



# FISHING FESTIVALS OF INDIA



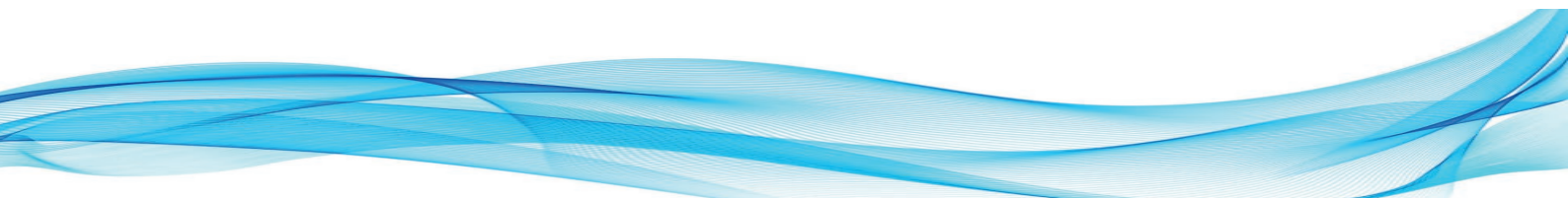
**NATIONAL FISHERIES DEVELOPMENT BOARD**

**Department of Fisheries, Ministry of Fisheries, Animal Husbandry &  
Dairying, Government of India**





Image source : Herald Goa





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## 1. INTRODUCTION

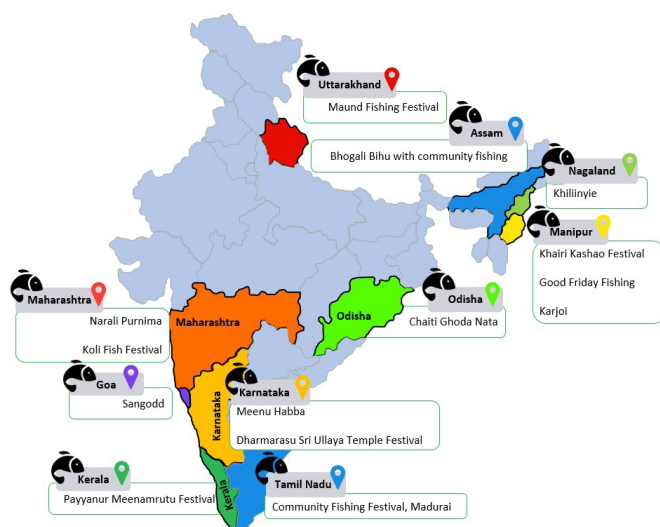
Living in India, a land of diverse cultures, it's pretty much clear that you're living in a land of festivals celebrated in some parts of the country nearly every day. Here people just don't celebrate deities, also celebrate the wind, rain, fire, trees and fish as well. Many festivals in fact are celebrated on changing of seasons or the arrivals of seasons, especially in a country where agriculture and its allied activities play a key role in the ordinary lives.

From music festivals to film festivals, flower fests to even fish festivals, you would be amazed at the variety on offer. Being a country where agrarian activities and their allies dominate, India also witnesses a number of unique and lesser-known fish festivals. The fishermen community across India celebrates the fishing festivals in various forms and carry forward their age-old traditions and celebrations associated with fishing. As part of celebrations, they also incorporate elements of dance forms, decorating their boats, and celebrating their traditional festivals with great grandeur.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF FISHING FESTIVALS IN INDIA

Fishing community holds an important position in the Indian economy and this community celebrates its occupation in a grand way across the country known by different names. From North to South and East to West, fishing festivals are celebrated not only by the fishing community but also fishing enthusiasts. This document presents the following fishing festivals that are celebrated by the different states across the country. Festival- wise details are provided in the succeeding chapters:

- 1) Khairi Kashao Festival, Manipur
- 2) Good Friday Fishing, Manipur
- 3) Karjoi, Manipur
- 4) Payyanur Meenamrutu Festival, Kerala
- 5) Meenu Habba, Karnataka
- 6) Dharmarasu Sri Ullaya Temple Festival, Karnataka
- 7) Narali Purnima, Maharashtra
- 8) Sangodd, Goa
- 9) Chaiti Ghoda Nata, Odisha
- 10) Bhogali Bihu with community fishing, Assam
- 11) Koli Fish Festival, Maharashtra
- 12) Khiliinyie, Nagaland
- 13) Maund Fishing Festival, Uttarakhand
- 14) Community Fishing Festival, Madurai



## 2.1. KHAIRI KASHAO FESTIVAL, MANIPUR

Manipur hosts a number of fishing festivals and one such traditional celebration takes place during the Khairi Kashao festival of the state. Also, known as Yaithab, the festival is a customary celebration by the Tangkhul people. Sometime, after the end of the sowing season, Khairi Kashao was devised as a means to invoke the rain gods but is also parallelly a fishing extravaganza. Promoting the age-old fishing methodology of the Tangkhuls, Khairi Kashao is celebrated every year during the dry month of April or May as a traditional mass fishing festival.



*Picture 1: Khairi Kashao festival celebrations in Manipur (Source: e-Pao)*

## 2.2. GOOD FRIDAY FISHING, MANIPUR

The Christian communities in the past, in most parts of the hilly districts especially the remote villages, go for group hunting in the forest or fishing during the Holy week to organise a joint feast on Good Friday. This practice is continuing till today in some villages in the hilly districts. The villagers organize the festival annually along Thoubal River during Holy week. Most of the villagers including men and women, young and old, boys and girls in the village spend the whole night of April 16 in the river by engaging in beating Guson or Tolgu (an underground stem of a particular plant). In the next morning, all the villagers catch the fishes which get paralysed and float near the surface as a result of the effect of 'Guson/Tolgu' solution. Some women cook food near the river bank while others get engaged in catching fishes. River fishing in preparation for Easter celebration has since long been a common practice among the tribal Christians.

Once in a year, community fishing takes place not only to catch fish but to enjoy and strengthen the bond of oneness in Christ and revive an age-old tradition. As Easter Community feast is considered incomplete without river fish, the fish caught are cooked and relished by the respective church during the feast on Easter Sunday.





*Picture 2: Good Friday Fishing celebrated in Manipur (Source: Archive Northeast)*

### **2.3. KARJOI, MANIPUR**

A fishing festival, Karjoi that takes place in Manipur sometime in March or April, is an annual celebration by the Maram tribe of the state. The Maram tribe of Manipur is known for its age-old fishing techniques and it believes that failure to hold the festival brings misfortune to its community. With age-old fishing techniques, the locals embark to catch fishes after which they start drinking and bring out the types of fishes, declaring that they have caught all fish. While the fish is taken home and is offered to people who are unable to make it by themselves, a portion is also dried and stored for use for the next fishing festival. The Maram people are very particular about the Karjoi and they hold it religiously since they believe that they would fall prey to misfortune otherwise.

### **2.4. PAYYANUR MEENAMRUTU FESTIVAL, KERALA**

The Payyanur Meenamrutu festival is a fishing festival of southern India. Held at the Ashtamachal Bhagavathi Temple in the Payyanur region of Kerala every year in the month of April, fishing is the main attraction during Meenamrutu as it is believed that the fishes so caught need to be offered to the Goddess, 'thaiparadevatha', an incarnation of Durga. The Kavvayi Puzha river becomes the hotspot of fishing for the day where Nongal, Maalan, and Irumeen varieties are fished and offered to the deity.



*Picture 3 – Fishing hotspot for Payyanur Meenamrutu celebrations in Kerala (Source: Trip advisor)*



## 2.5. MEENU HABBA, KARNATAKA

Meenu Habba, a unique fishing festival, is celebrated across many villages in the state of Karnataka. It is traditionally held after the Ugadi festival and before monsoon sets in. People go all equipped with traditional equipments to gather as large a fishy bounty as possible as this festival is the only occasion during the year when fishing is permitted.

In this festival, anybody can catch any number of fish, as there is no limit for the catch. Thousands of villagers from surrounding places also participate in this festival. The portion of fishing is covered by nets to ensure that fish grown do not escape from the waterbody. Villagers fix a particular day for Meenu Habba in May. Fish so caught are auctioned, and the money so collected used primarily for temple-related expenses and for other development works.



*Picture 4: Meenu Habba celebrated by villagers of Karnataka  
(Source - Deccan Herald)*



*Picture 5: Villagers gearing up for the celebrations to catch fish on the occasion of Meenu Habba  
(Source - Deccan Herald)*



## 2.6. DHARMARASU SRI ULLAYA TEMPLE FESTIVAL, KARNATAKA

This festival is not restricted to one particular community. Everyone is allowed to catch fish at the festival and it is an age-old custom. The fishing festival usually begins in the morning after prasadam is offered to the river. With the sound of fire-crackers, people rush to the river. This activity takes place on a particular day (Vrishabha Sankramana — the Solar ingress into the Zodiacal sign of Taurus) during the annual fair of the local Dharmarasu Sri Ullaya Temple which is also called as Khandevuda Ayano. This particular fishing session becomes more an auspicious occasion because fishing activities are resumed only after a long ban from Mesha Sankramana to Vrishabha Sankramana. Further, Vrishabha Sankramana is also the day when the fair starts and fishing is allowed. However, the fish caught on this occasion is prepared as a dish and served to the ‘daiva’ (deity), along with the performance of ‘daivaradhane’ rituals. The prepared fish dish is also offered by the locals to the ancestors and therefore fishing on that particular day holds religious as well as cultural significance for the people of this locality.



*Picture 6: Villagers actively participating in the fishing festival to catch fish.  
(Source –New Indian Express)*



*Picture 7: Villagers engaged in fishing activities on the occasion of the festival.  
(Source –The Hindu)*



## 2.7. NARALI PURNIMA, MAHARASHTRA

Narali Poornima or Coconut Festival is celebrated on the full moon day or Poornima of the month of Shravan by the Hindu fishing community of Maharashtra with a lot of fervour. The festival is actually celebrated to mark the end of the monsoon season, as the fishermen believe that they can now begin fishing safely. Apart from offering coconut to Varuna, the sea-God, people also offer prayers to the sea so that the God would keep them safe while they are in the sea fishing. It is worthy to mention here that no fishing is done during this period and no fish is consumed as well. It's only after Narali Poornima, after a coconut is offered to the God at high tide, the people would start fishing and consume fish. The traditional food of this festival is a sweet curry made from coconut.



*Picture 8: Children from Koli fishermen community dressed up in their traditional attire on the occasion of Narali Purnima. (Source –Firstpost)*



*Picture 9: A Koli fishermen couple offering coconut to sea-god for beginning fishing season safely. (Source –Firstpost)*





Picture 10: Koli fisherwomen dressed up in their traditional wear to worship sea god. (Source –Firstpost)



Picture 11: As a part of the celebration offering coconut to sea-God. (Source –Firstpost)

## 2.8. KOLI FISH FESTIVAL, MAHARASHTRA

Next to the real estate explosion of Yari Road in Versova, Mumbai, is the sinuous and cacophonous Versova village which is home to around 15,000 Kolis, Mumbai's fisherfolk community. Kolis is believed to be the oldest inhabitants of the land and this community has almost disappeared now in Mumbai.

Every January, a large ground in Versova fishing village in Andheri West is cordoned off for feasting. In 2006, the Koli association started the Versova Koli Seafood Festival, to earn from their fresh catch and showcase their dance, music and traditional culinary dishes. A string of stalls is erected and a massive stage is put up, only for three days, Koli mummies and grand-mummies dish out over 20 varieties of fish from dusk to midnight. It's often crowded and as loud as a fish market, but the community festival is a rare chance to sample the kind of traditional cuisine that never makes it to restaurant menus. And since the Kolis are traditionally fisherfolk, the catch is always fresh.



The Koli community dressed up in traditional clothes sets out to give guests a home-like experience telling everyone to enjoy the food and the hospitality and to come again next year. Apart from food, the other main attraction is the song and dance performance by the Koli community. Games and fun fair keep the kids busy as the adults shop for spices available at some of the stalls.



*Picture 12: Koli fisherwomen dressed up in their traditional attire to offer guests home-like experience  
(Source – Nat Geo Traveller)*



*Picture 13: Koli fisherwomen offering traditional cuisine (Source – Nat Geo Traveller)*



## 2.9. SANGODD, GOA

On 29<sup>th</sup> June every year, the Catholic Church celebrates the feast of St. Peter and St. Paul who are believed to be the pillars of Christianity. In Goa, this feast is celebrated by the fishing community of Goa as a tribute to St. Peter who was a fisherman by profession and marks the start of the ‘rampon’ fishing activity. The festivities are marked by making a ‘Sangodd’, which is made by joining 3-5 canoes which symbolise the contribution of St. Peter and St. Paul towards the building of the Catholic Church. On this day, the fishermen offer prayers to the Almighty by reciting prayers and litany, and they also remember their colleagues who have departed.

In Goa, different villages with a thriving fishing community have their celebrations for this feast, some even dating back centuries. The tradition of celebrating ‘Sangodd’ dates back to over 150 years and was followed by their forefathers. With youngsters now taking the lead, a fully decorated chapel with elaborate stages is erected on fishing boats that are tied together. Usually, every patron feast in Goa is celebrated with a tiatr in the evening at the church courtyard but for this particular feast, the stage is set on water. For ‘Sangodd’, canoes are tied together and a wooden stage is set up on the canoes for entertaining the audience. ‘Sangodd’ is the only Catholic festival in Goa that witnesses this tradition. ‘Sangodd’ isn’t just important for the fishing community but for every Goan who relies on the fresh catch of the day to please his fish loving appetite.



*Picture 14: Decorated chapel is erected on the fishing boat for celebrating Sangodd  
(Source –GoGoaNow)*



Picture 15: Decorated chapel is erected on the fishing boat for celebrating Sangodd (Source –GoGoaNow)



Picture 16: Youngsters taking ahead the tradition of the celebrations with performance on stage built on the boat (Source –GoGoaNow)

## 2.10. CHAITI GHODA NATA, ODISHA

The fishermen community of Odisha, performs Chaiti Ghoda Nata in a festival that lasts for 9 days beginning from the full moon day of the lunar month of Chaitra (April). The fishermen community in Odisha is known as "Keuta". The dance and the festival are closely associated and inspired by an Oriya puranic literature named Kaivarta Purana which tells the story behind the fishermen's killing fish.

The puranic story in brief: The Supreme God slept on the leaf of a banyan tree that floated on the ocean of milk. To keep the leaf-bed steady, someone was required to hold the rudder firmly. Therefore, he took some dirt from his ear and shaped a man. He breathed life into the man and asked him to hold the rudder firmly. While he was dozing, a gigantic fish came and swallowed him. When he did not find the man, the all-knowing God could realize the reason behind the disappearance of the man. He was angry. He caught the fish and pulled the man out from the stomach of the fish. The man was re-engaged in his duty. From that day onwards, man became one of the most vindictive enemies of fish.

As ordained by God, the first Kaivarta (fisherman) and his descendants started earning their livelihood by catching fish. A part of the banyan leaf was transformed into a horse. The God ordered Vishwakarma, the celestial craftsman, to build a boat. Relieving the man from his duty of holding the rudder of the leaf-bed, he asked the man to cross the ocean in the boat with the horse. The divine horse died on the eighth day of the lunar month of Vaishakha. God consoled the man saying that the horse was the goddess named Basuli and Her worship will bring him salvation. From that day onwards, the Kaivarta (Keuta in colloquial Odia) community holds the festival in which goddess Basuli is worshipped and the dummy-horse dance is performed.





Picture Courtesy: Google  
A man holding the Dummy Horse to play Ghoda Nacha.

*Picture 17: A man holding the Dummy Horse to play Ghoda Nacha (Source –Google)*

## 2.11. BHOGALI BIHU WITH COMMUNITY FISHING, ASSAM

In Assam, Makar Sankranti is celebrated as ‘Magh Bihu’ also called ‘Bhogali Bihu’. It is considered as one of the most important cultural festivals of the state. Magh Bihu marks the end of the harvesting season in the region. The festival is marked by feasts and bonfires. People from the community erect makeshift huts known as Meji and Bhelaghar, where they eat the food prepared for the feast and burn the huts the next morning. As part of the celebrations, people of Assam also traditionally organize community fishing and feasts.



*Picture 18: Villagers arriving with traditional fishing tools to participate in the celebrations.  
(Source - CGTN)*





*Picture 19: As a part of the celebrations people of Assam participating in community fishing  
(Source - CGTN)*

## 2.12. KHILIINYIE, NAGALAND

Khilinyie is celebrated to mark the New Year right after the harvesting of cultivated crops. The festival is celebrated with the invocation to God to bless the people with good productive summer and judicious use of harvested crops. The festival has seven-day rituals that are observed during the feast.

The first day of the festival, which falls on the 21st day of the Lunar month taking seven days is called, Khikro. It is the preparation for the festival. The term, Khikro means dropping of paddy grains into barns; the grains are collected by hand from leftover grains from the paddy fields as a ritual to be performed. On this day, all the people go to the fields to catch the fish for themselves. They are not allowed to take their fish catch to the village. The fish are kept on the outskirts of the village near the village gates. These are then collected on the next day.

The second day is called Khilii Lide meaning the first observation by eating new paddy with fish collected in the morning. The third day is called, Uvakiitiih which means a ritual preparation for oneself to consume the yearly produce judiciously. On the fourth day, an act of reconciliation with wildfire, called Meve is celebrated. On this day no one is allowed to smoke and it is done to protect the property from destruction. On the fifth day, Utheva an act of reconciliation with the most furious wild tiger is celebrated. On the last day, it is called Gwaphiih Chieswiih which is celebrated by the locals and it marks the beginning of the New Year.



### 2.13. MAUND FISHING FESTIVAL, UTTARAKHAND

The traditional fishing festival of the Jaunpuri community of Tehri Garhwal, Maund Matysa Mela is a fishing festival with a difference. The Agral river serves as the site of the community fishing once a year where a certain Timru plant powder is used to first desensitize the fish only after which the people began fishing in the waters. A one-day event that begins with beating of traditional drums and cries of “Macha, Macha” (Fish, fish), the festival was devised as a means to restrict all year fishing in the river which is fed generously by the small streams draining the northern slopes of the Mussoorie ridge.



*Picture 20: Villagers celebrating fishing festival (Source – Infinity)*

### 2.14. COMMUNITY FISHING FESTIVAL, MADURAI, TAMIL NADU

It is a ritual where people primarily from the farming community pray for a good yield during the sowing season and let fish seeds into the tank. Once the harvest is over, the festival is held so that the grown-up fish are caught. Year after year, when the tank receives water from the Periyar feeding channel, people let in thousands of fish seed and during the onset of summer when the water levels goes down, the fishing festival is organized. It's a festival that symbolizes the cycle of life and death. Usage of traditional and nearly-lost fishing techniques and tools is the major attraction.





Picture 21: Centuries old fishing festival near Azhagar Kovil in Madurai (Source – The Hindu)

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