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Participants of the Diwali celebration gathered on stage to celebrate Hindu culture. Lehigh's South Asian Student Association and Indian Club co-hosted a Diwali celebration on Nov. 11 (Photo courtesy of Neha Paras)

Diwali celebration brings piece of home to Lehigh



BY RAAID KHAN — ; PUBLISHED NOVEMBER 14, 2022, 4:15 PM

LIFESTYLE, TOP STORIES

Performers, dressed in their colorful kurtas or sarees, were scattered throughout the theater, exchanging hugs as they continuously built off each other's energy. The sweet smell of samosas escaped the serving room as the night's host passed out various dishes.

Lehigh's South Asian Student Association and Indian Club co-hosted a Diwali celebration on Nov. 11, showcasing Hindu culture through a series of musical performances, comedy skits and an authentic South Asian dinner.

The event returned to Zoellner Arts Center's Baker Hall for the first time since 2019, garnering an attendance of over 700 people.

Anny John, '26, said she never celebrated Diwali at home and enjoyed celebrating at Lehigh.

"My high school didn't do anything like this, so I'm glad Lehigh did because now I get to know a bit more about my culture," John said.

Arnav Chokshi, '24, said he misses the close-knit family qualities of Diwali at home, but appreciates the Indian traditions present on Lehigh's campus.

"People who come from different regions of India celebrate (Diwali) differently," Chokshi said. "It's nice learning how other people celebrate compared to how I do it."

As a Gujarati Indian, Chokshi's family has a custom of pouring water down crossroads to represent dumping out negativity. He knows people from other regions make rangoli, a colorful floor-mural representing good future and wealth.

Hiral Patel, '22, president of the Indian Club, and Munjal Joshi, '22, internal chair of Indian Club, said they appreciated the community's effort in replicating the warm emotion traditionally attached to Diwali. They said Lehigh's celebration felt like home.

Patel said even though the celebration felt different without the company of her friends and family, she felt happy to have fostered a new family at Lehigh.

"Diwali is all about celebrating with your close ones," Joshi said. "It's about sweets and crackers, but it's also about spending good time with the people you care about. It's about being grateful for the people in life and I'm grateful for them."

Bharath Jyothi, '24, public relations chair of the South Asian Student Association and one of the event's emcees, said last year Diwali was held on a smaller scale on the third floor of the University Center with around 150 attendees.

He said returning to Baker Hall allowed for a staged performance and gave the groups creative flexibility.

Jyothi performed a dance that included a skit to Pop Smoke's "Element."

"We all brought great energy to the stage," Jyothi said. "I thought the skit was pretty funny and we got a lot of reactions from the audience."

Anousha Mehta, '24, and Radhika Rawal, '24, co-presidents of the South Asian Student Association, said the lack of framework was an obstacle in the creative process.

Rawal said because most of their core executive members are juniors, this was their first time experiencing the event at Zoellner.

"We never experienced what it was like in-person," Rawal said. "It was a lot of guessing and figuring it out for the first time."

Mehta said the group booked Zoellner in spring 2022 and, for the presidents and programming chair, preparations began over the summer. Around mid-September, the rest of the executive board became involved, helping to figure out the event's co-sponsors, outside performers, dressing rooms and food.

Jyothi said their goal was to make the most out of the performance.

Mehta and Rawal said the show heavily depended on devoted practice and cooperation from its members.

The two said each of the dances had rehearsal times, with some meeting twice a week. Three joint rehearsals were also held to ensure all of the dancers could practice together before performing.

Zeeshan Khan, '24, member of the South Asian Student Association, said he applauds the audience for learning about an unfamiliar culture.

"I saw a lot of South Asian people, as expected, but I also saw a lot of other people from different fraternities and sororities and clubs around campus," Khan said. "It's great these people chose to spend their Friday night learning about a culture and an artform."

Mehta also took note of the Lehigh community immersing itself in events that celebrate diversity, such as Diwali.

"The cultural appreciation at Lehigh is definitely growing," Mehta said. "It was small before and, although it's not huge now, it's definitely growing, and it's nice to see that we're a part of that growth."