2.1 FESTIVALS IN INDIA

Every great religion has several important aspects that characterize it. These are: the doctrinal, the theological, the ethical and the communal aspects. The communal aspects relate to the feasts and festivals that people celebrate in the course of a year. India does not just observe few festivals pertaining to only one or two religions. As we have studied earlier we follow many religions hence each religion has introduced festivals associated with the events of the respective faith. Thus we have Hindu, Buddhist, Jaina, Sikh, Muslim and Christian festivals. All celebrated with equal interest and communal harmony.

A festival is celebrated to bring joy and good cheer in the community. However, the reason and purpose of celebration may be to commemorate a very great event or a saintly person. This serves to remember the heroes or great episodes that once played a very important role in the tradition of the community. Festivals also remind us of the ways in which our ancestors celebrated their happy days. In celebrating the festival we not only re-live a bit of the earlier joy but also acknowledge the importance of them. Thus a festival is important as it re-creates a part of the past history and tradition of a community. In addition, a festival is to be celebrated on a specific date that is assigned to it in the calendar. This is determined by tradition which uses astronomical configurations in the Hindu tradition. No land celebrates life like India. With festivals like Holi, and fairs like Pushkar. (People drench themselves in the days and moments that glorify harvests, seasons, triumphs, joys, sorrows, battles, Gods, and kings). This is the land with 365 days of sound and 360 degrees of colour.

2.2 SOME MAJOR FESTIVALS

Hindus from most ancient times have developed many colourful festivals. Every festival has at least one story associated with it from the rich Puranic literature. Some of the important festivals are:

Makara Sankranti: Makara Sankranti is celebrated on the day when the sun is directly above the tropic of Capricon. In the classical Hindu solar calendar the first day of the year is when the sun is in Aries. The solar year is divided into two long periods of six months each. One begins with the winter solstice. This day is celebrated as the Makara Sankranti. This occurs in the month of January.

On this occasion the meeting (sangam) of Ganga, Jamuna and the underground Saraswathi rivers is visited by thousands of people. It is believed that a dip in the river at this time has great religious merit. This is also supposed to cleanse one of
all the sins.

In Maharashtra and Karnataka it is celebrated by the distribution of ‘Til’ sweets (sesame seeds) along with sugarcane and jaggery. Friends and relatives exchange the items with a vow to renew friendship and speak pleasantly to one another.

In Tamil Nadu this festival is celebrated as ‘Pongal’, means boiling. Rice is boiled in sweetened milk preferably in a new pot. The length of time it takes to boil is an index of the fortune in the coming year. The shorter the time the more the prosperity. Earlier cattle were decorated and so were homes with ‘rangoli’ patterns made from rice flour.

Holi: Holi is a very colourfull festival. It is celebrated practically all over India in the month of Phalgun. It is actually related to the spring equinox. The celebration of Holi varies from region to region. It has also changed over the years in the way it is celebrated. Today, in some parts of the country it is impossible to step outside. This is because people play by throwing coloured water or powder on each other. There is a general atmosphere of revelry and gaiety. Sometimes even paints are used.

This celebration of fun is said to be an echo of the jolly deeds of Lord Krishna in his boyhood days. Others believe that it is the day when Krishna destroyed an evil giantess. The giantess is said to have begged Krishna to see that she is remembered at the close of the season. According to another story the shouts and screams are said to echo those of Rati the wife of Kama who was burnt by Shiva’s third eye. This symbolizes Shiva’s victory over desire. In fact, in some areas a pile of wood symbolic of Kama is burnt.

Maha Shiva Ratri: The festival of Shiva Ratri (Shiva’s Night) falls on the new moon day of the month of Phalgun. It is observed by the devotees of Shiva by fasting for twenty four hours. People keep awake during the night by offering periodic prayers to Shiva. The fast is broken with a delicious feast. In earlier times there used to be ritual bath in milk and honey during the night. However, today devotees spend the night listening to music, singing devotional songs, playing family games. On Shiva Ratri night long worship and fasting is undertaken. The devotees make it a point to go Shiva temple and offer milk.

Krishna Janmashtami: This festival is to celebrate the advent of Lord Krishna in the world. The name actually means the birth of the eighth day. It is observed on the eighth day after the new moon of the month of Shravan. Krishna is also the eighth avatar of Lord Vishnu. According to the Puranic tale, the evil King Kamsa had been warned by astrologers that his nephew would one day destroy him. The nephew was to be born to his sister Devaki. Therefore Kamsa kept Devaki and her husband Vasudev in prison and killed six of the babies born to them one after another. The seventh flew away to heaven warning Kamsa of his inevitable death. The eighth child was miraculously transported to Gokul to be brought up by foster parents. By divine power child grew up to take on his uncle, Kamsa and rid the earth of an evil king.

The entire day is spent in fast and prayer. At midnight the images of Lord Krishna are worshipped and the fast is broken with many sweet and goodies. It is a great occasion for joy and fun. In some part of the country ‘Dahi-Handi’ is organized in public squares. In this an earthen pot with curds is tied at a great height. Young men form human pyramids over which one person climbs to reach the handi and break it. There is great singing, chanting and encouragement from the great crowds.
that gather to witness it. Krishna Janmashtami in a sense celebrates the birth of a baby which is always a miracle. If that child is meant to spread so much good and knowledge to the community then it surely calls for a grand celebration.

Ganesh Chaturthi

This is celebrated on the fourth day after the full moon day in the month of Bhadrapada. This is observed in the honour of Lord Ganesh. Since this god is known as Vinayaka i.e. remover of obstacles, the festival is also known as Vinayak Chaturthi. In Tamil Nadu it is called Pillayar Chaturti.

In this festival, clay images of Ganesha are made by the thousands in different poses and decorations. The image is kept for a specific number of days in homes and is worshipped until it is again ceremoniously taken in a procession to a water body and is submerged. The festival also is known for specific sweets and preparation which are enjoyed friends and relatives gathering together.

During the freedom struggle Lokamanya Tilak converted the festival so that the community at large could take part. This was to bring a close knit feeling in the community to oppose the British. This lead to the formation of ‘Sarvajanik Ganesh Mandals’ i.e. groups to celebrate the festival for everyone. Usually a public place is decorated with great enthusiasm and an image is installed. Large crowds gather to witness the decorations and take ‘darshan’ of the god. Many competitions and programmes are held on each day of this festival. There is a long procession on the 11th day when all the sarvajanik Ganeshas are taken ceremoniously for immersion in a large water body. People in thousands gather to witness this occasion not only wishing goodbye to the god but also requesting him to come back soon.

Dasahara: Vijaya Dasami: This festival is celebrated throughout the country. In Bengal it corresponds to the Durga Puja. Dasahara means tenth day and Vijaya Dasami means the tenth day of victory. The Dasahara festival comes at the end of the monsoon months and is the opening of the whole season of colourful festivities.

In most of India it marks the victory of Goddess Durga over evil forces. There are many version of this day. It is also believed that it commemorates victory of Rama over the evil king Ravana.

In many towns and villages of India the scenes from the Ramayan in the form of ‘Ram Lila’ are enacted. People relive the moments of the epic with religious fervor and faith. Usually an effigy of Ravana is burnt to symbolize the victory of good over evil.

Divali: Divali is also known as ‘Deepavali’, the festival of lights. The name means a row of lights. It is celebrated on the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of the month of Asvin(October-November).

Divali is well known for ‘Lakshmi Puja’, the worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Therefore it is of importance to the business community. On this day they close the financial year and begin a new. Usually a fresh cleaning is done of all shops and establishments. The home is decorated with garlands and mango leaves. In the night light ‘diyas’ are lit and the home is decorated. Light is a major symbol in Divali. It is taken for all things positive and is symbolic of life, joy, truth, justice, knowledge and wisdom. Thus with the outer light the inner light too is to be lit.
Another view is that Divali celebrates the victory of arrogant tyrant Bali at the hands of Lord Vishnu when he appeared in his Vamana (dwarf) avatar.

Sometimes Divali is also taken as the return of Rama back to his kingdom or the destruction Kamsa by Lord Krishna. In Bengal it becomes the celebration of Kali.

In south India people wake up at predawn, massage oil and take a fresh bath. They wear new clothes and burst crackers heralding joy and celebration. Many types of sweets are prepared and enjoyed.

**Raksha Bandhan:** "Rakhi", as it is popularly called, is celebrated in the month of Shravan (August) on the day of the full moon. Literally meaning "ties of protection", it commemorates the bond between brothers and sisters. On the morning of the festival, women of all ages put a tikka of vermilion on their brother’s foreheads, tie a ceremonial rakhi (this may be a colorful thread, a simple bracelet, a decorative string or something really fancy, made of silver and crystals) on their brothers’ wrist(s), and offer them mithai (sweets) after an aarti (prayer). The brothers, in return, promise to love and protect their sisters, and gift them some money as a token of their affection. The practice often extends more generally to people of the opposite sex who are not biologically related. It has also been interpreted as a pledge by the strong to protect the weak.

**Bihu:** Actually a collection of 3 festivals, Bihu marks distinctive stages in the cultivation of paddy, the principal crop of the state of Assam. Bohag Bihu is also called Rongaali Bihu, the Festival of Merriment. True to its name, it ushers in a period of enjoyment. The festival lasts for several days. The first day, Goru Bihu, is reserved for cattle – cows’ feet are washed, their horns and hooves are rubbed with oil, and they are garlanded. The next day, Manuh Bihu, sees homage paid to elders, relatives and friends, with a special meal of chira, curds and sweets. The third day, Gosain Bihu, is dedicated to religious services. Games, sports, special Bihu songs, dances, “Bihu Kunwori” contests (dancing competitions) and fairs are all part of Bihu celebrations.

**Baisakhi:** A rural festival celebrated in Punjab on 13th April, Baisakhi signifies the beginning of a New Year for the Punjabi community. It was on this day in 1699 that the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, founded the Khalsa Panth. Prayer meetings and kirtans (singing of devotional songs) are organized in gurdwaras (Sikh temples) across the country. After the prayer, karah prasad is served to the congregation. The function ends with langar, the community lunch made and served by volunteers. In the rural areas, Baisakhi signifies the harvest of the (main) wheat crop. Farmers give thanks for Mother Nature’s bounty Purnima and pray for a better crop next year.

**Buddha Purnima:** Buddha Purnima falls on the full moon night in the month of Vaisakha (either in April or May), commemorates the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha. Notwithstanding the summer heat (temperatures routinely touch 45 degrees C), pilgrims come from all over the world to Bodh Gaya, the place where Buddha attained enlightenment. The day is marked with prayer meets, sermons on the life of Buddha, religious discourses, recitation of Buddhist scriptures, group meditation, processions, worship of Buddha’s statue and symposia. The Mahabodhi Temple wears a festive look and is decorated with colourful flags and flowers. Celebration of this festival has been recorded by the Chinese scholar, Fa-Hien.

**Christmas:** Christmas, the birth anniversary of Jesus Christ, is celebrated by Indian Christians on December 25th, in much the same way as it is celebrated by...
Popular Culture

Christmas worldwide. The day is ushered in with midnight mass, sounds of carols fill the air, Christmas trees are brought home and decorated, and gifts are exchanged with friends and family. All the major Indian cities wear a festive look. Shops and bazaars are decorated for the occasion and offer attractive bargains. Christmas sets off a week of festivities, culminating with New Year celebrations on 1st Jan.

Easter: The Sunday marking the resurrection of Christ is celebrated by Christians all across India. It is preceded by Lent, a 40-day period of fasting and prayer from February to March that begins with Ash Wednesday and culminates in Good Friday, the day of mourning when Jesus Christ was crucified. Easter eggs and hot cross buns are some of the goodies distributed on Easter.

There are a number of Muslim festivals like Muharram, Bakri Id, Ramzan, Id-E-Milad Shab-E-Barat and others. A well-known peculiarity of Muslim festivals is this that they do not correspond to any particular date or month of the Gregorian calendar, as they are based on the Hijra which follows pure lunar reckoning. As such these Muslim festivals do not have months corresponding to seasons.

Muharram: The first Muslim month is Muharram and Muharram is observed on the tenth day of this month. Muharram is a day of mourning as it commemorates the greatest tragedy in the history of Islam—the martyrdom of the Prophet’s grandson Hussein. Long processions with their Taziahs which are the gorgeous replicas of the martyr’s tomb, the masked dancers and the colorful crowds, give Muharram the appearance of a gay festival but in reality it is an expression of grief and distress.

Bakri-Id: This is one the celebration of which is enjoined in Koran and it commemorates Abraham’s sacrifice of his beloved son in obedience to God’s command. Abraham having implicit faith in God decided to offer the sacrifice. Abraham blindfolded himself and killed his son but when he removed the bandage from his eyes, found his son standing before him with a slain ram at the altar. Therefore, for Bakri-Id every Muslim family is required to sacrifice a healthy animal and distribute two-thirds of the meat among the poor. A full grown camel, cow, goat or sheep free from disease is considered the best offering with a short prayer which is an absolute surrendering of the soul and acknowledging the greatness of Allah.

Eid-Milad-ul-Nabi: The birth anniversary of Prophet Mohammad is celebrated all over India with the reading of the Quran and religious discourses in the mosques. The prophet was born on the twelfth day of the third month of the Muslim year and his death anniversary also falls on the same date. During the twelve days of sickness of the Prophet which ended in his death, sermons are delivered in mosques by learned men. Also a ceremony known as the “Sandal Rite” is performed over the symbolic foot-prints of the Prophet in stone, kept in some households or mosques. A replica of Burag, the horse on which the Prophet is believed to have ascended to heaven is kept near the foot-prints and is anointed with Sandal Paste. And the casket of foot-prints are decorated and illuminated. The twelfth day, which is the Urs proper, is observed quietly and spent in prayers and alms-giving.

Shab-E-Barat: This feast is held either on the thirteenth or on the fourteenth day of the eighth month of the Muslim year. It is a nocturnal observance as the fortunes of all mortals for the coming year are to be registered in heaven during the night.
Fatiha, which means blessings are recited over the food and the sweet dishes in the name of the Prophet, his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali.

**Ramzan** It comes at the end of the Muslim month of Ramzan during which every devout Muslim fasts by day and eats only at night. It is celebrated on the day following the appearance of the New Moon at the end of Ramzan and in the evening anxious crowds are seen watching the fading light of the western sky for a trace of the moon. The Ramzan fast, observed during the whole month begins daily from the time the first streak of daylight is observed on the horizon till nightfall when the stars become clearly visible. During the day even drinking water is prohibited but food is permitted to be eaten at night and the day is spent in reading the Koran. Community prayer, generally held in an open space is the most important part in Ramzan Id celebrations. Every Muslim is commanded by Koran to offer Id prayer with his brethren in full faith. As the congregation becomes unwieldy to be accommodated in a mosque spacious grounds are selected for Community Prayers. It is required that every Muslim gives alms to the poor and dressed in clean clothes to attend the public prayer.

So it is a prevalent custom in certain parts of India for the living wife of a Muslim to offer new clothes and finery to a former dead wife in a small ceremony which is known by the name - "Saukan Maura" – which literally means first wife’s crown. Greeting cards printed with “Id Mubarak” which is also the greetings for this Id festival are sent to friends and relatives also when friends meet they greet each other saying “Id Mubarak”. (Reference and courtesy: Mohammad Muain)

Other than these festivals certain seasonal festivals, national festivals like Independence day and Republic day, cultural festivals such as Elephanta festival, Khajuraho festival, Hampi Festival, Qutaub Festival and Taj festival. Some are associated with fairs such as Jagannatha Rathyatra, Pushkar festival, Goa carnival etc. All such festivals bring people together and they enjoy irrespective of their differences.

### 2.3 SELF ASSESSMENT QUESTIONS

**Self Assessment Question 1**

Complete the following with right answers:

- a) date that is assigned to it in the calendar.
- b) bring joy and good cheer in c) fasting is undertaken.

1. A festival is celebrated to ________________ the community.
2. A festival is to be celebrated on a specific ________________
3. In Tamil Nadu Sankranti festival is celebrated as ________________
4. On Shiva Ratri night long worship and ________________
5. Rakhi literally means ________________ it commemorates the bond between brothers and sisters.
Self Assessment Questions 2

State whether true or False:

1. The Mahabodhi Temple wears a deserted look and is decorated with colourful flags and flowers.
2. Shops and bazaars are closed for the occasion of Christmas and offer attractive bargains.
3. Easter is preceded by Lent, a 40-day period of fasting and prayer from February to March.
4. For Bakri-Id every Muslim family is required to sacrifice an unhealthy animal and distribute.
5. The Ramzan fast, observed during the whole month begins daily from the time the first night breaks.

2.4 TERMINAL QUESTIONS

1. What do you mean festival?
2. Give the list of major festivals followed in India.

2.5 ANSWERS

Self Assessment Questions 1

1 - b), 2 - a), 3 - e), 4 - c), 5 - d)

Self Assessment Questions 2

1 - F, 2 - F, 3 - T, 4 - F, 5 - F

Terminal Questions

1. A festival is celebrated to bring joy and good cheer in the community. However, the reason and purpose of celebration may be to commemorate a very great event or a saintly person. This serves to remember the heroes or great episodes that once played a very important role in the tradition of the community. Festivals also remind us of the ways in which our ancestors celebrated their happy days. In celebrating the festival we not only re-live a bit of the earlier joy but also acknowledge the importance of them. Thus a festival is important as it re-creates a part of the past history and tradition of a community. In addition, a festival is to be celebrated on a specific date that is assigned to it in the calendar. This is determined by tradition which uses astronomical configurations in the Hindu tradition. No land celebrates life like India. With festivals like Holi, and fairs like Pushkar. (People drench themselves in the days and moments that glorify harvests, seasons, triumphs, joys, sorrows, battles, Gods, and kings). This is the land with 365 days of sound and 360 degrees of colour.

2. the major festivals are Ganesha Chaturthi, Makara sankranti, Shiva ratri, Darchara, Diwali, Raksha Bandhan, Bihu, Baisakhi, Krishna Janmashtami, Holi, Buddha Purnima, Christmas, Easter, Id-Milad, Bakri-Id, Ramzan.
3. Note on Diwali:

**Divali:** Diwali is also known as *Deepavali*, the festival of lights. The name means a row of lights. It is celebrated on the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of the month of Asvin (October-November). Diwali is well known for *Lakshmi Puja*, the worship of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. Therefore it is of importance to the business community. On this day they close the financial year and begin a new. Usually a fresh cleaning is done of all shops and establishments. The home is decorated with garlands and mango leaves. In the night light *diyas* are lit and the home is decorated. Light is a major symbol in Diwali. It is taken for all things positive and is symbolic of life, joy, truth, justice knowledge and wisdom. Thus with the outer light the inner light too is to be lit. Another view is that Diwali celebrates the victory of arrogant tyrant Bali at the hands of Lord Vishnu when he appeared in his Vamana (dwarf) avatara. Sometimes Diwali is also taken as the return of Rama back to his kingdom or the destruction Kamsa by Lord Krishna. In Bengal it becomes the celebration of Kali.

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