

TRADITIONAL KITE FESTIVALS OF INDIA

By Dilip Kapadia

No month is without a festival in India. Ours is a land which has cherished festivities with the vision of oneness in life. Each community has retained its own uniqueness and adopted some customs from others. Thus each community has its own traditional festivals. Therefore in India, there are as many festivals as there are communities, religions, seasons and social functions. Festivals have a great role to play in the life of man.

In the Ramayana, it is said that Lord Ram once observed that though the rains were adequate, crops were good, and people had everything they needed to be happy yet they were not cheerful. So he went to the great Sage Vashishtha to discuss how to remove the lethargy, boredom and melancholy that had set among the people. Vashishtha advised him to have celebrations of some festival, and if there was no festival due, to organize a “YAGNA”. Yagna is a holy sacrificial fire in which one and all can take part. Things like barley, sesame, purified butter, yellow mustard seeds, sugar, etc. are offered to the Fire God. The wood used in this holy fire is mango wood. When burnt, these ingredients create a lot of smoke which not only reduces pollution in the atmosphere, but also cleans it. This smoke when inhaled by human beings is also beneficial to their health. Another sage, Valmiki said “Janah Utsavapriyah” – the people are fond of festivals. Therefore Lord Ram organized a Yagna and the people were enthused again and were cheerful and smiling. It is perhaps for this reason that India abounds in festivals.

The meaning of festival in Sanskrit is “Utsava”. The word Utsava is derived from “Utsarati” which means “elevates”. These festivals should be for elevating man further for linking him to his expanding existence.

Our festivals are expressions of our gratitude towards nature, deities and planets such as the sun and the moon which enrich our lives as they are for cementing our ties with others, family members or society and to relate ourselves to Divine. The speciality of our festivals is that there is always some festival or the other celebrated in honour of deities such as Hanuman (Monkey God), Ganesha (Elephant God), Naag (Snake God), Lord Krishna, Lord Rama, etc. Then there are festivals which mark important stages in the life of man – birth, marriage, first pregnancy, baptism, thread ceremony, anniversaries, birthdays, etc. Then there are the festivals to celebrate the triumph of good over evil – Diwali, Dassera, etc. Then there are the festivals linked with change of seasons, harvesting of crops or changes in planetary movements.

Makar Sankranti / Uttarayan is one such festival. On this day, there are two natural phenomena occurring. One is MAKAR SANKRANTI – the entry of the sun in the “Makar Rashi” (one of the zodiac signs) and the other is UTTARAYAN – the beginning of the northward journey of the sun. Uttar means North and Ayan means journey. Most of our festivals are backed by religious beliefs and ceremonies. It is this pressure of religious beliefs that motivates man to participate in the festivals. Our pandits (Godfathers) advocate that on this particular day, there are changes in the atmosphere and that these changes are beneficial to human health and hence every person should expose himself maximum to the sunlight, because the sun’s rays are at a unique angle only on this day. People go to rivers, lakes, sea, beaches for bath and then go to temples or pilgrimages thereby exposing themselves to the sun. People give alms to the poor and give food and money in charity on this day. For how long can one indulge in this? So one of the ways devised is to play games or flying kites from rooftops, grounds and beaches. In the eastern parts of the world, particularly in India, we have kites flown on manjha – cutting line, and therefore the kite flyers indulge in kite fights. This is so exciting and engrossing that people forget their responsibilities and duties. People young and old, males and females, from all walks of life fly kites from their roof tops right from dawn to dusk. They have their meals on rooftops. In fact, the Gujarat Govern-

ment has declared this day as a Government holiday and all shops and establishments, schools and colleges are closed on this day. The rickshaw operators, taxi operators and even the tobacco, cigarette and “paan” (beetle leaf) vendors take the day off and indulge in kite flying. The streets wear a deserted look. All the traffic is in the sky which is dotted with kites of different sizes and designs violating all traffic rules – its free for all. They are all busy having aerial battles trying to cut each others kites (lines), and at every kite cut the enthusiasts shout “Kaypo Chhe” – meaning I have cut your kite. The climax is from late afternoon till dark. After an enjoyable and, should I say, a busy day, when it becomes dark the kite enthusiasts experience a feeling of sadness because the fun and enjoyment have come to an end. However, a few enthusiasts still have some more fun up their sleeve. They fly kites with lit candles inside Chinese lanterns which are tied on to the line of a kite, anywhere between 5 and 10 lanterns can be tied on to a kite. This is “NIGHT FLY IN INDIA”. Then there are the colourful and noisy fire works which illuminate the sky.

This festival is not an isolated day of kite flying – meaning flying kites only on this day. Actually kite flyers start flying kites a couple of months before Makar Sankranti or the kite festival, only the mood and magnitude of the festival is absent. Preparations for the festival start about a fortnight before the due date. Kites are sold not in ones, twos or dozens but they are sold and purchased by scores and hundreds. Similarly, Manjha is sold in multiples of 900 metres. After bringing the material home, the kite enthusiasts start preparing the kites for the ‘D’ day by bridling them so that there is no time lost in fighting the fierce battles. Traders start selling kites for the festival from January 1 onwards. Kites are sold in shops, hand carts, footpaths and road side. The climax is on the eve of the festival. This day in local language is called “Katal Ki Raat” meaning “night of murder”. In the last couple of days, shops are open till well past midnight. These outlets are decorated with kites and illuminated with electrical lights and flood lights. Shop keepers who ordinarily sell goods other than kites, also start selling kites for this festival. A visit to the kite market on the “Katal Ki Raat” is an unforgettable experience and attracts locals as well as foreigners.

It is customary to eat Til Chikki (sesame cake – ingredients being sesame seeds and sugar) on this day. Til is good for health in the winter season as it fortifies us against cold, and especially at the change of season, Makar Sankranti marks the end of winter, from then on, the day starts becoming longer. The wind on this day is most unpredictable both in terms of direction and speed.

It is also a time of religious thanksgiving as the Gods awaken from their slumber.

Man is a creature of circumstances. Accordingly, in the eastern part of the world because of low winds and abundant availability of suitable kind of bamboo sticks and paper and light weight fabric such as silk kites are made from these materials. On the other hand, in the western countries, because the winds are of high speed, no paper is used, only fabric is used, mainly rip stop nylon which goes into making parachutes and sails of ships; and instead of bamboo sticks, fibre glass rods and carbon rods are used. The line used is also thick made of nylon or Dacron. Kite cutting is now spreading at an astounding pace from the eastern part of the world to Europe, America and Australia.

As against Makar Sankranti / Uttarayan which is based on solar movement, in India we also have a very popular Kite Festival which is based on the lunar calendar. This festival falls after the Makar Sankranti Festival. It is observed on the 5th day of the bright half of the fourth month of the Hindu Calendar. This festival is called “BASANTI” OR “BASANT PANCHAMI”. It heralds the onset of the spring season. BASANTI is very popular in Northern parts of India, particularly in the State of Punjab. A sizeable chunk of pre-partitioned India now falls in Pakistan. BASANTI is observed with full gusto and enthusiasm in Pakistan also. In fact it is a bigger Festival there and is celebrated for almost a week with colours and fragrance of mustard (yellow) and with kite flying. Although the Basant Festival is based on the Hindu lunar calendar / almanac, surprisingly there is no corresponding date in the Islamic calendar which is also based on lunar movements. There is a difference of about 12 days, a few hours, minutes and seconds between the lunar year and the solar year. The lunar day could

be of 21-27 hours depending on the season, but the solar day is of 24 hours. As per the Hindu lunar almanac, the day begins at sunrise, whereas in solar system the date changes at midnight. Thus the lunar year is shorter than the solar year by 12 days approximately every year, year after year. In the Muslim / Islamic calendar the day begins immediately after sunset. The Hindu year is adjusted after about every 33 months by having an extra month in the year. This month is called "Adhik Maas". "Adhik" means extra and "Maas" means month. During this month Hindus perform religious ceremonies, undertake penance, give alms to the poor, go to the temples to offer prayers and take outdoor bath on sea beaches or rivers. Marriage ceremonies and other auspicious functions are best avoided during this month. So, after 33 months, Hindus have a year which will be of 13 months. This is something like having a leap year with month of February having 29 days every fourth year. The Muslim / Islamic calendar has no such adjustment. Therefore the dates of Hindu calendar and Islamic calendar do not match, although both are based on lunar movement.

As there is no way to spot Basant in the Islamic calendar, but the people, both Hindus and Muslims are very eager and anxious to celebrate this festival, Hindu almanacs are summoned from India. But why are Muslims also celebrating this festival? The answer lies in the anecdote "Amir Khusro and his master Nizamuddin Auliya (Muslim saint) lived in the 14th century Delhi during the reign of Khalji Sultans. The story goes that a particularly close nephew of the Auliya fell ill, and died. At this, Nizamuddin Auliya slipped into a long period of bereavement. For the next six months he withdrew in his shell, ate little, did not speak to anyone, not even let out a smile. This got his disciple Amir Khusro restive.

One day, Amir Khusro chanced upon a group of Hindu women who were marching and singing songs in a festive mood, and were all dressed in yellow. Curious, he asked about the occasion, and was told that it was Basant Panchami and the women were dancing and marching towards Kalkaji Mandir, still a landmark in Delhi.

Something suddenly came upon Khusro, something fairly inspiring, for he slipped into a yellow robe and dashed to his master, whom he found sitting and mourning at the place where, subsequently, Humayun's tomb would be built. His trick clicked, for when the master saw the devotee approach in this particular attire, he could not help feeling amused. He smiled.

The smile, legend has it, shook the saint out of bereavement and Amir Khusro decided to mark the occasion as an annual festival. And since that day it became a ritual for the community around the dargah (grave) of Nizamuddin Auliya to walk up to the Sufi's tomb and sing 'qawwalis' (group singing and clapping in tunes), often composed by Khusro himself."

Basant is celebrated over a week with colours and fragrance of mustard, kite flying and "Urdu-Hindi poetry recitation" and dancing and entertainment programmes in different parts of Pakistan and India (this is singing by different sects). Mustard crop which is yellow in colour is in full bloom at this time of the year and is ready for harvesting. Symbolically, they hold yellow mustard flowers and are dressed in the same yellow colour, which Khusro had noticed on the marching women. The significance of the Basant Festival is not in the blossoming of the flowers, but in the specific flowering of mustard, since the colour of mustard is predominantly visible only when seen together, in totality, as a collective.

In India we have four important Kite Festivals. Besides Makar Sankranti – January 14th and Basant cited above, Delhi celebrates its Kite Festival on August 15th which is the Independence Day of India and Kolkatta celebrates on September 17th which is the (Vishwakarma Pooja Day) i.e the day on which the Divine Architect, Architect of the Universe

As against this festival flying, in India we have developed kite cutting as a sport. We have kite cutting competitions for individuals / teams at City level, State level and National level. Since competitions can be between / amongst equals only, we have clear cut rules to ensure this, eg. The size of the kites as specified, the line used

for making Manjha is as per specifications, etc. These competitions are conducted on knock out basis and league basis.

Kite flying has assumed International dimension in the last about 25 years. There are quite a few International Kite Festivals every year in different parts of the world. In India also, we have a very popular International Kite Festival organized by Gujarat Tourism during Makar Sankranti week since 1989. The International Kite Festival, Ahmedabad is meticulously managed and offers excellent facilities and hospitality to the participants who come from different parts of India and various countries of the world. As it happens, the International Kite Festival, Ahmedabad, is the first International Kite Festival of the calendar year.

My club, including myself have secured 1st prize at City level, State level, National level as well as International level. I have been a chief judge at the International Kite Festival at Ahmedabad.

Kite is known by different names in Indian languages – “Patang”, “Kankawa”, “Guddi”, etc. Patang is a Sanskrit word and it means butterfly. But Patang is also a proper noun. In the epic Shrimad Bhagwat Gita, Patang is the name of the third son born to Devkiji the mother of Lord Krishna and the sister of Kansa. Patang is the elder brother of Lord Krishna.

If you want an introduction to India and its culture, and to experience the Indian kite fighting enthusiasm and passion, then a visit to Ahmedabad, Vadodara, Khambhat, Surat, Jaipur, Hyderabad, Banares, Amritsar, Varasani, etc during the festival of Makar Sankranti, January 14th is highly recommended.

In so far as community kite flying / traditional kite flying festivals in the world are concerned, I would say that Ahmedabad is the KITE CAPITAL OF THE WORLD.