

12. FAIRS AND FESTIVALS OF INDIA

26th January, 1950 is one of the most important days in Indian history as it was on this day the Constitution of India came into force and India became a truly sovereign state. In this day India became a totally republican unit. The country finally realised the dream of Mahatma Gandhi and the numerous freedom fighters who, fought for and sacrificed their lives for the Independence of their country. So, the 26th of January was declared a national holiday and has been recognised and celebrated as the Republic Day of India, ever since.

Independence Day

With the decision by Britain to withdraw from the Indian subcontinent, the Congress Party and Muslim League agreed in June 1947 to a partition of India along religious lines. Under the provisions of the Indian Independence Act, India and Pakistan were established as independent dominions with predominantly Hindu areas allocated to India and predominantly Muslim areas to Pakistan.

After India's independence on August 15, 1947, India received most of the subcontinent's 562 widely scattered polities or princely states, as well as the majority of the British' provinces and parts of three of the remaining provinces. Muslim Pakistan received the remainder. Pakistan consisted of a western wing, with the approximate boundaries of modern Pakistan and an eastern wing, with the boundaries of present-day Bangladesh.

August, 15th, 1947 is the birthday of free India. It marks for her the end of an old era, the beginning of a new age. It's a day of freedom from the arduous British rule, 15th August is celebrated in India as Independence Day. To commemorate the sacrifice of martyrs Indians celebrate this day, to pay homage to the brave patriots who gave Indians a reason to smile. The celebration begins in the morning with unfurling of Indian flag at Red Fort, New Delhi..

Gandhi Jayanti

The birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the nations is celebrated with reverence all over the country. He was the man who played a significant role in achieving independence for India from the British Empire with his simplicity and strong will power. Mohandas Kararnchand Gandhi, also known as 'Bapu' or 'Father of the Nation', was born on the 2nd of October, in 1869 in Porbunder, Gujarat. He studied law in U.K and practiced law in South Africa. But he left his profession and returned to India to join the Indian freedom struggle. This day is being celebrated as "Non-violence Day" all over the world as per UNO declaration.

HINDU FESTIVALS

Makar Sankranti

The festival of Makar Sankranti traditionally coincides with the beginning of the Sun's northward journey (the UTTARAYAN) when it enters the sign of Makar (the CAPRICORN). It falls on the 14th of January every year according to the Solar Calendar. On this day sun enters in northern hemisphere. This day is celebrated as a festival right from the times of the Aryans and is looked upon as the most auspicious day by the Hindus,

Pongal

Pongal is the first festival beginning off each new year in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. As the dates for this festival are calculated by the solar calendar (i.e. Western), the dates of January 13-16 never change. Each day of this festival has a special significance, however, it is celebrated more grandly in the villages, while the city folk mainly celebrate on the second day only.

Vasant Panchami

Vasant Panchami is the festival dedicated to Saraswati, the goddess of learning.

Magh Sud 5 (5th day of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of Magh) is the day of Vasant Panchami. Hindus all over the world celebrate this festival with great enthusiasm. This Panchami is also known as Saraswati Day. It is believed that this day is Saraswati's birthday. Hindu temples are full of activities on this day.

Maha Shivratri

Maha Shivratri is celebrated throughout the country; it is particularly popular in Uttar Pradesh. Maha Shivratri falls on the 13th (or 14th) day of the dark half of 'Phalgun' (February-March). The name means "the night of Shiva". The ceremonies take place chiefly at night. This is a festival observed in honour of Lord Shiva and it is believed that on this day Lord Shiva was married to Parvati. On this festival people worship 'Shiva - the Destroyer'. This night marks the night when Lord Shiva did the Tandav' dance.

In Andhra Pradesh, pilgrims throng the Sri Kalahasthswara Temple at Kalahasti and the Bharamarambha Malikarjunaswamy Temple at Srisailam. About The Lord Shiva - the word meaning auspicious -is one of the Hindu Trinity, comprising of Lord Brahma, the creator, Lord Vishnu, the preserver and Lord Shiva or Mahesh, the Destroyer and Re-Producer of life. Shiva is known by many names like "Shankar", "Mahesh", "Bholenath", "Neelakanth", "Shambhu Kailasheshwar", "Umanath", "Nataraj" and others.

Holi

The festival of Holi is celebrated on the day after the full moon in early March every year. Originally a festival to celebrate good harvests and fertility of the land, Holi is now a symbolic commemoration of a legend from Hindu Mythology. The story centres around an arrogant king who resents his son Prahlada worshipping Lord Vishnu. He attempts to kill his son but fails each time. Finally, the king's sister Holika who is said to be immune to burning, sits with the boy in a huge fire. However, the prince Prahlada emerges unscathed, while his aunt burns to death. Holi commemorates this event from mythology and huge bonfires are burnt on the eve of Holi as its symbolic representation.

Ram Navami

The birthday of Lord Rama, the celebrated hero of the famous epic, 'Ramayana', is enthusiastically celebrated all over India. Lord Vishnu is worshipped in his human incarnation as Rama, the divine ruler of Ayodhya. Celebrations begin with a prayer to the Sun early in the morning. At midday, when Lord Rama is supposed to have been born, a special prayer is performed. Temples of Rama are decorated, religious discourses are held and the Ramayana is recited for ten days. People sing devotional songs in praise of Rama and rock, images of him in "a cradle to celebrate his birth. Rathayatras or chariot processions of Rama, his wife Seeta, brother Lakshmana and devotee Hanuman are held from many temples. The chariot is accompanied by several devotees dressed up in ancient costumes as Rama's soldiers. The procession is a gusty affair, with the participants shouting praises echoing the happy days of Rama's reign. People gather in thousands on the banks of the sacred river Sarayu for a dip. Some observe a strict fast on this day.

Teej Festival

Held during the monsoons, July-August Teej is also dedicated to Lord Shiva and Parvati and this time it is married women who pray for a happy and long married life. Though celebrations are held all over the state, it is particularly colourful in Jaipur where a procession winds its way for two days through the Old City. It is the festival of swings which are decorated with flowers and hung from trees. Young girls and women dressed in green clothes sing songs in celebration of the advent of the monsoon. The Teej idol is covered with a canopy whereas the Gangaur idol is open.

Raksha Bandhan

Raksha Bandhan (the bond of protection in Hindi) or Rakhi is a Hindu festival which celebrates the relationship between brothers and sisters. It is celebrated on the full moon of the month of Shravan. The festival is marked by the tying of a rakhi or holy thread by the sister on the wrist of her brother. The brother in return offers a gift to his sister and vows to look after her. The brother and sister traditionally feed each other sweets.

Nagpanchami

Hinduism as a religion is many-sided yet bound by a common search for Truth and to Hindus it means a way of life and a fellowship of faiths. With the advent of the Aryans, it originated as a simple form of worship of the forces of Nature, drawing in its system action in social organisations, local cults, deities diverse beliefs and modes of worship.

Nagpanchami is an important all-India festival and is celebrated on the fifth day of the moonlit- fortnight in the month of Shravan (July/August). This is the time when serpents invariably, come out of their holes that get inundated with rain-water to seek shelter in gardens and many times in houses. As such they pose a great danger to man. Maybe therefore, snakes are worshipped on this day. Right from the times when mankind started acquiring some sort of culture, Sun and Snake have been invoked with prayers and ritual worship in most of the countries. In India even before the Vedic times, the tradition of snake-worship was in vogue.

Krishna Janmashtami

Shravan vad 8 celebrates the birth of Lord Shri Krishna, one of the most venerated incarnations in the Hindu Dharma. Five thousand years ago, he incarnated, at the end of the third cosmic phase, 'Dwapar Yuga' and the beginning of the present, 'Kal Yuga'.

Janmashtami is the birthday of Lord Krishna, the re-incarnation of Lord Vishnu and gave us the vital message of the Bhagawat Gita - the guiding principles for every Hindu. Janmashtami is celebrated with full vigour all over the country. Janmashtami is celebrated in various parts of India to mark the birth of Lord Krishna. It is observed on the Ashtami day of the Shravan month according to the Hindu calendar. The temples of Vrindavan witness an extravagant and colourful celebration on this occasion. Raslila is performed to recreate incidents from the life of Krishna and to commemorate his love for Radha.

Ganesh Chaturthi

Ganesh Chaturthi is one of the most popular of Hindu festivals. This is the birthday of Lord Ganesha. It is the day most sacred to Lord Ganesha. It falls on the 4th day of the bright fortnight of Bhadrapada (August-September). It is observed throughout India, as well as by devoted Hindus in all parts of the world.

Dashahara

This festival is observed twice a year, once in the month of Chaitra and then in Ashwin. It lasts for nine days in honour of the nine manifestations of Durga. During Navaratri (the word literally means "nine nights") devotees of Durga-observe a fast. Brahmins are fed and prayers are offered for the protection of health and property.

The beginning of summer and the beginning of winter

are two very important junctions of climatic and solar influence. These two periods are taken as sacred opportunities for the worship of the Divine Mother. They are indicated respectively by the Rama-Navaratri in Chaitra (April-May) and the Durga Navaratri in Ashwin (September-October). The bodies and minds of people undergo a considerable change on account of the changes in Nature. Sri Rama is worshipped during Ramnavmi and Mother Durga during Navaratri.

Diwali

This is perhaps the most well-known of the Indian festivals: it is celebrated throughout India, as well as in Indian communities throughout the diaspora. It usually takes place eighteen days after Dashera. It is colloquially known as the "festival of lights", for the common practice is to light small oil lamps (called diyos) and place them around the home, in courtyards, verandahs and gardens, as well as on roof-tops and outer walls. In urban areas, especially, candles are substituted for diyas; and among the nouveau riche, neon lights are made to substitute for candles. The celebration of the festival is invariably accompanied by the exchange of sweets and the explosion of fireworks.

As with other Indian festivals, Diwali signifies many different things to people across the country. In north India, Diwali celebrates Rama's homecoming, that is his return to Ayodhya after the defeat of Ravana and his coronation as king; in Gujarat, the festival honours Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth; and in Bengal, it is associated with the goddess Kali. Everywhere, it signifies the renewal of life and accordingly it is common to wear new clothes on the day of the festival; similarly, it heralds the approach of winter and the beginning of the sowing season.

Diwali (also called Deepavali) is a major Hindu festival; Known as the "Festival of Lights," it symbolises the victory of good over evil and lamps are lit as a sign of celebration and hope for mankind. Celebrations focus on lights and lamps, particularly traditional diyas (as illustrated). Fireworks are associated with the festival in some regions of the country.

Chhath

The Chhath festival of sun worship is celebrated mainly in Bihar, Eastern UP and other parts of India where large number of Bhojpuri speaking populace is present. It is a festival in which mothers pray for long and healthy life of their children. The Mothers observe fast for the full day and in the evening when moon rises she worships moon. Again in the morning mother worships Rising sun by standing in the river water or pond.

Ghhath Puja is an Indian thanksgiving festival dedicated to the Sun God. During the celebrations of Chhath Puja, people gather on the banks of the River Ganges to bathe in its sacred water, pray and make ritual offerings to the Sun

God. Chhath Puja is a highly elaborate festival noted for its impressive display of colourful costumes, music, singing and extravagant rituals. Chhath Puja takes place, sometime during the months of October and November, immediately following the six-day festival of lights known as Diwali. Chhath Puja lasts for one night and one day.

Sarhul

I Sarhul which means the sal-blossom festival is a semi-religious festival of the inhabitants of Chhotanagpur. This festival is celebrated by several tribes of the region such as the Orions, Mundas and the Santhals, the Santhals call it Baha and celebrate it in the end of February-March whereas the Orions celebrate it a little late in March-April.

Karwa Chauth

The fast of Karwa Chauth is kept 9 days before Diwali. It falls on the fourth day of the Kartik month by the Hindu calendar (fourth day of the waning moon or the dark fortnight).

Karwa Chauth is considered one of the most important fasts observed by the married Hindu women. On this day the women pray for the welfare and long life of their husbands. The festival is followed mainly in the northern parts of the country.

Bihu Festival

The breathtaking hills and valleys of Assam come alive with the sound of Bihu thrice a year. A festival that marks the change of season, Bihu is accompanied both by prayer and great rejoicing. One of the seven northeastern states of India (which are also known as the Seven Sisters), Assam is renowned for its picturesque landscape, exotic fauna and fun-loving people.

MUSLIM FESTIVALS

Muharram

Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar. It is one of the four sanctified months of the year. Fighting in this month is looked down upon and is often put to the side in respect for Islam. Since the Islamic calendar is lunar, Muharram moves from year to year when compared to the Gregorian calendar.

Id-ul-Zuha

Also called Bakrid, Id-ul-Zuha, is a festival of great rejoice. Special prayers and exchange of greetings and gifts marked the Id-ul-Zuha (Bakrid), the festival of sacrifice, celebrated with traditional fervour and gaiety in India. Id-ul-Zuha is a reminder of Prophet Ibrahim's readiness to sacrifice his son for God's sake. It also marks the completion of Haj (pilgrimage to Mecca). On this day, special 'Dua' is recited by thousands of Muslims for peace and prosperity.

Id-ul-Fitr (Ramzan Id)

Coming with the new moon, this festival marks the end

of Ramzan, the ninth month of the Muslim year. It was during this month that the holy Koran was revealed. Muslims keep a fast every day during this month and on the completion of the period, which is decided by the appearance of the new moon, Id-ul-Fitr is celebrated with great eclat. Prayers are offered in mosques and idgahs and elaborate festivities are held.

Id-i-Milad (Barah-wafat)

The Prophet was born on the twelfth day of Rabi-ul-Avvra/, the third month of .the Muslim year. His death anniversary also falls on the same day, the word 'borah' standing for the twelve days of the Prophet's sickness. During these days, sermons are delivered in mosques by learned men, focusing on the life and noble deeds of the Prophet.

SIKH FESTIVALS

Baisakhi

The Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb, installed himself as the Emperor of India in 1657. To achieve his aim he had annihilated almost all his family opposition. Immediately after consolidating his power he embarked on a policy of religious persecution and set upon the process of Islamisation of India. The Brahmins were his primary target. He levied unethical religious taxes against Hindus and shut their temples and plaques of learning. He had been convinced by his clerics that once the Brahmins accepted Islam the others would follow. The Brahmins, particularly the inhabitants of Kashmir, looked for some dynamic leadership to fight this subversion.

Guru Govind Singh Jayanti

Punjab, rightly claimed as the traditional sword - arm of Bharatvarsha, has valiantly borne the first brunt of all the pre-European aggressors on her. And one of the most luminous stars which rose in that north-western horizon and shed its lustre over the entire length and breadth of the country is undoubtedly Guru Qovind Singh the tenth and the final Guru in the holy tradition initiated by that great saint Guru Nanak. Richly had Guru Govind Singh inherited the legacy of the fearless martyrdom of his father-Guru Tegh Bahadur. Guru Tegh Bahadur, with a view to instilling courage and confidence among the Kashmiri Hindus to withstand Aurangzeb's fanatical tyranny and threats to Islamise them, challenged the Mughaf emperor to convert him first. And the great Guru preferred to have his head roll down in Chandni Chowk of Delhi rather than sacrifice his faith, Govind Singh was just a boy of nine years at that time. On coming to know of his father's terrible end he e.xclaimed: "He saved with his blood the honour of Hindu Dharma. Oh, what a remarkable act in this Kalyufra! He preferred to give up his life, but not his faith!"

Gurupurb

Gurupurb is not a single festival or occasion. These are holy days and are associated with anniversaries of the many

of the Sikh Guru's birth or death, martyrdom day and anniversary of the installation of the Adi Granth Sahib. People from Sikh religion celebrate Gurupurbs. Some Gurupurbs 'are local events celebrated only where the original event took place. Some are celebrated universally.

CHRISTIAN FESTIVAL

Christmas

Jesus "Christ" is known as the founder or central figure of "Christianity.", Christmas is a Christian holiday on December 25 that commemorates the birth- of Jesus. Ancient Romans also commemorated Jesus' birth by marking a division of the Calendar still in use today. The years before Jesus' birth are marked as B.C. (Before Christ) and the years after Jesus' birth are marked A.D. (Anno Domini, which means, in the year of our Lord).

JAIN FESTIVAL

Mahavir Jayanti

According to the Digambara school of Jainism, Lord Mahavira was born in the year 615 BC, but the Swetambaras believe that he was born in 599 BC. Both sects however agree that he was the son of Siddhartha and Trisala. Legend has it that he was conceived by Devananda, wife of a Brahmin named Rishabhdeva. It is believed that the gods, ingeniously, transferred the embryo to the womb of Trisala. It is said that the expectant mother had sixteen auspicious dreams before the child was born (only 14 according to the Swetambaras). Astrologers . intepreting these dreams, stated that the child would be either an emperor or a Teerthankara.

This religious event is largely observed by the Jains by visiting sacred sites and worshipping the Teerthankara. The event holds special significance in Gujarat and Rajasthan due to the ancient shrines at Girnar and Palitana in Gujarat. Mahavir Jayanti is also celebrated at Parasnath Temple in Kolkata and at Pawapuri in Bihar. -

BAUDH FESTIVAL

Buddha Poornima

Buddha Poornima, which falls on the full moon night in the month of Vaisakha (either in April or May), commemorates the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha, founder of Buddhism, one of the oldest religions in the world. Notwithstanding the summer heat (the temperature routinely touches 45 degrees C), pilgrims come from all over the world to Bodh Gaya to attend the Buddha Poornima celebrations. The day is marked with prayer meets, sermons on the life of Gautam Buddha, religious discourses, continuous recitation of Buddhist scriptures, group meditation* processions, worship of the statue of Buddha and symposia. The Mahabodhi Temple wears a festive look and is decorated with colourful flags and flowers. The Chinese scholar, Fa-Hien, has recorded celebration of this festival.

CULTURAL FESTIVALS

Sindhu Darshan Festival

The Sindhu Darshan Festival, as the name suggests, is a celebration of River Sindhu, also known as the Indus. The Festival was organised at Shey livened up by the presence of a wide variety of cultural troupes from various corners of India. Troupes from States where the mighty Rivers of India run, brought with them water from those rivers in earthen pots and immersed the pots in the Indus, thereby mingling the waters from all over- India with that of the mighty 'Indus', the river that gave India its name.

Taj Mahotsav

This ten day event, held at Agra, Uttar Pradesh, the city of the Taj, in February, is a celebration of the arts, crafts, culture and traditions of Uttar Pradesh. Folk music, shayari (poetry), classical dance performances, elephant and camel rides, games and a food festival are the highlights of the festivities.

Tansen Samaroh

The great classical vocalist, Mian Tansen, was one of the "nine jewels", in Emperor Akbar's court. His memorial in Gwalior is the venue for the annual festival of Indian classical music held in November. Renowned singers regale audiences with mesmerizing sessions of much-loved classical raagas. Before performing the singers chew the leaves of a tamarind tree by the tomb - this is believed to improve the voice,

Teesta Tea Festival

This festival, held in Nov/Dec, commences in Dajjeeling and Sikkim and ends in Dooars, the gateway to the neighbouring kingdom of Bhutan. It includes a number of cultural programmes that take place in the lush greenery of historic plains, tea gardens, rolling hills and dense forests.

Bikaner Festival

This festival, held in January, in Bikaner, Rajasthan, is dedicated to the ship of the desert - the camel. The festival starts with a magnificent procession of beautifully decorated camels. There's plenty of Rajasthani culture on show too, to enchant those present:- music, dance and competitions.

Chapchar Kut

"Kut" means festival in Mizo parlance and the state of Mizoram celebrates 3 of them: Chapchar Kut, Mini Kut and Pawl Kut. All are connected with agricultural activities and all are celebrated with feasts and dances.

Chapchar Kut celebrates the arrival of spring. The festival begins with Kut Puipate, the inauguration ceremony, followed by the Then Katna, arranging of the dance groups in the stadium. Once the Then Hnihna begins, elders, dressed in traditional costumes to represent the various tribes of the region, take part in a fantastic procession called Kut rore.

This is followed by various tribal dances, the most important being the Cheraw (bamboo dance). The function ends with the Then Thumna, an event where local singers present traditional popular songs, with the cheering crowd joining in.

Ghennai Dance and Music Festival

Started back in 1927 to commemorate the anniversary of the Madras Music Academy, this month-long festival is held from mid December to mid January in the city of Chennai to celebrate (classical) Carnatic music and the dance traditions of South India.

For lovers of Carnatic music, this is a treat. "Held at a number of venues around the city by various sabhas (organisations), this cultural extravaganza sees more than 2,000 people take part. There are vocal and instrumental music concerts and solo and group dances, with upcoming artists getting a rare opportunity to perform along with well-established artists,

Elephant Festival

Elephants are the centre of attraction at this festival held every Holi, in Jaipur, Rajasthan. They stride majestically, parading their decorated trunks and tusks. The festival begins with a procession of elephants, camels and horses, painted and gaily decorated with glittering ornaments and embroidered velvets. The elephants greet o visitors, offer garlands to guests and walk past a jury of experts and tourists, vying for the "Best Decorated Elephant" shield. The animals are followed by lively folk dancers. Elephant races and elephant polo matches are special attractions. The highlight of the festivals is a hilarious tug of war between elephants and men. The Gaj Shringar exhibition displays every thing, connected with the elephant - ornaments, textiles (jhoo), howdahs and carnages, paintings, medicines and food. Tourists are encouraged to join in the dances, mount the elephants and play Holi.

Ellora Festival

This festival of dance and music is organised in the splendid surroundings of the magnificent Ellora caves in Maharashtra, a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Garden Festival

If you love flowers, you should at this spectacular flower show, held in the capital city, Delhi, each year. A huge variety of flowers and exotic plants are on display.

Hampi Festival

The ruins of the magnificent city of Hampi (353 kilometres from Bangalore), Karnataka, once the capital of the Vijayanagar Empire.(one of the greatest empires India has known) and now a UNESCO World Heritage site, come alive during this extravaganza, held in the first week of November. Dance, drama, music, fireworks, puppet shows and spectacular processions. All combine to recreate the

grandeur of a bygone era. The ruins of stone temples, elephant stables, barracks and palaces offer a fascinating glimpse into the lives of the people who once resided there.

Hemis Festival

The courtyard of Hemis Gompa (monastery), the biggest Buddhist monastery in Ladakh, in the state of Jammu & Kashmir, is the stage for this festival, which celebrates the birth anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava, revered as a reincarnation of Buddha. The colourful two-day pageant falls on the 10th day (Tse-Chu) of the Tibetan lunar month. A raised dais with a richly cushioned seat is erected in the courtyard and a small, finely painted Tibetan table is placed here. Ceremonial items - cups full of holy water, uncooked rice, tormas made of dough and butter, incense sticks are placed on the table. Traditional music is played, with four pairs of cymbals, pan drums, small trumpets and large wind instruments. Locals dress up in their finest traditional garb for the occasion. Lamas (monks) perform splendid masked dances and sacred plays to the accompaniment of cymbals, drums and long horns. The head lama presides over the function. Every 12 years, the two-storey high Thangka depicting Padmasambhava, richly embroidered with pearls and semi-precious stones, is displayed. The last display was in 2004. A colourful fair, displaying some beautiful handicrafts, is the special highlight of the festival.

Holla Mohalla

This Sikh festival begins the day after Holi, in March and lasts for 3 days. It is celebrated at the town of Anandpur Sahib (close to Chandigarh) in Punjab. Sikhs from all over the state (and outside) congregate at the Gurudwara Keshgarh Sahib, the place where the Khalsa (Sikh brotherhood) was founded. Early morning prayers herald the event. A large number of community kitchens offer -langar (free food) to those present. Dressed in traditional costumes, the Nihang Sikhs (traditional members of the Sikh army founded by Guru Gobind Singh) delight those present with a display of their skills in archery, fencing, tent pegging, bareback horse riding (standing erect on 2 speeding horses) and shooting. Mock battles are enacted with enthusiasm and the area resounds to the sounds of the firing of ancient cannons. Of course, this is Holi, so there's a lot of spraying each other with colour. A fair comes up around the Gurudwara. Evenings are for cultural events, including music and poetry competitions. The highlight of the last day is a long procession led by the Panj Piaras which makes a round of all the gurudwaras, in the area.

Hornbill Festival

Held in Nagaland in December, this festival pays tribute to the Hornbill - the most revered bird of the Naga tribes. The festival showcases Nagaland's heritage in all its diversity and grandeur.

Hoysala Mahotsava

The splendidly sculpted Hoysala temples of Belur and Halebid in Karnataka, a UNESCO World Heritage site, are the venue for this dance festival.

International Flower Festival

Held every summer during the peak flowering season, this festival "showcases the exotic flora of the tiny North Eastern state of Sikkim. On display are flowers, orchids, gladioli, roses, magnolia, cacti, alpine plants, creepers, climbers, ferns and herbs. There are seminars and lectures by experts. And, of course, momos and other delectable Sikkimese delicacies. If you like what you see, why not plan a trip to Sikkim? The best time to go is from March to May, when the plants (including 600 species of orchids, 240 species of trees and ferns, 150 varieties of gladioli, 46 types of rhododendrons) are in full bloom. Bonus attractions are river rafting and the yak safari,

International Mango Festival

Mango lovers, like wine lovers, are passionate about their favourites and at this festival, you can savour the many myriad varieties of the king of fruits and find out why cultural programmes liven up the event still further,

Island Tourism Festival

This ten-day long festival of dance, drama and music showcases the arts and crafts, flora and fauna and marine life of Port Blair, capital of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Aqua sports, tele-games and parasailing are added attractions.

Jahan-Khusrau

Only Sufi music is played at this music festival associated with Hazrat Amir Khusrau, one of the great followers of Hazrat Nizamuddin. Performers from all over the world perform. The festival takes place in Delhi in the last week of February.

Jaipur Heritage International Festival

The Pink City of Jaipur, Rajasthan, always fascinating, becomes even more so during this festival, spread over fourteen days in January and in locations difficult to find anywhere else in the world. Events include exhibitions, seminars, sports, children's programmes and of course, crafts bazaars.

Ka Pomblang Nongkrem

Also called Shad Nongkrem, this colourful 5-day long event is the most important and elaborate festival of the Khasi tribe. Held annually in November at Smit near Shillong, Meghalaya, it gives thanks to the Goddess Ka Blei Synshar for a rich harvest. An important part of this festival is the Pomblang Ceremony, at which goats are sacrificed and offerings are made to the ancestor and ancestress of the ruling

cjan and U-Lei Shillong (the deity of Shillong peak). Sanctification of the tangmuri (pipes) as queen of musical instruments, forms part of the ritual. After the religious rituals, on the fourth day, Khasi men and women, dressed in traditional splendour, perform the famous Nongkrem dance, with young women dancing within a protective ring formed by young lads. The festival ends on the fifth day with a prayer for prosperity.

Kala Ghoda Arts Festival

The spotlight of this festival, held in the megapolis of Mumbai in January, is on fine, folk and performing arts and ethnic cuisines. Events include movies, concerts, competitions, exhibitions, food courts, street performances, workshops.

Kalidas Festival

Nagpur, in Maharashtra, is the venue for this festival, dedicated to the great Sanskrit Poet Kalidas. Celebrated every November since 1995, it is a feast of Indian classical dance and music. Upcoming artists perform alongside experienced performers to make the festival a memorable experience.

Khajuraho Dance Festival

There's more to Khajuraho than erotic carvings on temple walls and this week-long festival of classical dances, held in February/March each year proves it. All the classical dance traditions - Kathak, Bharatanatyam, Odissi, Kuchipudi, Manipuri and Kathakali are on show, against the spectacular backdrop of the magnificently lit temples, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Modern Indian dance has also been added recently. The dances are performed by some of the best exponents in the field, in an open-air auditorium, usually in front of the Chitragupta Temple dedicated to Surya (the Sun God) and the Vishwanatha Temple dedicated to Lord Shiva, belonging to the western group. They bring alive the former religious capital of Chandeta dynasty, one of the powerful Rajput dynasties of Central India.

Konark Dance Festival

The floodlit Sun Temple of Konark in Orissa, a UNESCO World Heritage site and one of India's greatest architectural sights often described as a poem in stone, is the backdrop for this festival of classical dance held every December. Eminent dancers present their interpretations of various classical dance forms - Odissi, Bharatanatyam, Manipuri, Kathak and Chhau - as the sound of ghungroo bells, flute and pakkawaj fill the air. A marvellous crafts mela and delectable cuisine add to the festive mood.

Kurukshetra Festival

Kurukshetra, Haryana, is the battlefield of the epic Mahabharata, on which Lord Krishna gave Arjuna, the Pandava prince, the advice enshrined in the Bhagwad Gita,

the Holy Book of the Hindus. It is believed that Lord Brahma created the universe from Kurukshetra after performing a great yajna (sacrifice) here. Manusmriti here and the Rig and Sama Vedas (Hindu holy scriptures) are also believed to have been compiled here. Lord Buddha and the Sikh gurus came visiting. All-in-all, it is an ancient holy land associated with the origins of Hinduism.

The Kurukshetra Festival coincides with Gita Jayanti, which celebrates the birth of the Gita. It is expectedly an exhilarating and spiritual experience. Pilgrims gather to take a dip in the sacred tanks of Brahma Sarovar and Sannehit Sarovar. Religious festivities include week-long Bhagawad Katha (Story-telling sessions of the Gita), recital of shlokas (sacred verses), dance dramas and deep daan at Brahma Sarovar. Free medical camps, book exhibitions and recitals of bhajans (religious songs) in the classical tradition are also organised.

Ladakh Festival

A colourful kaleidoscope of cultures - Central Asian, Tibetan and North Indian - come alive in this festival held in September in Ladakh, nestled in the Western Himalayas. On display are traditional sports (polo and archery), folk dances and songs, age-old social and cultural ceremonies, art and handicrafts.

Lohri

Celebrated in Punjab on 13th January, Lohri celebrates the successful harvest of the Rabi crops - an extremely important event in a predominantly agricultural community. It is a community festival and celebrated as one. Children go from door to door to collect funds for community bonfires that are lit up in the evening. The villagers gather around the bonfires and offer sweets, puffed rice, til (sesame) and popcorn to the flames. The evening is spent singing, dancing and exchanging greetings with family and friends. After Lohri, the biting cold of North Indian winters begins to taper off.

'Lucknow Festival: Held in November-December, in Lucknow, the capital of the state of Uttar Pradesh, this festival perfectly captures the undying elegance and splendours of the ancient city formerly known as Awadh. The arts, crafts and above all, heavenly cuisine, are yours to savour for 10 memorable days, bringing alive Lucknow's Nawabi past. Colourful processions, traditional dramas, Kathak dances in the Lucknow gharana style, music concerts (sarangi/sitar recitals, ghazals, qawalis, thumri), traditional village games (ekka races, kite flying Competitions, cock fights), just choose what you want to be entertained by and surrender.

Mamallapuram Dance Festival

Dancers and musicians from across the country participate in this festival held at the UNESCO World Heritage

site of Mamallapuram, Tamil Nadu, in December-January, with Arjuna's Penance as its backdrop.

Marwar Festival

Originally known as Maarid Festival, this is held in Jodhpur, Rajasthan and is devoted to the music and dance of the Marwar region. Folk artists bring the myths, legend and folklore of the area to life. The festival is held for 2 days on Sharad Purnima, the full moon, in October.

The city of lakes, Udaipur, in Rajasthan, is the venue for this festival, celebrated in April during the Gangaur Festival. An exhilarating welcome to spring, it is an audio-visual feast with Rajasthani songs, dances, processions, devotional music and firework displays. A procession of colourfully attired women carrying images of the goddess Gauri make their way to Lake Pichola. A procession of boats on the lake, offers a fitting finale to the splendid celebrations.

Modhera Dance Festival

The Sun Temple at Modhera in Mehsana district, Gujarat, dedicated to Lord Surya, the sun god, acts as the backdrop for this festival of Indian classical dances, held every year in January for three days. The festival seeks to present classical dance forms in a milieu that is as close as possible to that in which they were originally performed.

National Kite Festival

This takes place in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, on Makar Sankranti (14th January), the day when the Sun enters the Makar Rashi (the zodiac sign of Capricorn, the goat), starting its northward journey. Makar Sankranti is the day of the equinox, when day and night are equally long. Hindus believe that those who die on this day attain moksha, escaping from the cycle of birth and re-birth. Thousands of colourful kites dot the skies as people vie with each other to win community kite-flying competitions. Special kites have little paper lamps attached and these fill the night sky with flickering lights. Special Gujarati cuisine, exhibitions of handicrafts and folk art enhance the festive spirit.

National Theatre Festival

Held in Kolkata in December, this is one of the largest theatre festivals in India. Drama troupes come, from all over the country and neighbouring countries too, to participate.

Natyanjali Festival

This 5-day festival which takes place in the premises of the ancient Nataraja temple of Chidambaram, Tamil Nadu, pays special tribute to Lord Nataraja, the dancing Shiva. It is held in February/March and begins on the auspicious occasion of Maha Shivratri. Leading dancers from all parts of India congregate and dance in the temple as an offering to Nataraja, while the carved pillars depicting Lord Nataraja in 108 poses of Bharata Natyam look silently on. The festival promotes the message of "Unity in Diversity", conveyed in the universal language of music and dance.

Nehru Cup Boat Races

Kerala's backwaters at Aranmula and Kottayam, are the picturesque setting for the annual snake-boat races held on the second Saturday of August every year. Tranquil lake fronts are transformed into a sea of humanity, as over 100 oarsmen in each huge (over 100 feet long) snake boat vie for the prestigious Nehru Trophy, named after independent India's first Prime Minister. An estimated 2 lakh people watch, while the beating of drums and cymbals and songs add to the festive mood. Preparations for the event begin several weeks in advance and celebrations continue long after, for the winning teams.

Nishagandhi Dance Festival

The Nishagandhi open-air theatre in the palace compound at Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, is the venue for this classical dance festival held every April. Renowned dancers perform Bharatnatyam, Mohiniattam, Kathak, Odissi, modern ballet and other folk forms. Artists and connoisseurs of dance come from all-over India to enjoy this cultural treat.

Pattadakal Dance Festival

The delicately carved temples at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Pattadakal (the ancient capital of the Chalukyan kings) in the state of Karnataka form the backdrop for this festival of dance, held to celebrate this marvellous heritage.

Pete De Pondicherry

This cultural pageant, held from 15th to 17th August, in Pondicherry, coincides with Pondicherry's Liberation Day. The Park monument is brilliantly lit.

Thrissur Pooram

"Pooram", the two-century-old festival held at the Vadakkunnaihan temple in Thrissur, Kerala, in April/May, is the most colourful of all the temple festivals held in the state. All the temples in the state send their best elephants to participate. Bedecked with golden headpieces coming down over the trunk, the elephants go round the temple in a splendid procession to the accompaniment of drums, pipes and trumpets. Carrying ceremonial umbrellas and fanned by white whisks, 30 of these gentle giants amble out majestically through the temple gate, to line up in 2 rows, facing each other, in the open ground. An elephant in the centre carries the image of Lord Shiva. Each "team of elephants" has its own Panchavadyam (literally "five instruments", i.e. conch, cymbals, trumpet and two kinds of drums) orchestra. The umbrellas are unfurled to the beating of the drums and cheering of the assembled crowds. Specially appointed judges award a prize for the most spectacular display. The festival ends with a magnificent display of fireworks that continues till dawn. Truly, you can call it a mammoth spectacle!

Qutub Festival

Veterans of Indian classical music and-folk dance fold audiences enthralled at this festival held in Nov./Dec. each year, in Delhi, against the historic ruins of the KJutub Minar, a UNESCO World Heritage site, Kuchipudi, [Odissi, Manipuri, Ghazals, Qawalis, Sarangi, Sitar, choose four event and look forward to a memorable evening. Spice it up further with regional cuisines available at the J stalls at the complex.

Rajgir Dance Festival

Rajgir, the ancient capital of the Magadha empire in Bihar, is held sacred by both Buddhists and Jains for its association with the Buddha and Lord Mahavira. Every October, a colourful festival of dance and music is held here. Instrumental music, devotional songs, opera, folk dance and ballet.

Gangaur Festival

The Gangaur Festival is the colourful and most important local festival of Rajasthan and is observed throughout the State with great fervour and devotion by womenfolk who worship Gauri, the consort of Lord Shiva during July-Aug. It is the celebration of monsoon, harvest and marital fidelity in Jaipur. Gan is a synonym for Shiva and Gaur which stands for Gauri or Parvati who symbolises iaubhagya (marital bliss). Gauri is the embodiment of perfection and conjugal love which is why the unmarried women worship her for being blessed with good husbands, while married women do so for the welfare, health and long life of their spouses and a happy married life.

The festival commences on the first day of Chaitra, the day following Holi and continues for 18 days. For a newly-wedded girl, it is binding to observe the full course of 18 days of the festival that succeeds her marriage. Even unmarried girls fast for the full period of 18 days and eat only one meal a day. Images of Isar and Gauri are made of clay for the festival. In some families, permanent wooden images are painted afresh every year by reputed painters called matherans on the eve of the festival. A distinct difference between the idols of Teej and Gangaur is that the Idol will have a canopy during the Teej Festival while , the Gangaur idol would not have a canopy.

FAIRS OF INDIA

Kumbha Mela

The pilgrimage occurs four times every twelve years, [once at each of the four locations. Each twelve-year cycle includes the Maha (great) Kumbha Mela at Prayag, attended by millions of people, making it the largest pilgrimage gathering around the world. The observance of Kumbha Mela is based upon the following story: thousands of years ago, perhaps in the Vedic period, gods and demons made a temporary truce to work together in obtaining amrita (the nec-

tar of immortality) from the Milky Ocean and to share this equally.

However, when the Kumbha (pot) containing the amrita appeared, the demons ran away with the pot and were chased by the gods. For twelve days and twelve nights (equivalent to twelve human years) the gods and demons fought in the sky for the possession of this pot of amrita. It is said that during the battle, drops of amrita fell on to four places: Prayag, Haridwar, Ujjain and Nasik, Thus, Kumbha Mela is observed at these four locations where the nectar fell. Kumbha Mela is attended by millions of people on a single day. A ritual bath at a predetermined time and place is the major event of this festival.

Other activities include religious discussions, devotional singing, mass feeding of holy men/women and the poor and religious assemblies where doctrines are debated and standardised. Kumbha Mela (especially the Maha Kumbha Mela) is the most sacred of all the Hindu pilgrimages. Thousands of holy men/women (monks, saints, sadhus) grace the occasion by their presence. The auspiciousness of Kumbha Mela is in part attributed to the gathering of thousands of holy men/women at one place on earth. According to astrologers, the 'Kumbh Fair' takes place when the planet Jupiter enters Aquarius and the Sun enters Aries.

Gangasagar Fair

Gangasagar Mela is the largest fair celebrated in West Bengal. This fair is held where the Ganga and the Bay of Bengal form a nexus. Hence the name Gangasagar Mela.

The river Ganga which originates in the Gangotri glacier in the snow clad Himalayas, descends down the mountains, reaches the plains at Haridwar, flows through ancient pilgrimage sites such as Banares and Prayag and drains into the Bay of Bengal. Sagar Island, at the mouth of the river Hugly in Bengal (accessed from Diamond Harbour), where the Ganga breaks up into hundreds of streams and drains into the sea, is honoured as a pilgrimage site.

Baneshwar Fair

The name 'Baneshwar' is derived from the revered Shivlinga, which is kept in the Mahadev Temple in Durgapur. "Baneshwar means the 'Master of the Delta' in the local Vagdi language and this name was given to the Shivlinga. The Baneshwar fair is held at a small delta formed by the river Som and Mahi, from Magh Shukla Ekadashi to Magh Shukla Purnima. Baneshwar fair in its present form is actually one of two fairs: one which used to be held in of Baneshwar Mahadev, (Lord Shiva) and another fair, which started after the construction of the Vishnu Temple by Jankunwari, daughter-in-law of Mayji, a highly revered saint considered to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

Sonepur Cattle Fair

A visual extravaganza awaits ali at the Sonepur Fair,

where multitudes congregate on Kartik Purnima to offer obeisance to Harihar Nath and participate in what is the biggest cattle fair in Asia. Festivities stretch over a fortnight, giving visitors a feel of the pulse of Bihar.

According to the Indian Almanac, the full moon day of Kartik Purnima or Purnima of the month of Kartik, which usually falls in November, is one of the most auspicious of days. A number of big fairs are held at important paces of pilgrimage. The Harihar Chhetra Mela near Sonapur is one of the biggest fairs held in India and is also the biggest cattle fair pilgrimage and the Harihar Kshetra Mela, as the Sonapur Fair is also known, is one of the biggest.

Sonapur is located in the Saran district in the northern part of Bihar. This district shaped like a triangle is demarcated by three mighty rivers - the Ganga, Gandak and Ghagra, demarcate this district, which is shaped like a triangle. Sonapur stands on the confluence of the Ganga and Gandak.

Tarnetar Fair

The Tarnetar Fair is one of the most important fairs of Gujarat. Various tribes like the Kalis, the Rabaris, the Bharwards, the Khants, the Khanbis, the Charans and the Kathis, get together to celebrate the famous legendary marriage of Draupadi with Arjuna, thereby retracing its origin to the times of the Mahabharata. Arjuna was the third of the five Pandavas of Hastinapur, who got married to Draupadi - the princess of this region, in the great Hindu epic, the Mahabharata.

Banganga Fair

The Banganga Fair is held annually on the full moon day of Vaishakh (April-May) near a rivulet 11 kms from the historical township of Bairath in Jaipur district. The stream is believed to have been created by Arjun, one of the Pandavas.

Visiting the Banganga Fair, taking a bath and paying homage to the holy sites in the vicinity at this time is therefore considered very auspicious by the pilgrims who come from Alwar, Behror, Jaipur, Bharatpur and many other places.

Devotees gather at the Shri Radha Krishnaji's temple in the morning, they take a bath at the ghats (a flight of steps leading to the water) of the Banganga river with the belief that it has powers to purify the soul. The people then proceed to the nearby shrines of Hanuman and Ganga Biliari and also visit the Shiva, temple and the Math of I Goswamiji.

Camel Festival

A lively and colourful event, the Camel Festival is organised by the Department of Tourism, Art & Culture, Rajasthan in Bikaner every year. January is just the right month for a desert spree and Bikaner just the right place to see the Ships of the Desert. In the camel country Bikaner,

these desert leviathans pull heavy cart loads, transport grain and even work at the wells.

The Camel Festival begins with a colourful procession of bedecked camels against the red sandstone backdrop of the Junagarh Fort, the festivity advances to the open-sand-spreads of the grounds, followed by the best breed competition, the tug-of-war contest, camel dance and acrobatics, etc.

The Camels display amazing footwork, dancing gracefully to the slightest direction of their trainers. Bridal, bridles, bejewelled necks, jingling anklets and long, lanky camel shadows on dusky sands cast a magical spell. Hundreds of tourists and thousands of locals and dignitaries revel in this man-and-animal affair organised especially for the tourists.

The evenings close with a different tenor and tempo altogether: a traditional rendezvous of renowned artists of Rajasthan and the local folk performers.

The jubilant skirt-swirling dancers, the awe inspiring fire dance and the dazzling fireworks light up the fortified desert city of Bikaner.

Bikaner is connected by rail and road with all the major cities. The nearest airport is at Jodhpur (243 kms.)

Kaila Devi Fair

The annual fair of Kaila Devi, (Mahalakshmi or the goddess of wealth), is held at the village Kaila (24 kms to the south-west) in Karauli district in the month of Chaitra (Mar-Apr), lasting for a fortnight. The temple of Kaila Devi is located on the banks of the Kalisil river in the hills of Trikut, 2 kms. to the north-west of Kaila village. Another attraction is the small temple dedicated to Bhairon, situated in the courtyard and facing the shrine of Kaila Devi is a temple of Hanuman locally called 'Languriya'.

Approximately 2 lakh devotees gather during the fair. The ritual of Kanak-Dandotis is observed by staunch devotees. They cover a distance of 15 to 20 kms to reach the temple, not on foot but by lying prostrate, making lines with their hands in that position, advancing up to the line drawn and repeating this procedure till they reach the temple.

While some eat food and take rest during the journey, others endure the rigours of the ritual without these.

Groups of Mina tribesmen arrive in a spirit of gaiety dancing, singing and creating a lively atmosphere. The spacious courtyard becomes the venue for dances and songs sung in praise of the guardian deity.

The nearest rail-head is Hindaun at a distance of about 48 Kms. Shri Mahavirji is another rail-head of the Western Railway near Kaila. The site is approachable by well maintained roads from Karauli, Hindaun and Mahavirji. During the fair, the State Transport as well as private operators provide bus services keeping in mind the huge inflow of pilgrims.

Shekhawati Fair

The Shekhawati Festival held on 10th and 11th February every year is organised jointly by the State Department of Tourism, District Administrations of Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu."

Shekhawati, already famous for its frescoes, is fast becoming a rural tourism destination too. Travelling on horse back, the tourists get a closer view of the countryside and the people.

And they return with an indelible imprint of not only the friendliness of the people but also of the agricultural revolution sweeping the villages-the region now exports 80 per cent of its crops whereas only a few years ago it could meet only 10 per cent of its requirement through local production.

For a broad-based discovery of Shekhawati's culture, the festival is spread over a number of venues - Nawalgarh, Sikar, Jhunjhunu and Churu.

The programmes include a one day tour of the region, camel and jeep safaris, farm visits, rural games, cultural programmes, haveli competitions and fireworks.

Nawalgarh is the central venue of the festival and can be reached comfortably by train and road from Jaipur (140 kms by Road).

Nawalgarh also has some of the finest frescoes of Shekhawati. The Clock Tower is a famous landmark and the Roop Niwas Palace hotel occupies a place of pride in the town.

Rath Yatra (Car Festival)

This spectacular chariot festival celebrated for 8 days, is held at the famous Jagannath Temple at Puri (Orissa). Thousands of devotees flock to Puri during the occasion as they believe that a glimpse of Lord Jagannath in his chariot gives salvation. Images of Lord Jagannath -the 'Lord of the Universe, his sister Subhadra and brother Balbhadr are taken out in a procession in three immense chariots. The main chariot is 14 metres high and 10 metres square with 16 wheels.

The deities are brought out of the temple to the chariots by rhythmic movement called 'Pahandi' in a royal procession to the accompaniment of the beat of the 'cymbals' and drums and chanting of prayers by devotees. The pushing and shoving to seat Lord Jagannath on his chariot continues for hours. The god it seems is testing the perseverance of his devotees.

The devotees in turn coax, cajole, they promise sweetmeats and other delicacies, when all this fails they call the Lord names and even give blows to the idol, all the while the surging crowd chants, sings and dances. It is believed that on these days Lord Jagannath will descend from his pedestal and mingle with his devotees with no barrier between them. After seating the idols, the traditional King of Puri sweeps the Chariots with a golden broom. Thousands of devotees pull these chariots to Gundicha Mandir, a temple 3 km away.

After a week, on 'Ashadha Sukla Dasami', the 10th day of the bright fortnight of Ashadha (June-July), return journey or 'Bahuda Yatra' of the deities commences in the same manner from Gundicha temple to the main temple like Rath Yatra. When two months of Ashadha fall in one year, Rath Yatra is observed as the festival of 'Nabakalebar' the old deities -are buried within the temple premises ('Koilibaikuntha') and are replaced by new deities, carved out of Margosa trees for which there are set procedures. Double Ashadha occurs at intervals of 8 to 19 years. Construction of the chariots begin as early as April.

Orissa is a land of innumerable fairs and festivals celebrated round the year but the most spectacular of them is the Rath Yatra, hitherto known as the Car Festival to western world. This chariot procession on the main streets of Ahmedabad city features a lot of colourful chariots, trucks and other vehicles. The procession commemorates the journey of Lord Krishna to Mathura, leaving behind grieving Gopis. The massive procession begins at Jagdish temple in Jamalpur. -The main chariots are dedicated to Lord Krishna, his brother Balaram and sister Subadhra, followed by colourfully decorated elephants, trucks, motor vehicles, pilgrims on foot, acrobats and gymnasts.

