

V. Francis Vineeth
Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram

RELIGIO-CULTURAL FESTIVAL OF INDIA

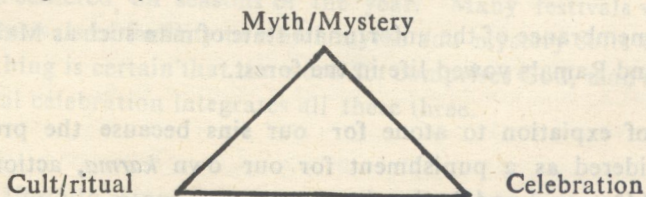
I. The Need of Festivals in man's Life

Man is living in this world of time and is looking forward to transcend time participating in the world of gods. Everything in this world is characterised by finitude and therefore man's desire to transcend time is actually to enter into that state of existence beyond time, the time of gods, the so-called sacred time.¹ For this purpose man creates mythological time in which he brings god down from the sacred time and he himself ascends from the ordinary time.

Festivals are celebrations of man entering into this sacred time. As sacred time, man also need sacred space. Sacred space is the space considered to be the centre of the world where the celebration takes place.² Sacred spaces are often related to events, mythological or historical. Thus Mount Morea where Abraham prepared his sacrifice of Isaac was considered to be a sacred space. So also Sinai in relation to Moses, Mecca in relation to Mohammed, Calvary in relation to Jesus and so on. For the one who celebrates the festival the sacred space is not the ordinary space anymore. It is the space in which he comes in touch with God; he moves from this world to the other world and participates in the life of God. Festival is thus man's entry into the divine rhythm of life at least for a moment of his life forgetting his ordinary life of pains and tears.

II. The Dynamics of the Hindu Festivals

The Hindu festivals as many other festivals in the world is centered around a triangle of myth, cult and celebration.



1. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Worlds, Inc., 1956), p. 81.

2. *Ibid*, pp. 43 ff.

1. The Myth

The festivals are always associated with a mythical story which is ritually celebrated. The mythical story is the factor that takes a person beyond time. *Satapada Brahamana* says: "Let us do what gods did in the beginning"³ What gods did in the beginning according to a hymn in *Rig Veda*, the *purushasukta*⁴ is that they sacrificed the primal man. Therefore it is suggested that we have to do sacrifice. Myths are remembered as they tell the story of humanity's deliverance from a predicamental situation.

2. The Cult

The myth remembered is actually enacted by ritual performances. The rite may demand purification of the self by way of libation and fasts, death and resurrection, and various offerings to the favourite deities.

3. The Celebration

The newly awakened consciousness or the newly obtained life free from evil predicaments is what is celebrated. Thus *Dasara* celebrates the deliverance of mankind from the wild reign of Mahishasura, which is preceded by ritual remembrance of the myth for 9 days (*Navaratri*). The same dynamics can be seen in Christian festivals as well which are preceded by 9 days Novena, Vigils, prayers, fasting and so on.

III. The Utsava Character of the Festival

The Hindu festival is generally known as *Utsava* which is the sanskrit word for festival. The word *utsava* means "to go upwards". The one who celebrates the festival goes upwards from the slavery of sin, death and darkness. Hence what is really celebrated is the liberation, the salvation obtained. This celebration may include :

1. The remembrance of the unfortunate state of man such as Mahishasura's reign and Rama's vowed life in the forest.
2. Rites of expiation to atone for our sins because the present state is considered as a punishment for our own *karma*, action. Hence Vigils (*Jāgarana*) and fasting (*upavāsa*).

3. *Satapada Brahamana*, VII, 2, 1, 4.

4. *Rg Veda*, X. 90, 1-16.

3. The appearance of the deliverer God : Durga comes as Mahishamardhini. Real *utsava* is the liberation of mankind which is celebrated.

A parallelism of this dynamics of festival can be seen in the celebration of Pasch ordered by Yahweh to the people of Israel.

- 1) The slavery in Egypt is remembered.
- 2) The lamb of expiation is ritually slaughtered.
- 3) The act of liberation from slavery is celebrated (*Utsava*).
- 4) The Commandment is given to remember this act of liberation continuously.

A Hindu festival is considered to be a means of celebration (*sādhana*) centred around the Reality (*sat*) which is God, man and the Universe for the sake of man's celebration (*utsava*) through his union with the Divine (*yoga*). Hence the festival includes the following :

i. *Sadhana* ii. *sat* iii. *utsava* and iv. *yoga*.

i. *Sadhana*

The classical definition of *Sadhana* is *anena sadhyate iti sadhana* — that by which something is made possible is a *sadhana*. Seen from this perspective the whole festival is a *sadhana*, a *sadhana* of *utsava* namely a means for liberation. The chief elements of the *sadhana* are : *Upavasa vrta* (the vow of fasting, and *Jāgaranna* (vigil).

ii. *Sat*

By *Sat* is meant Reality in all its dimensions. Primarily reality is God who manifested himself in manifold forms. So the festival will be centered around any of these forms of God. *Vishnu avatara* or *Shiva Linga* or *Durga* are examples of the same.

Reality also can be a favourite of God as a King or a Godly person. Reality is also considered to be one with the nature. Thus, harvest festivals are festivals centered on seasons of the year. Many festivals were in the beginning festivals of fertility to which myths and mystery cults were added later. One thing is certain that the word *Sat* comprises God, man and nature and a festival celebration integrates all these three.

iii. *Utsava*

Utsava literally means elevation and is understood as the supreme bliss (*ānanda*) to which man enters. This bliss is not to be obtained at the expense of everything else; but it certainly demands the re-establishment of proper harmony and rhythm.

iv. *Yoga*

Yoga means union and is derived from the word *yug-yog* which means to unite. *Utsava* or celebration is celebration of man's union with Reality.

This union is four-fold :

- a. Union with God through the favourite deity who is remembered and whose story is re-enacted.
- b. Union with fellow-beings : Humanity as a whole is delivered and very often festivals end up with a day of greeting and meeting one's own friends and relations.
- c. Union with nature : Festivals are fixed taking into consideration the course of planets and their effects on man and his earth.
- d. Union with oneself : Festivals demand days of vigil with a spirit of *Tapas* (austerity) and *Upavasa* (fasting) This is for the purpose of purifying one's own self and bringing deeper harmony and rhythm between the human and the divine.

Thus the Hindu festival becomes

- a potent means (*sādhana*)
- to elevate man (*utsava*)
- uniting him (*yoga*)
- with the divine (*sat*).

IV. The Hindu Calendar

1) The Hindu Concept of Time

The Hindu concept of time is generally understood as cyclic in contrast to the Christian concept which is said to be linear. Though this contrast is basically valid, it is not as simplistic as it appears to be. Hindus consider the time in which we live now as a part of the age of decadence called *Kaliyuga*. Three other *yugas* have preceded us. They were *Dvapara*, *Treta* and *Krta*. Righteousness or *Dharma* readily decreased in these *yugas*. Four *yugas* together make one *Mahāyuga* which is considered to be 4,329,000 years. 1,000 *Mahayugas* make one *Kalpa* which is the life-span of Brahman (the Creator). The word *Kalpa* means only estimate, suggesting that *kalpa* is

an estimated period of time. Within the *kalpa* history is not necessarily cyclic. But after one *kalpa* there comes what is called *pralaya* which is the time of resting for Brahma, the Creator - God. When he rises up, the process may start all over again. Thus it could be said that the concept of time is cyclic.

But the Christian linear concept of history as it is seen from the standpoint of a Hindu is only a flash which could be very well accommodated into the huge period of a *yuga*. Yet, with its stress on the decisive Christ-event, Christianity introduces a concept of time proceeding to a definite goal, to be accomplished in and through Jesus Christ.

2) The Hindu Calendar :

The Hindu Calendar of festivals is mainly based on Lunar months. Most of the oriental lands such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, Israel follow lunar months. India also knows the solar months based on the Zodiac system. *Sankaranthi* is the day the Sun enters into the mansion of each Zodiac (*Rāsi*).

Lunar months are the following :

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|------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Caitra</i> (March-April) | 7. <i>Aśvina</i> (Sept-Oct) |
| 2. <i>Vasākha</i> (April-May) | 8. <i>Karttika</i> (Oct-Nov) |
| 3. <i>Jyēṣṭha</i> (May-June) | 9. <i>Margha-sirsa</i> (Non-Dec) |
| 4. <i>Āsāḍha</i> (June-July) | 10. <i>Pansa</i> (Dec-Jan) |
| 5. <i>Sravana</i> (July-August) | 11. <i>Magha</i> (Jan-Feb) |
| 6. <i>Bhadrapāda</i> (August-Sept) | 12. <i>Phalguna</i> (Feb-March) |

Each lunar month is divided into two halves based on the waxing and waning of the moon.

Sukla-pakṣa

Bright half

When the moon waxes



Kṛṣṇa-pakṣa

Dark half

When the moon wanes

Each half is divided into 15 *tithis*, i.e, lunar days. A *tithi* is slightly shorter than 24 hours. This *tithi* is numbered as *Magha* 1st *Sukla* or *Kṛṣṇa*. 11th day (*Ekādasi*) of each half is dedicated to *Vishnu*. Hence *Ekādasi* fasting. The 4th day is dedicated to *Ganesa* and the 8th day to *Durga* and the 13th to *Siva*.

Similar system is also well known in Christianity: Every Sunday is dedicated to the Lord, every Saturday to Bl. Virgin Mary and Wednesdays to St. Joseph. Ganesa's feast falls on the 4th bright half of *Bhadrapada* (Aug-Sept) and therefore is known as *Ganes Chadurthi* (Ganes on the 4th). Krishna's birthday falls on the 8th dark half of *Sravana* (July - Aug) and is known as *Krisna janmaṣṭami*. (Birth of Kṛṣṇa on the 8th)

V. Myths and Mystery cults of Hindu Festivals

The Hindu religion is rich with fasts, feasts, and festivals. All festivals are remembrance (*anamnesis*) of some mythical story of deliverance. For certain festivals celebrated all over the country, the stories may vary from place to place. This is because people adapt the story to their surroundings. We are now looking into the myths, mysteries and ritual celebrations of certain widely accepted hindu festivals.

1. Deepavali - The Feast of Lights

On the 13th of the lunar month *Asvina* (Sept-Oct) the entire India enters into a joyous mood of celebration. The temples, streets and houses are decorated with lights of different colours and sounds of fire-work cram the atmosphere. People are beginning to celebrate the feast of lights. Several myths are remembered most of them are pointing to the story of their own deliverance from the demonic reign of ancient rulers.

Myth 1 - Krishna slays Narakāsura: Narakāsura was a demonic king who reigned without fear of men and God. The oppressed people prayed Vishnu for deliverance. Finally Vishnu comes down in the form of Krishna (*Avatāra*) and slaying Narakāsura delivers the people.

Myth 2 - The Coronation of Rama: The great epic *Rāmāyana* is the story of a beloved king Rama who was just and devoted to his people. But Rama had to spend several years in the forest in order to fulfill the vow of his father Dasaratha and undergo bitter ordeals. At last Rama returns victorious and was crowned as the King of Bhāratha. In certain parts of India Deepavali is a festive remembrance of this long cherished coronation.

Ritual 1: Dhanuthrayodasi - Commemoration of Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity on the 13th. Deepavali is a great festival especially for vaisyas the merchant class who celebrate the marriage between Vishnu and Lakshmi. The people close their accounts, go to the temple of Lakshmi or install her

image in their own house and worshipping the goddess of prosperity prepare themselves for the celebration of Deepavali.

Ritual 2: Nāraka Caturdaśī - Snānam (The ritual Naraka bath on the 14th)

On the 14th devoted brahmins make a ritual bath, perhaps symbolizing the emergence of the new life after the death of Nāraka. Fire-works celebrate the defeat of Naraka. Light is the cosmic symbol of the divine as darkness is that of the demonic. As the demon Nāraka was beaten the light of God begins to appear everywhere. The real light is considered to be Brahman. As the houses and streets are illumined by the rows of lights the real devotee also gets kindled from within by the divine light of Brahman. This light is nothing but truth itself. Deepavali is ultimately a feast of the triumph of truth over falsehood, of light over darkness. India's national motto reads: *Satyameva jayate* — the truth shall always win.

Ritual 3: Deepavali Proper — The night of 15th *Asvina* leading to the beginning of *karthika* is the most auspicious time of Deepavali celebrations. Remembering God's victory over demon worship of Lakshmi or Kali is ceremoniously done in different parts of the country. As the night becomes darker in the eclipse of moon the lights and fire-works make towns and villages of people glitter in astounding splendour. No darkness is so powerful that it cannot be overcome by light.

Ritual 4: The 4th day of celebration which falls on the 1st of *Karthika* is a day dedicated for the cattle of the household. Feast is not just for men alone. The cow which nourishes man with her milk and the oxen which carry his cart, and the goats and lambs which are part of his riches, all have to participate in the festive mood of the people. The deliverance of humanity is ultimately the deliverance of the entire universe with all living beings in it. Hence many Hindus decorate the horns of their oxen and cows and even vest them with garments and take them in procession in the village.

Ritual 5: The last day of celebration which falls on the 2nd of *Karthika* is known as *Bhratr-dvidiya* — the meeting of brothers on the 2nd. The festivity ends with a social function of meeting the dear and near ones. In the newly established order of righteousness such a brotherly meet is especially meaningful and guarantees love, concord and solidarity.

1. The Utsava

The real *Utsava* in the festival is man's forward leap from the depth of slavery imposed on him by the powers of the evil. Each one's favourite daity comes to deliver him. As moon wanes and disappears so humanity's light waned little by little and was completely eclipsed. But out of that darkness the crescent moon begins to appear and waxes again to the full moon. So must the divine moon shine forth in human consciousness and wax to its fulness. In the end it is not housetops and temple-domes that are illumined, but really the inner soul of man and this is what man ultimately celebrates.

2. Dasara

Dasara is a feast for ten days. The word *Dasa* means ten. The *Dasara* feast is preceded by 9 days vigil known as *Navaratri*. After the nine days vigil and prayer the 10th day is celebrated.

Myth 1: The widely acclaimed myth that is remembered and reenacted during *dasara* festival is the slaying of Mahishasura by goddess Durga. Mahishasura was a demon king who had his ferocious reign in Mysore, the then Capital of Karnataka. It is said that Mysore is an abbreviation of Mahishas *ur* (land). Though born of Asura dynasty Mahisha performed *tapas* (austerity and penance) and obtained from God the special boon that no man could ever slay him. Puffed-up with such a privilege Mahisha began his wild reign with nor fear for God nor concern for man. Both earth and heaven got frightened by Mahisha's thunderous threats. No man ever dared to face Mahisha because all knew that he can never be killed by a man. At last, hopeless though they were, people pleaded Vishnu the lord of Avatars. Vishnu came down as Durga, the goddess of retaliation and restoration of justice. Riding on a tiger the many-handed Durga appeared and defeated the demon Mahisha and liberated her people from the demon's grip.

In the city of Mysore in Karnataka, South India, the goddess Durga is solemnly installed on the hills Chamundi. Therefore she is popularly known in Mysore as Chamundeesvari, the goddess of the hill Chamundi. Tourists who visit Mysore do not miss Chamundi Hill because it takes them to goddess Durga as well as gives them a bird's eye-view of the whole city of Mysore.

Myth 2: In the North, however, *Dasara* is celebrated remembering Sri Rama's victory over Ravana. Rama the first prince and son of Dasaratha had to wage a war against the demon king Ravana who had stolen his wife Sita. Mythology says that Ravana who stolen his wife Sita had ten heads and it took ten days for Rama to decapitate all the ten heads of Ravana. Hence *Dasara* is said to be the abbreviation of *Dasa-hara*, i.e. ten killings.

The myth reminds us that we all are under the grip of evil powers and we have to kill the evil in us again and again.

Mystery Cults and Rituals

The nine days novena in preparation to the festival are divided into the three units of three days each. First three days are dedicated to Durga or Kali, the destroyer of evil. As Durga slays Mahisha or Rama defeats Ravana so must each one of us liberate our own selves from all pernicious cravings which control our life. The next three days are dedicated to Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. Once cleansed from our own sinfulness we have to adorn ourselves with noble qualities of which Lakshmi, is always a model and mediator. Last three days are dedicated to Sarasvati, the goddess of wisdom. The purified self aglow with sublime divine qualities must enter into divine enlightenment. Enlightenment from within is real wisdom.

During the novena (*navaratri*) days the devotees of Durga or Rama keep fasting taking only one meal of fruits and sweets made of milk a day. On the 6th day of novena, statues of Durga or Rama and effigies of Mahisha or Ravana are installed in different parts of the country. A priest calls on Goddess Durga and prays that she may descend from heaven and reside in her own image. She is venerated from next day onwards with ceremonial baths, offering of flowers, waving of lamps (*ārati*) and recitation of *mantras*. In Calcutta, which has been originated from Kali-ghat, goats are decapitated in her temples. Kali can be said to be the black Durga, the ferocious personification of the divine *śakti*, power which is considered to be feminine. On the 10th day goddess leaves the statue after having delivered her people. Commemorating the victory of gods over demons the effigies are burnt. While the statues of gods are ceremoniously taken to the nearest river and drowned there. During the *navaratri* days after the prescribed (*puja*) worship in the evening, part of the myths are dramatically presented for the education and edification of the people. Once again what is celebrated is the *utsava*, the forward leap of humanity from slavery to freedom.

3. Holi

On the full moon of the bright half of the *phalguna* month (February–March) the whole North India swings to the tone of Holi, a popular festival which reminds us of the carnival in the west.

Myth : There was a demoness called Holiga who used to devour everyday a child from a village. The villagers were very sad and indignant about this. But they could not help. Holiga should have her due everyday. At last, the lot fell on a widow's only son. Struck with sorrow, she ran to a holy monk who lived in that village. The monk advised her to gather all innocent children of the village and shout abusive words to the demoness who would dare to feed herself with innocent blood. The cries of the innocent have enormous power even above that of demons. The children of the village did exactly as the monk has advised them to do and to the astonishment of all the demoness Holiga fell down dead. It is surmised that the feast's name Holi is only a shortening of Holiga.

Ritual : As a popular festival Holi is very much celebrated in houses and streets than in temples and spots of pilgrimages. People sing songs, sprinkle colours on their garments and move about in a mood of freedom and relaxation. Of course all are liberated from the devouring mouth of Holiga. Once again the *utsava* is that of deliverance.

4. Pongal

Pongal is a tamil festival celebrated in the south especially in Tamilnadu. The feast falls on the 1st of Tamil month called 'Tai' which is 14th of January. Pongal is a harvest festival. The word Pongal literally means the 'rising up' of the cooked rice and symbolizes fulness and prosperity that follows man's hard work and patient cultivation of the earth. As rice, when cooked, swells, boils up and overflows so must our hearts too be awakened, expanded and reach out every one around us. As a harvest festival born of fertility cult Pongal does not have elaborate myths. Yet, a myth of cultivation is remembered.

Myth : Prathu, the son of Veena was an ambitious man and wanted to cultivate plant on earth. He tilled the earth. Protesting against the force man placed on earth, the earth taking the form of a cow, fled away to heavenly regions. Prathu, however followed the cow but could not enter into that sacred region where the cow found her safety abode. Prathu was

earnest and insisted to live on what the earth yields. At last, the cow, the mother earth, promised Prathu to fecundate the earth with her own milk. Then onwards the mother cow has lavishly poured her milk on earth and made it fertile for man. Thus Pongal is the celebration of the fruits of this fertility. Pongal is celebrated when the sun is at the farthest point of the equator and begins to move northwards. The winter has come to an end and the trees begin to blossom. The birds sing and the entire land is in the season of spring.

Ritual: The Pongal festival lasts for four days :

1. *Bhogi Pongal* (13th of January)

On this day of purification people clean up their houses and burn the waste during the night.

2. *The Sun Pongal* (14th January)

This is the real day of Pongal feast, dedicated to sun. After ceremonial bath the devotees boil rice with milk and sugar. As the boiling rice rises up the real *utsava* takes place in the heart of the devotee. The boiled rice is offered to sun, the lord of lights and the image of the invisible Sun, the Lord of truth.

3. *Mattu Pongal* (15th January) : The Pongal of the household animals

The domestic animals are great gifts of God and are considered to be man's living companions. He is with them in the fields, with the bullock carts and also at home. Hence the third day of *Pongal* is dedicated to them. As in *Deepavali* in the North, people in the South who celebrate Pongal adorn their household animals and bring them in procession and for competitions of animals.

4. *Kane Pongal* (16th January) : The Pongal of friendly meet.

The festival ends on the 4th day with visit of friends and relatives. The elder person of the house asks the visitor : "Has the milk boiled"? and the visitor responds, "Yes, the milk has boiled". Of course the milk of love mingled with the sugar of joy has really boiled in the heart of the devotees who celebrate the Pongal festival. Therefore he has come to visit his friends as a sign of his reaching out

to people around him. In Pongal what is celebrated is not necessarily the story of deliverance. It is more an act of thanksgiving to the sun who keeps the earth ever fertile, to the earth who yields her fruit to mankind and to all humanity who together till and cultivate the earth and also to the animals without whose help man is incapable of cultivating the earth.

VI. The Christian Adaptation of the Hindu Festivals

Today in India there is much talk on the Christian adaptations of the Hindu Festivals. In dealing with the problem of adaptation of Hindu festivals to a meaningful celebration by Christians or of Christian festival by an acceptable inculturation process, we have to take into consideration the following factors :

i. *The myth/mystery dimension*

The festivals are always centered on a myth. Myth definitely conveys some mystery. The myth may be transformed by the mystery dimension of Christian faith. The salvation event that took place in and through Jesus Christ becomes the major mystery factor in a christian's life. Hence pure myths unrelated to Christ-event may not be the content of a Christian festival. But at the same time myths that are being celebrated in festivals are not simply fairy tales or stories. Myths do bring to light certain dimension of our existence, certain predicamental situation in which we all participate, from which we all need deliverance. So the situation has to be looked into from this angle and to be reviewed from the angle of the salvation event which took place in Jesus Christ. In short, the content of mystery is transformed.

ii. *Cult*

The transformed mystery is to be brought into expression through rituals. The rituals are expressed through the means of symbols, literature, music and art. Rituals could be very well adopted from the festivals, provided they don't contradict the basic content of Christian mystery. Only in this way the celebration will be both Christian in content and indigenous in expression.

iii. *Celebration*

When the mystery is transformed and the ritual is adapted with necessary changes, the sence of celebration will naturally be different. The real *utsava* from a Christian point of view will be the deliverance from sin brought about by Jesus Christ.