

## Rose Petals from Heaven! Fireworks Celebrate Rama's Victory

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Photos: Bijay Dixit

By Jawahar Malhotra

**SUGAR LAND:** It has almost become expected that the Dusserah Mela – now in its fifth year at Skeeters Stadium – will herald the Hindu festive season of Diwali every year, and each year, the organizers keep trying to add another element to keep the audience guessing. Three years ago, the twin sets of demon effigies were added as well as the statue of Ganesh at the entrance which has always been a big draw people to be photographed beside. Two years ago, the floats and the parade were added and this year it only got bigger. Last year, a tall effigy of Hanuman was added to one side and many more booths to entice people into the bazaar that is created at the concourse.



And this year, things only got better with the addition a helicopter drop of rose petals just after the victory of Lord Ram over the evil demon Ravana and Ram's coronation, symbolizing the blessings of the Gods. "It was a tricky thing to pull off since we are so close to Sugar Land Airport," said an exhausted Arun Verma, the main organizer, three days after the event. "We had to convince them it would be fine as well as get the okay from the Skeeters General Manager Matt Thompson." In the end, Verma prevailed and the petal drop was like blessings from heaven. "Afterwards, Matt said that this was the finest event that he had ever seen at Skeeters," Verma said with pride.



And the pride is well deserved after the three months that Verma devotes to pulling the mela off, stepping aside from his real estate business (he lets his son handle it instead), friends and family. He spends all his time coordinating and organizing the volunteers and tasks and the results are quite evident.

The Dusserah and Diwali Mela by the Shri Sita Ram Foundation, has become the largest Hindu cultural and spiritual experience in the Houston Metroplex and probably across the State of Texas, if not throughout the Southwest. According to organizers, towards the end of the evening, almost 10,000 people had attended the mela throughout the 4pm to 11pm slot that it was on, this past Saturday, October 15, so much so that the police had to turn many cars away from the full parking lots.



The concourse was covered by people stopping by in the over 70 booths covered with tiny lights (almost 250,000 lights created the atmosphere), culminating in the 9 food stalls which did such a roaring business that there were long lines snaking around and indicates that more food booths are needed all around the stadium. Banners, flags and pennants honoring Lord Ram and Hanuman adorned the entire stadium. The late afternoon programs, though viewed by few in the stands (since everyone was apparently shopping or eating at the booths), produced some spectacular costumes from the children dressed as Hindu deities, as well as fine Indian dance – classical and Bollywood – performances from local dance schools.



The formal temple in the concourse was managed by Hanuman Swami of Rama Jaya Niketan temple of Katy while the field temple from where the aarti was conducted at the end was managed by priests from Meenakshi Temple of Pearland and all other temples in Houston. Indian Consul General Anupam Ray and his wife Amit, mother and son attended the event and participated in the Maha Aarti. Honoring a request from previous Consul General Parvathaneni Harish, the Hanuman Chalisa was recited this year and according to Verma, will become a permanent feature in future melas.



The parade of floats and marchers has grown this year to 50, and already the organizers have names of other groups which want to be included next year. Each float carried the flag of Sri Ram at its head. Ravi Shankar Puri spent every evening for the last month working on the 12 floats from the Shri Sita Ram Foundation that made the circuit, and he put the finishing touches in the lot behind the stadium where all the floats waited for their moment to shine. Mayor Protem of Sugar Land, Himesh Gandhi was the Dusserah Parade Marshall. And of course, the culminating fireworks display was spectacular to watch, better than the Fourth of July ones at the stadium!

Verma and the rest of his team are elated by the response. "Everyone felt the presence of Lord Ram, spirituality was in the air and the atmosphere was charged with shouts of "Jai Shri Ram" from the crowd reverberating all night along," Verma said after the mela, adding that he couldn't have done it without the full support of several hundred volunteers, dance schools, organizations and temples, parade participating organizations and vendors.