

RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

Along with millions of people coming from different parts of Karnataka in India, I participated in the zenith-celebration of the nine-days long Dussehra in Mysore this year. It was an enriching experience as this celebration brought together factual history and mythical history in such a vivid and colourful celebration of the festival of Dussehra. What was more striking in this emotional participation of so many people, without the distinction of caste, colour, and even creed (as many religious festivals turn out to be more and more social, and, hence, less sectarian in participation), is the fact that it creates, induces, maintains and sustains a community consciousness, a consciousness shared by all that they do form one integral community, and, thus, opening up a common platform to eliminate all divergences, positively fostering unity at all levels.

Celebration of feasts and festivals is an integral dimension of every religion. Religion being an instrument as well as the locus of 'binding' and uniting people of different strata of society, it has to necessarily employ different means to effectively bring about sustainable bonds and enduring communion among its followers. One of the effective means that the leaders as well as the followers of all religions employ and practise for this purpose is the celebration of festivals, although it should be borne in mind that all festivals are not necessarily religious in nature.

Sustainable bonds and enduring communion constitute the characteristic mark of any living and healthy community. Although communities evolve naturally and spontaneously, those bonds that sustain the communion among the members cannot be nurtured and maintained automatically or effortlessly. The vitality of any community depends on the conscious and wholehearted participation of the majority of its members in all those activities that would cater to its multi-faceted interests and needs. Apart from the day-to-day affairs, such a community requires special occasions and events, marking the commemoration of the past events, inspiration of the present moments, and expectation of the future dimensions possible and meaningful. Celebration of feasts and festivals, thus, has been an essential ingredient in fostering the bonds that unite the members of a community by spontaneously as well with conscious efforts provoking and encouraging the spirit of communion.

This communion is not to be limited to the members of any particular religious group. In the context of a fast-growing global economy, the prevailing attitudinal changes and social practices, migration of people from one place to another is an existential phenomenon. One of the results of this is the fact that none remains isolated, and everybody begins to recognize the value of plurality, not a plurality from which people keep away, but one within which everyone wants to participate and to get enriched. Most of these people who are on the move belong to one or another religion, although they may not be able to practise their religious observances as a group, both due to the lack of enough members and the needed infrastructure. However, apart from practising the rituals of their own religion and celebrating the festivals of their original community, they, too, feel the need to participate in the rituals and festivities of the community to which they belong now (due to the change of location), so that they can emotionally participate and share in the cultural and religious dynamics of the new community within which they have to realize their new identity. Facilitating this basically requires openness on the part of all. If people are able (and enabled) to respond positively, then it becomes an effective catalyst in transforming the society to enrich itself by the cultural and religious values of each other. This is not a call to dilute and dismiss anyone's (especially, of the minority in any particular spatial sphere) religion or culture, or any part thereof, if they are found to be meaningful and beneficial in uplifting our human nature to anything sublime, but an earnest call to be open towards everything best that humanity can offer from any corner. It is only in a continuous process of "give and take" that any person or group can grow in a holistic manner. In fact, this is facilitated by the observance of religious festivals.

Amidst the demanding but, sometimes unexciting daily chorus of religious as well as social practices people need certain special occasions to inspire and recharge them. This is said to be one of the functions of observing religious festivals. These may be considered as heightening moments in religious life, as they provide the necessary ingredients to lead basic human religious sentiments and emotions to the higher planes within which special and meaningful rituals and other social observances – carried out by the individuals as well as by the community as a whole – make everyone participate in a rich and lasting religious experience, thus, making room for further willing and enthusiastic engagement in the ensuing everyday-observances with proper orientation and gaiety.

The heightening of religious consciousness during the festival times may respond, at least, in two different ways. First, an open religious community will respond positively in such a situation, transforming itself as the locus of integration and harmony. Some other groups, however, may turn out to be fundamentalist in nature, and, hence, will be closed to any outside influence; they would prefer seclusion and perpetuate exclusiveness and fanaticism, thus, barring any integration and harmony with the members of other religious or social groups. Such would not even bother themselves when one member slays a person for participating in a religious worship or festivity merely because he or she belonged to another group or a caste that is lower in religious and social status; though not very frequent, there are certain cases where they would sometimes directly or indirectly encourage such practices. The need of the hour is a healthy religious perspective that should accompany any religious festivity; for, it tends to be more and more holistic in nature. That is, religion being the instrument of uniting the populace, all religious practices, including feasts and festivals can have any meaning only when they become instruments of integration and harmony, both within the particular religious group and among various religions and religious denominations. If they tend to cater animosity, instead of integration and harmony, among the people, then they cannot in any way be considered as religious at all.

Another unhealthy and dangerous tendency which is found prevalent these days is the politicisation of religious festivals. The present situation in India is a typical example. The boom of political parties all over the country, with national as well as regional or partisan interests, necessitates the employment of certain strategies to woo the electorate. Politicians read and manoeuvre the psyche of the electorate, and employ the most suitable methods to make the electorate dance to their tunes. For, they have realized that the religious sentiment of the people is the most effective tool available to them to swing the electorate to their advantage. They, therefore, plunge wholeheartedly to promote religious festivities, not with any motive to boost the religious experience of the people or the cause of national integration, but to cater to the sectarian interests of each and every particular religious group, and, thus, to provoke animosity among members of various religious groups. Such hidden agendas on their part adversely affect the building up of any sense of community among diverse interest groups. Ultimately, then, some of the pompous religious

celebrations and festivities turn out to be occasions for religious as well as national disintegration: this, however, shall not be permitted.

Apart from the public proclamation of the fundamentals of religion and the unity of a particular community that is involved in the external paraphernalia's of festivals, they should become instruments of internal transformation which is vital as far as any religion is concerned. For, festivals are important as the kernel of such a religious celebration is capable of leading devotees to a periodic existential transformation, which would make the dynamics of that religion more vibrant, and religious life more attractive and meaningful to its own members. It is from this perspective V. F. Vineeth, in the first article of this number, tries to capture the convergent as well as the divergent factors involved in religious festivals. His attempt to bring together the temporal and the eternal, the particular and the universal, faith and fidelity, cult and culture, myth, mystery and history, reflects the powerful dynamics involved in any celebration of religious festivals. His conclusions that "The joy of such a celebration should be internal as well as external, bringing God's peace and harmony to the humans and to the entire universe," and that "Festival is a joyful expression of the human acceptance of divine rhythm in our lives and in our universe" speak out the holistic vision that emerges out of the divergent factors converging within the occurrences and horizons of festivity.

Paulachan Kochappilly makes an exploration to expose the beauty of the feast of Epiphany celebrated among the St. Thomas Christians in India. Calling for the preservation and practice of regional forms of the feast of Epiphany, Kochappilly contends that "the Christian baptism, which is ... commemorated and celebrated during the feast of *denha*, considers the symbolisms of water and light as essential for the baptismal ceremony." In another article, "Festivals, Communication and Development," J. B. Jeyaraj engages in an analysis of the feasts of the ancient Israelite community, and points out that any such celebration is an occasion for generations to "remember the past history and the fulfilment of Yahweh's promises to their ancestors. It is theologised as the feast of Yahweh since Yahweh has acted in the history of their salvation." Moreover, he holds that "Festivals can contribute for the development of communities if they are planned, taught to the participants and celebrated meaningfully."

Attempting to understand the meaning and significance of festivals, S. M. Michael, holds that "feasts and festivals are related to the experiential dimensions of life," and that they can "be considered as rites of intensification, whereby the values and solidarity of the society are enhanced." In the context of India, Michael suggests that festivals have to be occasions for dialogue and mutual understanding among those religions, which accept and celebrate festivals with different dynamics, so that they can facilitate the incorporation of "whatever is good and noble in cultures, which will give and enhance life, a life in abundance." Delving deep into the inner recesses of the dynamics of religious observances associated with festivals, Ignatius Jesudasan convincingly interprets festivals as the mythical language of self-transformative history shared by its members. P. L. Shantakumari, a practising Hindu by faith and a scholar in Indian religions, unveils the rich and varied sense and dynamics of some Hindu festivals, and holds that their celebration "naturally paves the way for social unity, tolerance, harmony and peace."

During this festival season in India, through this collection of articles on religious festivals, contributed by authors belonging to various backgrounds, interest groups and religious communities, *Journal of Dharma* hopes to understand and articulate the dynamics of every related aspect, especially the religious and social dimensions of festivals. Keeping track with the religious perspective, it has to be insisted that celebration of festivals in any religion and culture has to be constructive and transformative of the personal as well as the societal levels of human life led by the followers of all religions. A religious festival, in order to be considered as religious, has to evoke a sense of community among the participants. Festivity is not merely for the sake of gaiety, but for transforming any partisan sentiments into a consciousness of universality and community, whereby the particular shall not lose its identity, but enrich itself by participating in the universal, and make the universal more vibrant and attractive, thus, paving the way for an understanding into the mythical and historical past, a bright, vibrant and meaningful present, and a hopeful and optimistic future for the whole humanity.

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