

Finding harmony on the cusp of war

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While people living on the border of India and Pakistan may soon be in the middle of a warpath, South Asians living here are trying to present a united front.

More than 1,000 people participated in a community festival Saturday in Chicago aimed at promoting solidarity between Indians and Pakistanis.

"We want to bring in harmony and unity, especially because India and Pakistan are (practically) at war," said Rajinder Singh Mago of Wayne.

Though Mago is a Sikh and the tension primarily is between Hindus and Muslims, he explained that his religion has its roots in Punjab and Kashmir, regions that straddle the border between India and Pakistan. Many American Sikhs also have family living there.

Saturday's event was sponsored by the Sikh community in Chicago. Sikhs from the suburbs were in attendance along with Sikhs from Wisconsin, Indiana, Iowa and Texas.

The goal of the festival was to celebrate history, heritage and culture, said Balvinder Singh, one of the organizers. The main draw of the celebration, for Sikhs, was the Vaisakhi festival.

Organizers said it is the first time there has been one in the Chicago area.

Vaisakhi, one of the most holy days of Sikhism, has dual significance. It signifies both the new year and the anniversary of the founding of Khalsa in 1699. Khalsa marks the birth of modern Sikhism. Vaisakhi traditionally is celebrated in mid-April, but organizers said they wanted to have the festival when the weather was warm.

The highlight of the day was two parades, one called Nagar Kirtan, the other a Mela Parade.

U.S. Sen. Richard Durbin, a Springfield Democrat, and U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, a Democrat from Evanston, were among the dignitaries marching in the parade. Thirty-three floats were part of the celebration which centered around Devon Avenue, near several South Asian stores and restaurants.

After the parades, hundreds of people gathered for a picnic and entertainment at Chicago's Warren Park. The event was dubbed a success though few Muslims and Hindus were in attendance.