

A Colorful Ram Leela Captivates Houstonians

By Jawahar Malhotra

HOUSTON: “The last time I saw the Ram Leela,” said Dr. Arun Verma, with a hint of a smile, “was in 1958. And, I wanted to make it possible again – for all of us here,” looking around at the near capacity crowd that was filling up the Cullen Auditorium at the University of Houston this past Saturday, October 23. It was late afternoon, and as the crowd trickled in, late as is the Indian ritual, it pushed the beginning of the first Ram Leela held in the Bayou City back by 30 minutes.

It was a sentiment echoed by many of the first generation immigrants who had come there, many with their own children in tow, to once again feel the sentiments that an early winter’s night in India used to elicit. Ram Leela is a tradition that is prevalent in North India and each village square, each city district and each neighborhood have their own version staged to huge crowds under colorful tents erected for the occasion and brightly festooned streets leading upto the venue.



Artists performing at the Ram Leela Show in Houston

Almost all of these Ram Leelas are performed to the *doh* – poetic verses set in Hindi and Sanskrit – from the *Ramcharitmanas* of Tulsidas, a 16th century poet who lived at the time of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb. His accomplishment is considered one of the greatest works of Hindu literature and when it was finished, it was the first time that the *Ramayana* was made available to the common man for song and performance.

Before then, the *Ramayana* of the sage Valmiki was only available to those who were versed in Sanskrit. The *Ramcharitmanas* – or *the Lake of the Deeds of Rama Rama* – is composed of seven *kands* of books that lead to the seven steps that lead to a Himalayan lake. Legend has it that Tulsidas’ rivals threw the pages of his half completed book into the river as they were jealous he would become famous. Tulsidas is said to have rewritten every *doha* again, verbatim, as he had been composing and reciting them ever since he was a young boy.

Since then, the *Ramcharitmanas* have been associated with the beginning of the tradition of the Ram Leela, or the Story of Rama, and faithfully, this first one in Houston adhered to the seven books, starting off with the birth and childhood of Rama, to his wedding with Sita and banishment to Banvaas. The *doh* played out in the background were from *The Ramayan* as sung by noted Indian singer Ramakant Sagar, and the actors silently mouthed the words, while playing out the scenes. As the *jaimallah* (wedding garlands) were exchanged by Rama and Sita, confetti was shot up through the air on to the audience.

This was one of the special effects that was promised to the audience; the others were fireworks – volcano sparklers that erupted from the stage, and at the conclusion of the performance, an effigy of Ravana was set afire on gigantic one filled with fireworks in the famous Ram Lila grounds in Delhi. For many boys and girls in North India, buying a small effigy and lighting it is a memorable experience.

During intermission, Verma thanked the audience for coming to “a historic event for Houston”, one he hoped would become an annual tradition and called out the names of the sponsors. He also noted that almost 150 people had taken part in producing and acting in the event and another 150 had volunteered to help. He introduced Harris County Commissioners Court Judge Ed Emmett, whose son is studying theology in India and has visited India many times. Emmett said it was important for these traditions to be passed along. “If I had my way, I would make everyone read the Gita,” he exclaimed. He then read a proclamation from the

Court and presented Verma a certificate of participation.

After a brief intermission that stretched on for another 40 minutes, Verma came onstage again to speak of the logistics of producing Houston's first Ram Leela under the auspices of the Shri Sita Ram Foundation which he heads and is involved in religious activities. He then read letters of felicitation from Sen. John Cronyn and Gov. Rick Perry. Verma also thanked Mandap Creations for the stage decorations, costumes and accessories.

And then, the story of Rama continued with the Aranya Kand as he goes off to Banvaas, his brother Bharat asks for his *chappals* and places them on the throne to rule rather than take power for himself; Sita is tricked to step across the power of the Lakhsman *rekha* and kidnapped by the demon Ravana. The rest of the story is familiar to most Hindus: the Monkey King comes to help rescue Sita; the most powerful monkey, Hanuman becomes a loyal servant to Rama and destroys Lanka; and finally the brothers of Ravana, and then himself are defeated by Rama.

As the story is well-known, in many passages, the audience often clapped along with the *songs* and *bhajans* that have become synonymous with them. At several important junctures, some of the cast dressed as Hanuman and the monkey army ran through the aisles shouting "Jai Shri Ram". And after the last scene, when Ravana's effigy was set ablaze, Ravi Puri, who played Rama's father Dasharatha and is a well-known religious singer, strode from the aisle onstage to lead a loud-clapping audience in "*Jai Ram, Jai Ram, Jai Shri Ram*" as a *dholuk* played out an accompaniment.

Although the performers were amateurs, some had a style that was captivating, like Arun Kumar who played Ravana; or Dr. K. D. Upadhaya who played the playful Hanuman. In contrast, the characters of Rama (Vipin Sharma), Lakshman (Dr. Dipesh Batra) and Sita (Kusum Sharma, Vipin's real-life wife) were played in deliberate, slow-movement to emphasize their calmness. The dances by the little children, and then by the pupils of Kusum Sharma's Shri Natraj School performed ensemble dances that were poised and charming.

The emcees for the event, Gopal Agarwal (with red *pagadi* and *achkan*) and Abha Diwedi asked everyone to encourage the performers with loud applause. But, most of all, despite a few glitches that are to be expected from amateur theatre, the colorful montages with each scene and setting in bright yellows, reds and blues were enchanting and mesmerizing. With little imagination, one was transposed back to an ancient era.

At the end of this first Rama Leela for Houston, everyone was given some *prasad* in tiny shiny red gift bags donated by Madhusudan Aggarwal of Free Dish Warehouse, and stepped by out to a modern, warm Houston night. For information on the Shri Sita Ram Foundation, visit shrisitaramfoundation.org

