his honour, and on Thursday January 21, 2021, his funeral service was restricted to a private affair.

Shri Amar Erry was a visionary and strong community builder who has left behind a wonderful legacy for many to treasure and emulate. He successfully brought together two sister religious organisations to jointly build and worship in an iconic multi-million-dollar facility in Markham, Ontario – the Vedic Cultural Centre – which stands as a testament to his commitment to unity and communal collaboration.

Those two bodies – Toronto Arya Samaj, made up largely of West Indians from Guyana and Trinidad, and Arya Samaj Markham consisting primarily of Indians from the Indian sub-continent and African and Indian Ocean territories – have coexisted and progressed in an atmosphere of mutuality and concord.

As a sign of their continued fraternal relations, the last rites of Erry Ji were performed by Pt Vidyarthi Sriram, one of the Priests of Toronto Arya Samaj.

Close friend and associate of the departed, Anand Rupnarain of the Toronto Arya Samaj, said he “will take solace in knowing that Erry Ji’s presence will forever be felt at the



Amar Erry

Mandir, which he worked so hard to realise”. Rupnarain attested that “Amar Erry had an extraordinary ability to raise funds and no one could resist his gentle charming way and winning smile”, a sentiment shared by all the past Presidents of the Toronto Arya Samaj.

Shri Amar Erry was well-connected and tapped into his wide network to assist and promote the Arya Samaj/Hindu community. Through his initiative many international personalities such as Swami Veda Bharati, Swami Baba Ramdev, Swami Agnivesh, and Swami Chinmayananda visited the Vedic Cultural Centre and conducted lectures and seminars.

Erry Ji was a true ambassador for Hinduism, who, as President of the Canadian Council of Hindus in 1987, mobilised the heads of Hindu Organisations to successfully host the Third International Ramayana Conference in Toronto.

Sharada Bhajan, who worked with Shri Amar Erry on the conference, described him as “a leader with unparalleled international Hindu/Arya Samaj connections and the brilliant wisdom to guide others in the right direction.”

The late leader is also credited with inspiring the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha America, a Congress of Arya Samajs in North America, to hold

annual conferences (sammelans) in different cities to address problems and to meet the challenges facing the Arya Samaj in the Americas. Four such conferences were held at the Vedic Cultural Centre in Markham under the leadership of Shri Amar Erry.

For Neera Chakravorty, General Secretary of Arya Samaj Markham, “Amar Erry was a pure gentle soul and his legacy as a humanitarian leader will guide the people and future generations to practice peace, create love and harmony among ourselves and the community.”



Markham Civic Centre’s flags were lowered to half mast

Mayor of Markham, Frank Scarpitti, who knew Shri Amar Erry personally, recognised him for bringing about harmony and collaboration among religious groups through Interfaith Dialogues. The Mayor offered this tribute to the family of Erry Ji on behalf of the City and Council members, saying: “I salute the memory of a man that dedicated his life to bringing people together. On a personal level, I always respected his words of wisdom and advice, which were often given in the spirit of who he really was: a true gentleman. We will never forget his immense contributions to Markham.”

A passionate and dedicated community volunteer, Shri Amar Erry sat on many boards and committees, including the Canadian Federation of Intercultural Friendship and Taste of Asia, to name just two. He was a recipient of the “Deeds Speak Award” by York Regional Police for his contribution to promoting and celebrating diversity.

Markham-Thornhill Member of Parliament, Mary Ng, said: “Erry devoted his life to making our community a better and more inclusive place to call home, [and will be remembered for] the countless acts of kindness he showed to all of us.”

Shri Amar Erry’s passing is an incalculable loss to our world that is yearning for that spirit of self sacrifice and being one’s brother’s keeper. His legacy will continue to shine and inspire those left behind.

Shri Amar Erry is survived by his wife Saroj; sons Sanjeev, Rajeev; daughter Geeta; daughters-in-law Sunita and Lisa; son-in-law Nakul; sister/brother-in-law Saroj/Daksh Arya; brother Davinder Erry; and five grand children.

## Strong, independent, & powerful

The following highlights are extracted from the celebration of the life of Ruby Samlalsingh, ‘Remembering Ruby’, which was delivered at the Mount Pleasant Funeral Centre on January 16, 2021.

RUBY SAMLALSINGH: JUNE 1, 1921 – JANUARY 6, 2021

Ruby Samlalsingh — Sister Rubes, Auntie Ruby — was born in a Trinidad beyond our imagining in 1921. It was a colonial possession within the British Empire. The importation of Indentured labour from India had only ceased four years earlier. Sugar and cocoa were still King. Car registration had only commenced in 1912 (a railway went from Port-of-Spain to San Fernando, stopping at the Claxton Bay Junction en route).

I’m not even sure how one travelled up the long, winding road from the junction to Sum Sum Hill, and to the house that played such an important role in her life. In those days it was a house that dominated the village, white, high, and standing in its own lands, the sand quarry up the road, the stables and paddock – they had racehorses – in the back.

Ruby’s Ma and Pa raised six daughters and two sons there. Ma, a Boodoosingh — they were Christian by the time Ruby was born — said her prayers in Hindi, and wore an ornhi. She was a gentle soul by all accounts, mother to her children, but also to the village, and to many of her relatives. Pa was a businessman, a voracious reader of the newspapers, and a bon vivant. His best friend was his brother, Cha Cha, or uncle to Ruby, whose own big house was further up the road in Tortuga. The brothers were inseparable, and so were their families: Samlalsinghs all.

Clearly, in the Trinidad of the 1910s, and 1920s, this was not a typical Indian family! Pa was also not typical – he wanted his daughters to be educated. Wilma would precede Ruby to University in Canada here in Toronto at Victoria College, and she preceded her to India too; Winnie became the first Indian woman in the civil service in colonial Trinidad. Each one of them became a strong, independent, and powerful woman —

loving, warm, and gracious. Ruby was the baby...

The house itself was the centre of all their lives. The place they grew up in; where they came back to; the place to which the extended family came, sometimes lived, and treated as a second home. The house itself was Claxton Bay. The glory days would cease with the depression: sugar and cocoa would both fail, but the house expanded, and the family lived on.

In 1942, Pa sent Ruby off to the University of Manitoba. She was “the first female visible minority” to graduate there. It is an awkward phrase, and I doubt that Ruby ever thought of herself in those terms anyway. From Winnipeg she travelled to a war-weary England where she worked at a diploma in the Social Sciences at Liverpool.

Not ready to return home, she then embarked on what many would consider the journey and adventure of a lifetime. She set out by boat, alone, for India; once there, she travelled the subcontinent, alone, from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and all stops between, before moving on, alone, to Ceylon. No shy retiring violet she.

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Ruby once calculated that in all she had 19 jobs during her career. Several were responsible and of consequence, but the most important was the five years she worked in Guyana.

In the mid 1950’s, the market for sugar was declining, conditions on the estates were appalling, and politicians were beginning to use this fact to give leverage to their ambitions. It was then that, still in her early 30s, Ruby received an invitation from Bookers Brothers and the sugar planters’ association to go to colonial British Guiana to assess, report on, and to improve the lot of the workers and their families.

Note that she did not apply for the position. She was asked if she would go. Such was her reputation in her field that her professors, English and West Indian, suggested her name. She would say later that her accomplishments in Guyana marked the high point of her working life.

Once there, she travelled widely, again often by herself, investigating conditions and setting up facilities for the women. Her actions, her decisions, and her reports had a



Ruby Samlalsingh

major and significant impact on the lives of the sugar workers.

These were the mid-1950’s. The feminist movement, the Gloria Steinhams, the Bella Abzugs, and the Angela Davises belong in the 1970’s. Ruby was ahead of them, and I don’t think she ever called herself a feminist: she was Ruby Samlalsingh.

After five years in Guyana, Ruby returned to Trinidad, but her ‘hot-foot’ was soon to lead her back to Canada. In 1963, at the age of 42, she enrolled at McGill University to study Economics. A single, coming-to-middle age woman giving up a good, comfortable life at home to be a student again.

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Ruby worked in the federal government until, ‘hot-foot’ again, she moved to Toronto in 1975, where she joined the provincial government in the Premier’s Office, and then at the Ministry of Labour. [Her] work on education, and on the rights of teachers, the research she carried out, and the papers she wrote, were valuable and influential in preparing the legislation of the decade. She retired in 1986.

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Ruby passed away peacefully at her residence in Toronto on January 6, 2021, less than half a year from her 100th birthday, after a long illness.