

The Festival of India

The Festival of India with the following six events was held in Laos from February 9-11, 2014.

1. Buddhist Festival (Buddhist Photo Exhibition by Nav Nalanda Mahavihara and Boudh Mahotsava by Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies)
2. Ramayana Dance Festival (by Kalakshetra Foundation)
3. Indian Food Festival (by ITDC)
4. Indian Film Festival (by Directorate of Film Festivals)
5. Yoga Classes (by AYUSH)
6. Mehndi Art (Ministry of Tourism)

2. The Buddhist Festival was hosted at the Dhamma Sabha, That Luang Stupa which is the most sacred Buddhist monument in Laos and venue of the nationally important festival in November every year. The Buddhist Festival which has two components, the first is Dhamma Darshan- a Photo exhibition of sacred Buddhist sites in India, and the second - Buddh Mahotsava that includes the construction of Sand Mandala, Butter Sculpture, Sacred Dance and Lama Chants by the Monks from the Himalayan Region. The Buddhist Festival was jointly inaugurated by Ven. Khamma Panyavichit, Head of Cabinet, Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization and Shri Ravindra Singh, Secretary (Culture) at 1400 hrs on Sunday, 9th February 2014 in the presence of a large number of monks, dignitaries, senior officials from Department of Religious Affairs, members of Indian community etc. After welcome address, Ambassador spoke about the Festival and its objectives. The three fold objective of the Buddhist festival was to illustrate the life and teachings of Lord Buddha in Laos, to strengthen our bilateral Cultural cooperation and finally to promote people to people level contacts through the medium of Culture. Secretary (Culture) spoke about Buddhism, India-Lao relations and thanked the government of Lao PDR for their support in organizing the Festival. The inauguration of Buddh Mahotsav was done by lighting the candles by Secretary (Culture), Ven. Khamma Panyavichit, Head of Cabinet, Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization and Ambassador. Lama Chanting and Buddhist sacred dance

were performed as part of the ceremony. Then the dignitaries witnessed the Sand Mandala and butter sculpture.

3. Thereafter, the photo exhibition (Dhamma Darshan) was inaugurated in the other part at the same venue by cutting ribbon by the Secretary (Culture), Ven. Khamma Panyavichit, Head of Cabinet, Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization and the Ambassador followed by tour of the exhibition by dignitaries and other guests who saw the 22 photographs depicting Buddhist art and architecture from the sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites of Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Sanchi, Piprahwa, Ajanta, Nalanda, Amravati and Nagarjunakonda ,etc. The impressive inaugural ceremony was attended by more than 300 persons.

4. In the forenoon of 10th February, Secretary (Culture) met with H.E. Mr. Bouangeun Saphouvong, Vice Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism and discussed issues of mutual interest. In the afternoon, Secretary (Culture) paid a courtesy call on H.E. Dr. Thongloun Sisoulith, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Record of Discussions of the meetings were sent separately.

5. The Food Festival was inaugurated at noon on 10th February at Hotel Don Chan Palace jointly by H.E. Prof. Dr. Bountiem Phissamay, Minister to the Office of the Government and President of Lao-India Friendship Association and Secretary (Culture) followed by lunch. The attendees at the lunch included H.E. Prof. Dr. Bountiem Phissamay, Minister to the Office of the Government and President of Lao-India Friendship Association, H.E. Mr. Hiem Phommachanh, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications, H.E. Mr. Bounkeut Sangsomsak, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, H.E. Dr. Khamphay Rasmy, Vice President, Lao-India Friendship Association, Ambassadors and senior government officials. A separate lunch was hosted by Ambassador's spouse for the spouses of VIPs including wife of H.E. Dr. Thongloun Sisoulith, Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Foreign Affairs, wife of H.E. Mr. Somdy

Douangdy, Minister of Planning and Investment, wife of H.E.Mr. Soukanh Mahalath, Mayor of Vientiane Capital, wife of H.E. Mr. Khammany Inthirath, Vice Minister of Energy and Mines on the 11th February.

6. In the evening the formal inaugural ceremony of the Festival was held at the prestigious National Cultural Hall. H.E. Prof. Dr. Bosengkham Vongdara, Minister of Information, Culture and Tourism was the Chief Guest. The function was attended by H.E. Prof. Dr. Bountiem Phissamay, Minister to the Office of the Government and President of Lao-India Friendship Association, H.E. Mr. Hiem Phommachanh, Minister of Posts and Telecommunications and H.E. Mr. Bounket Sangsomsak, Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs and Ven. Khamma Panyavichit, Head of Cabinet, Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization on behalf of the Lao government. The Buddhist monks, senior government officials, diplomatic corps, students, Indian community etc attended the function. The event commenced with welcome address by Ambassador, followed by address of Secretary (Culture) who stated that the Festival of India sought to showcase the rich and composite culture of India as well as to promote people to people contacts. He expressed thanks to the Government of Lao PDR for their support in organizing the Festival. H.E. Mr. Bosengkham Vongdara highlighted the historical and cultural linkages between Laos and India, rich and varied cultural heritage of India including the Buddhist tradition. Thereafter, the Choodamani Pradanam episode from Ramayana classical dance was performed. It was followed by a dinner for 240 invited guests. The inaugural ceremony was attended by about 500 people. A schedule of programmes of the Festival of India is also enclosed herewith.

7. Following is the brief summary of each of the events:

1. **Buddhist Festival**: Both the photographic exhibition (Dhamma Darshan) and Buddh Mahotsav including Sand Mandala, Lama chant, Sacred dance, Butter sculpture etc. attracted a large number of devout Buddhist monks and students

from Buddhist religious institutions apart from general public. It is learnt that everyday a few hundreds of people visited the Buddhist Festival so far. The Festival would last till February 15, 2014. Acknowledging the excellent quality and coverage of the photographs and based on the response of people visiting the Festival, the Department of Religious Affairs has sent a request to the Embassy to donate the photographs to them for mounting a permanent exhibition. The request was forwarded to the Ministry of Culture for their consideration. Both the Department of Religious Affairs and the That Luang Dhamma Sabha have expressed their gratitude to the Government of India for organizing the Buddhist Festival and look forward to more cooperation in the field of culture, especially covering Buddhist related activities.

2. **Ramayana Classical Dance**: The Kalakshetra artists performed three episodes namely, Jatayu Moksham, Choodamani Pradanam and Mahapattabhishekam from February 9-11, 2014 at National Cultural Hall. The Ramayana dance performance enthralled the audience. The performances were very impressive and attracted more and more crowds each day. More than 500 people including a large number of VIPs witnessed the dance performance. Ramayana dance was well choreographed and perfectly delivered. The narration of the scenes before commencement of the performance in English as well as Lao language helped the audience to understand the sequence of scenes better. On the last day of performance, the artists were given a standing ovation and a large number of audience went on to the stage to get their photo with the artists. Ms. Priyadarshini Govind deserves commendation and support and encouragement to replicate the show in other parts of South East Asia, where Ramayana tradition is popular.

3. **Food Festival**: The Food Festival got wider publicity and attracted about 300 people over three days. Laotians like Indian food very much as Lao food lacks variety and depth. They are attracted towards non-vegetarian part of the Mughalai dishes. The venue of the Festival, Hotel Don Chan Palace also

publicized the event very well. The menu offered wide choice in a buffet style food court during the lunch time at the hotel. In the evening, the hotel organized take away food at the Indian Food Festival counter at National Cultural Hall where festival events were organized. The Don Chan Palace was quite satisfied with the outcome of the event.

4. **Indian Film Festival**: The following six films were shown over a period of four days:

1. Dil Chahta Hai
2. Jo Jeeta Wohi Sikandar
3. Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam
4. Jodha Akbar
5. Kabhi Haan Kabhi Na
6. Zindagi Na Milegi Dobara

The Film Festival did attract about 50 people on an average to each of the shows. By and large the content of the film and quality of the print were satisfactory. However, the print of the first film Dil Chahta Hai was very poor with a number of breaks and dark lines in between. The Directorate of Film Festivals may be advised to get the films in digital VCD format instead of 35 mm spools. Apart from quality, the transportation would be hassle-free.

5. **Yoga**: On an average there were about 40 people attending Yoga everyday in morning and evening classes. The classes were held at the National Cultural Hall. In future the Yoga classes may be held jointly with a fitness centre to get synergy.
6. **Mehndi**: Mehndi painting was quite popular and a large number of girls and women got their hands painted. At the request of the hotel where the Indian

Food Festival was held, the mehndi artist set up a counter which attracted the VIPs' spouses and other ladies who went for henna painting after lunch.

8. The Festival of India was covered very widely in the electronic as well as print media, both in Lao language and in English. Newspaper clippings from print media are attached herewith. The free translations in English of Lao language articles are also enclosed. But for the shorter lead time, our efforts would have mobilized more visitors to the Festival of India.
