

# Celebrating the End of Varsavash

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Twinkling lights, murmur of praying devotees, rows of burning candles with their flames gently dancing to the evening breeze and the scent of burning incense made for an ethereal evening, the perfect setting for the newly-constructed Bhiton Pawoi Buddha Vihara waiting calmly to be donated to the Sangha (order of Buddhist monks); However, the beauty of the night escaped three youths struggling to put a crudely-made wire ring with a cross in the middle of the bottom of a huge deflated paper balloon hanging from a stout bamboo stick. A plastic shallow pan with melted wax and mustard oil lay nearby, saffron cloth strips soaked in the mixture ready to be wrapped round the intersecting point of the cross. Several such balloons or won bungs would be let off in the air later, the smoke from the lit cotton strips giving the upward thrust.

It was the second day of the 24th Sanzha Kando Poi. The laid back tiny hamlet of Bhiton Pawoi village, around five kilo meters to the west of Margherita in Tinsukia district, came alive on October 30 as people from the Singpho, Tai-Phake, Tai-Ahom, Tai-Khamyang and other Buddhist communities from other parts of Assam and Lathau, Miao and Bordumsa in Arunachal Pradesh converged here to take part in the three-day long festival to seek the blessing of monks, Considered auspicious by the Buddhists, the event is also called the Pravarana Utsav and is observed at the end of Varshavash or the three month long period when monks remain in their viharas and elders of the community fast and observe abstinence. The Buddhists believe that making offerings to the Sangha can earn benefit, reduce the effects of bad karma and help people break the cycle of rebirth.

This year's utsav was organized by the Meindung group of Purbanchal Buddha Samity which has six other units. Each of them takes the responsibility of conducting the festival in different years. The formal bestowal of the newly-built vihara was done in coincidence with the Poi. After an uneventful first day, October 30 dawned with the unfurling of the Buddhist flag. The afternoon saw a discussion in which Bhikkhu Panna Sara and the Regional Commissioner of CMPF, YS Tuning, spoke on ethics and rebirth in Buddhism respectively, while the DGM of IOC, Mridul Shyam, made a comparison of the faith with science. The session was chaired by Bhikkhu Wannasara Mahasthabir.

As the evening set in, several women engaged themselves in different looms, each determined to be the first one to finish weaving the kathin or saffron cloth woven overnight and meant to be wrapped around Buddha idols. After all, the Kathiri Chibar Daan forms an essential part of the Pravarana Utsav. The tradition is supposed to have started after Prajapati Gautami did the same for her step-son who came visiting after attaining enlightenment. At the entrance of the ground, people jostled with each other to carry the tall wooden structures, patethas or kalpatarus, laden with gifts and money, while others swung to the beats of thong (drums) and bou (huge gong). The patechas or kalpatarus represent the tree that bears fruit eternally and are donated to the monks. All the while, long tangkhorns or pieces of cloth flown as symbols of peace, waved gently from the ends of tall bamboo poles.

It was a night to celebrate before the dawn of a new day. As the day dawned, religious rituals started in earnest beginning with the cooking of payash or rice pudding for the monks. The rice pudding is generally cooked by a reputed married woman who has children too. Prayers were chanted and offerings were made. Kathin Chivbar Daan was eventually conducted by formally donating the vihara in an effort to eliminate the sins of the community.

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