

Celebrating culture of South Asia

50,000 attend annual Indo-American Fair

BY ZACK NEEDLES
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

WEST WINDSOR — It's not without good reason that the Indo-American Fair is the largest of its kind in the area.

Celebrating its fourth year, the fair (also known as Mela 2006, which is Sanskrit for "get together") has quickly become an institution in Mercer County — a celebration of South Asian art, food, music and culture.

After being forced to cancel Saturday's festivities due to merciless rain, the fair was rescheduled for Sunday and Monday, setting up shop at Mercer County Park.

"It's important for the younger generations to learn about their culture."

YASH SOI, fair trustee

Despite the last-minute date change, organizers said more than 50,000 people attended the festival, which boasted crowds of about 10,000 for each of its first two years and about 25,000 last year.

Yash Soi, one of three chief trustees in charge of the fair, said he believed much of the success can be attributed to the growing South Asian population in Central Jersey.

"The community is growing quite a bit," he said. "In West Windsor, Hightstown, East Windsor, Lawrenceville, and Trenton especially. There is a good number of South Asian people in those areas. We also attract people from Pennsylvania and Edison."

And this year there was certainly plenty for the local South Asian community to be attracted to, including a wide assortment of food, arts and crafts, traditional dance performances by local schools, and a number of musical perform-

South Asian culture, and even a fashion show by popular South Asian clothing line Sai Fashions.

New Brunswick resident Veena Singh brought her brother Arun Kaushish, his wife, Meenu, and their son, Ayush, to the fair during their two-day visit from their home in North Carolina.

"I read about it in the newspaper and was interested to see what they had here," said Singh, a first-timer at the fair.

The event featured a number of huge inflatable moon bounces for children to jump around in. Soi said it's no mistake that the fair makes an attempt to attract kids, but the intention is for them to learn something about the culture in addition to playing on the moon bounces.

"It's important for the younger generations to learn about their culture," he said. "To see kids here is a great thing."

Of course, one certainly didn't have to be of South Asian descent to enjoy all the fair had to offer.

For instance, Gary Hamilton, an architect from Ewing and a self-proclaimed "Indiophile" who has visited India three times and hopes to return again, said he came to the fair to further immerse himself in the culture he's become so fascinated with, despite the fact that it's not part of his ethnic heritage.

"I love the culture," Hamilton said. "For an ancient culture, there's a lot to learn from it. Also, the people in India are so gentle and kind. And, as an architect, I'm fascinated with the antiquity and modern aspects of their structures. There is also a variety of climates and topography there. It's very interesting."

For Soi, attracting people of all different heritages and backgrounds is one of the most important reasons for holding the fair.

"Our aim to help promote the Indian culture and we welcome Americans," he said. "We want to let people know about our rich culture. We're proud to be Indi-



PHOTOS BY DAVID

Thousands of fair-goers attended the Mela 2006 festival at Mercer County weekend. Above, Orchi Dutta, 18, of Plainsboro performs for the crowd. Fair also a big part of the fair with numerous Indian dishes available for sampling.

