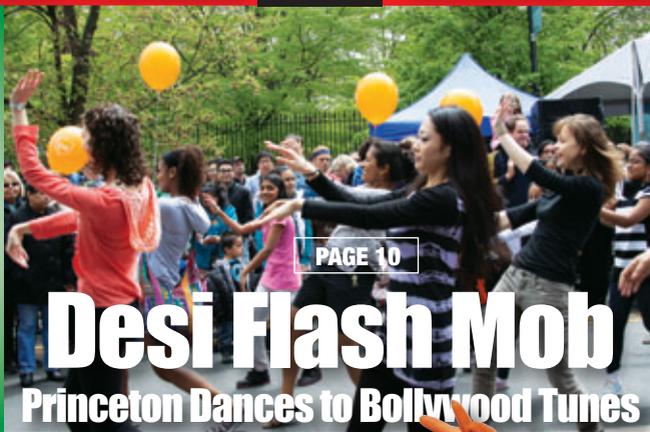


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A memoir by Columbia University's Padma Desai among season's list of books by Indians and about India

# Spring Reading



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Celebrities attend launch of American chapter of Arts for India

# Modi Award for Goldie



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# DESI TALK

IN NEW YORK



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Fifth Annual Natraj Folk Arts Festival

# Diversity on Display

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# Diversity on Display

— NEW YORK

**S**trapped securely in her car seat on her way to pre-school, Mythili, 4, listens intently to her father recite verses from the Bhagavad Gita. "Sri bhagavan uvaca ..." he recites from Verse 1 of Chapter 16, describing the qualities inherent in gods – and fearlessness is one of them.

On April 28, on the large and imposing stage at the Baruch College Performing Arts Center, New York City, Mythili fearlessly recited all the 24 slokas contained in Chapter 16. She is now almost at the end of Chapter 17, her father says, and getting ready for her next event.

"I recite a couple of slokas two or three times a week during the 15-minute drive to Mythli's pre-school," Dinesh Pai, professor at the School of Business Administration at Pennsylvania State University, told Desi Talk. She has been quick to pick up the words, and sometimes even corrects her father when he deliberately flubs words in some slokas to test her.

Mythili was the youngest among scores of children and adults who participated in the fifth annual Natraj Folk Arts Festival organized by The India Center, a group formed by a few Indian-Americans nine years ago to promote classical and traditional arts among children.

More than 150 people came to see the music and dance segments that were held through the day and featured close to 70 performers – some from schools as far away as Maryland and Pennsylvania, while others came from institutions in New



ELYSE FRADKIN

Children and adults performed side by side at the fifth annual Natraj Folk Arts Festival to a cheering crowd **Ela Dutt** writes



ELYSE FRADKIN



Top left, Mythili Pai, 4, recited the 24 slokas contained in Chapter 16 of the Bhagavad Gita at the 5th Annual Natraj Folk Arts Festival held at the Performing Arts Center in Baruch College April 28. Top right, Anurag Aiyer, 11, who emceed the Natraj Folk Arts Festival and also performed. Above, Lavani dancers from the Marathi Shala in Morganville, N.J. Below right, Gurpreet Singh's Punjabi songs had people on their feet. He was accompanied by Tashur Seen on the tabla and Aakash Desai on the dholak.

York, New Jersey and surrounding states. The music segment held before lunch included Punjabi, Marathi and Tamil folk songs, plus Mythli's Sanskrit verses; the later dance segment included Rajasthani, Gujarati, Marathi and other folk dances.

"It was very diverse," Gurpreet Singh, whose folk songs like "Challa" and "Dama Dam Mast Kalandar" had people jumping to their feet and clamoring for more.

The singer from Queens is a software engineer by day and began learning Punjabi folk songs when he was a child reciting kirtans at the gurdwara in his village near Jalandhar, Punjab.

On coming to America in 2008, Gurpreet, as he is popularly called, joined the Sangeet Vilas, a school of Hindustani music in Rego Park, Queens, founded by Kinnar Seen. With Gurpreet were Tashur Seen on the tabla and Aakash Desai on the dholak.

Stephanie Lalitha Cosme, of New Rochelle, N.Y., performed the Banjara Rajasthani folk dance. Of Spanish and Indian heritage, she

runs the Lalitha Dance Troupe and this was her third year performing at this festival.

Her student, Halle Simone Bolden, opened the dance segment with a vigorous Bhangra. Bolden also joined Cosme in the Rajasthani Kalbeliya gypsy dance to close their segment.

Students of Preya Patel, who runs Nritya Kalart, a dance school in Long Island, New York, performed Kathak. "I really like this festival. It gives the kids who do classical music and dance a platform to showcase their talent," Patel told Desi Talk.

Organizers have kept the show free of prizes and awards so that those performing do so in a stress-free manner, Veena Shetty, co-founder of The India Center, who also dabbles in stand-up comedy, told Desi Talk. Certificates were given to all those who participated.

Anurag Aiyer, 11, a student of Guru Savitri Ramanand, performed Carnatic music; 10-year-old boys and girls performed a folk dance.

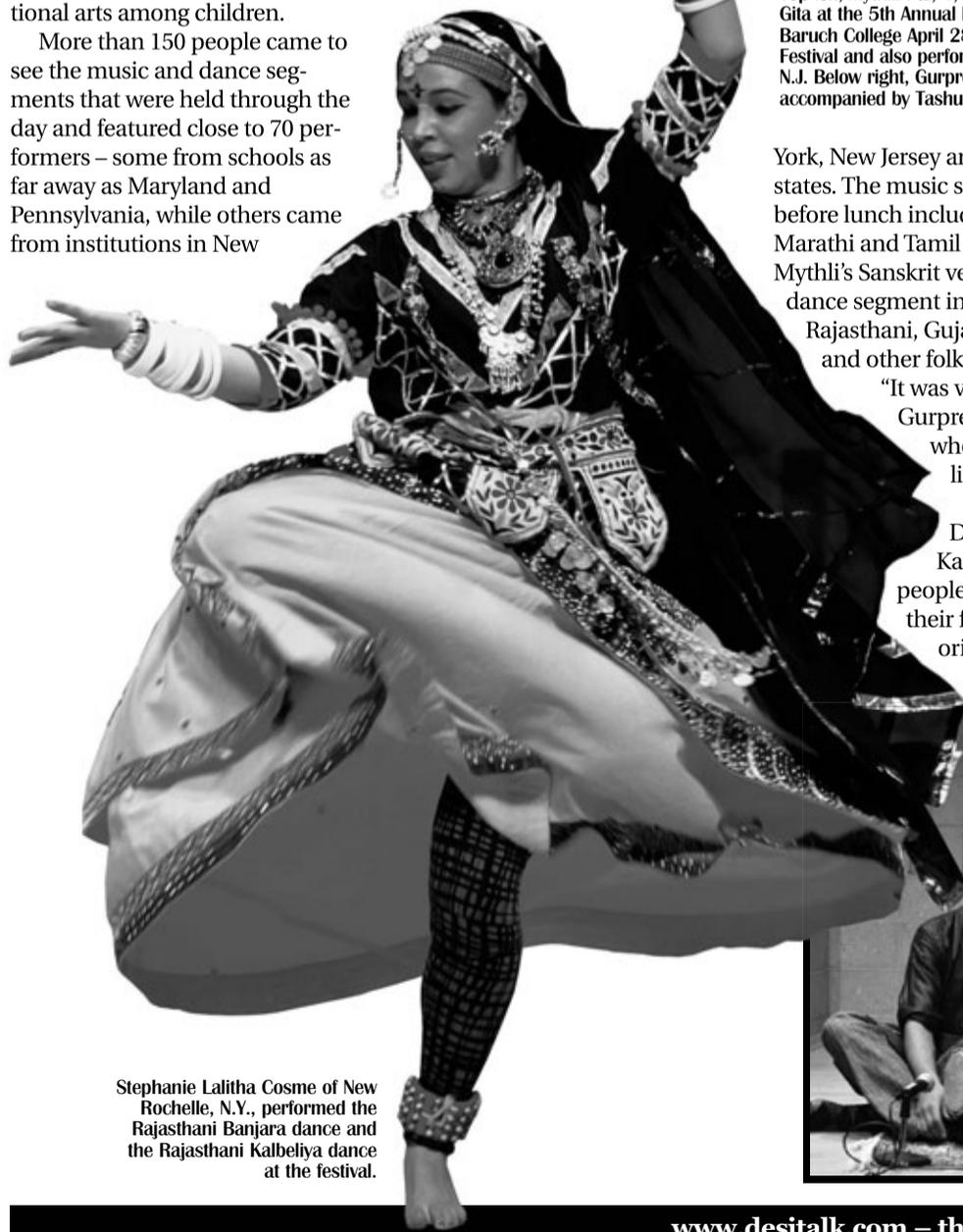
"They were so adorable with their little dhotis and scarves," Shetty said.

Snehal Vaze, founder of the Marathi Shala in Morganville, N.J., did a PowerPoint presentation about culture and the art forms of her state of origin. This was Marathi Shala's first time participating in the festival, Vaze told Desi Talk. Varsha Prashant, a teacher at Marathi Shala, choreographed a dance performed by students at the festival.

"Such big-stage exposure like Natraj Festival enhances the confidence of small kids and adults in a big way," Prashant told Desi Talk. Chinese dancer Mei Xei gave a PowerPoint presentation about how Indian dance forms have influenced movement and music in Chinese culture.

The India Center holds two arts festivals annually – the Saraswati Classical Arts Festival and the Natraj Folk Arts Festival.

Apart from Shetty, the other three board members of the center are graphic designer Deepti Vij; photographer and fine arts graduate Satish Shah; and Pai.



Stephanie Lalitha Cosme of New Rochelle, N.Y., performed the Rajasthani Banjara dance and the Rajasthani Kalbeliya dance at the festival.



ELYSE FRADKIN