

Hindu festival of lights kicks off seventh year at SLC library

By JUDY FAHYS
The Salt Lake Tribune

Geeta Behl, of Taylorsville, found herself transported thousands of miles back home, only with new friends and in a new place: the downtown Salt Lake City Library.

But it would be hard to tell from her broad smile and crystal-studded Indian dress if it fell short of the Diwali, or festival of lights, that she left behind a decade ago.

"We just like being in touch with India," she said Saturday, waiting in line for a henna tattoo, while her 6-year-old son watched a magic show. "It brings us all together."

This year's Diwali at the library, now a tradition of seven years, drew more than 500 people. Whether their roots were in Nepal, India, Malaysia, Bangladesh or somewhere else, they filled the room with the same sort of giddy excitement associated with Christmas or Hanukkah.

City Library Director Beth Elder helped organizer Riti Bhatnagar light the lamp to get the celebration under way as children giggled and squirmed joyfully in their seats. The lamplighting symbolized the triumph of the good in life over the bad.

Then Ashtok Joshi, the former owner, president and chief executive officer of the advanced materials company, Salt Lake City-based Ceramtec Inc., urged everyone to use the five-day celebration to become more giving, forgiving and loving.

"And if we do that, not only can we say 'Happy Diwali' to others, but we can say 'Happy Diwali' to ourselves," he said.

In that spirit, Joshi donated \$10,000 to the India Cultural Center of Utah in South Jordan, a co-sponsor of Saturday's event.

The crowd enjoyed a sampling of new and old.

Divya Narayanan performed the traditional "Vandana," or Dance of the Enchantress. And seven

Surachandam Dance School students twirled through the Kathak dance in shimmering, vivid dresses catching the lights, their cuffs of ankle bells fueling the crowd's enthusiasm.

A children's choir sang. Teen girls had the audience clapping the rhythm of their Bollywood dance.

"By dancing, they worship the goddess," said Safi

Safiullah, one of the festival organizers.

Safiullah calls the event an important bridge between traditions that many Hindus grew up with and those they are coming to know. For him, bringing the celebration to his home of 23 years fills a gap. He said it makes him think to himself: "Is it not great to see this thing happening?"

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Divya Narayanan performs the traditional "Vandana," or Dance of the Enchantress, during Diwali, or festival of lights, on Saturday at the Salt Lake City Main Library.