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Officially, Indian Independence Day isn't until Friday, but the Niles Public Library got a head start Tuesday with a special program designed to get young children interested in the nation's culture and history.

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Manisha Chander with Meera Masi Publishing talks about Elmo's trip to India during an Indian Independence Day program Tuesday at the Niles Public Library.

(Jason Brown/Staff Photographer)

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Vidhi Soni, 4, of Des Plaines, listens to a story Tuesday during an Indian Independence Day program at the Niles Public Library.

(Jason Brown/Staff Photographer)

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Manisha Chander with Meera Masi Publishing reads a story to youngsters during a Indian Independence Day program at the Niles Public Library Tuesday.

(Jason Brown/Staff Photographer)

Manisha Chander, who visited the library to host the program, works with Meera Masi Publishing, a company that aims to create curiosity about the languages, traditions and culture of India through a variety of products including books, audio CDs, DVDs and interactive toys.

Chander has a 4-year-old son born in America, and she said it was especially important for children of Indian heritage to understand their ancestral home.

"I was born and raised in the United States," she said. "Sometimes, kids who are born here never experience India. We want kids to be able to get a feel for India."

Chander said the only mainstream celebration of Indian culture in the area is the Indian Independence Day parade along Devon Avenue.

"The only occasion to really celebrate in the area is the parade down Devon Avenue, and not a lot of people can go," she said. "This program is really just another way to celebrate."

Chander's program for kids ages 3 to 8 employed a variety of teaching tools that included reading traditional Indian stories, listening to a recording of the Indian national anthem, and taking an imaginary trip to India with Elmo.

"He makes things fun for the kids," she said.

The children also created traditional rakhi bracelets exchanged during the Indian holiday of Raksha Bandhan, which celebrates the relationship between brothers and sisters.

Niles Library Director Linda Weiss said the library prided itself on being able to offer culturally diverse programming.

"Providing programs and collections for our diverse community is one of the ways we accomplish our library's mission," she said. "Our foreign language fiction selection is one of our fastest growing collections."

Weiss said the library had planned programs about understanding Muslim Ramadan and Native American culture in September, followed by Polish story time in November.