

Hindu Devotees Celebrate Makar Sankranti Harvest Festival

INDIA, January 14, 2014 (NY Daily News): Makar Sankranti is a major Hindu harvest festival celebrated in almost all parts of India. It marks the transition of the Sun into the zodiac sign of Makara rashi (Capricorn) on its celestial path. The day is also believed to mark the arrival of spring in India. Makar Sankranti is a solar event making one of the few Indian festivals which fall on the same date in the Gregorian calendar every year: January 14th.

Museum On Ayurveda Ready For Inauguration Near Thrissur

KOCHI, INDIA, December 22, 2014 (The Hindu Business Line): Vaidyaratnam has set up a museum on ayurveda to enlighten the public on its rich heritage and evolution. Set up with an investment close to US\$809,000 at Thaikkattussery near Thrissur, the museum, the first of its kind, will be inaugurated by former President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam on December 27.

Astavaidyan E.T. Narayanan Mooss, who supervised the setting up of museum, said the idea is to link the ancient tradition of ayurveda with its promising future as a safe medicinal system. The past and contemporary treatment, medicine preparation and impart of education are shown at a 3D gallery.

The exhibits in the museum include authoritative texts, description of various ancient practices of black magic, study of Vedas, Yaagas and Yajnas, Gurukula system, Rasasalas or pharmacies of ancient times etc

Sugar is “the New Tobacco”

UNITED KINGDOM, January 8, 2014 (Daily Mail): “Sugar is the new tobacco,” said Simon Capewell, professor of clinical epidemiology at the University of Liverpool. Professor Capewell is part of a new US-UK campaign group — Action on Sugar — that says asking firms to make voluntary changes has failed.

The typical Briton consumes 12 teaspoons of sugar a day and some adults consume as many as 46. The maximum intake recommended by the World Health Organisation is ten, although this guideline is likely to be halved.

The UN agency says there is overwhelming evidence coming out about sugar-sweetened beverages and other sugar consumption being linked to obesity, diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

A study by Action on Sugar found surprisingly high levels of sugar in many foods, including savory products and healthy options. A Mars bar has eight teaspoons of sugar, a can of Heinz tomato soup has four teaspoons of sugar, even Glaceau Vitamin Water, which is owned by Coca-Cola, has the equivalent of four teaspoons of sugar in a 500ml bottle.

Action of Sugar said food firms should be able to reduce the amount of sugar they add to products by 20 to 30 percent within three to five years, taking 100 calories a day out of the typical diet. This would be enough to halt or even reverse rising levels of obesity and associated ill-health, it claimed.

Graham MacGregor, a professor at the Wolfson Institute of Preventive Medicine in London and chairman of Action on Sugar, said: “We must now tackle the obesity epidemic both in the UK and worldwide. We must start a coherent and structured plan to slowly reduce the amount of calories people consume by slowly taking out added sugar from foods and soft drinks.” Dr Aseem, the group’s science director, said: “Added sugar has no nutritional value whatsoever, and causes no feeling of satiety.”

Uncertainty Looms over Kailash Mansarovar Yatra

DEHRADUN, INDIA, January 21, 2014 (Times Of India): Only a few months are left for the Kailash Mansarovar yatra to begin. But Kumaon Mandal Vikas Nigam (KMVN), the nodal agency for the ministry of external affairs-organized yatra, is still undecided about the route that the yatriis will take through Uttarakhand this year. [HPI note: this is for pilgrims going into Tibet from India, a different route than those going there via Nepal.] The main route of the pilgrimage — which is scheduled to begin from June 8 this year — was badly affected during the flash floods last year leading to the yatra being called off. Repair work in this area is progressing at a slow pace and it is unclear whether the route would be ready before the yatra commences.

Shirish Kumar, general manager, KMVN, told TOI that they were hopeful that the main route will open before the yatra begins but added they were also exploring the possibility of using two alternative routes as a backup plan this year. However, sources add that the alternative routes being considered could be “risky and unsafe for pilgrims.”

The yatra passes through Almora, Dania, Pithoragarh, Dharchula, Tawaghat and Narayan Ashram on a motorable road. The stretch between Dharchula and Narayan Ashram is presently being repaired. A 60-meter-long road bridge at Kanchyoti village between Dharchula and Narayan Ashram and large portions of road in the nearby Tawaghat area were washed away in the flash-floods last year. The Border Roads Organisation (BRO) and PWD are handling the repair and construction work in the area along with the Indo-Tibetan Border Police.

The recent announcement of the yatra dates by the ministry of external affairs, though, has put the state government under pressure to expedite the ongoing repair work. “We have now taken up construction of Kanchyoti road bridge and damaged roads near Tawaghat as a “special case.” With the help of BRO and PWD, we hope to clear the entire route by March end or April this year,” says Neeraj Khairwal, DM, Pithoragarh.

Pantheerayiram Celebrated In Kerala

KERALA, INDIA, January 12, 2014 (New India Express): It is the beginning of the year and Namboothiri families in Kerala are getting ready to conduct Vettakkoru Makan

Pattu (the song to worship Lord Vettakkoru Makan) or pantheerayiram. It is a popular but challenging ritual in which the chief priest has to break 12,000 coconuts continuously in one sitting.

Manoj Kumar Kandamangalam is one of the few priests in the state who excels in conducting pantheerayiram. Coming from a noted priest family in north Kerala, Manoj has conducted this ritual at various temples and households since 1996 and is probably the fastest at it. He holds the Limca Book record of breaking 12,000 coconuts in 2 hours and 13 minutes.

Pantheerayiram is carried out as an offering to Lord Vettakkoru Makan and Lord Ayyappan. “In Kerala it is conducted for Lord Vettakkoru Makan while in other south Indian states, the ritual is conducted for Lord Ayyappan,” says Manoj. Vettakkoru Makan is regarded as the son of Lord Siva. He was born to Siva and Parvathi while they were wandering through a forest in guise of tribal warriors. Soon after his birth, the infant was left in the forest and raised and trained in war strategies by tribal leaders.

Madurai Temple Reservoirs Fight For Survival

MADURAI, INDIA, January 6, 2014 (The Hindu): One look at the sprawling Mariamman Teppakulam, and it is the buzz of humanity inside the tank (a line water reservoir) that first catches your attention — boys playing cricket, people walking across the tank to go to the other side and few wheeling bicycles through patches of the dry brown and grassy green tank bed.

Many temple tanks in the city which were once brimming with water and where beautiful float festivals were held are bone dry now. The tanks found either inside or outside the temple premises are replete with rich history and fine architecture.

A source of water is something of great importance to a temple. “For most sprawling temples which bears the brunt of a hot sun, a tank ensures that some parts of the temple are always kept cool,” points out Sridhar Bhattar from the Narasingam Perumal Temple. The presence of a temple tank also results in groundwater table getting charged, says A. Gurunathan, Head, Vayalagam Movement of the Dhan Foundation. It has published a book on four prominent temple tanks in Madurai.

“Owing to scarce rainfall and channels that supplied water from a main source going defunct, either a concrete floor or tiles are laid on the tank bed to retain at least the little water that the tank manages to get since it cannot support percolation and groundwater recharge,” he explains.

While the channels need attention, sustained maintenance of the tank is needed, say experts. Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments department officials say Mariamman Teppakulam is to be renovated at a cost of Rs. 40 lakh. It will ensure that the cracked walls are repaired. “People must be aware of the history of old tanks so that they will understand the importance of conserving them. A systematic approach in upkeep of these ancient temple tanks will make a world of difference,” says official.

US Returns Missing Sculptures to India

UNITED KINGDOM, January 15, 2014 (BBC): The US has returned to India three ancient sculptures that had been smuggled into the US by art dealers and accomplices. The 11th-12th Century sandstone sculptures had been stolen from temples in India and offered for sale in the US.

India's consul general in New York, Dnyaneshwar Mulay, expressed gratitude to US.

"I'd really like to express very heartfelt gratitude to US authorities for having invested so much time, energy and resources in obtaining, securing and now helping us repatriate these [statues] to the place where they belong," Mr. Mulay was quoted as saying by The Hindu newspaper.

James Dinkins, executive associate director of Homeland Security Investigations, said "excellent cooperation" between the two countries had "led to the recovery and return of these priceless antiquities". "The pilfering of a nation's cultural patrimony cannot and will not be tolerated," he said.

500,000 Saplings Planted On Vaishnodevi Hills

JAMMU, INDIA, December 14, 2013 (Business Standard): As a result of the directions issued by Chairman of Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board N. N. Vohra, Shri Mata Vaishnodevi Shrine Board (SMVDB) has planted over 550,000 saplings, including forest, horticulture, floriculture, medicinal and ornamental species of plants during the last 4 years, a spokesman of SMVD said.

The initiative is aimed at conserving the environment and ecology and greening the Trikuta Hills and the tracks leading to the shrine.

In addition, 150,000 saplings of different species of plants were planted during the monsoon plantation season of 2013, spokesman said, adding that as many as 150,000 plants are being planted during the present winter plantation season, which will raise the number of plants put in the ground to 700,000.

CEO of SMVD Mandeep Bhandari said to generate in-house production of indigenous species of plants compatible to the local climatic conditions in the Trikuta Hills area, a multi-purpose nursery with a capacity to produce more than 200,000 seedlings per year is being set up at Kunkuniyallan village, near Panthal by the Board.

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40 Peters Road, Madras 600014. Ph. 28132790, 28131232