

India-Australia Friendship Fair kicks off I-Day celebrations

With fast bowler Brett Lee as the star attraction, weeklong celebrations of India's 60th Independence Day were kicked off here with an India-Australia Friendship Fair attracting 22,000 people in Sydney Olympic Park.

Brett Lee charmed the audience Sunday with Hindi sprinkled in his speech. Lee is heading to India Aug 19 to record another number with Asha Bhonsale.

He was mobbed like a film star but said his current cricket commitments wouldn't leave him with any time to act in a Bollywood film even though he had received some offers.

Among the dignitaries was Minister for Immigration and Citizenship Kevin Andrews, getting his blood pressure and cholesterol checked by doctors of Indian origin.

Andrews, in the spotlight since he cancelled freed terror suspect Muhammad Haneef's work visa last month, stressed how professional the Indian doctors carrying out the service had been and how valued they were to the country.

The chief guest at the fair, New South Wales Premier Morris Iemma, said people of Indian origin were a model community, responsible and law-abiding citizens, who should be treated with the respect they deserve.

He emphasized the importance of trade, culture and sporting links between the two countries.

The fair, which attracted only 250 people in 1994, has grown manifold to become one of Australia's largest cultural events, next only to the Chinese New Year.

Organised by the United India Association (UIA), the apex body representing 18 Indian community organizations in the country, the fair is living up to its commitment of multiculturalism.

UIA President Raj Natarajan, an electronics engineer who migrated with his family from [Bangalore](#) in 1988, said: 'The people to people exchange between the two countries is a vital component of the bilateral relationship. We can be very important ambassadors as we understand the emotions and value system of both cultures, essential for forging strong ties.'

A cultural programme of dance and music stretched into Sunday evening. From old Kishore Kumar and Lata Mangeshkar favourites of 1970s to east-west fusion music, the crowd tapped and clapped at every beat.

There was a fashion parade of saris and a Bollywood themed show with a live performance by 'Salaam Namaste' star Tania Zetta. Being thousands of miles away has not in any way dimmed the passion for Bollywood hits amongst Indians.

An Australian Football League (AFL) and cricket clinic, where aspiring sportspersons were given lessons by veteran players, was also organised. While AFL is yet to catch the fancy of Indians, people thronged the cricket clinic with Brett Lee at the crease.

The 100-odd stalls at the fair offered all that one needed to know about Indians in Australia.

From local Indian newspapers, Internet services, Hindi film CDs, camel rides and henna to alternative medicine stalls, yoga, dosas and jalebis, there was something for all. For one homesick couple, winning two return tickets to India on Malaysian Airlines, made their day.

The buzz at the Athletics Centre in the Sydney Olympic Park almost felt like spending a day in Delhi's Pragati Maidan. As dusk set in, a spectacular show of fireworks lit the skyline with the digital scoreboard wishing India a Happy Birthday.

Proceeds from this fair will be used for different community projects for the growing number of Indians in Australia, which at the last census accounted for 230,000.

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