

SPEECH OF 'BLE GOVERNOR SHRI
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BEHDEINKHLAM FESTIVAL ON 13th JULY, 2016

India is well known all over the world as a country of cultural and traditional festivals as it has many cultures and religions. One can enjoy the festival celebration in India every month. It is always crowded with people involved in the fairs and festivals celebration. Each festival has its own history, legend and significance of celebration. Being at festivals is like standing inside the mind of a culture as it dreams.

Festivals often serve to fulfil specific communal purposes, especially in regard to commemoration or thanksgiving. The celebrations offer a sense of belonging for religious, social, or geographical groups, contributing to group cohesiveness. They may also provide entertainment, which is particularly important to the local communities. Festivals that focus on cultural or ethnic topics also seek to inform community members of their traditions; the involvement of elders sharing stories and experience provides a means for unity among families.

Behdeinkhlam Festival is the most important festival of the socio-economic life of the Jaintias. It is observed by the non-christian Pnars who believe in the traditional faith of "niamtre".

The focus is on praying for the prosperity and good health of the people and on invoking divine blessings for a bountiful harvest after sowing is over.

Khlam means “plague or pestilence” and Beh Dien means to “drive away with sticks”.

In this festival, men take part in the dancing to the tune of drums and flute in the sacred aitar pool and women take part in offering sacrificial food to the spirits of the ancestors. They invoke their aid and intercession so that life here below will be good and worthy.

The climax of the celebrations is the tussle, as seen in a tug of war, for a large undressed beam by two groups of people opposed to each other.

The festival is also an invocation to God, seeking his blessing for good harvest.

According to the legend, Jowai town was once covered by thick forests without human habitation. It was the home of five deities- four huge stones and a river nymph. The four stones can still be seen at the four corners of Jowai town. These deities wished that God would create human beings and send them to settle here. Their wish was granted when a wandering Mongolian tribe arrived in the forest. To express this great joy at the arrival of humans, “U-Mokhai”, the eldest among the deities began a great dance. The thunder of the dancing deity scared the travellers but when they started to flee the deity addressed them to say, Children of God, fear not. You will live happily and prosperously in this land which shall be yours from tonight”. And so they stayed. Much later at the time of a great famine, the people of Jowai asked for help from the deity. He told them to perform a community festival after the sowing season and from then

onwards Behdienkhlam remains the primary festival of the Jaintias till this very day.

This festival is annually celebrated in the spirit of goodwill, brotherhood and joy. During the festival, the "Symbud Khnong", a log of great length was brought with thousands of people thronging to get a chance to touch it. It is believed that touching the Khnong will protect people from all sorts of sickness besides ensuring prosperity.

A week before the festival begins a pig is sacrificed to "thunder" (Knia Pyrthat) to ward off all evils. The underlying idea and purpose of this festival is to drive away all evils that plague human life. They also pray to drive away social evils which are inflicting the society.

The main feature of the festival is the making of the "Dein Khlam" and "Khnong", which are rounded, polished and tall tree trunks felled from a forest. After letting them lie in the woods for a couple of nights, the trunks are brought to the town with great fanfare. Later, these trunks are erected in each locality and in front of individual homes.

On the fourth day, young men, led by priests, carry bamboo sticks and visit each home beating roof-tops to chase away evil spirits, especially the demon of plague to the accompaniment of drums, cymbals and chanting in the Pnar language. The erected "khnong" is pulled down, broken and discarded. The group is offered home-brewed rice beer by the lady of the house.

The youth of each locality also try out their artistic skills

by erecting brightly coloured "rots" 30- tall structures built of bamboo, coloured paper and tinsel. Competition flares as each group tries to outdo the other in making the tallest and most artistic "rot". These rots depict wide range of social issues. They also carry strong messages for preservation and protection of the environment and mother earth besides the importance of peace and harmony.

In the afternoon of the fourth day, rots are carried in procession towards the "aitnar" site. The river is dammed and a low brick wall erected to form a kind of amphitheatre. Spectators begin to arrive- the women dressed gorgeously in colourful silk "Usens" and adorned with gold ornaments.

After the rots have arrived, the polished, rounded logs are thrown into the river where they float and all the dancing men and boys rush towards them and try to balance on the rolling, shifting, slippery logs. Religious rites and sacrifices at the sacred pool precede the immersion ceremony in the early hours of the morning. Mud is generously smeared by the participants on each other which resemble the Holi celebrations in the plains.

Interestingly, the festival is celebrated around the same time "Rath Yatra" is celebrated in other parts of eastern India. Besides being the most colourful religious festival, it is also the most important and unique dance festival of the Jaintias.

The climax of this famous festival is when people dressed up in their best attire would converge to a place called Mynthong to witness a game played called dad-lawakor between two teams from the upper and lower valleys of the

Myntdu River. It is a kind of soccer with a wooden ball. The side that wins is believed to be blessed with a good harvest. The Daloi or traditional chief acts as the referee.

After the function is over, the men folk go to their houses, take bath and offer their puja. Then they take their family members to the bridegroom's house for food. With this happy meal with the entire family, the festival comes to an end.

Diwali

Diwali is a five day festival that honors the victory of good over evil and brightness over darkness. It celebrates Lord Ram and his wife Sita returning to their kingdom of Ayodhya. It's known as the "Festival of Lights" for all the fireworks, small clay lamps and candles that are lit. The candlelight makes Diwali a very warm and atmospheric festival and it's observed with much joy and happiness.

Ganesh Chaturthi

The spectacular eleven day Ganesh Chaturthi festival honors the birth of the beloved Hindu elephant-headed God, Lord Ganesha. The start of the festival sees huge, elaborately crafted statutes of Ganesha installed in homes and podiums which have been especially constructed and beautifully decorated. At the end of the festival, the statutes are paraded through the streets, accompanied by much singing and dancing and then submerged in the ocean.

Holi

Holi is a two day festival that also celebrates the victory of good over evil, as well as the abundance of the spring harvest season. It's commonly referred to as the "Festival of Colors". People exuberantly throw colored powder and water all over each other, have parties, and dance under water sprinklers

Navaratri, Dussehra, and Durga Puja

The first nine days of this festival are known as *Navaratri*, and are filled with dance in honor of the Mother Goddess. The tenth day, called Dussehra, is devoted to celebrating the defeat of the demon king Ravana by Lord Rama. It also coincides with the victory of the revered warrior Goddess Durga over the evil buffalo demon Mahishasura.

In eastern India, the festival is observed as *Durga Puja*. Huge statues of the Goddess are made and immersed in the holy Ganges River. The festival is an extremely social and theatrical event, with drama, dance and cultural performances held throughout the country.

Onam

Onam is one of the biggest festival in Kerala. This ten day harvest festival marks the homecoming of the mythical King Mahabali. It's a festival rich in culture and heritage. People strikingly decorate the ground in front of their houses with flowers arranged in beautiful patterns to welcome the King. The festival is also celebrated with new clothes, feasts served on banana leaves, dancing, sports, games, and snake boat races.

Krishna Janmashtami/Govinda

Krishna Janmashtami, also known as Govinda, commemorates the birthday of Lord Krishna. An extremely fun part of the festival involves people climbing on each other and forming a human pyramid to try and reach and break open clay pots filled with curd which have been strung up high from buildings.

Pushkar Camel Fair

An astonishing 50,000 camels converge on the tiny desert town of Pushkar in India's state of Rajasthan for the Pushkar Camel Fair. For five days, the camels are dressed up, paraded, shaved, entered into beauty contests, raced, and of course traded. It's a great opportunity to witness an old, traditional style Indian festival.

Kerala Temple Festivals

Kerala temple festivals are elaborate and exotic. The main attraction at these festival is the elephants. Most Hindu temples in Kerala own elephants, the majority of which are donated by devotees.

The festivals form part of each temple's annual rituals. They're often a tribute to the temple's presiding God, who emerges from inside the temple once a year. Each festival has a different set of legends and myths behind it, depending on the temple God.

Carnival in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

The biggest parade in the world is held before Lent. It is the biggest carnival in the world with 2 million people per

day on the streets. The typical Rio carnival parade is filled with revelers, floats and adornments and samba dancers.

Yi Peng Lantern Festival, Thailand

Its a festival that witnesses thousands of sky lanterns light over Pingxi District in Taiwan. It was originally celebrated to ward off evil and disease from the town. The Taipei Pingshi Sky Lanterns were released originally to let others know that the town was safe. These lanterns are decorated with wishes and images relating to the owner and finally they're released off into the sky together magically decorating the sky into a sanctuary of lights.

La Tomatina

La Tomatina is a festival that is held in the Valencian town of Buño. On this day, participants throw tomatoes and get involved in this tomato fight purely for entertainment purposes after which the whole town square has been covered with tomato paste.

Harbin Ice and Snow Festival - Harbin, China

A festival exhibiting the most exquisite ice and snow sculptures in the world. Every year people build incredible things out of ice and snow, decorating them with lights and lasers.

Songkran Water Festival - Thailand

The Thai New Year festival falls on some of the hottest days in Thailand. People celebrate by throwing water on each other, using water guns, buckets, hoses- whatever they can get their hands on. Sometimes chalk or menthol (the latter

causes a cooling sensation) is mixed into the water to create a paste which people smear on each other's faces for good fortune. Elephants can also be seen walking around and splashing off water jets at people!

Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta - New Mexico, USA

The Albuquerque International Balloon Fiesta is a yearly festival of hot air balloons that takes place in Albuquerque, New Mexico, USA during early October. The Balloon Fiesta is a nine day event, and has around 750 balloons. The event is the largest hot air balloon festival in the world. Once the balloons are let off, they paint the sky with their vibrant colors and hues making it a beautiful sight to look at.

The World Bodypainting Festival

The World Body painting Festival is an annual bodypainting festival and competition held in Pörschach, Austria on lake Worthersee. It attracts artists from 45 nations and attracts 30.000 plus spectators.

International Cherry Blossom Festival

The International Cherry Blossom Festival is held in Macon, Georgia every spring. Macon is known as the "Cherry Blossom Capital of the World". Around 300,000-350,000 Yoshino Cherry Trees bloom around downtown, college campuses, and the neighbourhoods of Macon in late March every year. The festival lasts for ten days and features events for people of all ages.

The Three Rivers Festival

The Three Rivers Festival is an annual festival held in Fort Wayne, Indiana. The festival's run spans nine days in mid-July, starting on the first Friday after Independence Day. It is a celebration of the heritage of Fort Wayne, established during the French and Indian War at the confluence of three rivers, the Maumee, St. Marys, and St. Joseph. Events include a community parade through downtown, a food alley, amusement rides, a bed race, art and craft shows, children's and seniors mini-fests, an International Village, a shopping marketplace, River games and a fireworks finale.

Being a highly spiritual country, festivals are at the heart of people's lives in India. The numerous and varied festivals that are held throughout the year offer a unique way of seeing Indian culture at its best.

Festivals promote diversity, they bring neighbors into dialogue, they increase creativity, they offer opportunities for civic pride, they improve our general psychological well-being. In short, they make cities better places to live. People discover themselves at festivals. Festivals are fun for kids, fun for parents and offer a welcome break from the stresses of the nuclear family.