

## A Dusshera Mela that Many Had Dreamt About Finally Makes History



More than 8000 people attended the first ever Dusshera Mela this past Sunday at the Constellation Field in Sugar Land.

By **Jawahar Malhotra**

SUGAR LAND: For a while, all the pushing and shoving as you moved along with small steps in the crowd of people felt good. It felt nostalgic – a little like being back at New Delhi Railway Station after the train arrives and you just get carried along with the flow as everyone tries to get out all at once.

But the crowd this past Sunday, November 4 at the Constellation Field baseball stadium in Sugar Land off Highway 6 had just seen something historic happen in Texas, something akin to being back at the Ram Leela grounds in New Delhi itself: Dusshera celebrated complete with burning eight foot tall effigies of the vanquished demon king Ravan, his giant brother Kumbhakaran and son Meghnath set at the far edge of the baseball diamond.

And hordes of desis mingled on the concourse, stopped by the merchandise booths, crowded the Natura ice cream stall and stood in the long line for fresh *dosas* made by Sankalp in the concessions stand. Some bought fashion jewelry, others got *mehndi* designs and the kids got lounged at the toy booths while others strolled to the kiddies playground area and for face painting. Many more walked over to get a closer look at the two sets of effigies (imported from New Delhi) – the eight foot ones at First Base which were later burnt and the 25 foot ones at Third Base which were not and were there for effect. It was a Dusshera Mela that had not been seen before in the Metroplex.

It has long been a dream of the Hindu community in the Houston area to celebrate the month long festivities that culminate in Diwali (which falls on Tuesday, November 13 this year) with a large outpouring of people and a huge fireworks display to mark the traditional return of Ram, Sita and Lakshman back to Ayodhya many centuries ago after defeating the demons that plagued Earth.

Although there have been smaller fireworks displays at area temples – notably the Swami Narayan Temple many years ago – none came close to encapsulating the Hindu experience in the manner that people witnessed last Sunday night.

Darshak Thakkar (right) with his Krishna Sounds Band.



Convinced that his Lord Ram was the one who was guiding him and his wife Vinni to celebrate the most popular and joyous occasion in Hinduism, Dr. Arun Verma, an engineer-turned-businessman and devoted Hindu, set out to bring the Ram Leela to the large stage two years ago, with the creative association of Kusum Sharma, a talented dancer and choreographer. This year, Verma's new teamup with dancers Rathna Kumar, Divya Unni and Shiva Mathur staged a more ambitious Ram Leela at the Wortham Theatre downtown (*see IAN Nov. 2, 2012*).

But this year, Verma also had a much larger goal in his sights, nothing less than performing the Ram Leela onstage in the open, with a burning of the effigies later would satisfy him. "I am doing this all in the service of my Lord Ram," remarked Verma, who often deflects compliments that are sent his way. With the support of two dozen sponsors and several advertisers, Verma had planned for the past eight months to hold the joint Ram Leela and Dusshera Mela, separated by a week.

And there he stood, on a built up stage between first and second base in Constellation Field, welcoming the sponsors, speaking between the songs and performances that started in late afternoon and greeting Sugar Land Mayor Jim Thompson and US Congressman from District 22 Pete Olson and then stepping aside for actors to perform the fight to rescue Sita and kill Ravan scenes from the Ram Leela. After the performance, Sita, Ram, Lakshman and Hanuman made a round of the stadium seated in the back of a pickup truck past the thousands of people who sat in the seats on both sides of the stadium, which can hold 9,500 for concerts. All of this and the Mela's stage shows were broadcast on the stadium's giant video screen.

"We had over 8,000 people here tonight," said an ecstatic Verma as he took a minute to grasp the scene, "according to the counters at the gates. That has never happened before in Houston." He had been featured with Shalini Aggarwal a few days earlier on ABC Channel 13's Visions morning show and related the story of his quest to glorify Lord Ram.

When the moment came, Verma asked for the floodlights to be turned off and then with small "pows" the effigies burst into flames, one at a time, with Ravan (in the purple papier-mache outfit) going last. Fireworks burst into the air from behind and above the stadium to the delight of the old and young alike, with different colored rockets lighting up the dark, mild Fall sky, and culminated in a crescendo of multi-colored starbursts.

And just when the field show had left off, Darshak Thakkar and his Krishna Sounds Band struck up their musical medley in the concourse above first base, with an expanse of concrete in front of them open for dancers to crowd and show their moves. Many did just that for the next hour, but many others joined the stream of people to push and nudge their way to the exit, grabbing a handful of *badam-kharot* (almond-walnut) *prasad* from the volunteers, just before they passed through the gates.