

Close to the Buddha



In South Africa

- The current Indian Ambassador Harsh Shringla had held a similar Chettinad food festival in South Africa, when he was Consul General there in 2007, with the same chef Girish Kumar. At that time, he had also launched Seetha Muthiah's famed book entitled, 'The Flavours of Chettinad'.

The 'Dharma Darshan' exhibition displays the Buddha in various 'mudras,' and also the rare image of the 'Emaciated Buddha' (after his rigorous penance, and just before he gained enlightenment).

The panels recount various tales, including the 'Empty Throne', after the Buddha's passing away, which has moved many Buddhist viewers to tears. There are also calendar-style pictures of the many sacred Buddhist sites in India. These include not only the four important places: Lumpini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar, but also Rajgir, Sravasti, Vaishali and Sankasia, among others.

Jhumur Singh, the chief curator of the exhibition, said she had worked tirelessly along with husband Shailendra Kumar Singh, for over two years, to set up this exhibition. Both are Delhi-based artists, who were commissioned by the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara University to design this exhibition.

She informed that the statuettes on display are replicas of the actual ones, which are housed in the top museums of India. But they were not easy to recreate. First, came the clay moulds, which were the most difficult, as they had to capture the face, expression, feeling of the statues. Then came the plaster-of-paris mould and finally, the fibre glass casting.

"The clay moulds come out well, only if we have the right spirit within us, which is why my team of seven and I, meditated for many days, before we created them," said the sculptor. She pointed out

that the chief 'Tathagat' image, signifying the 'Exalted' Buddha, which is displayed in all the brochures and panels, was washed away the first time they made it! So, they resorted to meditating for three whole days, after which they got it right. She informed that the statuettes are expensive, and cost lakhs of rupees.

"I've become Buddhist, after working on the exhibition, as it's taken me to another level," said Jhumur. That is why, she could understand how the statuettes, although they were replicas, touched a chord in all the Buddhist viewers. In Laos and Cambodia, the exhibition was held in pagodas, while in Vietnam, it was housed in the important Fine Arts Gallery.

When the exhibition ended in Laos, the public did not want the artefacts to be moved, as they felt that the Buddha was moving away from them. So, the Secretary of the Indian Ministry of Culture decided to leave behind the artefacts, as a permanent exhibition at the pagoda, she stated.

The same thing happened in Cambodia, where huge throngs of monks and believers flocked to the exhibition, praying, meditating, pros-

trating and often weeping. "It was very moving. I've never seen anything like this!" said Jhumur. The Cambodians also wanted the images to remain in their country. So, many of the artefacts will go back to Phnom Penh after the Bangkok exhibition.

As for Vietnam, she talked about huge groups of students who came from various universities. "There were also many Buddhist believers, who came and sat in quiet meditation," she stated.

To give more people a chance to view the Buddhist artefacts, the 'Dharma Darshan' will move to a well-known place, the Siam Paragon hall, later this week.

Here again, it's being supported by the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives, who have invited a member of the Thai Royal Family to inaugurate the exhibition, offering further proof of its importance, in this Buddhist country.

For a festival that was set up in record three weeks' time, by an Ambassador who arrived in the city only two months ago, its new template and its impact have been very impressive.

GREAT IMPACT: The 'Dharma Darshan' exhibition. PHOTOS: LEKHA SHANKAR



cluded the colourful Aphilo Kuwo folk dance from Nagaland (the North-East state attracted attention in Thailand, after the Thai Princess visited it recently), as well as a superb excerpt from the 'Ramayana' by a group of Bharatanatyam dancers from Chennai's Kalakshetra. The excerpt was 'Mahapattabhishakam' and it was held at another exotic venue - the Sala Chalerkrung Royal Theatre, which traditionally stages stories from the Thai 'Ramkien', in the classical 'Khon' dance style.

There was a Yoga Workshop and 'Bollyfit' exercise routine for the health conscious, and a food festival that whetted Thai appetites, centred round Tamil Nadu's Chettinad cuisine, with two chefs specially flown down from the ITDC group.

The spicy, aromatic flavours of the Kozhi and Erachi Chettinad dishes, went down well with Thais, as they are used to a spicy cuisine.

The last event of the Festival, the Buddhist Exhibition, is currently on in the city, and is showing, not at a well-known hall or gallery, but at the Srinakharinwirot Varsity, where it has been attracting many Thai students, monks and academics.

Flavour & fervour

EVENT Food and fine arts have made the Festival of India in Thailand a huge draw.

LEKHA SHANKAR

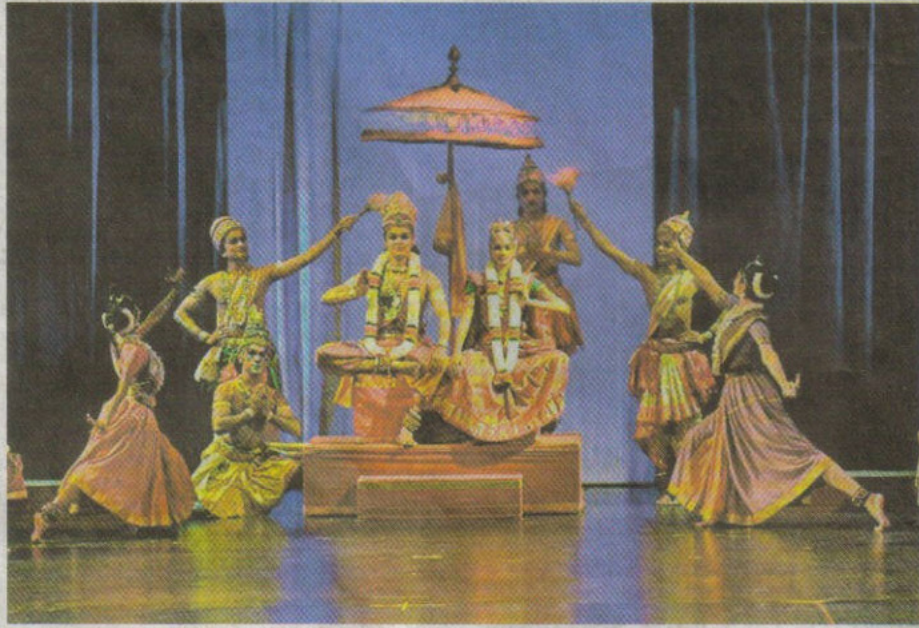
The first Festival of India in Thailand concludes this week, with a unique Buddhist exhibition, organised by the Nava Nalanda Mahavihara University from Nalanda, entitled 'Dharma Darshan,' which gives a glimpse of Buddha's life, through a series of rare and arresting statuettes, panels and pictures.

The exhibition came to Bangkok, after creating waves in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, which also held the inaugural Festival of India this year. The Asian events have been different in format to those held earlier in the West. They have been local-centric, focussing on Buddhist subjects, performances and venues as Buddhism is common to the countries of this region. In Thailand, it attracted large Buddhist audiences.

The newly-arrived Ambassador to Thailand, Harsh Shringla, considers this one of the highlights.

More a homage

The opening event was held in one of the most important Thai temples of Bangkok, Wat Bovornnivesvihara, the abode of the late Supreme Religious Patriarch of the country, whose body is enshrined there. Therefore, the dances of the Buddhist Lama monks from the Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies in Arunachal Pradesh, were not just a performance, but a homage to the Thai religious leader. They did their religious chanting, built an auspicious sand mandala and butter sculpture, and then, donned



SUPERB: 'Mahapattabhishakam,' an excerpt from Ramayana, and (below) the Cham dance. PHOTOS: LEKHA SHANKAR

elaborate costumes and masks for the sacred Cham dance, which expressed the themes of good and evil.

The Lama monks danced again at another important Buddhist venue, the Buddhadasa Indapanno Archives,

which again drew a large number of believers from that corner of Bangkok.

Other performances in-

