

Laser show, cultural, floating diyas mark San Antonio Diwali Mela

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SAN ANTONIO

Downtown San Antonio in Texas was aglow with laser show, lighting of diya floats on the banks of pond, showcasing cultural milieu of Indian dance and music and food, fun and frolic last week marking the third Diwali Mela at Hemisfair Park near Tower of Americas. The first Saturday of every November is celebrated as festival of lights in this first-ever San Antonio City sanctioned Diwali celebrations attended by close to 15,000 people.

The gala event was organized by the City of San Antonio with the support of India Association of San Antonio (IASA) and Alamo Asian American Chamber of Commerce. The importance of the city government was evident with the attendance of the Mayor of San Antonio Julian Castro and two former Mayors - Henry Cisneros and Phil Hardberger all of who have showered praise on the contribution of Indian-Americans to the City and the value the community brings in the form of culture, music and dance.

This annual celebration of Indian culture featured Indian dance and entertainment, an Indian craft market, various food vendors selling authentic cuisine samplings, vendors selling from Indian handicrafts to saris, consumer products to household wares attracting a large gathering of locals and desis as well. The bazaar had henna body art designers to decorate one's hands and food stalls to cater to the mouth. Crowds started pouring in from 5 PM thanks to the perfect weather and enjoyed the evening till the cops cleared the park well past 10 PM.

Due to fire safety regulations and dry weather in the absence of rains forced the organizers to go in for laser show instead of fireworks as in the past two years, according to Dr. Bala 'Vish' Vishwanathan, one of the brains behind organizing Diwali Mela and a prominent Indian-American physician of the city. "Several cities in the US have city or state sponsored Diwali Mela but here we have been asked by the City to put up a grand show as city-san-

tioned event three years ago and the tradition continues," he said.

The City of San Antonio had agreed to celebrate the festival of lights not only as a mark of respect to the world's largest Hindu festival but also it helps unite the people across the community. Hundreds of Caucasians, Hispanics, African-Americans, Europeans and Asians attend the grand festivity that brightens the skies of the city, he said.

The organizers had given opportunity to every available linguistic group to showcase their state's cultural heritage on the stage abutting the pond in the form of music and dance such as Gujarat, Punjab, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra etc. There were different dance forms such as bhangra, kolattam, Mohiniyattam, Odissi, Kathakali and Kathak not to mention Bollywood dance and Zumba by Spectrum Club.

The current Mayor and former Mayors and their spouse inaugurated the floating diyas by gently placing the lighted candles on the surface of the pond. Over 1000 diyas were then let into the water by the participants. The idea of floating lighted candle lamps was conceived by the team this year and the glittering diyas floated around creating an atmosphere of a real Indian festival. The organizers ensured that volunteers pick up all the diyas at the end of the show so that the artificial park pond is not polluted.

Speakers who conveyed the Diwali greetings and praised the organizers of the event on the dias include included Mayor Julian Castro, Joaquin Castro who is contesting for US Congress, former Mayors Phil Hardberger and Henry Cisneros; City Councilmen - Diego Bernal and Chris Medina; County Commissioner Tommy Adkisson and Indian Consul General of Houston Sanjeev Arora. The Russian Consul General in Houston Nikolay V. Sofinskiy also attended the celebrations.

"This year's free event celebrates Indian culture and traditions, while also showcasing the City's Sister-City Agreement with Chennai and its efforts to provide quality cultural programming to all San Antonians," said Kausi Subra-

maniam, president of the task force on sister city and member of Diwali SA Committee and a key organizer of Diwali mela.

"Like all of its Sister-City Agreements with cities around the world, the City of San Antonio is proud of its partnership with Chennai, India. The Diwali San Antonio Festival of Lights has grown to become one of San Antonio's signature cultural events. We are thrilled to co-host the festival once again and to continue to provide meaningful cultural programming to residents and tourists, alike," said Elizabeth Costello, Director of the City's International Relations office.

"We are proud that this event continues to grow each year and that the community of San Antonio, as well as visitors to the city, join us to celebrate the traditions of Diwali, India's largest and most festive holiday," said Kausi Subramaniam.

Diwali San Antonio Festival of Lights is the only major celebration showcasing Indian culture in San Antonio. Since signing a Sister City Agreement with Chennai, India in 2008, the City, especially through its International Relations office, has committed to strengthening its relationship with the Indian community of San Antonio. The International Relations office attracts global trade, foreign investment and provides protocol services for the San Antonio community and strives to foster foreign relations on behalf of the City in various capacities, said Hema Vishwanathan and Vijaya Botla, other key organizers of the event.

The core group has formed a non-profit named Anuja SA to coordinate with the city for the celebrations and has formed an alliance reaching out to other sections of the population. Diwali has come to be accepted on par with Oktoberfest and St. Patrick's Day in San Antonio thanks to the initiative of the Indian-American community leaders. Destination Diwali with fixed date every year attracts tourists to San Antonio from other major cities such as Austin, Dallas and Houston and the city government is more than happy to work with the core group to make the event an all out success, Hema said.



Henry Cisneros, Kausi Subramaniam, Vijaya Botla, Julian Castro, Phil Hardberger, Sanjeev Arora, Hema Vishwanathan and Dr Bala Vishwanathan



Kathakali dance at the festival



kids and adults enjoy letting the lighted diya float in the pond

Ex NY Consul Cherian dies in Afghanistan

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NEW YORK

Former Consul for Visa and Passport in Consulate General of India in New York Thomas Cherian and presently Consul General of India in Afghanistan died on Thursday while undergoing an operation for a blood clot at Mazar-e-Sharief. He was 56. Thomas, posted recently, had a fall in the bathroom and was rushed to a hospital at Mazar-e-Sharief, family members said. His body was

flown to New Delhi and from there taken to his native Kerala for burial. He is survived by his wife and two children.

He breathed his last while undergoing an operation, they added. Thomas had a long tenure in the External Affairs Ministry and had served in various capacities in New Delhi, New York, Kuwait, Kenya, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Kabul.

He was a former Kuwait Mar Thoma parish member, and currently a member of Dwaraka Mar Thoma Church, Delhi. His mother

parish is Pallickal St. Thomas Mar Thoma Church.

External Affairs Minister S M Krishna has condoled the untimely demise of Cherian, describing him as a devoted and competent officer who was serving his nation with dedication.

In New York, the diplomats and staff of the Consulate General of India led by Consul General Ambassador Prabhu Dayal condoled the death of their former colleague and conveyed their sympathies to the grieving family members.

Obama lauds role of Sikhism on Guru Nanak Birthday

OUR BUREAU

WASHINGTON

President Barack Obama has made the following observation on the anniversary of the Birth of Guru Nanak Dev. "I send my best wishes to all those observing the anniversary of the birth of Guru Nanak Dev Ji, the first Sikh Guru", he said.

In addition he said, "On this occasion, we are reminded of the fundamental principles of Sikhism, including the equality of all

people, the sanctity of living an honest life, and the importance of service to our neighbors. I'm proud that during my presidency the White House hosted the first celebration of the birth of Guru Nanak, and our country is grateful for the extraordinary contributions that Sikh Americans have made to our nation.

As Sikhs across America and around the world celebrate the life of Guru Nanak, all of us can draw inspiration from his message of equality, honesty, and helping those who are in need."

