

BUDDHA MAHOTSAVA
FESTIVALS OF INDIA IN LAO PDR, CAMBODIA AND VIETNAM



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1. The Buddha Mahotsava, the Buddhist festival, was celebrated under the aegis of the Festivals of India in Lao PDR, Cambodia and Vietnam in February – March 2013. The Nava Nalanda Mahavihara and the Central Institute of Himalayan Studies conceptualized and developed the Buddha Mahotsava's events in the 3 countries.

2. The Buddha Mahotsava was conducted at the holiest of shrines in each of the 3 countries. These were the following:
 - a) The That Luang Stupa in Vientienne
 - b) The Wat Onalum Pagoda in Phnom Penh
 - c) The Pho Wuang Pagoda in Ho Chi Minh city

The Buddha Mahotsava included a series of expositions of Dhamma to spread the message of Buddhism, organization of a sand mandala, butter sculpture, Lama chanting, Sacred dance of Cham, and the lively masked and costumed dance associated with the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. In each of these events, the Buddhist monks from the host country participated with great enthusiasm and vigor. There were thousands of people who visited the That Luang Stupa, The Wat Onalum Pagoda and the Pho Wuang Pagoda. Ho Chi Minh city witnessed the largest attendance running upto almost a kilometer of pilgrims who had come to witness the Dharma Darshan Exhibition, the Lama Chanting and Cham Dancing. Thousands of Wats enrich the landscape of the

three countries. The events were attended by the Great Patriarchs of the Major Wats of the host country, Senior Ministers and senior members of Government.

2. India's cultural heritage is a source of inspiration to people everywhere. India's cultural exchanges with South East Asia, centuries old, continue to inspire people to people relationships. There is a visible impact of the Indian heritage on the scriptures and the way of life of the people of the Mekong region. There is deep conviction about the Buddhist traits of humility, gentleness, justice and charity. There are many similarities in languages of the region and Sanskrit. The Panchatantra and Jataka Tales are narrated with great enthusiasm and part of folklore.

3. The Dharma Darsana (Experience the Dharma) an Exhibition curated by the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara was on display at each of the 3 countries. This exhibition showcasing Buddhist Art, Architecture, Sculpture, Paintings aimed to present the life of Lord Buddha as depicted in the art, architecture, sculpture and paintings found in India and the message of Dharma was conveyed to followers of Buddhism the world over.

4. The exhibits in the Dharma Darshan included photographs of a sacred foot print of the Lord Buddha, with the auspicious symbols of Buddhism from Amaravati in Andhra Pradesh, a Cameo depicting the worshipping scene of Dharma Chakra, the great Stupas at Sanchi, Dhamekha, the preaching Buddha from Sarnath, Painting of the birth of Buddha at Lumbini, a statue of seated Buddha in Bhumi sparsa mudra, the Lion Capital from Saranath, some casing stones from the stupa from Bharhut and some modern paintings, depicting the Jataka stories.

4. The Dharma Darshan exhibition facilitated and encouraged cooperation in the realms of art, architecture, sculpture and culture on the whole, education including academic activities, in these fields and to foster understanding of the rich cultural legacy of Lord Buddha.

5. The most popular event of the Buddha Mahotsava was the sacred cham dancing performed by the monks of the Central Institute of Himalayan Studies. The lively masked and costumed dance was one of the highlights of the event and was conducted nearly 3-4 times a day. Indian monks participated along with the monks from the host countries in the Sand Mandala, the Butter Sculpture and Lama Chanting.

6. The events showcased the rich cultural heritage of India which given its spread has become the common heritage of the countries of South East Asia. Of all the events of the Festival of India, the one which was inspirational in building people to people contact was the Buddha Mahotsava.

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**Author is a senior civil servant, an IAS officer of 1989 batch, served as Joint Secretary International Cultural Relations in the Ministry of Culture from August 2013 to December 2014.*

The views expressed in the Article are his personal.