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Flavors, colors, cultures mingle at festival

Hundreds pack conference hall in St. Charles to get a taste of south Asia.

By Aisha Sultan
ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

ST. CHARLES • Various ethnic groups, which typically celebrate their own festivals and holidays, came together for the first-ever South Asian Heritage Festival at the Columns Banquet and Conference Center.

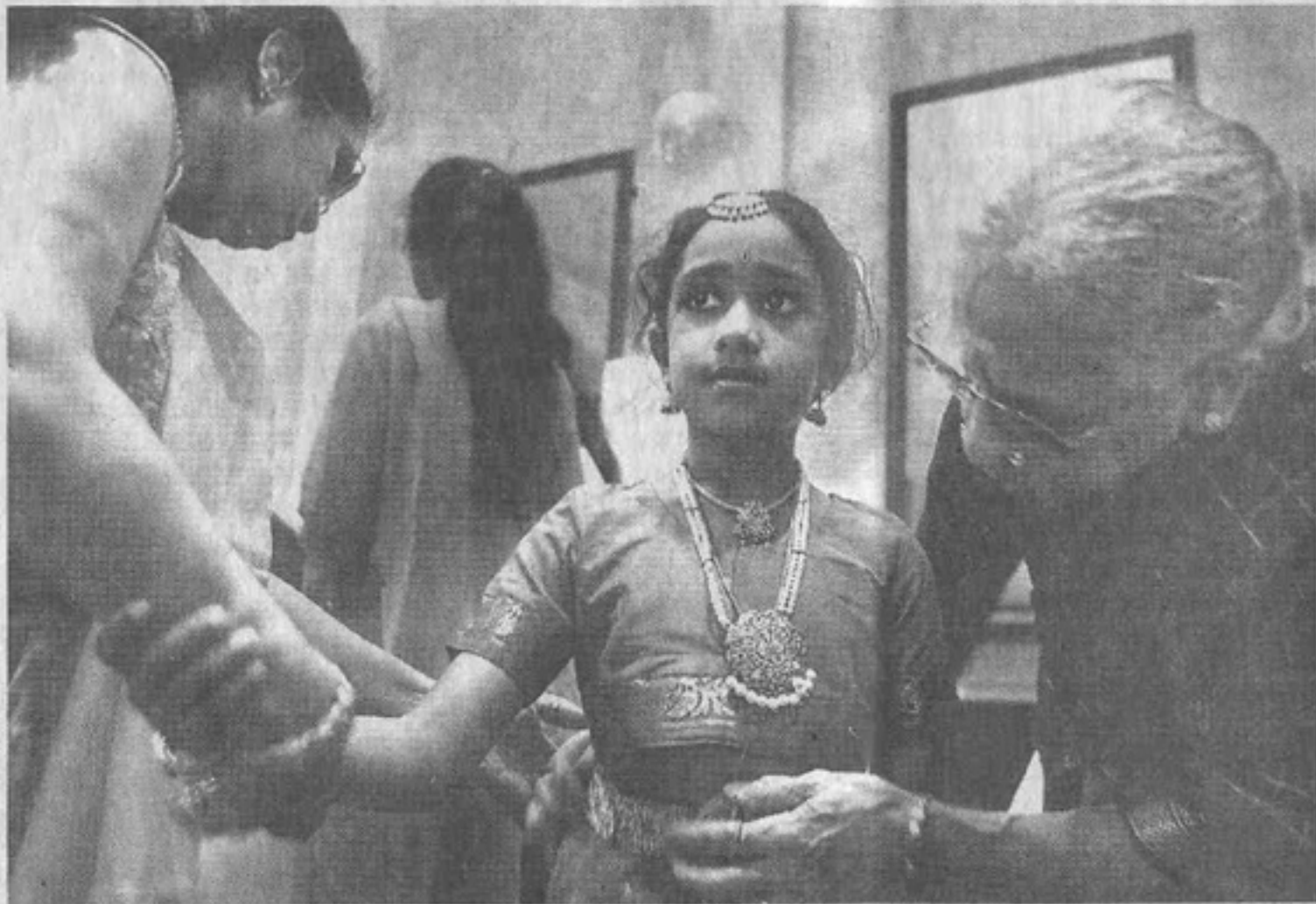
While several of the countries in the subcontinent, especially India and Pakistan, have tense political relationships, that took a back seat to the desire to promote local South Asian businesses and cultural groups.

"Basically, the common man don't care about all these conflicts. They just want to be together," said Rao Chilakala, a software engineer from St. Charles County, who organized and promoted the event.

Hundreds crowded into the hall, where 40 booths offered ethnic clothing, native arts and crafts and, of course, food.

The turnout surprised many of the vendors.

"I never thought we were going to make it this big," said Chandrasekhar Reddy Gummi, president of the Telugu Associa-



Meghana Bharadwaj, 7, is fussed over by her Aunt Rama Vishwanathan (left) and her grandmother, Meenakshi Gopalan, on Sunday before the girl performs an Indian dance. Photo by Christian Gooden

tion of St. Louis. "We were really skeptical."

Fatima Dalal, whose booth advertised her floral and wedding services, noted the immense diversity within the south Asian subcontinent — religious, linguistic and culinary.

"This way people get to know each other's culture," she said.

Plus, the familiar Bollywood music and spicy aromas highlighted the cultural commonalities.

Susan Cassler, 60, of south St. Louis county, came with an Indian friend from work. She and her husband sampled various south Indian dishes like spicy chick pea appetizers and dumplings in yogurt. Cassler said she

was wowed by the colorful fabrics, the woodcarvings and jewelry. Sipping a bottle of mango juice, she admits she didn't know much about south Asian culture prior to meeting her friend, but she's fascinated by what she has learned.

"We're planning a trip to India next year," Cassler said.