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Oh, Texas: The iconic clocktower beset with fireworks

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CULTURE

Diwali  
Deep in the Heart of Texas

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Each year at the University of Texas at Austin, the Hindu Students Association puts on a grand celebration of light that is a perfect fit for the Lone Star State

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BY SIVAGAMI NATESAN, AUSTIN

THE TOWER GLOWS ORANGE LIKE THE flame of a lamp illuminating the Austin skyline. On the campus of the University of Texas, one of America’s finer public institutions, the iconic UT Tower serves as a temple of higher learning. Today the tower has literally been converted into a temple—a Hindu temple—the three arches at the base serving as shrines for Ganesha, Lakshmi and Saraswati. The steps are decorated with little lamps forming the shapes of an Aum and a swastika. It is a cloudless, moonless, starlit night. The flame of the tower glows orange today in

honor of the festival. The stage is set for Diwali, Texas-style, hosted by the Hindu Students Association. This is one of the largest campuses in the United States, and approximately 3,000 of its 51,000 students are of Indian origin.

Celebration of faith is central to all cultures in all times. Adapting these celebrations to suit a different place and time is central to the sustaining of a culture. Here at UT, a dynamic group of students make this possible each year with their celebrations of Diwali, Holi and Navaratri. "It helps us tie back to our roots and express Hinduism in our own student way," says Eesha Gulati, a fourth-year undergraduate in communications and South Asian studies. Kokila Priya Muthu raman, a graduate who served on the executive committee of the Hindu Students Association during her four years here, explains, "The intent of this celebration is to share our culture with people who are not familiar with it. We want to share a part of who we are and increase awareness of Hinduism on campus."

The steady stream of guests entering the mall are greeted by students wishing them "Happy Diwali" and putting tilak on their foreheads. Each person is given a small plate decorated with Indian motifs, holding a bag of akshata (unbroken, turmeric-stained rice) and a bookmark with the dearly familiar Ravi Varma rendition of Lakshmi standing on a lotus. On the bookmark is a verse from the Devi Bhagavatam: "We meditate upon that principle of sentience reflected in all living beings that is the cause of the universe. May that Goddess, in the form of consciousness, inspire our thoughts."

The guests remove their shoes at the lower level of the south mall and walk up steps decorated with painted pots upturned to serve as bases for a line of diyas (lamps). The floor of the upper level has been lined with tarpaulin and white sheets designating the seating area. In front of the temporary temple, facing the havan kund (ceremonial fire pit), sits Brahmachari Girish Chaitanya, the acharya of Chinmaya Mission Austin. Four students are seated around the havan with him: Naveen Pattisapu, Tara Sharma, Atul Gupta and Jennifer Chou. Arjun Adapalli and Vishaal Sapuram lead bhajans, Arjun strumming his guitar, as people flow in to join the event.

As on any campus, the rainbow of students from many backgrounds is well represented. Some are perfectly dressed in impeccable, traditional Indian clothes; others come straight from their lab or study group wearing shorts and t-shirts. Troy Johnson, a construction planner with the university and part-time student, is

attending for his second year. “It gives me the opportunity to experience a different culture without going to India,” he says.

A few families bring their young children. Neha Patel is attending with her brother Paras and his wife, their two children and a cousin. “We are not very active in the community, and we have moved to Austin, away from our home in Houston, so this event gives us an opportunity to participate.” Sreenivaas, a graduate student in electrical and computer engineering, bows intently at the shrine. He is away from his home in Chennai for the first time. “I have been so connected to my roots in India for 23 years. I do my daily puja. It is special to have a havan for Diwali.”



Tara Sharma and Naveen Pattisapu greet guests with tilaks



While India remains the spiritual substratum for us all, the homes of the Indian diaspora are all over the world. That each of us has managed to make and sustain our homes retaining the Indian ethos is a testament to the strength of this culture that pervades our being socially, religiously and culturally. This was brought home by young Puja Patel, a first-year student working in the rangoli booth that the students have set up. “Each year my family meets for Diwali, and we do a big puja. I treasure the job of decorating the front of our home with rangoli. This year, for the first time, I am away from home. Working in the rangoli booth at this event is my way of connecting what I did at home with where I am on campus.”

In the storytelling booth, Parth Bhatt, a junior in economics and mathematics, enacts the story of Bali and Sugreeva, inviting fellow students to join in. In another booth the students craft thorans (hanging decorations) for the thresholds of their dorm rooms. At the bazaar booth, the students purchase small trinkets with tokens earned from participating in the other booths. This is a labor-intensive event, with over 60 volunteers carefully programmed into half-hour slots.

Dr. Soncia Reagins-Lilly, Senior Associate Vice President for Student Affairs and the Dean of Students at UT, explains that student events on this campus are entirely student-driven: “If the students are willing to advocate for what they want, the university is willing to support it.” The students must work with various university offices and private sponsors to come up with funding for the event. They are also responsible for all logistics— audio-visual, furniture, tents for the booths and activities, etc.—and for obtaining the required permits from the university, fire marshal and police department.

In 2002, when Varun Mehta came to UT, Navaratri was the more public event on the campus. On the weekend closest to Diwali, some 150 students would gather in a covered area on campus and sing bhajans. “I come from a tradition where Diwali is huge,” says Varun, a co-founder of the Hindu Students Association. “It was important to me that Diwali be celebrated on the actual date rather than on a convenient weekend. Here we were, students on a campus with nowhere to celebrate on Diwali day. On the weekend most students went home anyway.”



The crowd attending the havan and festivities; a boy explores the diyas decorating the steps of the mall



For Varun and his fellow students this festival meant a puja, fireworks and new clothes. Today the students hand out custom-printed T-shirts for publicity prior to the event. They arrange for a professional fireworks display that is shot from the school’s famed clocktower, lighting up the night sky and the faces of the delighted crowd—celebrating the victory of light over darkness, of knowledge over ignorance. The university only permits fireworks to be shot from the tower on one other occasion, and that is graduation night in May.

Amulya Aradhyula is a third-year student who bicycled to the event in her traditional ghagra outfit. She deeply appreciates the unifying nature of the event. Harold Wardlaw, a physics student, recounts, “I was first exposed to India only after coming to this campus. Now I cannot get enough of it. After coming here, I have worked in Delhi and am currently looking at internships in Pune. I cannot wait to go



“After class you turned to your friend and asked, ‘Can you please shed some light on what happened in class?’ It is this light in the form of knowledge that we seek to dispel our ignorance.”

Vice President Joe Biden spoke beautifully of that light in his address this year at the White House celebration of India’s Festival of Lights: “Folks, one thing that Diwali reminds us of is that there is a light within all of us, a light of knowledge and compassion, a light that empowers us to do good—to, as Abraham Lincoln said, respond to our better angels.... Every year, Diwali reminds us of the fundamental human bonds that unite us, which are much more powerful than those things that divide us. Right now people of four major faiths are celebrating Diwali. Millions of Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists in India and here in America are lighting lamps in their homes, reflecting on a year gone by and praying, as we all are here, for a good year to come.”

Beginning the rites, Brahmachari Girishji methodically explains the procedure and philosophy of each step of the havan to the audience. Any auspicious beginning starts with Ganesha, the elephant-headed Remover of Obstacles. We cannot proceed with any activity and expect success without removing the obstacles in our own mind. Next we pay respect to our lineage of teachers. He asks the audience to seek the blessings of each one’s lineage of teachers, a step whose importance is underlined on a university campus. He pays respect to his guru, Swami Chinmayananda, by quoting him: “Religion without philosophy is superstition. And philosophy without religion is sheer madness.”

He explains why Lakshmi havan is performed for Diwali: “Some people may look at Mother Lakshmi as just the green stuff in our pockets. She is much more than that. Lakshmi must be seen as the true prosperity of human life, the prosperity of wisdom.”

Each part of this universe is invoked in this havan. The planets are represented in betel nuts placed next to the kund. The embodied soul is represented by the kalasha (copper pot) filled with water; the human body is made up of the five elements, predominantly water. The thread tied around the kalasha represents the connection between the gross and the subtle bodies; it has at least 72 lines appearing with a prescribed number of intersections, representing the 72,000 subtle nerves in a human body—the channels through which the pranas, or vital forces, flow. It is into this kalasha of our own being that we welcome Lakshmi as the

true prosperity of the human body and mind.

After describing and then chanting the ceremonial sankalpa (expression of intent), Brahmachari Girishji explains, “Together we resolve to bring prosperity to the professors, students and staff of the university, represented by these four yajamans (officiants) seated here on either side of the havan kund.” He instructs, “When I say ‘swaha,’ you guys take a piece of dry coconut and place it in the fire. For those of you participating in the crowd, you guys take a few grains of akshata and place it on your Lakshmi bookmark.” His casual lingo reveals his own background of having grown up in the United States. Through his personal experience, he understands the mindset of a Hindu student on an American campus.



University town: The UT Tower beams, its three arches facing the mall at the center of the Austin campus



The fire grows steadily as he chants and explains the Purusha Suktam, an ancient hymn from the Rig Veda. He describes how the universe came out of fire and that the flames are responsible for conveying the prayers and offerings of the havan from this manifest world to the unmanifest world. As the fire peaks during the purnahuti (final offering), he directs the crowd to come forward, offer small pieces of dried coconut and accept prasad from the yajamans. The arati song, signaling the end of the rites, is played over the public address system while people young and old take turns offering arati at the three shrines at the base of the tower.

The crowd moves down one level to the lower part of the mall, clearing a stage for the cultural program. Pooja Raman, a secondyear student in the Business Honors program, performs a traditional Ganesha Vandanam, saying later that she couldn't believe she was dancing under the university tower, looking directly across at the

State Capitol dome. Dhivya Manogaran dances the glory of Shri Rama, befitting the event of Diwali. Vishaal Sapuram, a young classical singer and chitra vina player who graduated in December, performs a beautiful song.

Then it is time for the much-anticipated fireworks. "We completed our puja at home and then came here for the fireworks," says an Indian graduate student who brought his American wife and two young children, dressed perfectly in dhoti and ghagra. Their eyes reflect the scintillating fireworks.

The crowd mills around the tent where dinner is being served. There is a nominal charge, since the students were unable to get the food sponsored. The menu is representative of the celebration, Indian in essence but with a twist of imagination: paneer tikka burritos, jeera rice, naan, raita and chilled Mexican-style cucumber drinks made by a team of students. On a college campus, many people show up primarily for the cheap food!

There are so many ways to celebrate Diwali, even right here in middle America. Inspired students like those at the University of Texas have brought the celebrations right into the campus mall, the center of their university community. Brahmachari Girishji puts the event in perspective for the guests: "This is the land of the free and the home of the brave. What is true freedom? Knowledge is the greatest freedom we have." His words echo the line etched in stone above him on the base of the tower in giant, bold letters: "Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free."

Events like this Diwali celebration are held on campuses big and small all over the world where the Indian diaspora has extended. More and more, Americans and those of other cultures are coming to realize that their own deepest convictions have been expressed in Hindu thought since time immemorial. The world is truly one.