

Punjabi event adds dance contest, expands to Indian Cultural Festival

By RON KNOX

Special to The Star



Children recently practiced a Punjabi folk dance in anticipation of Saturday's Indian Cultural Festival at the Shawnee Civic Center.

It all starts with the rhythm, Sukhdarshan Dhaliwal says.

When one person steps, the rest step in kind. The music, he says, pushes them. Maybe they step together 30 seconds or so. The music, as always, dictates the dancer's rhythm.

"Everybody has to coordinate, depending on the rhythm," Dhaliwal says.

For the second year the children of Punjabi Indians will step in time to the music, only they'll do it in Johnson County. The Indian Cultural Festival, sponsored by the Punjabi Cultural Society of the Heartland, will include 12 groups of Punjabi youngsters, ranging in age from 9 to 20, in a dance competition with serious cash and prizes on the line.

For the children, event organizer Dhaliwal and the culture as a whole, the dance is an extension of the music, the heartbeat of their region in India.

Located between Pakistan and the first rocky slopes of the Himalayas, Punjab is an amalgam of peoples and cultures that have settled in the river-rich valley since prehistoric times.

Now the Punjabi people have spread to every nook of the world, taking with them a vibrant tradition of food, dance and music that blends the very ancient with the very modern.

Last year the get-together was a distinctly Punjabi affair. Only a handful of families participated in an event that could have doubled as a reunion of sorts rather than a cultural festival. There was no dance contest, and only a handful of non-Indian onlookers showed up.

But this year, Dhaliwal says, the festival is drawing on the traditions and dances of all of India. The sound system in the Shawnee Community Center should blare the increasingly Western sounds of Bhangra — native to the Punjab region — but will also feature Dandiya Dance and other entertainment familiar in almost every region in India.

The idea, Dhaliwal says, is to create a festival welcoming all of Kansas City's Indian immigrants. It's about Indian unity, he says, hopefully bringing together an Indian population that, according to the 2000 Census, made up more than 1,000 Kansas Citians.

"This is the first time that it will be an Indian cultural festival," he says. "If we can join together, we can all do one program."

The public is invited. The sights and sounds of the festival promise to be a sensory treat — not to mention the Indian buffet from India Palace of Overland Park.

But with any luck, Dhaliwal says, the event can become a cultural celebration of India's independence day — Aug. 15, a day Indian immigrants celebrate from New Delhi to New York and beyond.

"We're trying to tell everyone: 'Let's come together,' " Dhaliwal says. "Let's make this a yearly event."

Indian Cultural Festival

Where: Shawnee Civic Center, 13817 Johnson Drive

When: 6 p.m. Saturday **What to expect:** A wide array of traditional and modern Indian dancing, music, drink and food. The India Palace plans to offer vegetable pakors and chicken tandoori as appetizers, goat curry, chicken korma, vegetable korma and aloo chole (potatoes and chickpeas) as main entries, with basmati rice, nan bread and kheer (rice pudding) on the side.

How much: \$15 for adults, \$5 for children 6-12. Dinner and drinks are included.

For more information: www.pcssofheartland.com