

Indians celebrate Diwali, Australia benefits

Neena Bhandari / Sydney October 16, 2011, 0:14 IST

Every October, with the ripening of mangoes, the Indian community in Australia gears up for festivities that not only provide business opportunities for the diaspora, but also make a substantial contribution to the local economy.

Diwali has been added to Australia's multicultural calendar as one of the largest festivals. Organised by the Hindu Council of Australia (HCA) in Sydney and Celebrate India Inc in Melbourne, the festival provides a platform for corporations and small businesses to showcase their wares. Apart from banks and telecom companies, apparel and cuisine, henna and jewellery, and media and entertainment, it has also found sponsors in the local and state government organisations.

Melbourne's iconic Federation Square provides over A\$1 million annually in direct and "in kind" support for approximately 20 multicultural festivals, including Diwali which attracts 70,000 people.

"We are supported by the Australian community and Victorian & Indian governments as well as the City of Melbourne, which covers about 75 per cent of our expenses. This year, the Metro, Australian Football League, Tourism Victoria and Arts Victoria have come on board for the first time," said Arun Sharma, founder and chairman of Celebrate India.

From October 17 to 26, the city will be decked up with 50 Diwali banners, a Diwali boat on the Yarra river and the Federation Square will host traditional and fusion dances, and Bollywood film screenings sponsored by Mind Blowing Films. At the Tullamarine international airport, traditional drums and dances, a replica temple and decorative banners will greet passengers.

In the year ending June 2011, overnight visitors to Victoria from India increased by 24.5 per cent to 62,500, the highest on record, and they spent A\$299 million, an increase of 15 per cent year-on-year. Driven by service industries such as education and tourism, Victoria's exports to India grew from approximately A\$650 million in 2005 to A\$1.8 billion in 2010. Over the past decade, Indian companies have committed to the creation of more than 4,500 jobs in Victoria through proposed investments of approximately A\$300 million.

"The Diwali fair didn't have any business sponsor and the fair revenue was around A\$65,000 six years ago, but last year, it touched approximately A\$240,000. Most of the money raised goes back into the state economy. For example, the hiring cost of the Parramatta stadium alone is A\$100,000," said Sanjeev Bhakri, HCA secretary.

The main sectors targeting the ethnic Indian market in Australia are banks, loan brokers, money transfer, telecommunications, property development and educational institutions. One of the sponsors of the Diwali fair in Sydney is TimesofMoney Ltd Remit2India. As the company's head of marketing, Achal Shah, said, "It's an opportune time to reach out to the Indian community in Australia. The profile of the Indian in Australia fits in very well with the online medium of transfer that we provide, be it convenience, cost-effectiveness, safety or anytime access."

India receives \$55 billion as remittances from its NRI community across the world. While online remittances constitute an estimated 15 per cent, given its distinct advantages, it's the fastest growing medium for sending money home. Remit2India plans to participate in many more such events in Australia.

As Sheba Nandkeolyar, chief executive officer and founder of Multicall Connexions, a leading agency specialising in communicating with multicultural audiences in Australia, said, "Festivals provide a marketing platform to reach out to Indians back home and emotionally connect with the community residing in Australia."

"Culture goes beyond language and is very deep rooted. No marketing strategy can beat a cultural connection," added Sheba, who is also the vice-president of the Australia India Business Council.

Most of the earlier Indian migrants, who came after the "White Australia" policy ended in 1971, celebrated Diwali with few friends at home, a game of cards and sparklers thrown in, and going to a temple. But now, home dinners have moved to restaurants.

Like other festivities, the Holi Mahotsav at Darling Harbour in Sydney has grown from a one-day event in 2003 to a three-day event, with about 180,000 people participating and 400 artists performing, majority of them pro bono.

The festival includes a large street procession of community floats, starting from Hyde Park through the Sydney Central Business District and culminating at the Harbour.

“The cost of hosting and organising the festival is close to A\$250,000 and benefits generated by the festival to the local economy exceed A\$500,000. Now, the City of Sydney has joined us in the celebrations with their financial support,” the festival’s founder and president of Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan Australia, Gambhir Watts, said.

Another major fair around India’s Independence Day is the Australia India Friendship Fair in Sydney, organised by the United India Association (UIA), which represents 19 regional organisations from India. Over the years, the fair has grown from a few hundred visitors to over 18,000 people in 2011.

“The fair showcases India’s rich heritage. It also provides commercial opportunities for companies and small businesses. We spend over A\$250,000 on hiring the venue, supporting various cultural groups, laser and firework display, sound and music equipment, camel and other joy rides,” said Amarinder Bajwa, UIA president.

The festivities have had a flow-on effect on strengthening cultural, educational, tourism and trade links. “We very much value the contribution Indian Australians, in New South Wales in particular, are making in building closer economic and commercial ties. The drive and determination to succeed, so evident in the Indian culture, is the reason why India is an emerging economic power,” NSW Premier Barry O’Farrell, who is leading a senior business delegation to India in November, told this correspondent.