

India Herald

Houston gets ready for Ramleela

The second Grand Ramleela performance by 100 plus performers from the Houston Indian community is scheduled to take place on Nov. 13 at the University of Houston's Cullen Auditorium.

The Houston Ramleela is carefully planned in November between the Hindu festivals Dusshera and Diwali to be enjoyed beyond any scheduling conflicts from numerous celebrations of Durga Poojas, Garbas during the sharad Durga Navratra in the month of October and Diwali celebrations in later part of November. The 2011 Ramleela in most cities in India started on September 27 and ended on October 6 with Vijaydashami, the culmination day of Navaratri.

Ramleela is a stage play of epic happenings from life of Hindu God Ram enacted in the form of a play and folk opera.

The performers who play the role of Lord Ram and Lakshman set the fire through an arrow to the huge effigies of Ravan, Kumbhakaran and Meghanath on Vijaya Dashami day and the skies light up with sparkles and fireworks of sorts.

Watching Ramleela constitutes a divine experience for the planners, viewers and the performers -- all.

The performing characters manifest divinity through the play by the viewing public. The Ramleela episodes reinforce noble character, family values of obedience, respect, and reverence for elders and holy men, and victory of good over evil. Watching Ramleela together is a memorable family event.

In most Ramleelas, particularly those played in North India, Ramcharitmanas, written by the 16th century saint Goswami Tulsidas is recited as dialogue as well as recited by priests from specially erected platforms.

In most traditional versions, open-air productions are staged by local Rameela committees in centrally located permanent Ramleela grounds.

Ramleela is an institution of some age and wide geographic spread beyond the bounds of the Indian continent.

In areas where it is enacted it draws largest public attendance of all festivals as well as creates a non-sectarian appeal.

At international level, as of year 2005, Ramleela has the honor of being a UNESCO cultural festival and is also performed in many countries like South Africa, Mauritius, Fiji, Canada, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, England and other Great British countries, Australia and Thailand.

The plot story of Ramleela is simple; Ram, the incarnation (avatar) of Vishnu, born to King Dasarath of Ayodhya upon performance of vedic rites (yagna), demonstrates divinity and perfect character at an early age.

By sixteen he performs many supernatural acts of valour and marries Sita, daughter of King Janak.

Being the favored son of the King for taking over the kingdom of Ayodhya, when the time for Ram's coronation comes, Kekayi, one of the three queens to the King, begins to get worried that Ram may prove less than filial to her son, Bharat.

Based on advice from her favorite maid Manthara, queen Kekayi invokes a long forgotten boon granted her by Dasarath, and forces the old king to banish Ram to the forest for 14 years while the throne would go to her son, Bharat.

Ram leaves for the forest cheerfully fulfilling his father's commitment created by the grant of the boons. His wife Sita and half-brother, Lakshman dutifully join him for the years of exile. Ram lives in forests, visits holy men (Rishis), and kills off demons along his journey on foot through the exile years.

Back at Ayodhya, the king dies from separation of son Ram and Bharat refuses to accept a throne that was gained by deceiving an elder brother he worshipped as a god.

Ram refuses to come back to Ayodhya inspite of sincere requests from Bharat and the constituents of Ayodhya.

The commitment of a king cannot be altered as it would dishonor the king's dynasty. Bharat rules the kingdom as a regent for Ram. One of the exploits Ram encounters during his exile is demoness Sroopnakha, demon king Ravan's sister who is attracted to the two brothers. She is punished by Laksman and carries her wounds and inflammatory tales to her brother Ravan who is a supreme scholar and warrior. Ravan plans to avenge his sister's insult by kidnapping Sita while Ram and Lakshman are away.

While searching for Sita, Ram makes friends with the Vanar-King Sugriva and gains assistance of great Hanuman, a highly revered character in all Hindu mythology.

Known as the son of the wind God, wiser than the wisest and yet always a humble servant to Ram, Hanuman leads a search for Sita and comes back with news of her location. Ram builds a bridge across the ocean to Ravan's island of Lanka and attacks with help of an army of vanar soldiers.

Ravana's arrogance and lust for Sita results in demise of all his sons and brothers except for Vibhishan, who defected from Ravan before the war and ultimately revealed to Ram the secret location for attack for Ravan's death in battle.

After crowning Vibhishan at Lanka, Ram returns to Ayodhya with Sita and brother Lakshman in a flying chariot, in time to be crowned as king of Ayodhya as his exile period ends on Diwali day.

In Houston, you have an excellent opportunity for a heartfelt family experience with your children, grandchildren and friends on November 13th, Sunday from 4-7 p.m at the Cullen Auditorium of University of Houston.

Historical records suggest that Ramleela in theatrical format has been staged for at least 300 or so years. Over the centuries, it has helped bring traditional Hindu ideals to the young generations and preserve the Hindu culture in periods of stressful and difficult era of foreign rule in Northern India.

For sponsorships, purchase of tickets and other details, you may contact Usha Mehra at 281-550-5877 or e mail at arunverma@bvm-group.com.

—Usha Mehra