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INDIAN FESTIVALS, DUSSEHRA AND DIWALI AT SKEETER'S STADIUM BRING TO LIFE LORD RAMA'S 'VICTORY OF GOOD OVER EVIL'



Dr. Arun Verma, Founder, Shri Sita Ram Foundation with Parade Marshall Consul General of India, Houston P. Harish at the Skeeter's Stadium in Sugar Land, TX during the Diwali and Dussehra celebrations on Sat. Oct. 17, 2015. Photo credit: Tomas Ramos

by Somdatta Gangopadhyay.  
Edited by Shobana Muratee

**SUGAR LAND** – This year's Dussehra and Diwali festival at the Skeeters Stadium on Saturday, October 17, scaled new heights when it went over the top with its visual impact: towering effigies and idols (including a 25ft tall Lord Hanuman), colorful fireworks, drama, parade under spotlights, streaming bazaar and above all a rock solid community turnout!

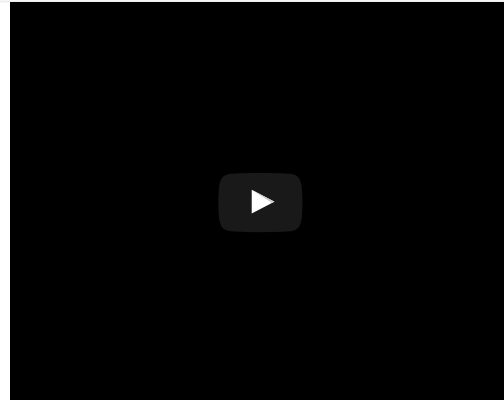


The Orissa Culture Center (OCC) float during the grand parade at the Skeeters Stadium in Sugar Land on Oct. 17, 2015. OCC co-partnered with Shri Sita Ram Foundation in presenting the festivals. Photo credit Shobana Muratee.

"It is a challenging task to motivate an increasing number of organizations (over 70 this year and increasing each year) to focus on a common goal, produce a fabulous colorful show, interesting, culturally educative, distinctly full of energy, for all age groups, nationalities and above all an example of unity of various faiths," expressed Dr. Arun Verma, founder of the host organization, Shri Sita Ram Foundation. The celebrations were a collaborative effort of Shri Sita Ram Foundation and Orissa Culture Center (OCC) of Houston.

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The grand entrance to the pavilion. Photo by Shobana Muratee.

With setting sun, the stadium lights shone brighter showing a packed stadium. At the entrance, welcoming all was the gigantic orange idol of Lord Ganesha, the dispeller of all evil. Before Him was a delicate rice rangoli (floor art) of Shri Sita Ram that was a treat to many eyes.



Voice of Asia publishers Mrs. Moani Thomas and Koshy Thomas were honored as Media Sponsors.

The chanting of Lord’s glory inside the temple built for the event paved the route to a spiritual journey enveloped by an aroma of bhakti (devotion). The rice rangoli of Shri Sita Ram was a treat to many eyes.



Media Sponsors being honored by Arun Verma and Dr. Sen. Photo credit: Tomas Ramos



The cultural show was opened by Sangeeta Dua, host, TV Houston followed by a bhajan performance by the ISKCON of Houston and then a dance by Radharani Dance and Tippani and Garba Raas by the Natya Upasana Dance Academy. A costume competition for little children dressed mythological characters was one of the highlights. The Kathak Nritya Kala Kendra who showcased their Krishna and Bangla dance performance was introduced by Dr. Nik Nikam. Shweta Arora, emceed part of the show introducing the performers of Ashirwad -A Blessing, who presented Durga. Media sponsors including Koshy Thomas, publisher, Voice of Asia were among them the honored. Grand Sponsors were Wells Fargo Bank and the Nova Asset Management and sponsors of in other categories were duly recognized on the occasion.



The Wells Fargo's horse drawn chariot at the parade. Photo by Shobana Muratee.

US Congressman Al Green, Sugar Land Councilman Harish Jajoo, City of Stafford Councilman Ken Mathew were among the dignitaries present who gave their greeting on the occasion.



ISKCON of Houston kirtan group were a major part of the celebration with their non-stop kirtans. The gave a fitting finale to the show. Phot by Shobana Muratee.

The mythological play Ramleela was a window to the audience to understanding the ancient heritage of the Hindu religion. Performers dressed in colorful costumes presented the story of epic Ramleela while celebrating the victory of good over evil. The audience which comprised of all age groups was sitting spellbound by the performance of the Ramleela as it continued and let the sky echo with 'Har Har Mahadev' chants. A classical Indian traditional dance performance added variety to the cultural evening. 'Shri Sita Ram Foundation has provided an amazing opportunity to the Indian American and mainstream community of Greater Houston to experience the rich and glorious tradition of Ram Leela and celebration of Dussehra in India. For many young participants of the Mela, this is a formative experience of rich Indian Cultural traditions . It was heartening to that many temples of the city came together to celebrate and mark the victory of Good over Evil.' said the Indian Consul General.

The crowd also had the opportunity to shop some ethnic Indian dress as well as jewellery and other accessories from the vendors displaying their wide range of collection. Apart from salwar kurta, there were other varieties too like lehnga choli, salwar kameez and many other dresses. Food vendors including the wellknown Hot Breads, Bawarchi, Saravaana Bhavan and some others catered with their mouthwatering food like dosa, medu vada, paneer bun, pav bhaji, biryani and the list would go on. Devotees also had the opportunity to refresh themselves with 'prasadam' (offering from the Lord).

Children had the opportunity to exercise their right to enjoy to the fullest with free balloons, face painting, petting Zoo as well as an active fire truck from the city of Sugar Land which kept them entertained throughout the evening. 'I'm making sure that the



The much awaited grand parade begun as processions were carried on by Shri Meenakshi Temple Society, Houston Maharashtra Mandal who appeared along with drum beats and huge pomp and grandeur. Among others, there were Shri Guruvayurappan Temple, Shri Sita Ram Foundation, the Gayatri Parivar, Houston Baptist University (HBU) who appeared dressed in blue and beige. A loud cheer from the audience along with the announcements as to introduce each organization added liveliness to the evening. Bollywood Shake and their procession added color to the moment followed by Gauriya Govinda Math as they proceeded with 'Haribol' chants. The graceful dance performance embodied by ISKCON in their procession did bring delight in the hearts of many as the audience created rhythm through their claps as they were also encouraged to chant 'Hare Rama Hare Krishna' as the procession continued. ISKCON celebrated its 50th anniversary this year and in the parade had large banners of Srila Prabhupad, Acharya and founder of the movement outside India. Vedic Temple of Katy followed next who also invoked the spirit of religiousness which was followed by the Jalaram Temple, Houston Ratha Yatra organized by the Orissa Culture Center (OCC) which enlightened the air with the traditional classical Odissi dance as the members also shared the story of the trio Balaram-Jagannath-Subhadra going to visit their aunt on the pious occasion of Ratha Yatra. The Aga Khan Society and the Wells Fargo were among some of the others who added to the richness and diversity of the parade. The horse-drawn carriage procession by Wells Fargo which was led by four white horses added elegance to the parade.

Deeyas (4000 LEDs) were seen moving in circular motion the dark as the religious rituals inaugurated the Maha Arti, offering worship to Goddess Lakshmi and Ganesh A splendid firework show added sparkles to the moment which followed thereafter the Maha Arti. Effigies of Kumbh Karan, Ravan and Meghnad were burnt so as to symbolize the destruction of evil force. Toward the end was also a lucky draw for a free trip in the US.

"It is time consuming but when done with devotion towards it becomes easy, satisfying and wanting to do more of it to please Lord Ram. We try our best," Dr. Verma had to say about the success of the event.

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