

Tens of thousands descend on Sugar Land stadium for Diwali celebration

By Ana Goni-Lessan, Staff writer

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Tikka is applied on the forehead of Sushma Panthi, left, as she is welcomed by Kinal Mittal, 17, to the Diwali Festival of Lights event in Sugar Land, Saturday, Oct. 20, 2018.

Photo: Marie D. De-Jesús, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

The sounds of drums and Indian dance music echoed Saturday night through Skeeter Stadium in Sugar Land, a place usually filled with fans cheering to the crack of baseball bats.

Yellow banners reading “Jai Shri Ram,” or “Victory to Lord Rama,” hung from the walkway’s ceiling. Dozens of red-tented vendor booths strung together with twinkle lights showcased saris, linens, candles and jewelry. Gold bangles glittered under the fluorescent lights.

This year marks the seventh annual Diwali and Dussehra festival by Shri Sita Ram Foundation, a nonprofit that provides funding to programs that promote Vedic culture. The holiday, which falls around Nov. 7, is also called the Hindu Festival of Lights and recognizes the victory of good over evil.

“It’s an event to display our culture, Indian heritage,” said Kris Marepelli, event commander.

Marepelli said she expected a crowd of 10,000 people to come to this year’s festival, which featured Gov. Greg Abbot as chief guest and U.S. Rep. Pete Olson as parade marshal. The Indian community is one of Houston’s fastest-growing populations, jumping 83 percent from 2000 to 2012, according to the Migration Policy Institute.

Children acted in plays of Indian epics on a stage in the middle of Constellation Field, and families took photos with people dressed as gods and goddesses from Indian scriptures. A parade and fireworks closed out the celebration.

Nila Patel, owner of OmniHeena in Sugar Land, was selling henna tattoos, drawing flowers and swirl designs on hands at her booth. Patel, 30, learned how to tattoo with henna when she was young and has had at booth at this event for the past three years.

“It’s really fun. People really like this henna,” she said. “They really like the color because it stays up to seven days.”

Saif Adil, 34, said he came to the festival with his wife and 5-year-old, Kabil, to connect with the Indian community. While Kabil was jumping in a bounce house, Adil noted that the little boy hasn’t spent much time in India.

“He’s more Texan than I will ever be,” Adil said. “It’s for him to see and watch and learn and continue to be a part of [the community].”