

Floats, Fireworks, Floodlights at Skeeter's! 10,000 attend Ram Leela, Dusshera and Diwali Mela 2013

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Dr. Arun Verma and Dr. Nik Nikam hosting the event



Carriage carrying Sri Ram, Sita, Lakshman and Haunam during the parade. Photos provided: Muhammad "Mo" Muizz



Dr. Arun Verma honors media sponsor Koshy Thomas of Voice of Asia



Float of Narayana and Lakshmi followed by ISKCON Kirtan group



Lord Kartikeyan float by Sri Meenakshi Temple. Photo by Shobana Muratee

By Shobana Muratee

SUGAR LAND – One of the finest expressions of a community coming together was witnessed at the Skeeter's Stadium on 19th Oct where 10,000 Indian Americans and friends joined in the spectacular, most dramatic trio festivities celebrating Ram Leela, Dusshera and Diwali event was organized by Shri Sita Ram Foundation, USA in association with the Orissa Culture Center and the India Studies Program at the University of Houston.

Dr. Arun Verma, Houston's well known businessman, philanthropist and founder of Shri Sita Ram Foundation, USA, who had introduced large scale event to the Indian American community in Houston, said it could not have been possible without the support of the 50 orgar that joined in the effort.



Priests of local Hindu Temples performing the Maha Arati at the Skeeter's Stadium. Photo provided: Muhammad "Mo" Muizz

This year's attendance outnumbered the 7000 from last year and it also included many extra features like a parade complete with elaborate floats like the elegant Wells Fargo Stage Coach, The University of Houston float carrying a huge cutout of Saraswati devi (Goddess of Knowledge), Sri Meenakshi Temple's silver peacock with Lord Kartikey riding it, Durga Maa, Sri Lakshmi Narayana, Rath Yatra by Orissa Culture Center, Ram Darbar on a two horse Rath, and Ravan Darbar, and more. Plus the Color Guards and Pipe Band from Ismaili community, Tassa Band, Bhangra Team by Nishani, Garba Team by U of H, American Band by HBU and the Kirtan Groups from ISKCON and Gaudia Matha added to the spectacular show.

There was something for everyone to learn, especially for children to participate and imbibe the rich ancient heritage of Indian culture. The costume competition was organized by Kiran Verma where 50 children of various age groups participated. Ashirwad Blessing, a Vedic school headed by Geetha and Sridhar Ravula had Ramayan Live, a multimedia presentation and competition among seven teams of five to seven people each. They had the seven kaands of Valmiki Ramayan on display where the participants made presentations. They were all dressed up in costumes to represent various characters from the Ramayan. The three winning teams received trophies and cash prizes. Bhajans were presented by groups from renowned classical groups and temples in Houston. The celebrations of triumph of Good over Evil concludes the Dusheera and ushers in the Festival of Lights celebrating Shri Ram's return to his kingdom in Ayodhya along with his consort Sita devi and brother Lakshmana. Their exile and encounter with evil King of Lanka, Ravana and return to Ayodhya triumphantly was portrayed in the well strung two-hour ballet Ram Leela, directed by Dr. Rathna Kumar, Founder of Samskriti and Anjali School of Dance. Sugar Land Mayor Pro-Tem Bridget Yeung inaugurated the RAM LEELA stage show.

The celebrations started at 4pm and concluded with Maha Arti, accompanied with bhajans and nearly 3,000 diwali diyas (battery-operated) under the moonlit skies, performed by high priests representing various Hindu temples and was followed with the burning of the effigies of Ravan, Meghnath, and Kumbhakarn – symbolic of triumph over evil. Later, the Laser Light show and fireworks lit the packed Skeeter's Stadium until 10pm that night, giving a fitting finale. The event was emceed mainly by Dr. Nik Nikam and Dr. Arun Verma and a segment by Kalasuda Devi dasi. Congressman Al Green and Congressman Pete Olson graced the occasion and gave their messages. Dr. Verma recognized Grand Sponsors Wells Fargo and Mercedes Benz of Sugar Land, among others including individual sponsors and media sponsors like Voice of Asia. More than fifty vendors and association had their booths of food, apparels, jewelry and other items.



Durga Maa float. Photo credit Shobana Muratee

Free balloons, face painting and clowns were provided for all children. The tickets were kept at a minimum of \$3.00 (went up to \$5.00 near the event time) to enable as many parents with small children to have access to the event. The tickets were free for children under 3 and many students got free access. The organizers felt that every child should be able to attend this event which is taken for granted by every child in India, during this festival season. There were also kids zone for children to play plus any number of toys from various vendors. Two lucky winners won free tickets from Houston to anywhere in India, courtesy of Riya Travel and Turkish Airlines.

The Ram Leela, Dusshera and Diwali delivered more than it had promised – a show that spared nothing to capture the true essence of Indian culture and vibrancy of its festivals. It was indeed the most auspicious way of ushering the New Year!