

## Indian culture fair a success at Civic Centre



Dressed in her traditional saris and wearing bangles on her wrists, Spoorthi Tammareddi danced to the song “Old is Gold” during the Indian Cultural Festival Saturday. [Enlarge photo](#) — Photo by [Kevin Anderson](#)

By [Caroline Boyer](#)

August 7, 2007

The gathering had all the typical trappings of a party, with music, dance and food, but it wasn't just any party — it was a cultural celebration.

The second annual Indian Cultural Festival Saturday at the Shawnee Civic Centre brought hundreds from around the Kansas City area to enjoy Indian food and a lively dance contest with 12 groups entered. The pinks, reds, greens and blues of sparkling saris and robes brought the center's more neutrally toned gymnasium to life.

Groups were judged on coordination, costumes, choreography and creativity, and a wide range of groups entered. Some were like those of Joyeeta Chakraborty, who entered two groups of girls from her Mudra Academy in Overland Park. Chakraborty said the girls, who ranged in age from 5 to 15, had been practicing for a month, and the festival would be one of their three main performances during the year.

The girls performed traditional dance moves to songs from Bollywood films, combining intricate hand and head motions with elaborate body movements. The teenage group, dancing to “Chilman” and dressed in glittering red and gold, received third place.

Then there was a group of recent high school graduates from Gardner who had choreographed the performance themselves. The big difference between this group and others was not only the fact that it was all-male — only two other groups had male dancers — but also that only one of the five members was of Indian descent.

Sundeep Singh and his sister, Shevy Kur, began the group two years ago by recruiting Singh's classmates, including David Frazier, Billy Pelkey, Nate Stoner and Will Mallory, to form a dance group to enter the school's talent show.

With Kur's choreography, the boys learned the traditional Bhangra dance in two weeks, and the friends were a hit at school.

"The whole school loved it, and it became really popular," Singh said.

In addition to performances with the school's dance team and at school diversity functions, the group has danced at several Punjabi Society events and twice at diversity events put on by the Hallmark Company. Though the group will scatter to various colleges this fall, Singh said he and Mallory hope to create a new group at Kansas University.

It seems the judges were impressed by their performance, which began with Singh playing a Dhol, a drum used for the Punjabi Bhangra dance, and included acrobatic movements in which the dancers flipped each other head over heels or leaped from the back of another kneeling dancer. The group received the first-place prize of \$500.

The festival was organized by the Punjabi Cultural Society of the Heartland, founded in July 2004. Shawnee resident Sukhdarshan Dhaliwal, one of the society's founders and its current president, said the society was created to help Punjabi natives maintain the traditions of their homeland in America, including passing those traditions to the next generation.

The Punjab region is located in northwestern India, sharing a border with Pakistan. The culture places much importance on its music and dance; as Dhaliwal says, "They are very fond of music and their cultural traditions."

Dhaliwal estimated that there are now 400 to 500 families from the Punjab region of India who have relocated in the Kansas City area. The Shawnee Civic Centre has been home to many of the Punjabi Cultural Society events, including the Lohri and Vaisakhi festivals specific to the Punjab region.

But Dhaliwal said the society decided to begin an annual Indian Cultural Festival to celebrate all of India's cultural traditions.

“This time we thought we need to this is more like a unity thing, we need to unite all cultures together on one stage,” he said.

The Civic Centre has been the chosen site both because of its ability to accommodate large crowds and because Dhaliwal, a Shawnee resident, could easily access the facility. But next year, the organization may need to provide more space; while the first annual festival brought about 300 people, this year’s event pushed the 500-person limit for the Civic Centre gym.

“I was kind of surprised to see that myself,” Dhaliwal said of the large crowd, which created long lines for the buffet of traditional Indian food.

The society’s next focus, however, will be celebrating the release of Dhaliwal’s third book of Punjabi poetry, “Sach De Sunmukh,” a saying that means “In the front of truth.”