

Fremont: Festival of India spotlights a formerly invisible culture

Festival founder started the event 25 years ago to demonstrate to kids and community the value of his homeland's culture.

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Aric Crabby/Bay Area News Group

Dancers with the Haryanvi Bay Area Association perform along Paseo Padre Parkway during the India Day Parade on Sunday, Aug. 13, 2017, in Fremont, Calif. The annual event celebrates India's Independence, and includes two days of activities that culminate with a parade in downtown Fremont.



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FREMONT — Twenty-five years ago, Fremont cardiologist and Indo-American Romesh Japra felt like a second-class citizen.

His kids would see it in school — “Go back to India” scrawled on a chalkboard. And he’d see it himself at the workplace and on the news.

“I discovered that as a doctor, others at the hospital would tell me not to have contact with their patients, not even talk to them,” he said. “And there were hate crimes happening against people from India — it was quite common.”

Yogi Chugh said people only knew of India what they saw on the news, and it wasn’t flattering — “snake charmers and cows in the street.”

Such was the backdrop when Japra founded the Festival of India in 1993 in an effort to showcase a culture and values that were being lost in America. What began on a whim with colleagues including Chugh quickly took root, and on Sunday, thousands from the Bay Area and beyond converged on Paseo Padre Parkway for a creeping parade of floats and marchers representing about 20 different regions of India as well as religious and community organizations.

It shows the broader community a little of what being from India is about. And perhaps more importantly, said Japra, it gives the youth an idea of where they’re from and something to be proud of.

“I called it ABCD — the American-Born Confused Desi,” said Japra. “But now I’m seeing confidence. They feel more empowered. Now it’s ABCI — the American-Born Confident Indian.”

The event, which is spread over the weekend, features various dance and cultural performances, including a variant of the “American Idol” song competition. It wraps up with a private party and mixer that brings out the Bay Area elite from business and tech to mingle with some big-name Bollywood stars from India, including parade Grand Marshal Manoj Bajpai.

“He is the Robert Redford of Bollywood,” said a somewhat star-struck Japra.



Bajpai, who rode through the parade in a horse-drawn carriage, said the pride he sees in the younger participants and watchers is “very much visible.”

“They love America, and being Americans, but at the same time they feel so rooted to the place where they come from,” said Bajpai, sequestered in a celebrity tent behind the main festival stage. “They may be second or third generation, and what they’re feeling is pride for the journey made

by their forefathers.”

Bajpai said that was particularly poignant on the 70th anniversary of India’s independence from the British. It’s a patriotic festival for both India and America, with an abundance of flags of both countries.

It’s also got a counter-event that has been around since its nascent days. Sunday saw about 100 Sikhs turn out to loudly protest, some beating shoes against a placard of pictures of India’s leaders.

“This is not our Independence Day,” said Punit Kaur of Fremont, who is now in her 20s but has been coming to protest since she was 5 years old. “Sikhs still don’t have rights in India. We cannot celebrate independence when it is something we never received.”

The group is “boisterous but peaceful,” said Fremont police Sgt. Paul McCormick. “They are respectful of the city; we have a good relationship with them.”