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## Cutting across racial barriers

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IT was an evening of culture when the Temple of Fine Arts and some 200 guests celebrated the Purnima Mela (Festival of Full Moon) in Jalan Berhala in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur recently.

The Purnima Mela is the result of a combination of the multi-racial cuisine and culture of Malaysia, featuring an assortment of tastes and flavours in food, music and dance.

Guests who included officials from the Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry, hoteliers, members from the travel trade, were taken on a unique Indian cultural expedition through several dance, music and a lavish spread of scrumptious vegetarian cuisine and sweetmeats.

The women members served the guests rice, string hoppers and a choice of vegetarian delights such as appam, Indian-styled koay teow, and thosai, among others.

And the interesting part was that even the men helped the women in preparing several dishes.

Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister Datuk Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir who was the guest-of-honour launched the evening with the lighting of the kuttu valaikku (ceremonial lamp).

Also present were his wife Datin Suraya Mohd Noah, HELP Institute executive chairman Datuk Paduka Dr Saleha Mohd Ali, who is also the patron of TOFA and Sungei Way Group exco member and Sunway Lagoon Club chairman Puan Sri Susan Cheah.

TOFA president Dr N. Radha Krishnan said TOFA Malaysia, which was started in 1981, was originally meant to propagate Indian cultural and artistic tradition in Malaysia under the guidance of their founder directors Gopal Shetty and V.K. Sivadas and inspired by their patron Swami Shantand Saraswathi.

TOFA now has branches in Penang, Johor Baru and Malacca and recently took a more national cultural colour in their public persona.

This has enabled TOFA to work closely with the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism to promote the rich culture beyond Malaysia.

"We hope to ensure that our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's vision that Kuala Lumpur become more culturally alive is achieved.

"Therefore, we want the mela to fit into the cultural calendar of KL so that future tourist arrivals can be scheduled to attend this event which is held monthly," said Dr Radha.

Dr Radha said TOFA has plans to increase the frequency of the mela to fortnightly and maybe even weekly if they are able to get the support from the tour industry.

He added that while the mela entertains the tourists, TOFA will help the youngsters who come to learn dance, music and the art of serving, cooking, acting, dancing, choreographing and lighting among others.

All cultural performances led by Umesh Shetty and K. Shankar were indeed a sight to behold. But the best was the group performance where Malaysia's rich multi-cultural dance was shown in Zainal Abidin's album Ikhlas song.

Shankar, who is also the assistant director of TOFA, said they are able to blend the subtleness of the various culture (including Chinese, Western and Malay) into the original Indian classical dance which makes their performance a unique feature.

"We have to have a broad mind and choreograph our own style so that the

various communities in the country and abroad are able to appreciate our dance," said the 34-year-old Shankar who took up dancing at TOFA in 1981.

Since then, the troupe has performed Mashuri, Swan Lake, the Taj Mahal, A Mid Summer Night's Dream, Lady White Snake and Ramayana not only in Malaysia but also in India, Perth, Sri Lanka and Singapore.

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