

HAND BOOK ON Nature Based Festivals of Sikkim



Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP)
Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department
Government of Sikkim

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Published by :

Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP)
Forest, Environment And Wildlife Management Department
Government of Sikkim, Deorali, Gangtok - 737102 India

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Photographs from: Cultural Affairs & Heritage Department, Govt of Sikkim & Department of Information & Public Relations, Govt. of Sikkim.

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Forest, Env. & W.L. Mangt. Deptt/
Mines, Minerals & Geology and Science,
technology & Climate Change Deptt.
Government of Sikkim

Message

It gives me immense pleasure to release the book titled “Handbook on Nature based festivals of Sikkim”, being published by the JICA assisted Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP), Department of Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management, Government of Sikkim.

The State of Sikkim, with its diverse communities and attributes makes the state an acknowledged tourist destination for its overwhelming natural beauty and rich cultural legacy. The project aims to improve the Ecotourism profile of Sikkim through structured interventions under ecotourism component of SBFP. Currently, the project is working in 11 ecotourism zones of the state to develop new and innovative ecotourism based products and services, which are envisaged to support the conservation efforts as well as creating more livelihood opportunities for the local people.

This handbook highlights important nature-based festivals prevalent in various communities such as Tendong Lho Rum Faat, Namsoong or Nambun, Muk Zikding Rum Faat, Pang Lhab Sol, Loosong, Bum chu, Losar, Drukpa-Tshezi, Dasai or Vada Dashai, Tihar, Maghey Sankranti, Yuma Sham Manghim & Sakewa.

Hence it is a laudable attempt to provide information about the various festivals and fairs which are prevalent in the state.

I am confident that this book in its precise outline may be seen as a reference for tourists, tourism industry partners and all concerned.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tshering Wangdi Lepcha'.

(Tshering Wangdi Lepcha)
MINISTER

Preface

Fairs and festivals are closely connected to human society from ancient times. Festivals have evolved as an integral part of the societal fabric of communities reflecting their cultural, social, historical, spiritual and domestic life. While some festivals are ingrained in the religious and spiritual milieu, many others have evolved as a mark of changing seasons, events which have historical or cultural significance, etc.

As a matter of fact, festivals may differ on type, character, rituals and festivities associated with it; but what is invariably found in them are the spirit and enthusiasm as well as the continuity and direction it provides. Festivals are marked by amplified social interactions, where people leave behind their regular activities and engage in festivities and celebrations. Often, festivals are regarded as the mark of community identity and promotes the continuity of tradition and heritage. Based on the form and orientation, festivals can be broadly categorised into two groups- 'culture oriented' and 'nature oriented'.

Being a multicultural society with each community and society known for its typical cultural attributes, India is considered as a land of festivals. Festivals or Utsava's are an essential part of Indian society and there would hardly be any month that goes-by in India without the occurrence of festivals. By virtue of their distinctive fervour, festivities and the mood, some of the festivals have become tourists attractions. North-Eastern

part of India with the presence of diverse ethnic cultural communities and their unique festivals is a favourite tourist region for many tourists.

Located in the Eastern Himalayas, Sikkim is an established tourist destination popular among tourists from both India and abroad. It is the exquisite natural beauty and the distinctive cultural features that make Sikkim a valued tourist destination in India. Each community that inhabits Sikkim has got its own culture, tradition and festivals.

This handbook attempts to capture important nature-based festivals of Sikkim prevalent among various communities. Following attributes / characteristics have been considered while making the selection of nature based festivals of Sikkim;

- ❖ Origin of the festival is related to a nature based phenomena
- ❖ Festivals which revere nature and its varying elements
- ❖ Mythology behind the festival is grounded in nature based occurrence / occurrences
- ❖ Main rituals of the festival are focused on nature and its various elements, etc.

For each of the festival listed in the handbook, careful effort has been put to highlight its unique and important features like origin, occurrence, festivities and rituals, community or community's linkage, festival location (s), probable dates, etc.

Foreword

Sikkim is a state endowed with rich and unique biodiversity and distinct cultural values. Hence, it is of utmost importance to conserve and protect these valuable resources for the benefit of both the present and future generations. The Japan International Co-operation Agency (JICA) assisted Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation & Forest Management Project (SBFP) was being conceptualised and implemented in the State to achieve this aim. The Forest, Environment & Wildlife Management Department (FEWMD) is the implementing agency for this project. SBFP focuses on 3 core areas of intervention namely; ***Biodiversity Conservation, Ecotourism and Joint Forest Management.***

Under the ecotourism component of SBFP, the project aims to improve the ecotourism profile of Sikkim through structured interventions. As the initial step in this direction, Government of Sikkim notified the SBFP Sikkim Ecotourism Policy, 2012 drafted by the SBFP team. Currently, the project is working in 11 notified ecotourism zones of the State in order to develop new and innovative ecotourism based products and services. While these products are evolved from the typical biodiversity and

cultural features available for the local area, they are conceived to support the conservation efforts while creating more and more livelihood opportunities for the local people. Further these products and services are being marketed in the national and international ecotourism markets and thereby ensuring to position Sikkim as one of the most desired ecotourism destinations in the country.

This Handbook on Nature based Festivals of Sikkim is an attempt to facilitate ecotourism by showcasing at a glance the diversity of Sikkimese culture as represented by an array of festivals. Festivals and fairs are popular tourism products which attract tourists from distant places. There are many nature-based festivals celebrated in the state. Capturing some of the important nature based festivals, this handbook is envisioned as an information source about the various festivals, their background, important festivities and rituals, festival venues, dates, etc.

I hope that this handbook on nature based festivals of Sikkim will benefit tourists, tourism industry partners and all others concerned, as they explore this unique land and its people.



Dr Thomas Chandy, IFS

PCCF-cum- Principal Secretary, FEWMD & Project Director,
Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project,
Govt. of Sikkim.



Acknowledgements

I would like to convey my sincere thanks to Shri. T. W. Lepcha, Honourable Minister of Forests, Environment and Wildlife Management Department (FEWMD) and Dept. of Science & Technology and Climate Change, Govt. of Sikkim for his continuous encouragement and inspiration in bringing out this handbook.

My heartfelt thanks goes to Dr. Thomas Chandy, PCCF-cum-Principal Secretary, & Project Director (SBFP), Govt. of Sikkim for his guidance, inputs and views to improve the handbook.

I am grateful to the officials of various departments and organisations, particularly Cultural Affairs & Heritage Department, Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Sikkim State Library, Department of Information & Public Relations etc. for their support and making available scholarly inputs and variety of resources such as books, journal articles, documents etc.

Thanks are due to Mr. Jagdish Sharma, Officer on Special Duty, Department of Cultural Affairs & Heritage, Mr. Sonam Gyatso, Additional Director, Ecclesiastical Department, Mr. Tenzing Saphel, Librarian, Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, for their support in the form

of sharing views, knowledge and academic materials relevant to the subject matter.

This handbook is the product of dedication and collective effort put up by the Ecotourism Section of Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation & Forest Management Project (SBFP) supported by Japan International cooperation agency (JICA); special mention goes to Dr. S. Anbalagan, IFS, Mr Udai Gurung, IFS, Ms. Arati Basnet, SFS, Ms. Sonam Laden and Ms. Sandhya Pant; Mr. Muhammed Nahar J, National Ecotourism Marketing Specialist, Mr. Masanori Shintani, International Ecotourism Marketing Specialist, and others from Louis Berger Group and PADECO Co.Ltd. and all other staff of SBFP.

I may have forgotten to mention names of individuals and organizations who have provided support in bringing out this valuable publication. They all deserve due acknowledgement.

N. Jaswant

N Jaswant, IFS DFO (Ecotourism)

Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project, FEWMD Govt. of Sikkim.

Introduction

Festivals are integral to the cultural and social life of Sikkim. Festivals or Utsavas in Sikkim range from local events to state wide festivals which are declared as state holidays. Festivals are spread throughout the year; practically none of the months passes by in Sikkim without a festival. However a good number of festivals occur particularly during the spring and fall season as both these seasons roughly corresponds to the end of the agricultural season. It is the availability of ample 'leisure time' and 'resources' that enable the communities to celebrate their festivals during this period with much fanfare.

Sikkim is inhabited by multi cultural communities and each of them has cultures, traditions and rituals which are specific and typical of them. In general, the Sikkimese society is inhabited by three communities namely; **Lepchas**, **Bhutias** and **Nepalese**. Buddhism and Hinduism are the major religions followed by the people here. Co-existence of these diverse communities has offered Sikkim wide variety of festivals as they are being celebrated with lots of fervour in different parts of the state. Notably many festivals in Sikkim are rooted to respective religions and are largely based on religious scriptures, events or sermons. Some of these festivals occur as a sign of changing seasons while others mark the beginning or culmination of seasonal agricultural activities like sowing or harvest. Similarly there are festivals which pronounce the arrival of New Year and some festivals are being celebrated on certain ethnic traditions, historic moments, etc.

Monasteries and the monk community act as the focal point for many of the Buddhist festivals. These festivals are known for their magnificence and spectacle and it captivates the tourists in awe. The Buddhist calendar is filled with many festivals, among which the most popular are, Panglhapsol, Namsoong,

Loosong, Bum chu. For the majority Nepalese community, their festivals are mainly connected to the Hindu religion. Invariably all important Hindu festivals like Dasai, Tihar, Maghey Sankranti, etc. are being celebrated in Sikkim with slight variations in festivities and associated rituals compared to the celebrations elsewhere. Besides this there are festivals which are celebrated by ethnic tribal communities and the festivals of the Lepcha community deserves special mention here.

It is also observed that the list of festivals in Sikkim are growing every year mostly due to the addition of festivals and special events which are being promoted for attracting tourists to the state. Some of these festivals namely; Winter Carnival, International Flower show, Rhododendron festivals, Trekking festival, Paragliding festival, etc are promoted by Government agencies namely Tourism department, Forest department, Culture department, etc. as special occasions to attract more and more tourists to the state and to make the state an all-year-round destination.

Nevertheless, the objective of this handbook is to showcase prominent festivals prevalent among different communities of Sikkim which are nature based. Accordingly the handbook covers nature based festivals of Lepcha community, Bhutia community and the Nepalese community.



Lepcha & Bhutia Festivals



Tendong Lho Rum Faat

Background & Festivities:

Tendong Lho Rum faat is an indigenous festival prevalent among the Lepcha community of Sikkim. It is an annual festival celebrated in the month of July-August..

Considered as the aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim, the Lepchas worships mountains, rivers, lakes and caves as sacred manifestations during the festival period. Mount Tendong, which is situated at the heart of Sikkim is considered by Lepchas as their Mayal Lyang (heaven), that is why the festival of Tendong Lho Rum faat is celebrated in an epic scale remembering and paying homage to this sacred Mountain. One of the oldest and significant festival, Tendong Lho Rum faat is celebrated by Lepchas with the same fervour and enthusiasm even today.

The legend behind the festival points to a deluge which nearly destroyed Sikkim, which was later blocked by Rum (God) and Sikkim was saved from drowning. It is believed that God has created high hills and mountains that diverted the flow of rivers from effecting any destruction. As a mark of respect, Lepchas revere and worship these mountains.

Most important festivity associated with this festival is the ritual dance performed by the priests- the Boogthings and the Muns. Paying homage to Mount Tendong locally known as Tendong is a significant event participated by all Lepchas. Offering chee (millet beer) is one of the important ritualistic traditions of the festival.

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- Dzongu, North Sikkim, Gangtok, etc.
- August 8th every year



Namsoong or Nambun

Background & Festivities:

Namsoong or Nambun is a festival prevalent among the Lepcha community in Sikkim. They celebrate Namsoong or Namboon to welcome the New Year as per the 'Dungit Karchu' or Lepcha calendar. It generally falls every year in December / January. This festival corresponds to the harvest and the advent of the New Year for the Lepcha people in Sikkim.

Namsoong is based on the origin, struggle and existence of the Lepcha community. This festival demonstrates the establishment of 'peace' overpowering 'evil' in the land of the Kanchendzonga. Legend behind this festival portrays Lepcha people's victory over Lashong Mung Puno, the demon king after a prolonged war which lasted for 12 years. Each year the demon king assumed forms of different animals, like mouse, ox, tiger, rabbit, python, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, bird, dog and pig and later these animals represented various months of Lepcha year. People gather to enjoy the harvest and pray for a prosperous New Year.

Main festivities happen at Namprikdang in Dzongu, North Sikkim. The seven days long celebration is accompanied by many games, such as, Long Tyok (game of throwing flattened stone), thahut (jumping competition) and Chongay (game of archery) along with songs and dances. The celebration culminates with a grand feast.

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- Main celebrations are held at Tarkot Tam Aitma, a place at Namprikodam, Dzongu, North Sikkim
- 1st day of eleventh Buddhist month, usually in December.



Muk Zikding Rum Faat

Background & Festivities:

The Lepcha community who are the lovers of nature and all things living or non-living. The festival Muk Zikding Rum Faat is a festival which is connected with nature and its greenery. Zikding Rum Faat reinforces the Lepcha belief that a balanced ecology and environment is integral for the survival of human race. The word 'Muk' means greenery whereas 'Zikding' connotes sprouting of vegetation. During the festival the Lepchas offer prayers to 'Rum', the Almighty God.

This festival marks the onset of the season characterized by sprouting of vegetation, trees and shrubs and also the mating season of animals and birds. One of the rituals attached to this festival is the prayers offered by Boongthing- the local healer to Rum for timely rain, sunshine, clean air and water to save the world from natural calamities like flood, landslide and famine.

As part of the festivities the altar is decorated with medicinal plants, cereals, fruits, flowers, etc. and a stone pillar called Longchaok is erected near the altar.

The festival is celebrated in Dzongu, North Sikkim. The seven days long celebration is accompanied by many games, such as, Dhuko Thuck (game of throwing flattened stone), thahut (jumping competition) and Chongay (game of archery) along with songs and dances. The celebration culminates with a grand feast.

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- Dzongu, North Sikkim
- February – March every year



Pang Lhab-Sol

Background & Festivities:

Pang Lha-sol also known as “Nay -tso” is the local festival of Sikkim celebrated by the Bhutia community and observed every year on the 15th day of the 7th month of the lunar calendar. As the native festival to Sikkim, Pang Lhab-sol marks the consecration of Mount Kangchendzonga into Buddhist religion. “Pang Lha” means gods of the higher ridges and “sol” means to worship. And in real sense, ‘Pang Lhab-sol’ signifies the people’s sense of devotion and honour to the guardian spirits of the land for defending dharma, peace and prosperity of the country.

This festival was popularised by the third Chogyal (ruler) of Sikkim, Chakdor Namgyal, who had added the ‘Pangthey Chaam’ to the festivities. Notably, this festival commemorates the brotherhood sworn between the Lepchas and the Bhutias – two important inhabitants of Sikkim. Mask dances, religious dances and songs are the main attraction of this festival.

Main ritual of this festival is worshipping the snow clad Mt. Kanchan-dzonga (Khang-chen-dzonga) and reveres it for its unifying powers. Brewed millet, liquors, fruits, etc. are being used as the main offerings. As part of the ritualistic tradition, cham dances are held in various locations, where the guardian deity is portrayed by masked Lama dancers as a fiery red-faced deity with a crown of five skulls, riding a snow lion. However the mood would go for a dramatic turn as ‘Atchars’ – jesters who play antics make their entry during the Chaam performances

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- Celebrations are mainly held at Pemayangtse, Rabongla and Thangu Gonpa (Lachen) with warrior dance and normal prayers are offered in all the major monasteries
- It falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month according to Tibetan Calendar i.e. around August-September annually.



Losoong

Background & Festivities:

Also known as 'Sonam Losoong', this is the main festival of Bhutia community in Sikkim. The Bhutia New Year or Losoong occurs between 25th to 29th day of the tenth month of the Tibetan year. This period also marks the winter harvest and thereby provides ample leisure time and resources for people to celebrate Losoong with immense fervour and gaiety. It is also the time when farmers pay their obeisance to the Gods with the offerings of the first parts of crops and fruits, seeking protection and prosperity for the good harvests.

Main attraction of Losoong are the Chaam dances that are performed in the monasteries, notable being at the Palace (Tsulakhang), Phodong and Rumtek. Men folk adorn attires of mystical forms and recreate Gods, while the dance performance symbolise the exorcizing of the evil and welcome good spirits of the New Year. Another special event corresponding the festival is the Black Hat/Chena Chaam dances held at Enchey, Ralong, Phodong and Rumtek monasteries. These dancing ceremonies are held 2 days prior to Losoong and they celebrate the victory of good over evil. Archery competitions are organised during the festival period. The entire households of the villages gather at their respective monasteries and attend to this ceremony with their share of offerings

Generally people are seemed to be engrossed in the festivities that are filled with special feasts, wearing new clothes and paying visits to friends and relatives.

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- Celebrations are mainly held in monastery Phodong, Phensang, Ralang, Gyalshing, Pelling, Kewzing, Sang, etc.
- 1st day of eleventh Buddhist month falls in December



Bum Chu

Background & Festivities:

Bum chu is a festival celebrated by the Buddhist community in Sikkim and normally occurs between January – March. ‘Bum’ in fact means “pot or vase” and ‘Chu’ means “water”. Bum Chu is celebrated every year at Tashiding with lots of festivities. As part of the functions, Lamas opens the pot containing holy water. The level of water in the pot foretells the future of the coming year: brimful foretells bloodshed and disturbances; if the pot is almost dry famine is predicted; and if the pot is half-full then it promises a year of peace and prosperity. A part of the holy water is distributed among the pilgrims and then the pot is sealed until the next year.

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- 14th and 15th day of first Buddhist month falls in March
- Celebrations are mainly held in Tashiding monastery



Losar

Background & Festivities:

Losar is the Tibetan New Year celebrated mainly by Buddhist communities in Sikkim chiefly Sherpas, Tamangs, Gurungs and Bhutias. Dates of this festival are decided on the Tibetan Lunar calendar and usually it corresponds to January or February of English calendar. In Tibetan, “Lo” means “Year” and “Sar” means “New”. The celebration continues for 2 weeks, whereas the main celebrations take place for the first 3 days.

On the first day of Losar, a beverage called changko is made from chhaang (a Tibetan beer) and the second day of Losar is known as King’s Losar (gyalpo losar). People wish each other by uttering the word Tashi delek” (blessings and good luck). Besides clothes, toys, candies, breads, fruits and fresh Chang beer are exchanged as gifts. People eat special foods such as guthuk noodles made from cereals and dried cheese, and various types of vegetable soups and often drink Changko- rice beer.

Most sought after event as part of this festival is the Cham or Losar Cham, the ceremonial masked dance which is essentially poetic renditions of the colourful man. The theatrical dances hold great spiritual significance. Monasteries in different parts of Sikkim organises Losar celebrations with Chaam dances, rituals, etc. Gutur Chaams depicting the ritualized destruction of evil by good are performed at Pemayangtse and Rumtek monasteries. Monks wear colourful masks symbolizing different figures and perform the dances. Losar is a ritual with the main purpose to ward off evil by invoking the powerful deities.

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- Monasteries mainly Pemayangtse, Rumtek, etc.
- January - February



Drukpa -Tshechi

Background & Festivities:

Drukpa – Tshechi is a popular celebration among Buddhist communities in Sikkim. The festival date is determined on the movement of the moon and as per the Tibetan calendar, it falls on the fourth day (Tse-zhi) of the sixth Tibetan month (Drukpa.) This festival is celebrated as a mark of Buddha's first preaching of the Four Noble Truth to his disciples.

As part of the celebrations, Buddhists light butter lamps at the Gumpas and their own houses.

Celebration Venues & Dates:

- Celebrations are held during August
- Celebrations and prayers are held in Chortens at Deoralim Chuklankhang, Manilakchang, Enchey Gumpa, etc.





Nepalese Festivals

Dasai or Vara Dashai

Background & Festivities:

Dasai, otherwise known as Durga Puja is a festival prevalent among the Hindu community of Nepal and India. There are two types of Dasai namely, Bara Dasai and Chaitay dasai. Bara Dasai is also known as Bijaya Dasami and Dussehra while Chaitay dasai is otherwise known as Ram Nawami.

Festivities of Dasai permeate from the event of the slaying of the demon Mahisasura by Goddess Durga- symbolic of the destruction of evil by the forces of good. This festival is being celebrated in the autumn season marking the end of monsoon and dotted with warm and pleasant days. Generally it occurs during the month of October and the preparations for the festival begin well in advance and people resort to clean their houses and surroundings.

‘Tika ceremony’- is the most important ritual in Dasai, where Tika made of mixture of curd, rice and vermillion is put on by the elders of the family on the foreheads of the younger members as a mark of holy blessing. Barley seeds are sown in the soil on the first day of this festival and their growth foretells good harvest. Festivities continue through “Phulpati” (day of flowers) followed by Maha Astami, Kala Ratri and Navami. As a culmination of revelry, Vijay Dashmi falls on the 10th day of the festival symbolizing of victory of Lord Rama over Ravana. This day is celebrated with people smear their foreheads with colored rice and the barley sprouts, which was sown on the first day of Dasain, are picked and placed over the ears.

Cultural programs and shows are organised throughout the state during Dasai

Celebration Venues & Dates

- Throughout Sikkim
- Dasain is celebrated during the months of September-October (Ashwin in the Nepali calendar).



Tihar

Background & Festivities:

Corresponding to the Diwali festival in other parts of India, Tihar is celebrated a fortnight after Dasai and symbolizes the return of the epic hero 'Rama' from his fourteen year exile. It falls in the month of kartik by the Nepali calendar. It is celebrated for five days.

According to legend he reached his kingdom during the new moon and hence people lighted lamps to dispel the darkness. The Nepalese celebrate this festival for five days and during this time groups of boys known as 'Deusi' and group of girls known as Bhaileni visit neighbouring houses singing deusi for small tips.

First day of the Tihar is called 'Kag Tihar' which literally means 'the festival of the crow (kag)'. This day delicacies are prepared and crows are fed. The ensuing day is celebrated as 'Kukur tihar'. On this day, Kukur (dogs) receive special attention as they will be adorned with flower garlands and given with special food cooked with meat and rice. Gai Tihar is the third day and on this day, Gai (Cows) and worshipped and given special food. In the evening each household worships the Goddess Lakshmi by lighting lamps. This will be followed by the visit of girls who goes to house after house and sing special song known as the 'Bhaileni'. Next day is the celebration of Goru (ox) tihar. And the penultimate day is known as Bhai-Tika. On this day, a sister (Cheli) puts a multicoloured tika, usually of three or four colours on the forehead of the brother (Maiti).

Another interesting feature of the festival is the visit of group of boys to various houses in the village singing traditional songs (deusi) normally accompanied with folk instruments and percussion like the Madal.

Celebration Venues & Dates

- Throughout Sikkim
- Falls during October / November every year



Maghey Sankranti

Background & Festivities:

Celebrated in the month of January every year, Maghey Sankranti or Makar Sankranti is an important festival among the Nepalese Hindus of Sikkim. Interestingly Nepalese & Buddhists also observe this festival great fanfare. Signifying the change of a season, Maghey Sankranti occurs when the sun shifts towards the Tropic of Cancer. Actually the month of 'Magh' begins when the Sun changes its position from Dhanurasi to Makarasi and this also marks the turn of the last season of the year, 'winter'. Maghey Sankranti is observed on the first day on which the sun's position is over Maka Rashi.

One of the important rituals of this festival is taking a dip in the river and is generally offered at the confluence of rivers. In Sikkim the bathing festival happens every year at the confluence of Bara Rangit and Chota Tista near Jorethang, South Sikkim. People take bath in the river, clean their body and worship the nature divinities. Collection of different edible roots and tubers and serving cooked food items made of roots and tubers are considered to be a delicacy during this festival. Other recipes which are offered specially in this occasion are Khir, Khicheri, Sel roti, Curd, Chewra and Curry of pumpkin.

Special celebrations called 'Tribeni Melas' are organised every year. Jorethang Mela in south Sikkim attracts large number of people both pilgrims and revellers. Various exhibitions, cultural programmes, entertainment and shopping facilities are offered during the Mela period.

Celebration Venues & Dates

- Jorthang, South Sikkim
- Normally in January (Magh in the Nepali calendar).



Yuma Sham Manghim

Background & Festivities:

Yuma Sham Manghim is a festival prevalent among the Limboo community. Limboos are nature worshippers. Yuma is the Goddess of Limboo, who is considered as the Goddess of protection and progress. Goddess Yuma is equated with Goddess Saraswati in the field of learning and with Goddess Lakshmi in matters of wealth and with Lord Bishnu in matters of protection. Yuma is believed to be all powerful and all pervading mother of the universe.

Worshipping of Goddess Yuma is the main ritual and the ceremony is conducted by priests known as Phedangba Yewa or Yema. What followed is a simple ritual known as Yumasham using pure water, lamps and leaves. Over the years Yuma sham has become a community festival and places like Mangshila in North Sikkim, Aahoo Yangthang in East Sikkim and Heeyangthang (Martam) in West Sikkim are prominent places in Sikkim where the rituals take place. The rituals are offered to a square platform in the shape of a pyramid with eight steps each signifying different aspects of nature – earth, water, fire, air, sky, mind, brain and pride.



Celebration Venues & Dates

- Mangshila in North Sikkim and Auhhoo Yamthang in East Sikkim Heeyangthang (Martam) in West Sikkim
- Normally in December month



Sakewa

Background & Festivities:

Sakewa is a nature festival celebrated in Sikkim particularly among the Kirat Rai community. This festival is also known as Bhumi Puja or chandi Puja as earth worshipping is the main philosophy behind this. Most of the celebrations occur during full moon of Baisakh matches with May-June of English calendar.

Festivities of Sakewa will be preceded by customary rituals to please the deities. Such rituals are conducted by Mangpa (village priest) at a sacred place. Mangpa prays to Mother Nature to protect the villages from all evils and provide good rains and harvest.

The most celebrated event of this festival is a dance called Sakewa Sili (Sili means Dance). Villagers form big circles and follow the hand and foot movements of the leader Sili Mangpa (Male) and Sili Mangma (Female). It is important for the dancers to follow the movements according to the leader. The dance symbolizes the spirit of their togetherness, fraternity and above all the feeling of joy and closeness to nature. The dance is usually performed for a good harvest in the coming season.

Interestingly there are many forms of Silis and each depicts different facets of a natural phenomena. The most popular among silis are the 'Chasum Sili' and this dance enacts different processes involved in an agricultural cycle like planting, harvesting, husking, cooking and eating. Some Silis are created based on animals, birds, etc. For example 'Narowa Sili' illustrates the life cycle of the Crane (Karang-Kurung). Different stages of a Crane's life – raising the chick, learning to fly, confusing the hawks when they are attacked and huddled flight, etc. are demonstrated beautifully through this dance form. Actually, the Sakewa puja and dance reverberates the cordial and everlasting relationship between man and nature.



Celebration Venues & Dates

- Linzey, East Sikkim & Namchi, South Sikkim
- Falls in May -June



Sikkim Biodiversity Conservation and Forest Management Project (SBFP)
Forest, Environment and Wildlife Management Department
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