

Discover India

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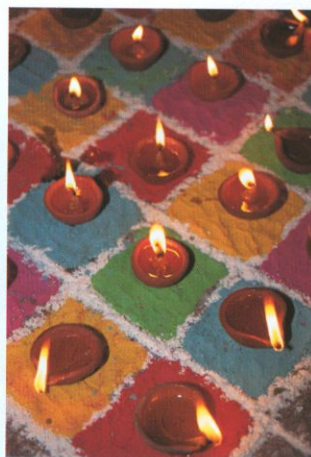
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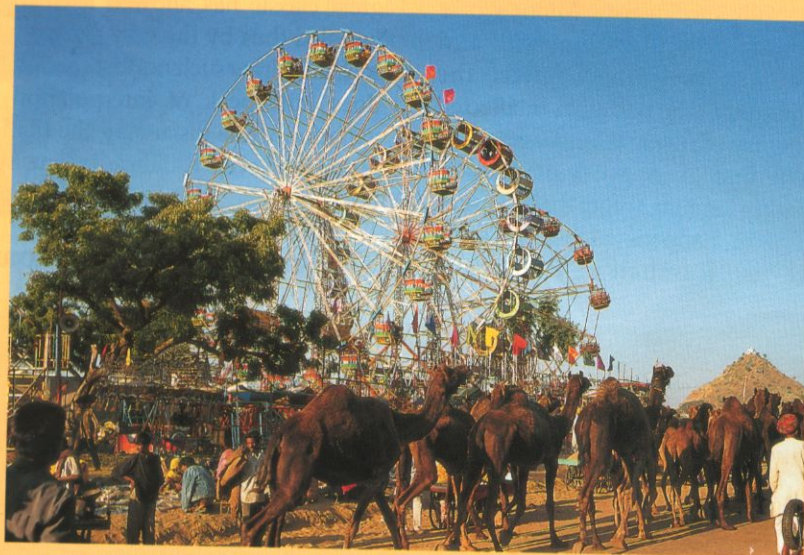
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Why we Celebrate

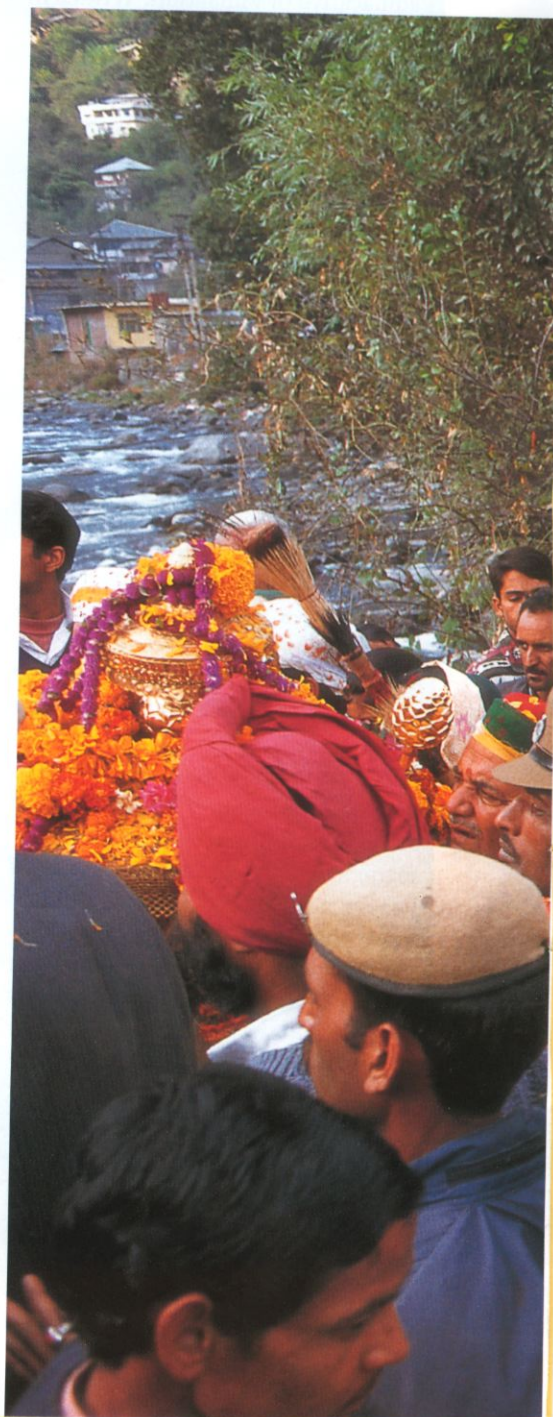
Text: Nihal Mathur

Woven into the very fabric of Indian life and ethos are Fairs and Festivals that have come down to us today, spanning hundreds and, yes, even thousands of years in our history and culture.



Fairs and festivals are not merely events for merrymaking but have a vastly deeper significance in our lives, connected as they are to our ancient religion and mythology and what is perhaps not so evident, to the changing rhythms of the six seasonal divisions of the year.

Take for instance, Diwali, the most celebrated festival of India. Coming in the months of October/November, this is the time after the 'kharif' crop has been harvested when there is a sense of plenty with the people. During this time, there is agricultural surplus, buying and selling, acquiring of assets



like gold jewelry, property or starting a new venture etc. It is only natural that this festival has been linked to Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity who it is said, would enter your home only if it was clean. Consequently the houses were whitewashed, brass and bronze utensils were given a fresh coat of nickel, clothes were put out to dry in the sun and every dark corner of the house was emptied of its contents, to be brushed and dusted. In short, this simple tradition incorporated the critical message essential for well being in a

tropical climate: filth and fungus brought in by the monsoon were to be thoroughly cleaned before the festival of Diwali which marked the on-set of the winter season. In much the same way the festival of Holi marked the beginning of summer and Janamasthami, the rains etc. Tied to these festivals were customs of food and clothing, befitting the change of seasons.

Sanctified by mythology, the festivals also became annual events to remember the timeless wisdom of the ages, enshrined in our epics and other

scriptures. On festive occasions, besides the feasting and celebration, tradition decreed that we reflect on some of the more important, though philosophic, aspects of our lives by listening to recitation from the holy books, performing puja and thanking the gods for their bounty. Essentially then, the festival was each individual's expression of harmony with his own self and Nature.

While the festival was, by and large, celebrated at home, the fair on the other hand drew the individual out to a particular place — like a temple or

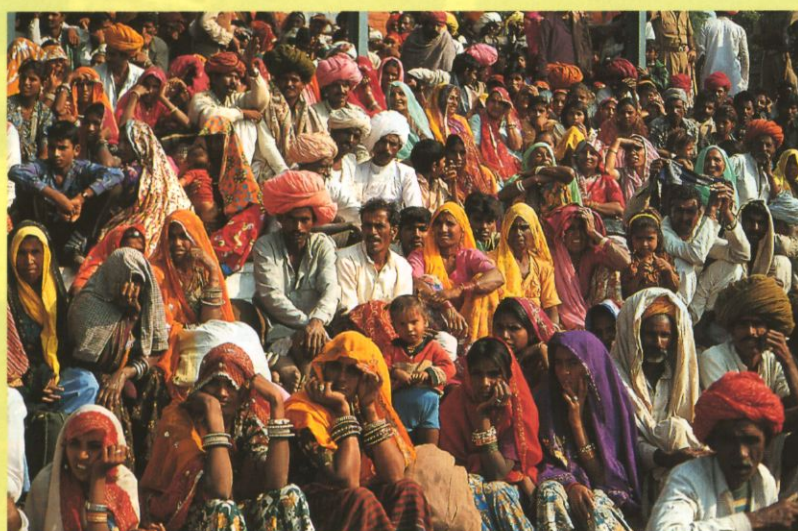
Left: A view of the camel fair ground at Pushkar, Rajasthan. (Arijeet Gupta)
Below: Kullu Dussehra festival in Himachal Pradesh. (Rajeev Rastogi)





Above: Celebrating Holi, the festival of colours. (Prakash Israni)

Middle: Thousands of spectators gather for the cultural show at the Pushkar fair in Rajasthan. (Arijeet Gupta)



Potters do brisk business during the festival of Diwali.
(Nihal Mathur)



river, where hundreds of thousands of people gathered annually to celebrate an occasion. Perhaps the most important *raison d'être* for the fair was the intrinsic human need to meet and interact with others of their kind. Much before the advent of instant communications and speedy travel and transportation, people were scattered far and wide with little or almost no contact with others. Fairs provided an opportunity for a whole lot of different people, whether they were sadhus or singers, performing artists or craftsmen, poets or painters, to come together, meet and exchange news and ideas.

Whatever the reason, the fairs and festivals were fixed in the calendar so as to fit into the working pattern of the people. Care was taken to see that these events were scheduled when the people were not busy with the various activities of agriculture or, if they were, that they were relatively free from their fields so they had enough time to participate.

Like the festivals, the fairs also came to punctuate life and provide a welcome relief from the monotony of mundane existence. Leaving behind the drudgery of everyday care and worry, people flocked to the fairs not only for entertainment but also to see the wider world at work. For the spiritually inclined, the holymen were there with their commentaries, dialogues and discussions on the scriptures. The poets gathered together in a group of their own, while the *nautanki* and the *nautch* girls danced and played to amuse the amorous adults. There were magicians, snake charmers, fire-eaters and of course, the acrobats that enthralled the child in all of us! Then there were festive foods to cater to every palate and pocket but above all there was shopping. Depending upon the size of people coming to the fair, craftsmen from far and near came to sell their products. Articles for all kinds of purposes and made out of all types of materials, which were normally not available in the small village economy, were now on display and sale. Whether, it was textile or terra-cotta, a wooden or metal object, the purchased craft item became a cherished symbol of the fair and a memory of good times associated with it.