

Mela! An Indian Fair

by Richard Kurin

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Mela! An Indian Fair on the National Mall provides a culturally appropriate setting for a variety of Indian ritual, performance, craft, commercial, aesthetic and culinary traditions. Presenting the skills of more than 60 folk artists, craftspeople and cultural specialists from India and the Indian-American community in a temporary bazaar replete with Indian handicrafts and cuisine, this program offers visitors a unique opportunity to experience and participate in Indian culture.

A *melā*, or Indian fair, is a large gathering of people who temporarily come together at a culturally appropriate time and place. *Melās* usually occur at the intersections of trade routes, river banks or confluences. The specific fair ground often has a rich history and is frequently associated with the deeds of a god, goddess or local hero. The time of the fair is set by the movements of sun, moon, planets and stars in accord with one of the various solar and lunar calendars which mark time in India.

Melās may be organized for a variety of reasons, but they often evoke and integrate three goals of action (*dharmā*, *artha* and *kāma*) discussed by Indian philosophers, for fairs are at once religious, commercial and pleasurable events. According to the rather extensive survey conducted for the Indian census, most fairs arise from and have at their core ritual activities associated with a particular festival.

Festivals, or *utsava* (inspiring events), may celebrate religious feats, exemplary moral victories, or cosmological occurrences. Many of India's yearly festivals recall the actions of Hindu gods and goddesses — for example, the birth of Krishna (Janmashtamī) or the triumph of Durgā (Durgā Pūjā). Others focus on the life or accomplishments of Hindu sages, Muslim saints (e.g., *urs*, or death/union anniversaries), Sikh *gurus*, or the leading figures of other religious communities, such as Buddha Pūrṇimā for Buddhists, Mahāvīra Jayantī for Jains, or the festival of St. Francis Xavier for Christians.

Festivals may commemorate the victories of culture heroes both ancient and modern. The autumnal Dassehrā festival marks the victory of Rāma and his wife Sītā over the demon king Rāvana some three to four thousand years ago, thus affirming the code of conduct expected of husband and wife, prince and princess. A similar victory of justice over injustice is celebrated on Gandhi Jayantī, the birthday anniversary of Mohandas Gandhi, who provided the moral leadership during India's drive for independence. Other festivals are closely related to the agricultural cycle and may express thanksgiving for a good harvest (e.g., Pongal in Tamil Nadu) or inspire the community to greet the needed monsoon rains — Tīj in Rajasthan, for instance.

Melās often have a ritual center, be it a holy confluence of rivers, a sacred lake, or a temple or shrine at which religious activities take

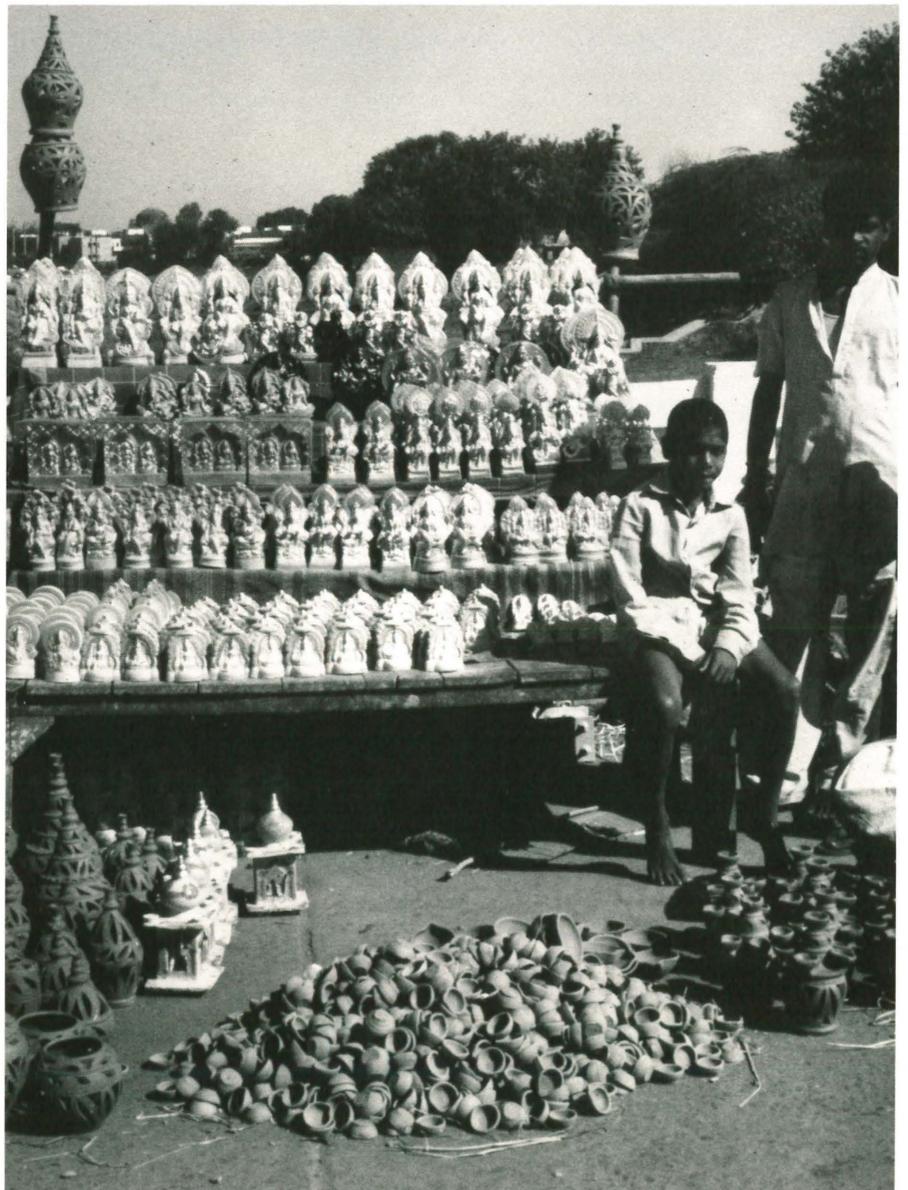


place. For Hindus, such activities typically include worshipping the deities (*pūjā*), making special drawings or representations (*kolam* or *rangoli* floor painting), bathing (*snāna*), viewing the deity (*darshana*), enacting poignant dramas (*līlā*), eating divinely marked foods (*prashād*) and singing devotional songs (*kīrtan* and *bhajan*). Muslim rituals might include offering prayer (*duā*), partaking of blessed foods (*tabarak*) and singing special songs (*qawwālī*). At a Sikh melā one might find a two-day continuous reading (Akhand Pāth) of the Adi Granth and the ingestion of *amrit*, the symbolic nectar of life. Despite the fact that these ritual activities vary, Indian melās are noteworthy for transcending differences and drawing together participants from diverse religious, ethnic and linguistic communities. Indeed, “*mil*,” the Sanskrit root of the term “*melā*,” denotes meeting and mixing. It is through shared experience, embodied in blessed foods, songs and sounds, sights and substances marked by a divine presence that people of different backgrounds become more alike and unified.

Most melās, even those seemingly constituted for purely religious purposes (like the Kumbha melās or the urs of Muslim saints), have features in common: pavilions and facilities for pilgrims and visitors,

Procession of local deities for the Kulu melā, held during the autumnal Dassehrā festival. Photo courtesy Air India

including a temporary bazaar or market and food stalls, and performance areas, sideshow stalls and entertaining diversions. Many are in fact oriented toward the pursuit of trade and commerce. Like the temporary weekly markets in many rural districts, melās promote the circulation and integration of goods within the wider economic system by allowing the marketing of manufactured city goods in rural areas, as well as handcrafted tribal and village goods in urban areas. Several melās, such as those at Pushkar and Sonapur, function as large regional livestock markets where bovines, camels and horses may be traded. Such melās allow for the redistribution of livestock and determination of their market value. On a retail level, the makeshift stalls found at melās are equipped with a wide assortment of merchandise. Since whole families will often travel to a melā aboard their bullock cart, vendors are equipped with materials for everyone in the household: pipes, shoes and gadgets are popular with men; clothing, trinkets, household goods and ornaments with women. A large variety of inexpensive, ephemeral toys is often available for children, and animal accouterments — bells and harnesses — are commonly purchased by livestock traders who decorate their bullocks or camels in hopes of



making them more attractive to potential buyers.

In pleasurable fashion melās provide a traditional means for the transmission of knowledge. Children and adults cheer at the bullock or camel cart races, laugh while riding on human-powered ferris wheels and exhibit astonishment at the feats of the many itinerant performers — snake charmers, acrobats, jugglers, magicians, impersonators — who frequent the fair.

Melās have always been educational events, and it is through such exposure to these folk artists as well as folk theater groups that children learn of the living traditions of the wider community. Historically, the country fair in India has provided the forum within which various religious leaders, holy men and intellectuals would present their opinions. It was at melās that Western missionaries debated Hindu *brabmans* and Muslim *maulvīs* before assembled crowds. Currently, the state governments have recognized that melās are important events through which knowledge can be disseminated, so it is not uncommon to see pavilions set up at melās featuring exhibitions of modern agricultural technology, alternative energy sources and family planning.



Icons and images for sale in a mela stall.

A makeshift food stall offering snacks to fairgoers
Photos by Daphne Shuttleworth

The Mela program on the Mall is really a fair within a fair. It is a composite melā, compressing both space and time to present selectively only a few of India's many traditions. Just as a melā would in India, the program encourages visitors to learn about and participate in Indian culture. The structures on the Mall have been built largely with natural and handcrafted materials from India, while the site itself has been designed to reflect indigenous Indian concepts. The Learning Center tent houses the various ritual activities associated with some Indian festivals: a pūjā, or worship ceremony to Ganesha, the elephant-headed son of Shiva and remover of obstacles, is exhibited in order to impart to visitors a sense of Hindu household and temple ritual; kolam floor painting from Tamil Nadu is also demonstrated, as through such an art space is sacralized and made ready to receive the presence of the deity. Also in the Learning Center are artisans who build the bamboo and paper structures for the Hindu Dassehrā and the Muslim Muharram celebrations. For Dassehrā, the Rām Lilā is enacted. At the climax of this play about the defeat of the demon Rāvana by Rāma, a burning arrow is fired from Rāma's bow to ignite the statues of Rāvana and his allies. For Muharram, ornate *taziyas*—replicas of the tomb of Hussain, the martyred son of Ali— are paraded through city streets by Shiite Muslims. The rest of the site is organized according to the *pancha mahābhūtāh*, the five elements of Hindu metaphysics and their corresponding senses: sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. Song and dance will be found in the sound sections, as activities associated with space or ether, the most subtle of the elements. In the touch area, associated with the element air, are the acrobats, jugglers, kite maker, clothing and stalls for fans. In the sight section are numerous stalls offering items of brass, terra cotta, wood, leather and stone— all associated with the element fire and the notion of form. Roaming through this section are the magicians and impersonators to challenge the eye. The taste section features food, snacks and beverages, while the fragrances of India are evident in the flower, incense and essence stalls.

By walking through the site, enjoying its sensations and participating in its delights, one finds the melā an avenue for experiencing Indian culture and learning of its traditions.

Suggested reading

Bhardwaj, Surinder Mohan. *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Singer, Milton, ed. *Traditional India: Structure and Change*, Part II. Philadelphia: The American Folklore Society, 1959.

Census of India, 1961. *Fairs and Festivals*, Part VII-B. Delhi: Manager of Publications, Government of India.

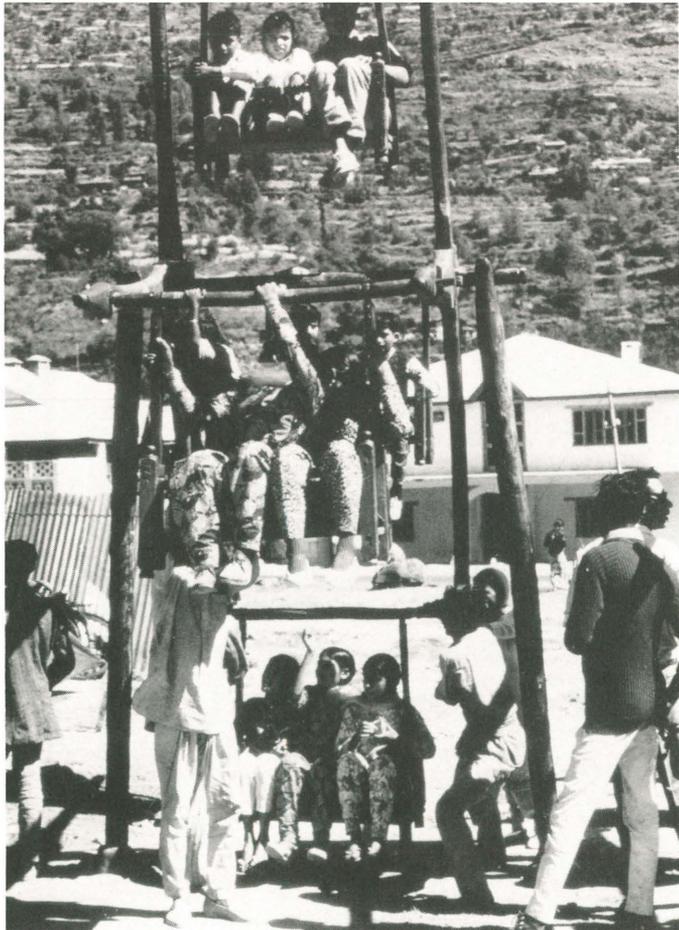
Suggested films

Folk Performers of India, by Nazir Jairazbhoy. 46 min. color video. University of California, Los Angeles, Department of Music.

An Indian Pilgrimage: Ramdevra. color. South Asian Area Center, University of Wisconsin.



Folk dancers join in a circle dance to celebrate a festival in Gujarat.



Children visiting the Kulu mela are entertained by a ride on the human powered ferris wheel. Photos courtesy Air India