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Texas Governor addresses Dussehra-Diwali festival rally



Texas Governor Greg Abbott, left, with festival organizer Arun Verma of Shri Sitaram Foundation, USA and Durga Agrawal, noted Indian community leader, addresses a huge gathering at Sugar Land's Constellation Field on Saturday, Oct. 20. The festival showcased India's ancient culture through various activities and presentations like Folk Dance Ensemble, historical plays, bridal fusion show, cuisines from different parts of India, and a parade comprising about 50 floats showcasing historical representations. U.S. Rep. Pete Olson was the grand marshal of the parade. Story on Page 13

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COMMUNITY

More than 10,000 people attend the Dussehra-Diwali festival



A scene from the Ramayana



Sri Ravula in Maha Vishnu costume

Houston area community at large thronged the Constellation Field in Sugar Land to celebrate the annual Diwali festival, the festival of lights, on Oct. 20.

As Texas Governor Greg Abbott joined the Indo-American community as the chief guest, representatives of the consulates of India, Indonesia, Brazil, Republic of China and Mexico attended the celebrations as well.

This was the 7th annual Diwali Dussehra Festival organized by Shri Sita Ram Foundation, a non profit engaged in promoting Vedic culture and heritage of India. The Foundation also provides funds to support 30 nonprofit organizations annually, offers a limited number of scholarships and assists disadvantaged people in the local community.

Celebrations showcased different and unique aspects of India. The entire stadium was decorated inside and out with close to a million multicolored lights which was seen from a distance as people drove in. The entire concourse was decorated with garlands & flowers to welcome guests in the spirit of "Athiti Devo Bhava", which mean guests are to be seen as god.

High school volunteers welcomed the visitors with folded hands saying "Namasthe". A huge deity of Hindu God Ganesha known to be the remover of obstacles adorned the entrance.

Attendees were treated with further visual delights as they walked in to see 70 beautifully decorated red satin draped shops glittering with lights adorning the entire concourse, selling traditional jewelry, clothing and sundry items briskly, and a food court offering cuisine from different parts of India.

Children had a wonderful time with a variety of treats to engage their interest in e.g. free balloons, face painting, henna, playground, moon walks, petting zoo, pony rides, exploring fire engine and police cruiser. There were games such as shooting the demon with bow and arrow and demon shaped

piñatas filled with candy, which the children delighted in breaking with a stick.

Divine meet & Greet was arranged in the concourse where-in audience could interact with artists dressed up as historical characters. Both kids and parents enjoyed taking pictures with them. Beating of musical drums accompanied merriment and dancing by many.

The Constellation field was a visual delight with effigies of demons (to be consumed by fire later) on one hand; a beautiful temple of the prominent Hindu God 'Ram' decorated with 6 feet high elephants on either side in the center field; and a towering 25 feet high inflatable replica of Hindu God, Hanuman on the other side. The huge concert style stage built on the second base of the stadium with large LED screens held everyone's attention, where a number of stage performances continued from 5 p.m. onwards.

Several children dressed up as inspirational characters from Indian history, enthusiastically participated in the costume contest. Houston's best dance schools performed variety of dances in the spirit of Diwali Dussehra Theme.

Mesmerizing performances such as Brides of India, 10 Vishnus, Egyptian Spiritual Dance by Tanoura dancer, Action packed Ram leela Yuddh Kand, Eight minute Ramayan Dance kept audience captivated. A helicopter rose petals shower to Coronate GOD Ram grandly concluded stage performances.

The chief guest for the event was Texas Governor Gregg Abbott who flew in from Austin to celebrate Diwali with 10,000 plus attendees at Skeeter's stadium. He fondly talked about his visit to India earlier this year, his meeting with Prime Minister Modi, and with Indian Industry leaders. He spoke about the growing friendship and trade between India and Texas and the similarities between Indian and Texan values. Abbott talked about values that Diwali stands for, i.e.

'Victory of good over Evil', 'Knowledge over ignorance', 'light over darkness' and 'hope over despair'. The growing similarity of shared values such as education, entrepreneurship, economic advancement, and compassion will continue to bring the communities of India, Texas and Indian Americans closer to each other.

Congressman Pete Olson was The Parade Marshal for the Dussehra Parade, the highlight of the evening for which audience patiently waited.

Dussehra Parade led by Olson holding the Indian flag was followed by community at large. Many Temples, Ismaili Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, local groups, cultural organizations, faith and service based organizations participated in the parade, representing unity in diversity. Floats from 45 different organizations depicted Indian culture, heritage and

scenes from Indian History. Wells Fargo stage coach majestically pulled by four horses followed by Jagganath Chariot by Orissa Culture Center concluded the spectacular parade.

Priest from different temples in Houston together performed Maha Aarti, the final prayers to conclude the event; a ritual to worship, glorify and thank Lord Ram (God) for the celebrations and for the wellbeing of all living beings in the world. Thousands at the stadium switched on their phone flash lights while kids switched on their finger lights given earlier and participated silently in Maha Aarti.

The event concluded with the countdown for effigy burning of the demons, followed by remarkable Diwali fireworks to celebrate the 'Victory of Good over Evil'.

The event not only featured people from various back-

grounds but also made everyone feel welcome.

For example, Jessica Gonzalez from the Swami Dayanand Education Foundation noted "This is such a lively event, and although I am not Indian, I feel like I am a part of it."

Ranjit Singh of the Sikh National Center echoed this sentiment by saying "I have celebrated this event since I was a child, and this celebration does a great job of representing various cultures and religions."

When asked about their experience, another visitor said "The Dusherra Diwali mela was the most spectacular event I had ever attended. I have not seen something so big in India too. The maha-aarti was cherry on the cake, thousands of people doing Aarti together reminded me of Shri ganga river Aarti in Haridwar. This was my first time here and I'm bounded for a lifetime now".