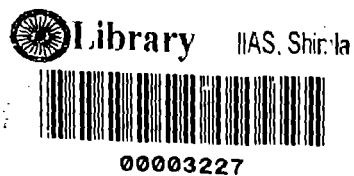
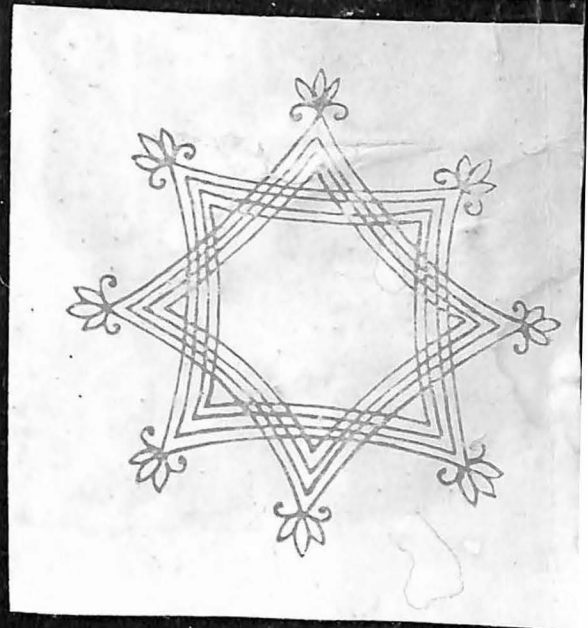


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# Festivals of India



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# FESTIVALS OF INDIA

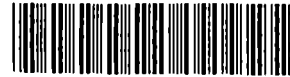


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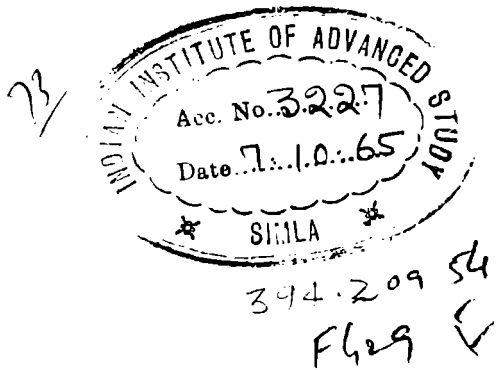
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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The Indian calendar is one long procession of festivals. Most of the communities and religious groups observe them with zest. Festivals enliven the social life and provide opportunities for artistic expression. For instance, festivals are occasions when women in most parts of India prepare rice-flour designs on their doorsteps and in their courtyards; and they embellish their hands and feet with lovely patterns made with henna paste. Also, the festivals are the occasion for music, dance and drama or for worship in temples, mosques and churches.

The festivals are as varied in origin as they are large in number. Some of them celebrate the birthdays of national heroes or the eternal cycle of the seasons. Others have origins in the religions, myths and legends. For their proper understanding and appreciation, therefore, it is essential to form a coherent idea of the religious beliefs of the people. Of the 362 million people who live in India, 303.6 million are Hindus, 35.4 million Muslims, 8.2 million Christians, 6.3 million Sikhs, 1.6 million Jains, 1 million Parsis and 0.2 million Buddhists.

#### HINDUISM

Hinduism, as a faith, is many-sided, yet bound by a common search for

truth. It is not a well-defined creed, but a way of life, a fellowship of faiths. With the advent of the Aryans in northern India, it originated as a simple form of nature worship and gradually spread to the rest of the country, drawing into its fold local cults, gods and goddesses and diverse beliefs and modes of worship.

Philosophical Hinduism believes in the oneness of the Supreme Soul which is represented by a triad of gods — Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Siva who is both the Destroyer and generator of new life.

The individual souls are but different manifestations of the Supreme Soul. Before the individual soul ultimately merges into the Supreme, it must work out its destiny by passing through a series of births. According to his station in life, a man must perform his special duties. Hinduism thus lays emphasis on action.

Hindus have a vast body of literature, the four Vedas being the most sacred and the earliest. Associated with them are the Brahmanas and the Upanishads. The two books which have greatly influenced Hindu life and thought are the Epics — the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. In the *Mahabharata* is contained the *Bhagavad Gita*, the quintessence of the Hindu view of life.



## HINDU GODS AND GODDESSSES IN POPULAR FESTIVALS

*Siva* (literally meaning auspicious). The Hindu trinity is represented by Brahma the Creator, Vishnu (Narayan) the Preserver, and Siva (Rudra) the Destroyer and Reproducer of life.



Siva is generally represented as an ascetic sitting on a tiger skin. Snakes are coiled round his blue neck, his hair and his body. He has a third eye in the centre of his forehead, and a crescent moon rests on his head. His abode is the high mountain, Kailasa, and his mount is the sacred bull, Nandi. He is also worshipped in the form of a *linga*, representing the power behind creation. He is also Natraja, lord of the dance, a conception widely represented in sculptures and bronzes.

The great goddess Mahadevi, the consort of Siva, has a variety of names given to her according to her various forms, attributes and actions. Broadly, she represents two forms of the female energy of Siva; one mild, the other fierce. In her former aspect, she is called Uma, Gauri, Haimavati, Jagat-mata, Bhavani or Parvati; and

in the latter, she is known by such names as Durga, Kali or Chandi. The divinities one usually comes across in Hindu mythology are as follows:

*Parvati*, the loving wife of Siva.



*Durga*, the goddess of battle, the Pallas-Athene of Hinduism, has ten



arms and holds weapons of retribution in them. She was sent by the gods to destroy Mahishasura (the buffalo demon). Her mount is the lion. Although warlike in aspect, Durga is worshipped as the Mother who triumphs over Evil.

*Kali*, a relic of the original pre-historic religion, the black goddess



who has conquered Time (Kal). She is propitiated by sacrifice. She wears a necklace of skulls, and her red tongue hangs thirstily out of her mouth. Sacrifices are made to this goddess whose Dance of Conquest is famous in legend.

*Ganesa*. Son of Siva and Parvati, this god is very popular, being the household deity of prudence and prosperity. It is considered highly auspicious to invoke his blessings at the commencement of any undertaking.

According to a legend in the *Matsya Purana*, Parvati ordered Ganesa to keep guard at her door while she bathed. Siva coming home, was denied entry by him. The angry god cut off Ganesa's head, but on



Parvati's request he ordered that the head of the first living being found should be brought to him. This happened to be that of an elephant. Ever since, Ganesa has had an elephant's head.

*Lakshmi*. Like the Greek Aphro-



dite, this consort of Vishnu rose from the foam of the ocean. Enchantingly lovely, she stands on the lotus which is her symbol. She is the much sought after goddess of wealth and prosperity.

*Sarasvati*, the consort of Brahma, is the goddess of learning and of the

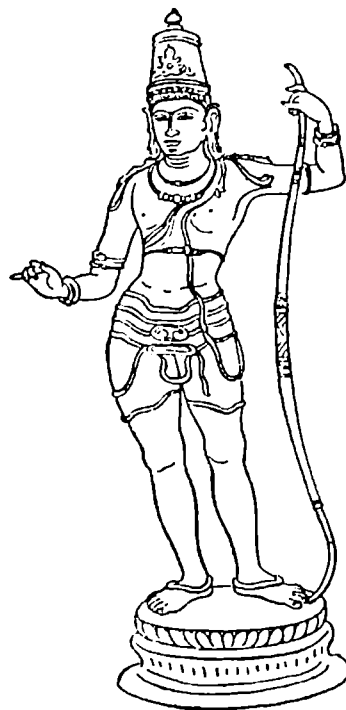


arts and sciences. She is represented as of fair colour, draped in spotless white, and sitting on a lotus. The swan is her mount and she holds a 'veena' in one hand.

*Rama*. He is the seventh incarnation of Vishnu. His exploits form the subject of the great epic, the *Ramayana*.

Born in Ayodhya (Uttar Pradesh), as heir to the throne, Rama was exiled from his kingdom for fourteen years. His devoted wife Sita and his brother Lakshmana accompanied him into exile. Ravana, the ten-headed demon who was king of Lanka, carried away Sita during her husband's absence. Rama set out in search of her and

when he found her in Lanka, a great battle ensued between him and Ravana. Assisted by the monkey chiefs, Hanuman, and Sugreeva, Rama



was victorious, and brought the faithful Sita back to his capital, where there was great rejoicing. His brother, Bharata, who had loyally ruled the kingdom as Rama's regent, welcomed them with open arms. For Hindus, Rama is the ideal man and king, and Sita the ideal woman.

*Krishna*. The eighth incarnation of Vishnu, Krishna is one of the most popular gods. He was born to destroy Kansa, the evil king of Mathura. He grew to manhood among the cowherds of Mathura, and the love of the *gopis* (milk-maids) for him symbolises the yearning of the human soul for the pleasures of kinship with God. In the great war between the Kauravas and

the Pandavas described in the *Mahabharata*, Krishna sided with the Pandavas. The *Bhagavad Gita* (the Song Celestial) sung by him to clear



the doubts and hesitations of Arjuna, one of the Pandavas, contains the essence of the Hindu view of life.

Krishna is represented as a handsome youth, sky-blue in colour, and always holding a flute.

### ISLAM

Islam means resignation to the will of God. It is a strictly monotheistic religion which believes that there is only one God. Brotherhood and equality among the believers and a caste-free society are its main features. The holy Prophet Mohammed is believed to be the last and the greatest of the prophets, and the holy *Qoran*, as revealed to the holy Prophet, is the sacred book of the Muslims.

The five duties of a devout Muslim are:

1. Belief in the one true God;
2. Prayers five times a day;
3. Giving of alms;
4. A month's fast every year; and
5. Pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in one's life-time.

### CHRISTIANITY

Although many of the present-day Christians embraced the religion in recent times, tradition has it that the Syrian Christians of South India were converted by Thomas Didymus, one of the twelve apostles of Christ. Recent research indicates that St. Thomas preached, in all probability, about 48 A.D. at the court of King Gondophares of Taxila, now in West Pakistan. From there he is believed to have come down to the Malabar coast and established seven churches in South India, where traditions of the ancient church are still preserved.

The Roman Catholicism in India owes a great deal to St. Francis Xavier, a Jesuit missionary who came to India in the middle of the 16th century.

### SIKHISM

The word "Sikh" is derived from the original Sanskrit word *Shishya*, meaning disciple. This eclectic monotheistic religion is an offshoot of Hinduism. Its founder Guru\* Nanak (1469-1539) was revered by both Hindus and Muslims alike, though the Sikhs later suffered persecution at the hands of the Mughuls. Nanak's

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\* *Guru*=Teacher

"teaching was essentially a crusade against cant and humbug in religion."\* His teachings and those of the nine gurus who followed him are embodied in the *Adi Granth* or the *Granth Sahib*. Guru Gobind Singh (1666—1708)



welded the Sikhs into a martial community in 1699. He also instituted the use of the "five Ks" which distinguish the Sikh community from others:

*Kangha*, a small comb in the hair;  
*Kesh*, unshorn hair;  
*Kirpan*, a sword by the side;  
*Kachha*, a pair of shorts; and  
*Kara*, a steel bangle.

Their conventional mode of salvation consists in saying *Sat Sri Akal*—Truth is Eternal.

### JAINISM

Jainism is of great antiquity, being older than even Buddhism.

\*Khushwant Singh: *The Sikhs*.

The Jains believe that right faith, right knowledge, right conduct and chastity lead the wayfarer along the path of salvation.

Vardhamana Mahavira, born about 599 B.C., was the twenty-fourth



Tirthankara. Ultimate release from matter is, according to the Jains, the ideal state of existence for the soul.

As even the minutest being is believed to have life, the Jain is very careful not to destroy it. There are two main Jain sects: the Digambaras (sky-clad), nude and unencumbered by material things; and the Svetambaras (white-clad) who believe that white apparel is no hindrance to salvation.

Jainism is a monastic religion, and the Jain community consists not only of laymen but also of monks and nuns. The Jains are concentrated mostly in western India, particularly in Saurashtra and Mysore, where beautiful temples have been built by this prosperous community.

### ZOROASTRIANISM.

"There is but one path, the path of Asha. All other paths are false paths."\* This quotation sums up the teachings of Zoroaster. The path of "Asha" is a path of action—good thoughts, good words and good deeds—with emphasis on service. Every living being, whether plant or animal, is believed to possess an eternal principle (*fravashi*). *Fravashis* of the noble dead are invoked at every important Parsi festival, and it is a high honour for a Parsi to have his name included in the list of *fravashis*.

Because of religious persecution, the Parsis left their homeland in Iran and sought refuge in India in the seventh century A.D. They live mostly in western India, particularly in Bombay.

### BUDDHISM

In the sixth century B.C., that is about the same time as Mahavira, the great Jain teacher, Prince Siddhartha,

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\*The book of *Yasna*.

who later came to be known as the Buddha, revolted against the religion as practised in his day. Like Mahavira, he renounced the world and discovered that *kama* (desire) lay at the root



of all evil. The cessation of desire he found possible only through knowledge. In the ideal state of existence there is a release from the cycle of births and rebirths and this is called *nirvana*. In this state, the ego of man is completely annihilated, and he is free from joys and sorrows alike.

## CHAPTER II

### ALL-INDIA FESTIVALS

The great diversity of Indian religious beliefs and the varied cultural traditions of the different States never fail to interest the visitor. This diversity accounts for the large number of festivals in India. Some of these are common to the whole country, while others are observed only by a sect or community.

The major festivals common to all India are discussed in the following pages in order of their occurrence. No dates have been given for Muslim festivals which fall in different months of the Gregorian calendar.

*January 1—New Year's Day.* This international festival is celebrated mainly by the upper and middle class city-dwellers. The New Year's Day is an official holiday throughout India.

*January 26—Republic Day.* On this day in 1929, the Indian National Congress took a pledge to work unceasingly for the establishment of a Sovereign Democratic Republic in India. This goal was reached on January 26, 1950, when the new Constitution came into force.

Celebrations are held every year, throughout the country. Those in the capital (New Delhi), however, are the most spectacular. They include an Armed Forces parade, and a cultural

pageant comprising tableaux contributed by the different States.

*Kumbha Maha Mela.* This great religious gathering is held once in twelve years. A legend has it that before the universe took shape, the *devas* (gods) and the *asuras* (demons) churned the formless waters. From the ocean, there arose Dhanvantari carrying in his hands a *kumbha* (pot) containing nectar. The gods and the *asuras* struggled for the possession of the precious liquid. During this struggle, drops of nectar fell at twelve places in the world. Four of these, namely, Hardwar, Ujjain, Prayag and Nasik, are in India, and this great *mela* is held at each of these places in a 12 year cycle. In 1957, it was held at Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh.

*January/February—Basanta Panchami.* It is mainly a North Indian spring festival. Sarasvati, the goddess of learning and the arts, is worshipped. The yellow of the flowering mustard fields is the colour of the day. Field sports and kite-flying competitions are part of the celebrations.

*End of February/Beginning of March—Sivaratri.* This night is dedicated to the worship of Siva.

Anyone worshipping him on this night is believed to be released from the cycle of birth and rebirth.

*February/March—Holi.* There are many legends concerning the origin of this gay spring festival. The most popular among these concerns Prince Prahlad, the God-fearing son of the evil King Hiranyakasipu. Prahlad did not give up worshipping the god Vishnu in spite of fearful persecution by his father and his demon aunt Holika. Ultimately, when Holika, who was immune to death by fire, took Prahlad and entered a blazing furnace built for his destruction, it was the wicked Holika who was burnt to ashes by Divine intervention, while Prahlad came out unscathed.

Holi is a festival of colour. Riotously gay crowds fill the streets, squirting coloured water on all passers-by. All people regardless of age, caste or station participate in this fun.

On the evening preceding the colour festival, bonfires are lit. These symbolise the burning of Holika and the destruction of Evil.

*March 21—Jamshed Navroz.* This is celebrated by the Fasli section of the Parsi community. It dates from the time King Jamshed ruled Persia. Worship at the fire temples is followed by visits to friends and relatives when greetings are exchanged.

*March/April — Mahavira Jayanti.* Vardhamana Mahavira, the twenty-fourth Tirthankara, was born on this day more than 2,500 years ago. For the Jains, it is a day dedicated to his memory.

*March/April—Good Friday.* Christians observe Good Friday as the day on which Jesus Christ laid down his life for the good of humanity. Services and recitals of religious music are held in the churches.

*March/April—Easter Day.* The Christian belief in the resurrection of Christ is celebrated with fervour by members of the community. Processions are taken out in some parts of the country.

*April/May—Vaisakhi.* *Vaisakhi* or *Baisakhi* is the first day of the month of Vaisakha—the beginning of the Hindu year. A holy bath in a river, tank or well is an important feature of the day's observance.

*Shab-i-Barat.\** Muslims believe that on this night, God registers the actions of men and dispenses their fate according to their deeds.

Originally intended by the holy Prophet Mohammed as an occasion for prayerful vigils and fasting, this has developed into a joyous festival celebrated with fire-works, illuminations and crackers.

*April/May — Buddha Jayanti.* Siddhartha, who later came to be known as the Buddha, was born on the full moon day of Vaisakha in 563 B.C. at Lumbini in Nepal. It is a national holiday in India and is observed by people of all faiths.

*Ramzan Id (Id-ul-Fitr).* Coming with the new moon, this festival marks the end of the solemn month of *Ramzan*—a month of fasting for Muslims. This festival, therefore, is a

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\* Like all other Muslim festivals, this can occur in any month of the year.



joyful event. People wear their best clothes and go to mosques for prayers.

This is essentially a day for almsgiving.

*Id-ul-Zuha or Id-ul-Azha (Baqr Id)*. This day commemorates the sacrifice of Abraham. According to Islam, Abraham, on being ordered by God to offer his son Ismael as a sacrifice, blindfolded himself to carry out the divine instructions. On removing the cloth, however, he found his son by his side and a ram slain on the altar. Both the father and the son praised God, who commended Abraham's implicit trust in Him.

During the day, rams and goats are sacrificed. Feasting and rejoicing follows.

*July/August—Naga Panchami.\** This day is dedicated to the great serpent Shesha or Ananta (Infinite) on whom the god Vishnu is believed to recline during the intervals between the dissolution of one universe and the creation of another.

Huge cloth effigies of the serpent are made and worshipped. Stone images of snakes are bathed in milk and coirras are offered milk in the belief that this will result in immunity from snake-bite.

*August 15 — Independence Day.* India achieved independence on August 15, 1947. It is a day of dedication for all the people in India. The National Flag is unfurled and public tributes are paid to national heroes. The President in Delhi and the

Governors in the State capitals hold receptions in the evening.

*July/August—Raksha Bandhan.\** In the days when gods warred with the demons, the consort of Indra (the Puranic King of the Heavens) tied a *rakhi* (a silken amulet) around his wrist, by virtue of which, it is said, the god won back his celestial abode from his enemies.

On this day, sisters are supposed to be in a position to demand anything from their brothers. Men consider it a rare privilege to be chosen to act the part of brothers to the girls who may tie *rakhis* on their wrists.

*August/September—Khordad Sal.* This day is the birth anniversary of the Prophet Spitaman Zarathustra (Zoroaster), who was born at the beginning of the first millennium B.C. This is one of the most important Parsi festivals.

*August/September — Ganesa Chaturthi.* Ganesa, the elephant-headed god of wisdom and prosperity, is a popular deity and is a favourite with children.

Clay images of Ganesa are made by the thousand and sold to worshippers. After duly sanctifying them through rituals, worship is offered to the images, after which they are immersed in the nearest tank or river. This is a great day of rejoicing for all. Dances and music add to the picturesqueness of the festival.

Ganesa presides over the lintel of the doorway in many a Hindu home as he is believed to ward off all evil.

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\**Naga*—Snake, *Panchami*—the fifth day of the lunar fortnight.

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\**Raksha*—protection or help  
*Bandhan*—to tie.

*August/September — Janma Ashtami.* Krishna is one of the most popular of Hindu gods. The anniversary of his birth is celebrated at midnight because he was born at that time.

The celebrations are most remarkable in and around Mathura, because this place had close associations with Krishna's early life.

*Muharram.* It is a ten-day observance of intense mourning by the Muslim community to commemorate the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, the holy Prophet Mohammed's grandson.

Muslims take out impressive processions, to the accompaniment of heart-rending dirges. They observe a fast in which even water is forbidden. *Tazias*, replicas of the martyr's tomb at Karbala, beautifully made with paper and bamboo, are carried in procession and buried. A horse, symbolising Imam Hussain's horse, Dul Dul, also takes part in the procession.

*October 2—Gandhi Jayanti.* The birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi is celebrated with reverence, and homage is paid to the great leader. Mass prayers and spinning are held. In Delhi, Indians and foreigners gather at the *Samadhi* to offer floral tributes and recite verses from the Gita, the Qoran and the Bible and to chant the Mahatma's favourite hymns.

*September/October — Dassehra.* Symbolising the triumph of Good over Evil, Dassehra is one of the chief festivals of India. It is a ten-day festival.

Each of the first nine nights

(*navaratri*) of this festival is dedicated to a different aspect of the goddess Durga, the incarnation of Parvati. The origin of Durga Puja (Durga worship) goes back to epic times when Rama invoked the help of Durga, the war goddess, against the demon King Ravana.

In North India, vivid portrayals of the battle between Rama and Ravana are given by masked dancers who go on elaborate floats, in a procession through the cities.

The tenth day is the culminating point of the festival. Colossal pasteboard effigies of the three principal demons of the *Ramayana* — the ten-headed Ravana, Meghnada and Kumbhakarna — are erected. These are packed with crackers and explosives. The festivities conclude with Rama shooting fiery arrows into the effigies, which explode the crackers inside them. This symbolises the ultimate triumph of the forces of Good over those of Evil.

*Bharat Milap.* This festival is celebrated on the day following Dassehra to commemorate Rama's reunion with his loyal brother Bharat. Hindus consider this as an auspicious day for family reunion.

*October/November— Gurpurab.* Guru Nanak (1469—1539), the founder of Sikhism, endeavoured through his teachings to rid both Hinduism and Islam of the superficialities in religion. His teachings made him equally revered by both the communities.

The four places most sacred to the Sikhs are: Amritsar, Taran Taran, Patna and Anandpur. All Sikh festivals are celebrated there with great

enthusiasm. They are generally organised on the following pattern:

For two days and nights preceding the festival, the *Granth Sahib* (the holy book of the Sikhs) is read continuously from end to end (Akhand-Path).

On the day of the festival, the *Granth Sahib* is taken out in an impressive procession through the streets. Five of the most orthodox members of the community walk before the sacred book with drawn swords in their hands.

*October/November — Divali or Dipavali.* Every home, however lowly, is decorated with twinkling *dipas* (clay lamps with oil) to welcome Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Unlit houses are, it is believed, overlooked by the goddess! Rice-flour designs on the doorsteps, and fire-works and illuminations lend colour and picturesqueness to this festival.

The new commercial year begins with Divali and businessmen open new account books on this day. Divali heralds the approach of winter, and the winter crops are sown.

According to a popular belief, this loveliest of Indian festivals cele-

brates Rama's victorious return to his capital from exile.

*Id-i-Milad or Bara Wafat.* The twelfth day of the Muslim month Rabi-ul-Awwal is sacred to Muslims both as the birth and the death anniversary of the holy Prophet Mohammed (570 to 632 A.D.).

*December 25 (Pausa 4) — Christmas Day.* The birth anniversary of Jesus Christ is celebrated by Christians throughout India. Shops and homes take on a festive air.

On Christmas Eve, services are held at midnight in the churches. In some North Indian villages, groups of Christians sing indigenous carols to the accompaniment of musical instruments.

*December/January — Gurburab.* The birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh (1666—1708), tenth in the line of Sikh religious teachers, is celebrated with great enthusiasm by the Sikhs.

It was Guru Gobind Singh who welded the Sikhs into a martial community. In 1699, at Anandpur in the Punjab, he tested and chose five of the most courageous of the community to form the "Khalsa," a militant fraternity of the "Pure". They were called the "Panj. Pyare" (the beloved five).

*Republic Day in New Delhi — a view of the pageant*





*A merry and colourful Holi. Smeared and drenched with colour, these Holi revellers are in high spirits.*

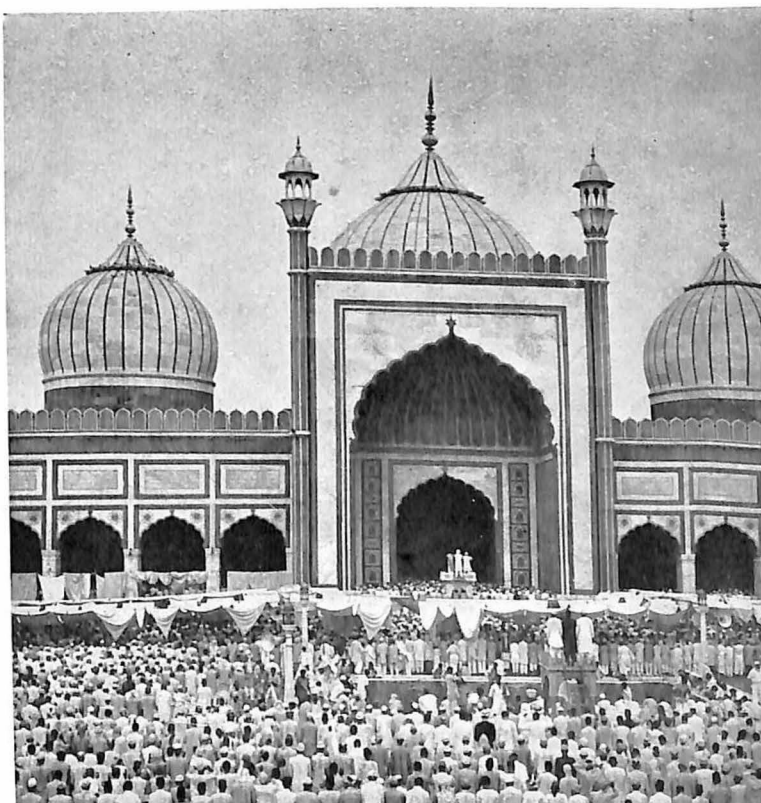


*Millions of devout Hindus throng the banks of the holy Ganga at Hardwar during the Kumbh Mela.*

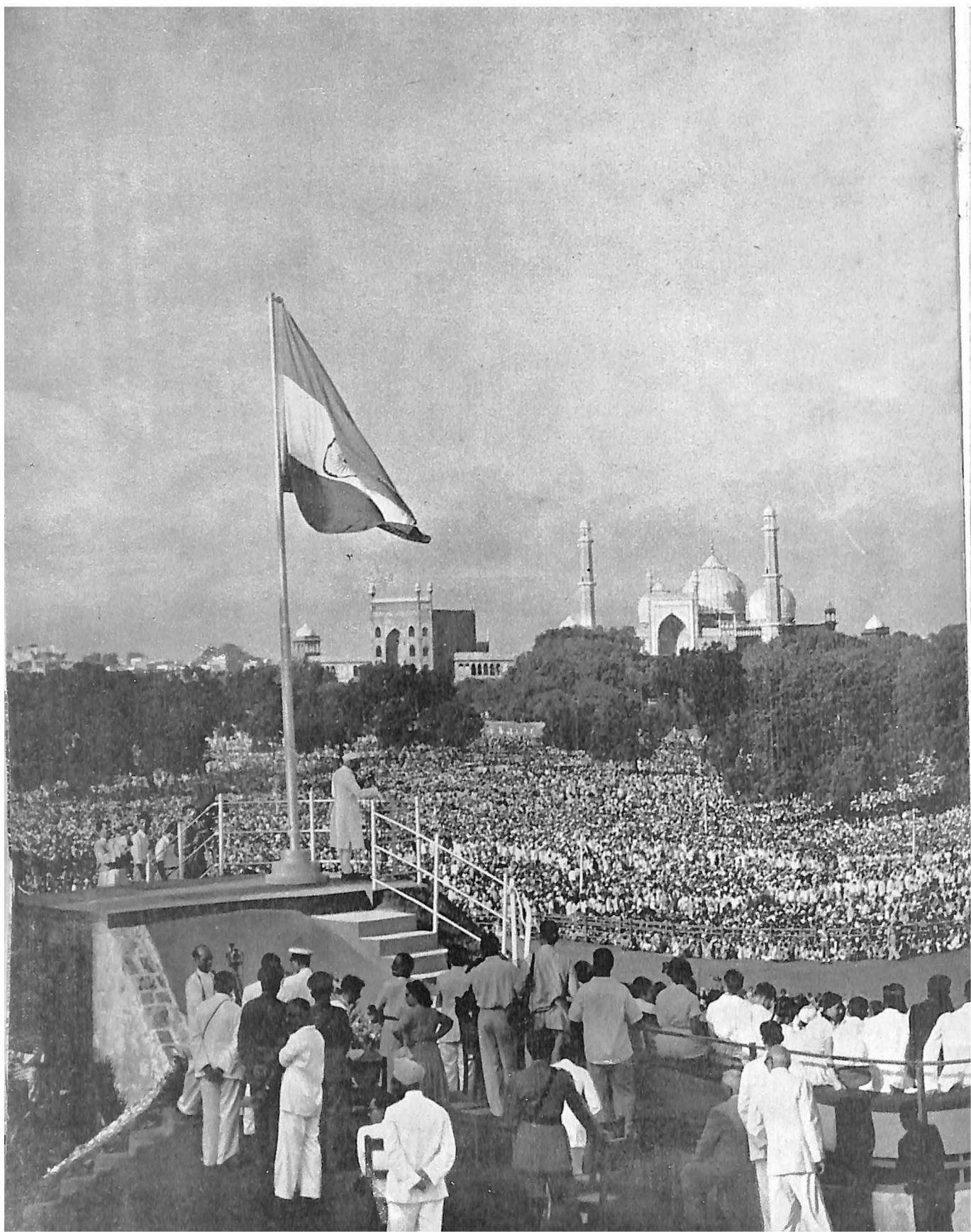


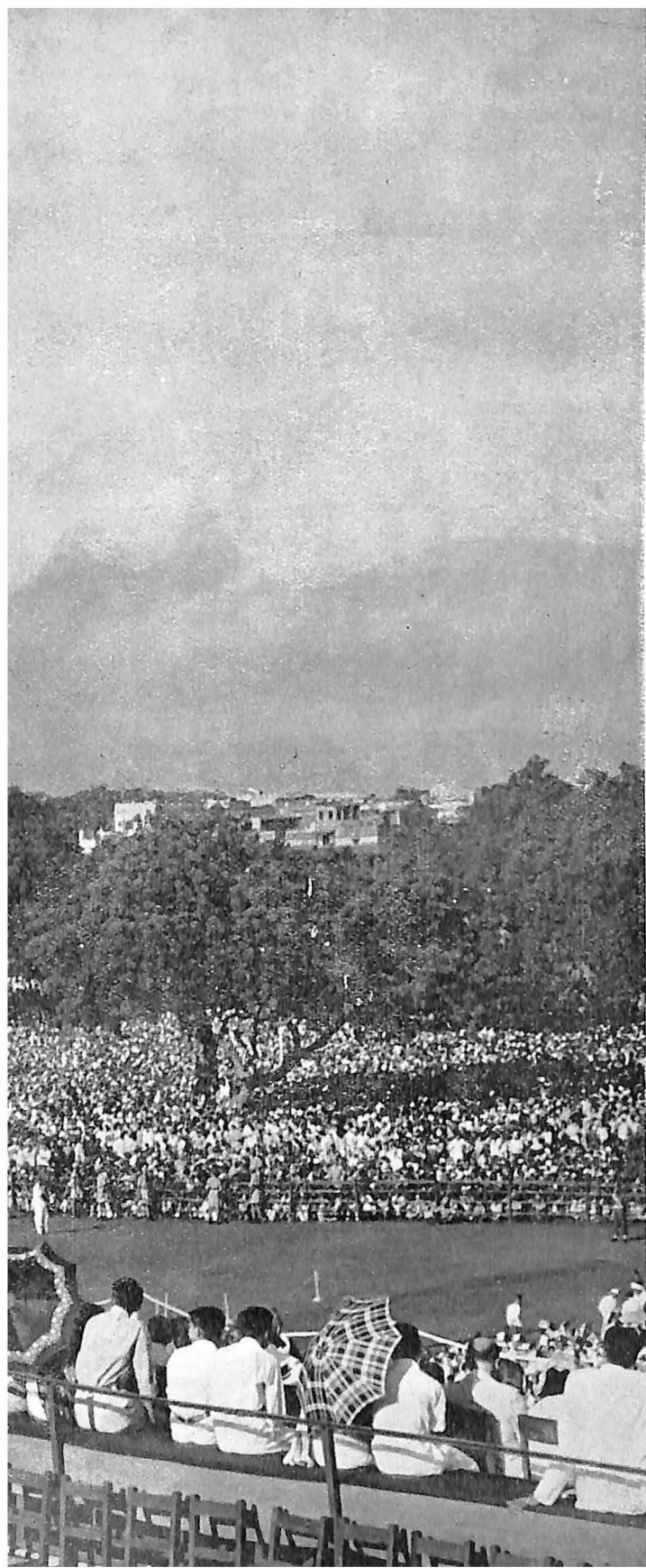


*The huge chariot of Lord Jagannath being pulled by devotees during the Car Festival at Puri (Orissa).*



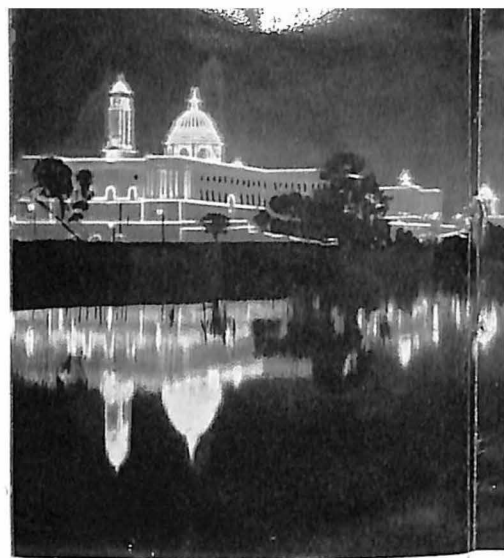
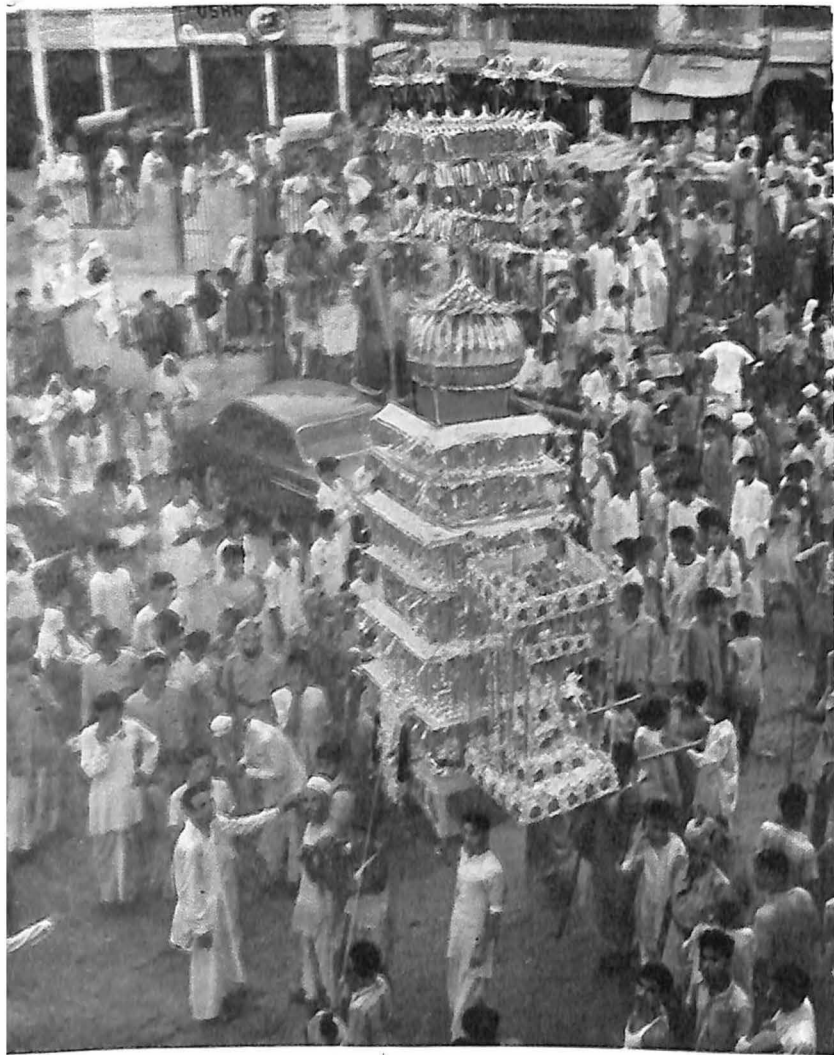
*Prayer congregation at Delhi's great Jama Masjid on the occasion of the Id festival.*





*Independence Day in Delhi. Prime Minister Nehru addresses a large gathering of people from atop the rampart of the historic Red Fort. In the background is the Jama Masjid and the city of Old Delhi.*





*Republic Day celebrations in New Delhi  
Bhavan and the Secretariat Building*

*The Tazia in a Muhar-r  
ram procession*



*The effigies before  
being set fire to, at  
Delhi's Ram Lila  
Grounds*



*Delhi. The Rashtrapati Bhavan illuminated*



*One of the floats in the Republic Day Pageant at the Capital. This tableau is from Bombay*

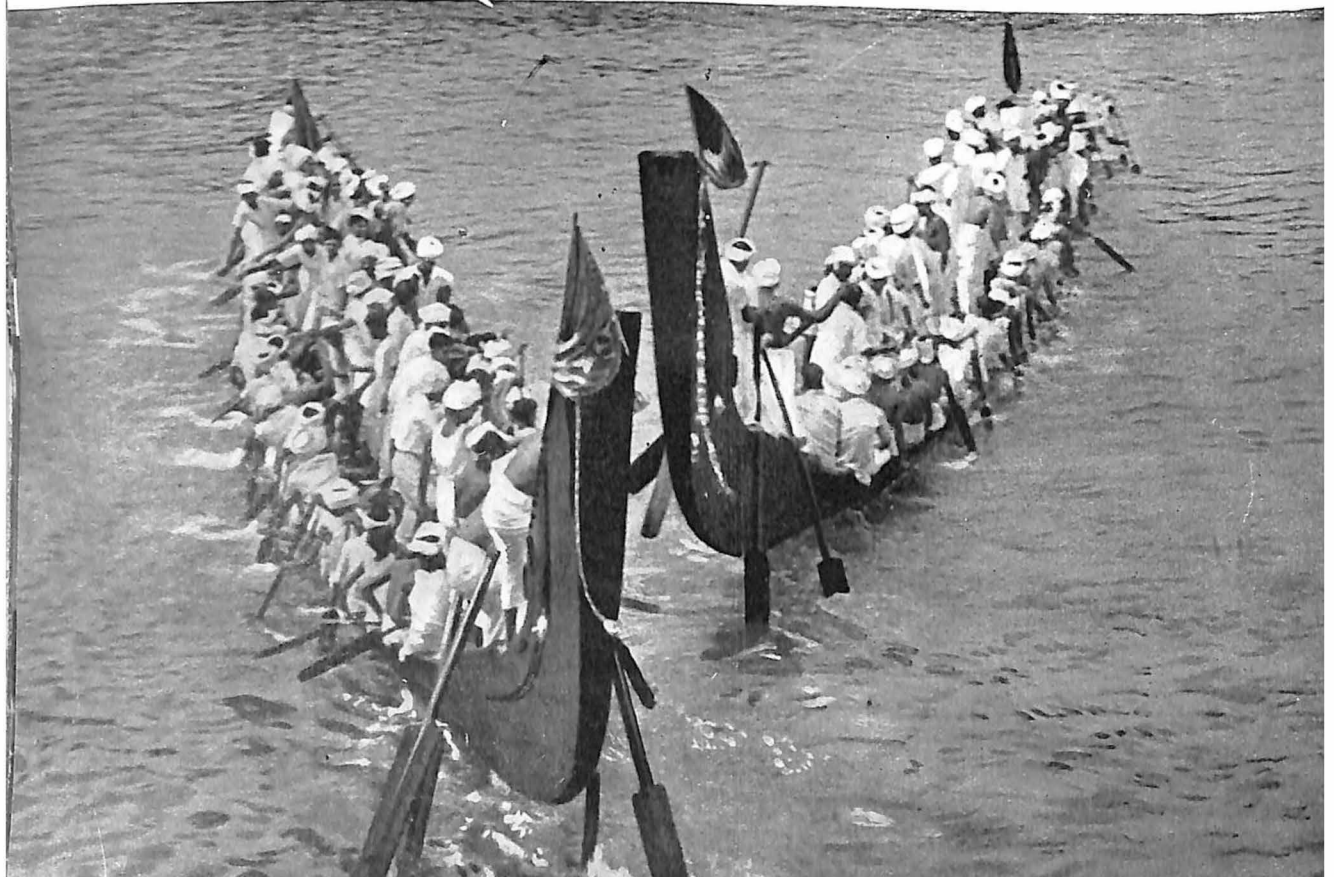
*The Dussehra Pageant in Mysore. The Governor of Mysore, seated in the howdah, goes in procession*





*Raksha Bandhan — a sister ties a rakhi around the wrist of her brother.*

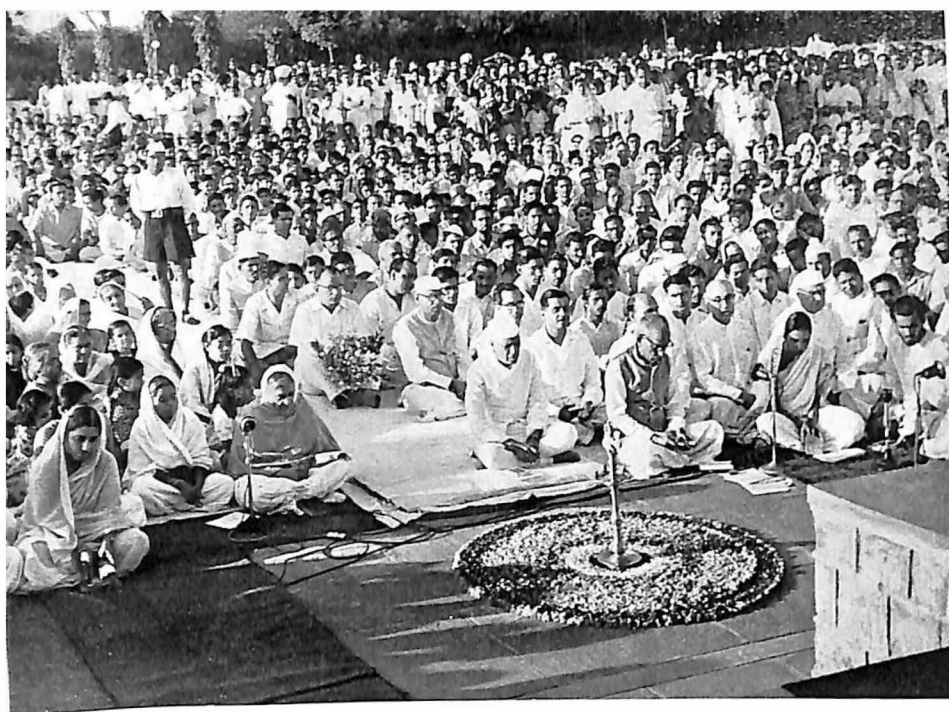
*The Onam festival is one of the most important festivals of Kerala. Part of the celebrations is this snake boat race.*





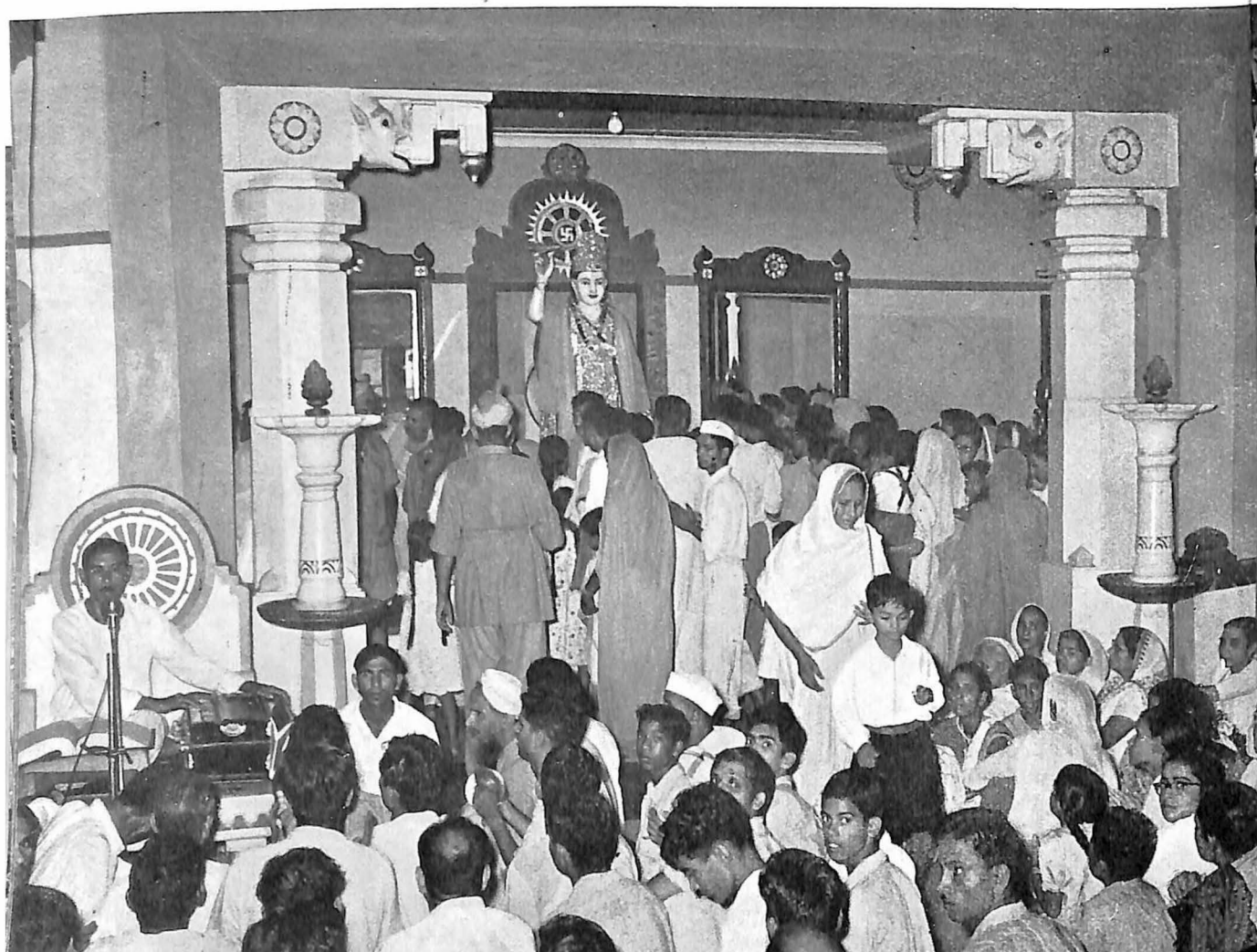
*Young devotees carry clay images  
of Ganesh for the Ganesh Puja*



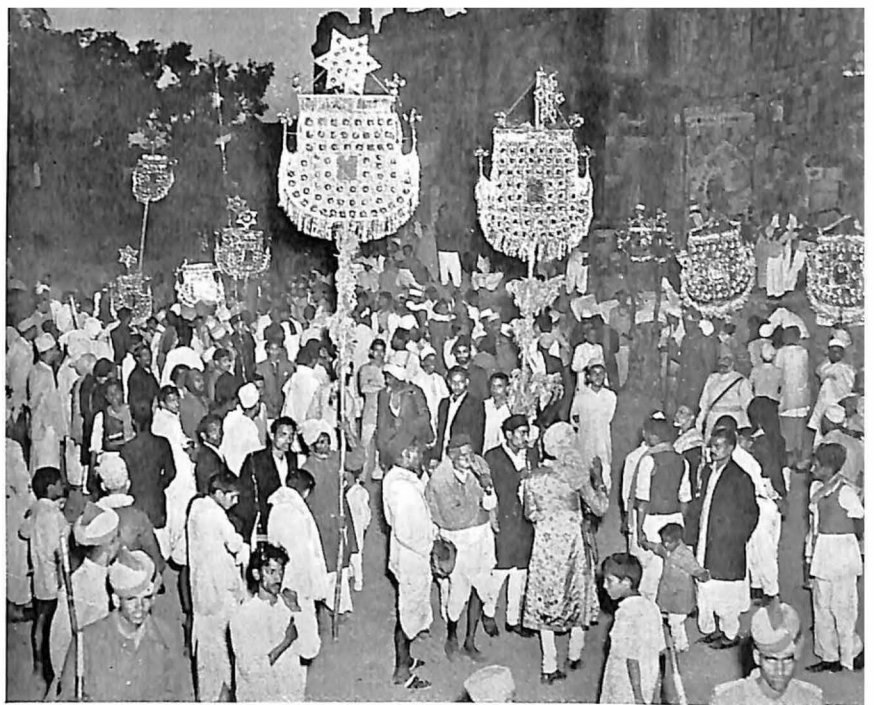


*Gandhi Jayanti or Mahatma Gandhi's birthday is solemnly observed. Prayer meetings and mass spinning sessions mark the celebration. This is a view of the prayer meeting at Raj Ghat, Gandhi's 'samadhi' in Delhi.*

*Krishna Janmashtami. Lord Krishna's birthday is celebrated with great enthusiasm. Here is a view of devotees in the Birla Mandir, New Delhi, on Janmashtami day.*



*Sair-e-Gulfaroshan — the fair of the flower sellers — is one of the oldest and most picturesque annual fairs in Delhi. This fair was initiated by Muhammad Shah Rangila, nearly 200 years ago.*



*Guru Nanak's Birthday is the most important festival of the Sikhs. Here, a Sikh congregation is seen listening attentively to religious songs.*



*Christmas service in an Indian church.*



CHAPTER III  
REGIONAL FESTIVALS  
NORTH

**KASHMIR**

*February/March — Shivaratri or Herat.* The festival has a special significance in Kashmir and lasts 15 days. On the thirteenth day called Herat or Hercha-truah, the great Shivaratri day, a fast is observed during the day, and Bhairava puja is performed in the evening. This is followed by a family feast. The festivities conclude with the distribution of walnuts, home-made cakes, and candy.

*March/April — Nau Roz or the New Year's Day* begins in every Hindu home with an invocation to goddess Lakshmi. The housewife in every family adorns a large plate with paddy, sugar, curd, fruit, walnut, coins, a piece of mirror, an ink-holder and the New Year Scroll. In the early morning, she shows the plate to every inmate of the house. This is believed to symbolise the blessings of the goddess for the moral and material well-being of the family.

*May—Jaitha Ashtami:* The eighth day of the bright fortnight of Jyaistha is the birthday of the goddess Ragniya, who is believed to have her abode in Khir Bhavani, about 22 km. (14 miles) from Srinagar. For days before the festival, all roads and streams lead to

Khir Bhavani, a well-known spring-girt temple, where people pray and make offerings of milk, *kheer* (rice boiled in milk) and flowers to the goddess.

*August/September — Urs Shah Hamadan (Srinagar)* — Shah Hamadan was a Muslim saint of Persia, who visited Kashmir towards the end of the fourteenth century. His shrine in Srinagar is greatly revered by Muslims who hold *urs* every year to commemorate his visit to this happy valley.

*December/January — Khichri Amavasya:* According to Hindu mythology, Kashmir was the abode of Yakshas or semi-divine beings. The Lord of the Yakshas is invited on this day to relish the *khichri* (rice cooked with dal and ghee) which is placed in the attic in a plate.

**LADAKH**

Festivals in Ladakh are associated with gods and fairies, magic and mysticism and are celebrated in the monasteries. A few of the more important festivals are given below:

*June — Mela Hemis Gompa:* The famous Hemis Gompa, 25 miles from



Leh via Chughlamsar, is the oldest, richest and biggest monastery in Ladakh. A fair is held here on the 10th day of the fifth Buddhist month every year and lasts 3 days.

The lamas dance wearing grotesque masks, and the low subdued notes of the music enhance the air of mystery. The *Mela* celebrates the birthday of Padma Sambhava, the founder of Lamaism.

*December — Mela Losar:* Losar (New Year) is essentially a harvest festival. On this day, monasteries and houses are illuminated with candles or oil lamps.

### PUNJAB

The Punjab has a large Sikh population, and all Sikh festivals are celebrated here with great enthusiasm.

*January — Lori.* It marks the culmination of winter. From this day, the freezing cold is believed to be on the wane.

Children go from door to door and collect funds for community bonfires which are lit in the evening. People who gather round the bonfires throw sweets, crisp rice and popcorn into the flames, sing popular folk songs and exchange greetings.

*April/May — Baisakhi (Vaisakhi).* For the Sikhs, this day has a particular significance, as it was on this day in 1699 that Guru Gobind Singh formed the Sikhs into the "Khalsa" (the Pure).

*October/November — Tikka.* This festival is celebrated on the day following Divali.

Women make a paste of saffron and rice, and apply it on their brothers' foreheads, hoping to protect them from evil powers by this visible sign of their love.

### HIMACHAL PRADESH

*Minjar Mela at Chamba.* Held in the picturesque setting of Chamba, this hill festival provides a great spectacle. Until recently, the *Raja's* procession from his palace to the cliff over-looking the river Ravi was the highlight of the day's festivities. Now the State officials and the *Raja*, if he is in town, go to a canopy erected on the cliff. Here everyone throws a *minjar* (a silk and silver tassel) into the torrent. This is a symbolic sacrifice to propitiate the river goddess, who is believed to avert all calamities from the town. Formerly, a young buffalo was pushed into the swirling waters as a sacrifice to the deity. This practice has been discontinued.

*September/October — Dassehra* in the Kulu valley. At Bajaura in Manali, the graceful Kulu dances are performed on this festive occasion. The deities of the lovely Kulu valley are carried to the green, where the celebrations take place.

*April and October — Jwalamukhi Fair.* The goddess of the volcano Jwalamukhi, in the Kangra valley, is worshipped by throngs of hill people in their colourful costumes, who come from the surrounding areas. The jets of inflammable gas that issue from the volcano are worshipped as sacred fire from the mouth of the goddess herself.

Besides these festivals, numerous local fairs are held in these and other parts of Himachal Pradesh.

## DELHI

*January 26 — Republic Day.* Nowhere in India is the Republic Day celebrated as enthusiastically as in the capital. In the morning a mammoth military parade and a colourful cultural pageant cover a five-mile route, which is lined by a million people on either side. In the evening, a reception in the beautiful Mughul Gardens in Rashtrapati Bhavan (the President's residence) is followed by an impressive display of fireworks and illuminations. Troupes of folk dancers from all parts of India take part in the celebrations. The festivities are rounded off with the "Beating of the Retreat" on January 29.

*March/April — Christian Mela at Mehrauli.* At Mehrauli, about eight miles from Delhi, a procession of Christians from all over the metropolis goes through the streets of the little town, singing hymns. A service is held in the interesting little St. John's Church, built early in this century.

*August/September — Sair-e-Gul-faroshan.* The distinctive feature of this unique "Festival of Flowers" is joint participation in the celebrations by Hindus and Muslims. Huge *pankhas* (fans) made of palm leaves and decorated with tinsel and flowers are carried through the picturesque town of Mehrauli. Fire dancers lead the procession. All the participants, Hindus as well as Muslims, together go to the Dargah Khwaja Sahib, a place sacred to the Muslims, and then to the Hindu Jog Maya temple.

*December — Urs Hazrat Nizam-ud-din.* The saint, Hazrat Khwaja Nizam-ud-din Aulia (1238—1324), held the coveted position of Domestic Prelate through the rule of three dynasties. His tomb, which has become a shrine is revered by the Muslims, and devout members of the community believe that the water of the sacred tank there possesses healing properties.

Khwaja Nizam-ud-din and Sultan Ghyas-ud-din Tughlaq, the founder of the Tughlaq dynasty, did not see eye to eye on several matters. The Sultan wanted his people to build him a capital at Tughlaqabad near Delhi, while the saint wanted them to build a tank where his shrine now stands. As the available workmen were divided between the two projects, progress of work on the new capital was slow. The Sultan, therefore, ordered them to stop working for the saint. Afraid of losing their heads if they disobeyed the Sultan, and of their souls if they disobeyed the saint, the workmen solved the problem by working for the Sultan in the day and for the saint at night. On hearing this, the Sultan cut off oil supplies to the workmen. Without light, work at night became impossible, but the saint miraculously produced light from the water of the tank. The saint also laid the new capital under a curse, on account of which it came to be deserted.

*Mushairas* (poetic symposia), in which leading Urdu poets take part, are held during the *Urs*, and pilgrims gather here from all over the country and Pakistan.

## UTTAR PRADESH

*February/March — Holi (Phool Dol) — the Flower Festival.* Holi is celebrated in an unusual way in Barsana and Nandgaon, two villages about 48 km. (30 miles) from Mathura. These two villages enjoy the distinction of having been the homes of Radha and Krishna, the divine lovers. On the first day of Holi, the women of Barsana play holi (throw coloured water) with the men of Nandgaon and then flail them with stout sticks. The men are powerless to defend themselves and must make do with leather shields and stag horns. The following day, the women of Nandgaon attack the men of Barsana in the same fashion. The mock fight is considered good fun, and it is even considered auspicious to sustain an injury as a result of it.

*March/April — Car Festival at Mathura.* In the Sri Rangji Temple at Brindavan, about 9 km. (6 miles) from Mathura, gorgeous *vahanas* (chariots), carry the temple deity Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi through the streets for ten days.

The Sri Rangji Temple was built in 1851 and is managed entirely by South Indian Brahmins.

*March/April — Rama Navami.* The birthday of Rama, the celebrated hero of the famous epic, the *Ramayana*, is enthusiastically celebrated at Ayodhya (Fyzabad), his birth place. Temples are decorated, religious discourses are held and the *Ramayana* is recited for 10 days. People gather in their thousands on the banks of the sacred river Saryu for a dip.

*July/August (Sravana) — Festival at Brindavan.* The Sri Rangji Temple at Brindavan near Mathura is dedicated to the god Vishnu. According to a legend, the god sent his elephant to collect flowers. The elephant wandered too close to the water and its leg was snapped up by a crocodile. Vishnu answered the elephant's prayer for help, and came riding on Garuda to save him.

Effigies of an elephant and a crocodile are floated in the temple tank. An ingenious device clamps the elephant's foot into the jaws of the crocodile. The god is then brought in on his mount, and a fire cracker flung by him at the crocodile separates the two figures in the tank.

*August/September — Ban Yatra (the Forest Pilgrimage).* In this month, Krishna is believed to have protected the villagers from heavy rains by lifting up the mountain Govardhan, situated some miles from Mathura. This forest pilgrimage, which commemorates the event, lasts for a month. During this period, the pilgrims visit all the places connected with the life of Krishna. *Rasa Lila*, a dance-drama depicting episodes from the life of Lord Krishna, is performed here by troupes who specialise in this art. A whole month's pilgrimage must be completed in its entirety, otherwise no merit accrues to the pilgrim.

*October/November — Kansa ka Mela.* To commemorate the destruction of the demon king Kansa of Mathura by Krishna, a fair is held at Mathura and at Fatehpur Sikri (the sixteenth century capital of Akbar). Huge effigies of the demon are set up

in the midst of the fair. Two boys representing Krishna and his brother, Balaram, are then carried in chariots or on horseback, and they aim flower-decked staves at the effigies. This is the signal for a general onslaught on the helpless demon who dies the death he deserves !

### ASSAM

*January — Bhogali Bihu.* Bhogali Bihu is an Assamese harvest festival. After women have harvested the winter paddy, thatched pavilions are set up in every village, and young men spend the night feasting. According to the custom of the festival, the pavilions are set ablaze early next morning. This is the signal for the festivities to begin. Buffalo fights are a major attraction.

*April/May — The Goru and the Rongali Bihu.* The Goru Bihu or the cattle festival is celebrated on the Hindu New Year's Day. Cattle are washed and decorated. They are smeared with turmeric and are treated to *gur* (jaggery) and brinjals.

*The Rongali Bihu (the colourful, gay festival).* Assamese girls try to outrival one another in weaving beautiful scarves for presentation to the men of their choice on the day of this gay festival. The boys look for the loveliest "kapo" (dove) orchids to present to the belles. These gay scarves and orchids add colour to the dances that follow. Having chosen their future life partners, the young couples go to their respective relations for a while before they are married.

*October/November — Ras Lila.* Graceful dancers of Manipur enact

scenes from the life of Krishna. As most of the Assamese are Vaishnavas, and since Krishna was an incarnation of Vishnu, this festival has great significance for them.

### BENGAL

*January/February — Vasant Panchami* or Saraswati Puja. In Bengal, the day is dedicated to the goddess Saraswati. Being the goddess of learning and of the arts, her greatest devotees this day are students, scholars and artists. All books and writing materials are dedicated afresh, being piled up before prettily decorated images of the goddess. These images are then taken in a procession through the streets and immersed in sacred tanks and rivers.

*Gangasagar Mela or Pausa Sankrant.* Pilgrims congregate to bathe on Sagar Island, about 64 km. (40 miles) from Diamond Harbour Station, where the Ganga mingles with the waters of the Bay of Bengal.

*February/March — Ramakrishna Utsab.* Ramakrishna, a great Hindu saint, was born on February 20, 1833, in the village of Kamarpukur. He believed that all religions were true, and that they reached the One True God by different paths. His birth anniversary is celebrated by members of the Ramakrishna Mission.

*March/April — Dol Purnima.* This festival is much the same as Holi in other parts of North India. An image of Krishna, smeared with *abir*\* and *gulal*\*, is placed in a *dol* or sway-

\* Coloured powders

ing cradle decorated with flowers and carried in a procession to the accompaniment of songs, specially composed for the occasion.

Being also the birthday of Gauranga or Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, it assumes special significance for the followers of Vishnu.

*April 14—Naba Barsha (Bengali New Year's Day).* The day begins with *prabhat pheries* (early morning processions), song and dance to welcome the New Year. A dip in a river or tank is another essential feature of the day's ritual.

With powdered rice, the housewife makes beautiful designs called *alpana* on the floor.

*October/November — Kojagari Lakshmi Purnima.* The first full-moon night after the Durga Puja is observed as the Kojagari Lakshmi Purnima. On this day Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, is worshipped in most Bengali homes. An earthen lamp fed with *ghee* is kept burning the whole night. People believe that the goddess would bring good luck and prosperity to those who keep their homes well-lit and doors open to welcome her on this auspicious night.

#### BIHAR

*December/January — GURPURAB.* The birth anniversary of Guru Gobind Singh is celebrated at Patna, his birth place (see page 16).

#### ORISSA

*June/July—Car Festival at Puri.* Jagannath, the deity in whose honour the festival is held, is believed to be

an incarnation of Vishnu. King Indradyumna, the legend goes, found a relic of Krishna, and wished to house it in a temple of Vishnu. So he engaged the services of Visvakarma, architect of the gods, to build him a magnificent temple and an image which would be worthy of it. The architect agreed on the condition that he would be left entirely unobserved until the completion of his assignment. The work began, and in one day a beautiful temple was built. The King, however, was unable to restrain his curiosity, and went to see the architect at work. In a rage, Visvakarma abandoned his work, leaving the image without hands or feet. The King's plea for forgiveness was answered, and Brahma breathed the power of a deity into the unshapely image, which has since then become one of the most famous of the deities.

The deity Jagannath, his brother Balabhadra and their sister Subhadra, are placed on colossal chariots, each 13.7 m. (45 ft.) high with huge wheels measuring 2.1 m. (7 ft.) in diameter. These are pulled by hundreds of devotees from all parts of India. The spectacular procession goes to Gundicha Bari, about 3 km. (2 miles) away. After a stay of seven days at Gundicha Bari, the deities are carried back to their temple.

#### RAJASTHAN

*March/April — Gangaur.* The spring festival of Gangaur is held in honour of Gauri, the goddess of abundance. Girls worship the goddess throughout the preceding fortnight. Although celebrated throughout Rajasthan with great enthusiasm, the

celebrations in Jaipur and Udaipur have their own charm and attraction. In the former, a procession of the goddess is taken out from the city palace and thousands of people from the countryside throng the city to take part in it, while in the latter, a boat procession in Pichola lake adds to the gaiety of the festival.

*June/July—The Teej Festival.* The Teej is mainly a women's festival held in honour of Devi (Parvati). She is worshipped in the home for two days, and is then sent out of the house with all the love and affection due to a daughter of the house when she leaves for her husband's home. This festival also celebrates the beginning of the monsoon rains after 3 months of sizzling heat, and the peasants bring their families to the cities for the occasion. Their gay costumes add colour to the festival. It is marked by an impressive procession, headed by richly caparisoned elephants, camels and horses. The goddess follows, and the day ends with worship.

*October/November—Pushkar Ka Mela.* A fair is held by the sacred tank at Pushkar, about 11 km. (7 miles) from Ajmer. The tank is believed to have been created by Brahma himself. Camel and horse shows are also held.

*Urs Moin-ud-Din Chishti at Ajmer.* Saint Moin-ud-Din Chishti was greatly revered by Emperor Akbar who used to make pilgrimage to his shrine on foot.

Pilgrims fill the shrine of this Muslim saint, and the celebrations continue for seven days. Well-to-do families donate food which is cooked

on the spot and distributed among the pilgrims. Religious songs are sung.

## BOMBAY

*March/April—Mahavir Jayanti.* It is an important festival of the Jains whose ancient shrines at Girnar and Palitana in Saurashtra, attract pilgrims from all parts of the country. The day is dedicated to the memory of Lord Mahavira, the last and the 24th Tirthankara of the Jains, who was born on this day.

*August/September—Ganesh Chaturthi.* It is a popular festival in Maharashtra. A clay image of Ganesa, the elephant-headed god of wisdom and prosperity, is brought into the house on the first day amidst music and rejoicing. For almost 10 days, Ganesa is worshipped and there is much feasting and music. On the last day, the image is taken out in a procession and immersed in a lake, river or the sea. Cultural programmes are organised, fairs are held in many places, and gaiety marks the occasion.

*October/November — Dev-Divali.* The hills of Mount Girnar in Junagarh are the scenes of great festivity on the 10th day after the Divali. Thousands of Jain pilgrims gather on this day at the foot of the sacred hills for circumambulation.

*October/November — Navaratri.* Though the festival is observed throughout India, it has special appeal in Gujarat. Every evening during the nine nights, womenfolk perform a *garba* dance. They go round and round an earthen lamp placed on a stand, clapping their hands in a rhythmic movement.

## SOUTH

### MYSORE

*August 11—The Feast of St. Philomena.* A tastefully decorated image of St. Philomena is taken in a procession through the town. After the procession, a service is held in the beautiful Gothic Cathedral of St. Philomena. The Roman Catholic population of Mysore celebrates this day with great fervour.

*September/October — Dassehra.* The most remarkable Dassehra celebrations in the country take place in Mysore.

The Dassehra in Mysore, justly renowned for its pageantry and spectacle, is a big draw, for here one can have glimpses of the traditional glamour and colour of the Orient. The festival was first introduced in 1610 A.D. in Mysore State by Raja Wadyar and is a legacy of the imperial rulers of the Vijayanagara dynasty.

On the last day of the festival (*Vijayadasami* evening), the former Maharaja of Mysore, who is now the Governor of the State, proceeds, seated on an exquisitely painted and richly caparisoned elephant, from the Palace to Banni Mantap in a colourful procession followed by a cavalcade of soldiers and scouts and tableaux. The festivities round off with illuminations and a display of pyrotechnics. Sports and cultural programmes are organised throughout the State.

*The Great Head Anointing Ceremony at Sravanabelgola.* Once every 15 years, the colossal 17 m. (57 ft.) high granite statue of Gomatesvara (a Jain

saint), carved a thousand years ago, is anointed by several thousand Jain monks standing on a scaffolding. Gold and silver flowers and precious stones are among the costly items of the saint's bath.

According to legend, prince Gomatesvara, who had redeemed his kingdom from his brother in a bitter war, realised the futility of earthly power. He therefore presented his kingdom to his brother and became an ascetic. In admiration, the grateful brother erected a towering golden statue of Gomatesvara. Some years later, Kalala Devi, mother of the minister Chamunda Raya, read this story and took an oath that she would not touch food until she had seen this wonder. After a long and fruitless search, they came to Sravanabelgola. In a dream Chamunda Raya was asked to let fly an arrow at the highest rock he could see. He did this. On opening his eyes, he found to his amazement, the huge head of the present day granite Gomatesvara in the place of the rock. A priest striking the rock with a jewelled hammer on a diamond chisel uncovered the rest of the colossus. Chamunda Raya learnt in a dream that the golden statue was not for mortal eyes to see and that the granite statue was the wonder his mother was waiting for.

### MADRAS AND ANDHRA PRADESH

*January—Pongal (Makara Sankranti).* This three-day festival is the biggest event of the year for the

Tamils as well as for the people of Andhra Pradesh.

Bhogi-Pongal is the first of the three days, and is celebrated as a family festival.

Surya-Pongal, the second day, is dedicated to the Sun (*Surya*). On this day, *Pongal* (rice cooked in milk and jaggery) is boiled by women who offer it to the Sun. Friends greet one another by asking "Is it boiled?" And the answer is "It is!" Great rejoicing follows.

Mattu-Pongal, the third day, is the day dedicated to the worship and veneration of cattle (*matu*). The *Pongal* that has been offered to the local deities is given to the cattle to eat. Their horns are polished and flowers are hung around their necks. Coloured balls of the *Pongal* are also made and left in the open for birds. In Madurai, Tiruchirapalli and Tanjore, a kind of bull-fight, called the "Jellikattu" is held. Bundles containing money are tied to the horns of ferocious bulls, and unarmed villagers try to wrest the bundles from them.

With ingredients provided by the freshly gathered harvest, community meals are held at night. Everyone, however humble, is invited to sit at dinner with the richest member of the community. Even passers-by are invited to the feast.

*January — Tyagaraja Festival.* Tyagaraja was a South Indian musician born in Tiruvarur in 1767, and is celebrated for the many Telugu songs he composed in praise of Rama. His life and works are a source of great inspiration to young poets and musi-

cians. At Tiruvaiyaru, about 13 km. (8 miles) from Tanjore, South Indian musicians gather at the poet's memorial to sing in his memory. Young artists believe that they will be blessed with a melodious voice if they anoint the shrine with honey and sing Tyagaraja's songs at his memorial.

*April—The Tamil and the Telugu New Year's Day.* They are generally celebrated in mid-April.

*April/May (on the day of the full moon)—Madurai River Festival.* The banks of the river Vaigai present a glittering spectacle. The two deities, the god Sundaresa (incarnation of Siva) and the goddess Meenakshi (incarnation of Parvati), with pearl crowns on their heads and riding on a golden bull, are taken out in a splendid procession from the Meenakshi temple. The god Alagar (incarnation of Vishnu) gives his sister, Meenakshi, in marriage to Sundaresa amid great rejoicing, and the goddess's magnificent trousseau, consisting of gem-studded crowns, expensive clothes and palatable delicacies is presented. Devotees clothed in yellow and red dance among the processionists and spray coloured water on them.

*August—River Festival on the Banks of the Kaveri.* The village deities are taken out to the river in procession, preceded by ancient manuscripts and records possessed by the villages. Milk, rice, beads, red bangles and other articles symbolising fertility and prosperity are also carried in the procession and immersed in the river. The river goddess is invoked and the deities are bathed.



Rivers are worshipped in India as they give life to the land.

*August/September—Gokula Ashtami (Janma Ashtami).* Children sing songs concerning the life of Krishna and gather fruit from trees on the roadside. At midnight, the hour when Krishna is believed to have been born, torchlight processions are taken out, and the image of Krishna is carried through the streets. The following day, a pole (*uriyadi*) smeared with oil is set up. An earthen pot containing money and silk is tied to its top. Boys dressed as Krishna try to climb the pole and win the prize, while spectators squirt water at them. A similar custom is observed in Bombay during this festival.

*September/October—Festival at Velanganni.* Roman Catholics believe that a miracle took place at Velanganni, about seven miles from Nagapatnam. An image of the Virgin Mary was miraculously brought up in a fisherman's net. It has since been housed in the Church. Thousands of pilgrims flock to this "Lourdes of the East" to be cured of their infirmities.

*October/November — Navaratri (Dassehra).* The first three days of this nine-day festival are dedicated to the goddess Lakshmi (see page 7), the next three days to Shakti or Parvati (see page 6), and the last three to Sarasvati (see page 8).

Every home has a *kolu*, a decorated stepped platform covered with toys and clay figurines representing gods and goddesses and animals. Gifts are exchanged. In the main room a *kalasam* (a silver, copper or clay

vessel with a coconut in it, representing the goddess Durga) is placed, and girls dance and sing.

*Ayudha Puja*, celebrated on the eighth and sometimes the tenth day of the festival, is the day dedicated to the worship of arms and implements.

*Vijaya Dasami*, the tenth day of the festival, is an auspicious day to embark on a new enterprise. On this day Sarasvati, the goddess of learning, is worshipped and homage paid to books and musical instruments.

This division of the nine days is, however, not a rigid one, for a particular goddess may have more devotees in a certain region. In such a case, more days will be devoted to her worship than to the worship of the other goddesses. At this time, one of the main attractions in Hyderabad is the dances of the Banjara (gypsy) women which are very colourful.

*October/November — Dipavali.* Dipavali or Divali does not have the same significance in the South as it has in the North. Here, it is mainly celebrated as the day on which Krishna destroyed the demon Narakasura, who had caused tremendous havoc in the country. New clothes are worn, and old articles are exchanged for new. It is a day for ceremonial baths.

*November/December — Karthikai Festival.* This is the South Indian festival of lights, and is celebrated on the night of the full moon. The two most popular beliefs regarding the origin of this festival are: one, that Raja Mahabali (see page 26) prayed to the god Vishnu that this festival be celebrated once a year in his memory.

The second belief concerns the god Siva. Once, while Vishnu and Brahma were arguing as to which of the two was superior, a great fiery *linga* (see page 6) appeared before them.

Astonished, the two gods set about trying to find its source. Vishnu turned himself into a giant boar and plunged deep into the under-world for a thousand years, but had to admit defeat. Brahma, as a swan, soared through the void for a thousand years in the hope of finding the end of the column. He too, was unsuccessful. Then the *linga* took the form of god Siva (whose symbol it was), and the two gods acknowledged his supremacy.

The hill of Arunachala, believed to be the original fiery *linga* of this legend, at Tiruvannamalai, is the venue of some of the most impressive celebrations. A huge beacon is lit before the Siva temple here and blazes for several days. Devotees of Siva believe that he embodies the universe. So in the five great South Indian Siva temples, he is worshipped in the form of the five elements which make up the universe—air, water, earth, ether and fire. The legend of Mahabali is also celebrated by lighting oil torches and carrying these in a procession, and shouting, “Mahabali”.

*November/December — Vaikunth Ekadashi.* Legend has it that Mohini, the divine temptress, tried to persuade the pious King Rukmangada to partake of food on a day the scriptures ordained that a fast should be kept. In sore distress, he prayed to Vishnu, who saved him from the temptation

and took him to his celestial abode (Vaikunth).

An interesting feature of this festival is a gateway that is thrown open to the thousands of pilgrims who come to the temples on this day. This gateway is called the “Vaikunth Vasal” and to pass through it is to obtain the boon of paradise. At Srirangam, an island in Tiruchirapalli, this festival is observed for twenty days.

*December—St. Thomas's Day.* St. Thomas Didymus, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, is believed to have been the founder of the Christian Church in South India (see page 9). Impressive processions are taken out, and services are held in churches.

*The Fire Walking Festival.* Fire walking festivals are held in the villages in honour of the local deities and to ensure good harvest. They are held once a year, and the time is fixed by the local soothsayer.

The chief priest of the temple and twelve “Hero-youths”, who are to perform this feat, go out in a procession from the temple to bathe. An elaborately decorated image of the temple deity is held above the chief priest's head. The “Hero-youths” carry colourful *chhatris* (fringed umbrellas) over their heads. Returning to the temple, the procession presents a weird sight. Smeared with turmeric powder, they begin the dance that culminates in fire-walking. They walk over a long pit covered with live coals and come out unscathed. After this, singing and feasting continues late into the night.

## TEMPLE FESTIVALS

*The Brahmotsavam.* This festival is held in Tirupati about September, and in Srirangam about March/April and December/January.

This ten-day festival is celebrated with great eclat in the famous temples (of Meenakshi) at Madurai, Kanchipuram and at Tirupati. Intricately carved figurines of the temple deities are decked in splendid apparel, seated in magnificent carriages symbolic in character and taken in procession. Beautifully decorated elephants lead the procession, and fireworks and crackers are let off along the route. Devotees follow the procession chanting verses from the scriptures and singing hymns, while house-holders along the route offer their gifts to the deities.

*February/March—The Teppam.* At Mylapur Kapaleeswarar, Koil and in the Parthasarthy Swamy Temple at Triplicane, in Madras, this festival is seen at its best. Seated in a beautifully decorated *teppam* (float), the temple deity is floated in the tank. To the accompaniment of chanting by the priests, the *teppam* is taken round the tank three, five or seven times. The illuminated *teppam* is a pretty sight.

*April — Brahmotsavam or Car Festival.* On the Tamil New Year's Day about April, the biggest Car Festival is held at Tiruvadamardur near Kumbakonam. The festival at Tiruchirapalli and Kanchipuram is also worth seeing.

Each big temple has a car, a beautifully carved wooden chariot. On the day following the Brahmotsa-

vam in every temple, the deities are decked in all the temple finery and are placed in huge chariots. The chariots are then drawn along the streets by several hundreds of devotees.

## KERALA

Kerala is the home of the famous Kathakali dance. The dance gestures form a complete vocabulary and interesting facial make-up adds to the enjoyment of the performance. Dance is an important part of the life of the people of this area, and all their festivals are joyously celebrated with song and dance.

*March/April—Vishu.* This is the Malayali New Year's Day. Everything wears a bright aspect. Gifts are exchanged. The custom is that elders give cash presents to dependents and relatives younger to them. This is called "Kyeneettam" (extending the hand).

*April/May—Pooram:* It is celebrated with great enthusiasm in the Vadakkunathan Temple at Trichur, where thousands of people assemble on the day. An elephant procession and a beautiful display of pyrotechnics are the important features of the festival.

*August/September—Onam.* This major festival of Kerala is celebrated against a setting of lush green vegetation. This picturesque harvest festival gives the Malayalis four days of colour, feasting, boat races, song and dance.

In the days when gods and men were close to one another, Raja Mahabali, who is believed to have

ruled at Mahabalipuram, an ancient city near Madras, practised great austerities and obtained power over the three kingdoms of heaven, earth and *patalam* (under-world). The gods begged Vishnu to deliver them from this unbecoming subservience to a mere mortal. Vishnu, therefore, took the form of a Brahmin dwarf, named Vamana, and came to beg a boon of the king. Mahabali, whose munificence was well known, pledged himself to grant the petition. The dwarf prayed that he might be given all the land he could cover in three strides, to which the King agreed. Growing to super-human proportions, Vamana now covered the earth and heaven in two strides and asked where he should place the third step. The bewildered King refused to accept defeat, and offered his head. Vamana covered the proffered head of the King by his third stride and sent him to the netherworld. Thus dispossessed, Mahabali was banished to the under-world, of which he was made the ruler. In recognition of his piety, however, he was allowed to return to his realm in an invisible form once a year. Onam is celebrated to welcome the hapless King and to assure him that his people are happy and wish him well.

At Trichur, caparisoned elephants take part in a spectacular procession. A magnificent display of fireworks marks the end of the festivities here.

At Shoranur, appreciative crowds gather on the green where colourfully dressed *Kathakali* dancers re-enact the well-loved stories of the epic heroes and virtuous women.

On the eve of *Thiruonam*, the second and most important day of the festival, Raja Mahabali is supposed to visit his kingdom. Every home is bright and shining in preparation for the royal visit. No work is done after midnight. Visits are exchanged and lengths of auspicious saffron cloth are presented by friends to one another.

The Vallumkali\* (boat race) is one of the main attractions of Onam, and is best seen at Aranmulai and Kottayam. About a hundred oarsmen row huge and graceful "odee" (boat). Oars dip and flash to the rhythm of drums and cymbals in each boat. The songs are generally topical in character and concern people well known in Malabar. Above each boat gleam scarlet silk umbrellas, their number denotes the affluence of the family owning the boat. Gold coins and tassels hang from the umbrellas.

In the evenings, pretty girls perform the *kyekottikali* (the clapping dance) in the open, dancing around the traditional brass lamp. Intricate patterns of flower petals are made on the grass forming a flower carpet for the dance.

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\* *Vallum*—boat, *Kali*—play.

## CHAPTER IV

### CULTURAL FESTIVALS

Colourful and varied as the Indian festivals are, their association with the country's cultural traditions have enhanced their popularity. For centuries, dance, drama and music have been essential concomitants of most of these festivals.

In recent years, there has been a revival of the cultural traditions — folk as well as classical. Folk art, such as folk dances and puppet shows, has invaded the city stage and is enjoyed by sophisticated audiences. In fact, the four most important cities of India — Bombay, Calcutta, Madras and Delhi — have first-rate cultural programmes throughout the year. For the foreign visitor, the Indian Travel and Tourist Industry's Council in collaboration with important cultural organisations, draws up a programme of cultural events dur-

ing the winter season. The programme comprises a varied fare of dance and music recitals and dramatic performances, fairs and exhibitions. Besides providing excellent entertainment, these offer the foreign visitor glimpses of the joyous spirit which pervades the festival season.

The cultural programmes are drawn up by the Council well in advance of the winter season and given publicity abroad, so that the intending visitor can buy tickets for the programme of his choice ahead of his Indian holiday. The details of the programmes can be obtained by the intending visitor from his travel agent or the Government of India Tourist Offices in New York, San Francisco, London, Paris, Frankfurt, Ceylon and Melbourne.

## NATIONAL AND GREGORIAN CALENDARS

A uniform National Calendar, based on the Saka era, has been adopted by the Government of India for official use. It has been in use since March 22, 1957. The Gregorian calendar also remains in use.

The Saka era is 78 years behind the Christian era. The table below gives the names of the months according to the National Calendar and their equivalents in terms of the Gregorian Calendar.

### *National Calendar*

Magha  
Phalgun  
Chaitra  
Vaisakha  
Jyaishta  
Asadha  
Sravana  
Bhadra  
Asvina  
Kartika  
Agrahayana  
Pausa

### *Gregorian Calendar*

January/February  
February/March  
March/April  
April/May  
May/June  
June/July  
July/August  
August/September  
September/October  
October/November  
November/December  
December/January

## FESTIVALS AT A GLANCE

<i>Month/Date</i>	<i>Festival</i>	<i>Place of Celebration</i>
January 1	New Year's Day	Mainly by Christians and city-dwellers.
January	Tyagaraja Festival	Madras and Andhra Pradesh
January 26	REPUBLIC DAY	Throughout the country but more specially in State capitals. Spectacular celebrations in Delhi.
January/February	Basant Panchami	Mainly in North India and West Bengal.
February/March	Sivaratri	Throughout India
February/March	HOLI	Throughout North India especially in Barsana and Nandgaon near Mathura.
March 21	Jamshed Navroz	Throughout India by Parsis, Main centre : Bombay city.
March/April	Mahavir Jayanti or the Birth-day of Lord Mahavira	Throughout India by Jains.
March/April	Good Friday	Throughout India by Christians.
March/April	Easter Day	Throughout India by Christians.
April/May	Buddha Jayanti	Throughout India by Buddhists.
—	Ramzan Id (Id-ul-Fitr)	Throughout India by Muslims.
—	Id-ul-Zaha	Throughout India by Muslims
June/July	Car Festival	At Puri in Orissa only.
July/August	Raksha Bandhan	Mainly in northern and western India.
August 15	INDEPENDENCE DAY	Throughout India.
August/September	Ganesa Chaturthi	Mainly in western and southern India.
August/September	Onam	Kerala.
August/September	Janma Ashtami	Throughout India.
—	MUHARRAM	By Muslims—main centres : Lucknow and Delhi.
October 2	Gandhi Jayanti	Throughout India.
September/October	DASSEHRA	Throughout India. Main centres of attraction : Delhi, Mysore, Calcutta, and Kulu.
October/November	DIVALI	Throughout India.
December 25	Christmas Day	Throughout India by Christians.

**FOR ALL TOURIST INFORMATION, PLEASE CONTACT :**

**OVERSEAS**

1. Government of India Tourist Office, 19 East, 49th Street, New York 17 (N.Y.), U.S.A. (Tel. MUrray-Hill 8-2245)
2. Government of India Tourist Office, 685 Market Street, San Francisco 5 (Calif.), U.S.A. (Tel. EXbrook 7-0066)
3. Government of India Tourist Office, 28, Cockspur Street, London, S.W.1., U.K. (Tel. TRAfalgar 1717-8-9)
4. Office National Indien de Tourisme, 8, Boulevard de la Madeleine, Paris (9), France. (Tel. OPEra 00-84, ANJou 83-86)
5. Indisches Verkehrs-buro, Baseler Hochhaus, Baseler Strasse 46, Frankfurt/Main, West Germany. (Tel. 32380 and 32396)
6. Government of India Tourist Office, Leonard House, 46, Elizabeth Street, Melbourne, (Australia). (Tel. MF 8057, MF 8491)
7. Government of India Tourist Office, Bank of Ceylon Building, Yark Street, Fort, Colombo, Ceylon. (Tel. 78805)
2. Government of India Tourist Office, 13, Old Court House Street, Calcutta. (Tel. 23-2889, 5721 and 2819)
3. Government of India Tourist Office, 88 Janpath, New Delhi. (Tel. 40706 and 48649)
4. Government of India Tourist Office, 35, Mount Road, Madras. (Tel. 86999)
5. Government of India Tourist Office, 191, The Mall, Agra. (Tel. 2377)
6. Government of India Tourist Office, Krishna Villas, Station Road, Aurangabad. (Tel. 17)
7. Government of India Tourist Office, 15-B, The Mall, Varanasi (Banaras) Cantt. (Tel. 189)
8. Government of India Tourist Office, 16-A, Mahatma Gandhi Road, Bangalore. (Tel. 4505)
9. Government of India Tourist Office, Willingdon Island, Cochin. (Tel. 45)

**IN INDIA**

1. Government of India Tourist Office, 123, Queen's Road, Churchgate, Bombay. (Tel. 241585 and 242145)
10. Government of India Tourist Office, Ajit Mansions, Nehru Road, Darjeeling. (Tel. 50)
11. Government of India Tourist Office, Rajasthan State Hotel, Jaipur. (Tel. 1182)
12. Government of India Tourist Office, Plot No 5, Hamidia Road, Bhopal. (Tel. 649)