

## MEANING AND SIGNIFICANCE OF FEASTS AND FESTIVALS IN HUMAN SOCIETY

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### 1. Introduction

There is a growing trend in anthropology to understand humankind through its experience. The anthropology of experience deals with how individuals actually experience their culture.<sup>1</sup> In almost all cultures, life is experienced as pulsating and rhythmical. It is a combination of breaks and reunions. Rituals and rites are the means by which these experiences of life are communicated. Hence, experiences of humankind are heavily embedded in cultural symbols, particularly those of feasts, festivals, rituals, celebrations and other powerful performative genres.

In every human society, life itself is a celebration of giving meaning to different events of human existence as people encounter changes in their own lives and in the environment. For centuries, different cultures have experienced life in different ways and these experiences are stored in different rituals, symbols and myths. Thus, rites and rituals are impregnated with meaning.

In order to be alive and active, a culture has to relive its experiences. This means that the experiences stored in rituals are to be enacted, myths recited, narratives retold, events of importance celebrated. These enactments, recitals, retellings and performances transform and enable the

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<sup>1</sup>V. Turner and R. Burner, "Cultural Performance as Celebration," *Anthropology of Experience*, 23-47, New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

people involved to re-experience the heritage of their culture. "Life consists of retellings."<sup>2</sup>

Studies show that in spite of urbanization, industrialization and modernization, these religious practices do not die out, rather they strengthen group solidarity, by modifying themselves and adjusting to new situations. Feasts and Festivals come under these aspects of cultural life of the people.

## **2. Feasts and Festivals: Experiential Dimensions of Life**

The word 'festival' is derived from the Latin term *festum* (bright, rejoicing) to mean celebrations, also known as rest days, memorial days, holy days, and holidays. Although most feasts and festivals are religious in origin, many have a political and civic background. They are not merely known in every country, primitive, backward or advanced; they seem to date back to pre-historic times.

Feasts and festivals are related to the experiential dimensions of life. They are cultural celebrations. It is in the celebrations of the feast and festivals that a community re-experiences, re-lives, re-creates, re-tells, re-constructs and re-fashions its culture. Thus, festivals constitute a prime act of reflexivity, whereby a society gets shaped and reshaped. They can, thus, be considered as rites of intensification, whereby the values and solidarity of the society are enhanced.

## **3. Essential Aspects of Feasts and Festivals**

The concept of festival embraces two modes: a) enjoyment and b) enrichment. Enjoyment (carnival) inverts the social order and leans towards breaking barriers between the rich and poor, between high and low in status, between the privileged and the underprivileged. Victor Turner refers to this equalizing process in celebrations as anti-structural, which is more or less subversive of the social order. *Communitas*, that is, universal fellow feeling, reigns for those who are willing to participate in the celebrations. Society looks at itself transformed. Enrichment is done

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<sup>2</sup>Turner R., *Anthropology of Experience*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986, 12.

by the performance of rituals and ceremonies, which celebrates the past memories making it a reality today giving meaning to human existence in the midst of death and life. It is the tension between these two dimensions of festival that gives it its warmth and power. Such tensions between enjoyment and enrichment are the seedbeds of cultural creativity of a community. Thus, everyone may participate in a festival because of its enjoyment element.

Studies on feast and festivals by Milton Singer, Dell Hymes, Richard Bauman, Victor Turner and others have shown us that feasts and festivals are not only naturally occurring units of *meaning* but are also *periods of heightened activity* when a society's presuppositions are most exposed and the core values are expressed. Through the celebrations of feast and festivals the people involved give expression to the meanings of life, which their religion, culture and language have crystallized from the past.

#### **4. Types of Feasts and Festivals**

Classifying festivals tends to be problematic. They may be religious, political and national, economic, or sporting. Certain rites of passage may also be classified as festivals, because these rites and ceremonies empower the whole community. Although most festivals take place regularly on specific calendar dates, a broad division of feasts and festivals could be attempted in terms of domestic and social observances.

##### **a. Seasonal Feasts and Festivals**

In almost all human societies work and life tend to be governed by seasonal and ecological rhythms. Change in the environment, such as the alteration of the seasons and even the succession of day and night, the phases of the moon, or the progression of the seasons in their annual cycle involve a disturbance of all the members of a group. They are crises because in many societies, the food supply and the means of livelihood are so dependent upon the vagaries of the environment and its climatic conditions that these human groups live in a perpetual state of anxiety and uncertainty. Moreover, the changes in nature exert an alteration in the occupational rhythm of life. Consequently, these changes involve a readjustment of the interaction rates.

For example, in a country like India that is predominantly agricultural, important crises, that is, crises that involve relatively great changes of interaction rates, come in the spring at planting time, and in the fall at harvest. Some of the extensive cyclical rituals, such as planting ceremonies, mark the beginning of such a period; some others like the harvest rites, mark the end of a period of technical activity. The ritual techniques used in these crises enable individuals affected by the changes to build up the new interaction rates needed to restore their equilibrium. Human life needs to be adjusted to these changes in nature. Accordingly, every culture marks culturally recognized points in the passage of time such as first fruits, harvest, mid-summer, new year, new moon, etc.<sup>3</sup> The Babylonians, who paid earnest attention to lunar phenomena, were disturbed whenever the moon disappeared and declared such a period (at the end of the month) an unlucky day and a time of sorrow. Prayers were recited and expiatory rites performed, particularly for the king, who, it was believed, needed special protection on unlucky days. A prayer to the moon god 'Sin' describes the thirtieth day of the month as the god's holy day or festival.

#### **b. Rites of Passage as Feast and Festivals**

Every individual in a society undergoes different phases of life such as birth, puberty, adulthood, old age and death. From birth till death human beings take up different positions in life such as childhood, youth, marriage and parenthood. All these changes and positions in life involve different responsibilities and each of these changes disturbs the individual's equilibrium in relationship with the family and society. A person's ability to handle these situations is marked with uncertainties. Hence, these disturbances that involve marked changes in the habitual interaction rates of individuals are known as crisis. Every culture meets these crisis situations through various rituals so that an individual may pass through these stages without much stress and strain. These rites and rituals are called *rites of passage*.<sup>4</sup> These rites and rituals literally mark the

<sup>3</sup>See E. O. James, *Comparative Religion: An Introductory and Historical Study*, London: Methuen & Co., 1961.

<sup>4</sup>Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (First published in 1909), London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960.

passage of an individual from one state in his relations with other people to another state. Hence, these are marked with celebrations. A careful observation of different cultures would reveal the universality of these celebrations.

The purpose of these rituals and celebrations is to transform an individual from one stage of life to another. These rites and celebrations are seen as both indicators and vehicles of transition from one socio-cultural state and status to another – childhood to maturity, virginity to marriage, childlessness to parenthood, sickness to health, death to ancestry, and so on. These ceremonies and specific rites also pay an important role in the ordering and reordering of social relations.<sup>5</sup>

Van Gennep pointed out that, when the activities associated with an individual's "life-crisis" ceremonies are examined in terms of their order and content, it is possible to distinguish three major phases: rites of *separation*, rites of *transition* and rites of *incorporation*. It is good to be aware of the essential characteristics of these three transitory stages in the life crisis rituals.

Normally, the "Rites of Passage" are associated with non-periodic changes such as birth and death, illness, and so on. The "Cyclical Rituals," on the other hand, are usually connected with the periodic changes; the daily, weekly, monthly, or yearly changes which are associated with changes in technology through the alternation of day and night and of the seasons. Most characteristically, however, the non-periodic changes producing the rite of passage affect a single individual specifically, and the rest of the group only through their relations with him or her, while those producing the Cyclic Rituals affect all the members of the group collectively. These rites, coming periodically, help to reinforce the habitual relations within the society. E. D. Chappell and C. S. Coon (1942) call these rites and rituals as "rites of intensification," since the goal of these celebrations is the strengthening of group unity.

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<sup>5</sup>Gluckman S., *Sociology of Religion*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962, 4.

These rites which accompany and bring about the change of seasons, year or month are also, according to van Gennep, ceremonies of passage. Certain feasts and festivals in different parts of India and in other geographical areas of the world may include rites of expulsion of winter and incorporation of spring, e.g., in *Holi*, the one dies and the other is reborn.<sup>6</sup>

### **c. Other Festivals**

There are also political, national, economic or sporting festivals. Some of the political festivals celebrate the triumph of state power or celebrations of national independence. Among festivals of the economy can be countered trade exhibitions. Today sports have turned out to be occasions of big festivals all over the world. The major festivals of sports include the Olympic games, the World Series and the World Cup.

Here in this essay, however, we shall continue to concentrate only on Religious Feast and Festivals with special reference to Hinduism and Christianity.

## **5. Religious Feast and Festivals**

Religions regularly celebrate the anniversaries associated with their gods or founders, holy figures, or even other connected great events. As religious, many of them were in ancient times prohibitory, or sacrificial and laudatory, and stemmed from nature worship and ancestor worship, and were rituals within the cult of the dead. In relation to the dead, annual and monthly feasts or banquets were times of fellowship with the dead, to whom offerings were made. Nature worship, particularly common among nomadic peoples, entailed reverence toward the sun and moon, and rites around solar and lunar feasts. Among agricultural peoples, sunshine and rain, winter and summer, seedtime and harvest were, and are, of vital importance; hence, their feasts are solar and are held during solstices and equinoxes.

Complex societies, too, with their political crises and wars of conquest and of deliverance, establish feasts of victory, of veneration for

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<sup>6</sup>van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 178-180.

great leaders, and of thanksgiving. In all major religions, feast days, dedicated to great leaders, are outstandingly characteristic.

As humans we move in the world of ordinary and extraordinary, between the world of purity and pollution. The holy and the unholy things acquire a mystic potency, a magico-spiritual power that was an expression of man's limitedness and inadequacy. Moreover, sanctity was attached to the chief or ruler, as in Egypt, where the Pharaoh was revered and worshipped. It was believed that from them emanated at particular times special influences upon the people. Hence, it became superlatively imperative for one's welfare to observe times and rituals when the gods were most favourably disposed, for the power that blessed could also inflict a curse. Days consecrated to the deity became days of concentration upon him; hence, distracting labour was forbidden. Abstinence from work was itself a rite of reverence. Priestly supervision accented these attitudes. For example, in the post-exilic calendar among the Hebrews, the Day of First Fruits which opened the Feast of Weeks was a time of "holy convocation," when no work was permitted (Lev 23:21; Num 28:26). Among the simple cultures there was also a rite of sacramental eating preliminary to the general use of the harvest. In more advanced cultures this rite developed into act of sacrificing a portion of the first fruits to the God, thereby honouring him and expressing thanksgiving for a good harvest and thereby, also, soliciting his aid against the Evil who caused poor harvests. Therefore, the rite often was preceded by ceremonial cleansing or purgation and was accompanied by tasting and continence.

Religious festivals illustrate the importance of the social factor in religious experience. Religious festivals include enormous gatherings. The largest festival in the world, the Maha Kumbha Mela of India, is held every twelve years, timed to take place at an auspicious position of the planet Jupiter. The Maha Kumbha Mela draws 15 million participants to the banks of the River Ganges. Ascetic holy men abound, seeking the opportunity to cleanse themselves from sin by bathing at the auspicious moment, thereby obtaining merit.

The major world pilgrimages also include massive festival occasions, such as Guadalupe Day (December 12), near Mexico City, where the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego in 1531, this festival is the most

heavily attended Christian pilgrimage in the world, attracting more than 5 million pilgrims a year. Other religious festivals take the form of passion plays. Another type of religious festival primarily takes the form of a public procession

#### **a. The World View of Hindu Feasts and Festivals**

Writing on the "Hindu Fasts, Festivals and Holy Days," Monier Williams observes: "No country upon earth rejoices in a longer list of holidays, festivals (*utsava*) and seasons of rejoicing, qualified by fasts (*upavasa*, *vrata*), vigils (*jagarana*), and seasons of mortification, than India. Most of these fasts and festivals are fixed to take place on certain lunar days (*tithi*)." <sup>7</sup>

Thus, many of the Hindu feasts and festivals are related to celestial phenomena like the new moon and full moon playing an important role. Full moon and new moon sacrifices were extensively performed in ancient India. Later, many full moon and new moon days were associated with festivals. Eclipses also attracted widespread attention in India. In fact, diurnal phenomena like dawn, sunrise, mid-day and sunset have been marked as auspicious for prayer.

These religious attitudes are popularly known as "Cosmic Religions" in contrast to meta-cosmic soteriologies. Cosmic religion refers to human attitude to the mysteries of life that are in some way related to the cosmic forces, which we need and yet fear. These forces also serve as "ambivalent symbols of our own subconscious forces." <sup>8</sup>

According to Monier Williams, the Hindu celebrations are related to sanctity of certain moments and periods of time by association with memorable events, holy persons, and notable psychic experiences. This is the basic idea underlying the observance of sacred days and festivals, as well as the undertaking of pilgrimages to places considered especially sacred.

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<sup>7</sup>Monier Williams, *Hinduism*, New York: Macmillan & Co., 1919, 248.

<sup>8</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, London: Fontana, 1971, 69.



There is not an object in heaven and earth which a Hindu is not prepared to worship – sun, moon, and stars; rocks, stocks, and stones; trees, shrubs, and grass; seas, pools, and rivers; his own implements of trade; the animals he finds most useful; the noxious reptiles he fears; men remarkable for extraordinary qualities, viz., great valour, sanctity, virtue, or even vice; good and evil demons, ghosts, and goblins; the spirits of departed ancestors; an infinite number of semi-human and semi-divine existences; inhabitants of the seven upper and the seven lower worlds – each and all come in for a share of divine honour or a tribute of more or less adoration.<sup>9</sup>

#### **b. The World View of Hebrew and Christian Feasts and Festivals**

As Semites the ancient Hebrews shared many of the beliefs and practices of their race. With an original Chaldean background and later several centuries of exposure to Egyptian culture it was inevitable that they would absorb many of the customs of the people with whom they had close contacts. The early Hebrew feasts and festivals combined the lunar and the agricultural types. Many of their ancient festivals were those of the new moon. After they had adopted an agricultural way of life in their Palestinian homeland, they established feasts that reflected their new interests, but they were essentially nature festivals. There can be no doubt that the Hebrew holy days were derived from Babylonian and Egyptian sources. When Jerusalem became the capital the festivals in this city were reduced and refined. Toward the end of the monarchy when the Hebrews indulged in astrology, divination and the worship of heavenly bodies, prophets Jeremiah and Zephaniah came up heavily on the worship of nature. They challenged the Hebrews to worship the Creator God who is the Master of Nature. Gradually, the agricultural and lunar festivals of the Hebrews lost their naturalistic character and acquired meanings and rituals that set them apart from gentile observances.

The Christian feasts and festivals also concentrate on God the Creator and his redemptive act in the history of humankind in Jesus Christ. St. Augustine exhorted the Christians to celebrate the Nativity, not like the

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<sup>9</sup>Monier Williams, cited in *Festivals in India*, Special Volume of *Vivekananda Kendra Patrika*, 6,1 (February 1977), 24.

heathen on account of the birth of the sun, but on account of him who made the sun.

Although Sunday may be regarded as the principal Christian holy day, Easter is the central and pivotal festival of Christianity, not only because of its commemoration of the Resurrection, but also because a number of other feasts are related to and are dependent upon it for their dates. The Catholic and Episcopalian ecclesiastical calendars also commemorate the lives of Christian saints.

## **6. Dialogue in Feasts and Festivals**

Though feasts and festivals are born in a natural setting of the change of seasons, rites of passage, religious, civic and political contexts, the interpretation and the meaning of life to these natural occurrences are given from the world-view of a particular community. For example, the Judeo-Christian world-view interprets the natural occurrences in terms of the Creator God who is the Lord of Nature. Hence, worship is due only to God not to nature. Many other religions, on the other hand, including Hinduism, do not consider it anything wrong to worship the nature in their feasts and festivals. Precisely this difference in Judeo-Christian religions is attributed to the ecological crisis and the process of secularisation in the modern world of today. Is it true that Judeo-Christian religions are minimizing the importance of ecology? We require a dialogue here. Similarly, does Hinduism promote worship of nature through their feasts and festivals with less importance to God, the Creator of nature? This also requires an exploration in dialogue. Could we learn from each other while being faithful to our religious traditions? What are the similarities and differences between cosmic religious traditions and meta-cosmic ones? Could it be possible to integrate these traditions without abandoning one's own? All the above queries require much reflection and dialogue in mutual understanding and respect.

There is another area in which the Christians in India need to study the religious celebrations of the Hindus deeply. The observation of Monier Williams gives a challenge to Indian Christians to be deeply rooted in their Christian faith as well as in their ancient traditions. Writing on the "Hindu Fasts, Festivals, and Holy Days," he maintains: "And first, with regard to

the general custom of fasting, it may be worthwhile to point out that no Christian man – be he Roman Catholic or Anglican – not even the most austere stickler for the most strict observance of every appointed period of humiliation and abstinence, can for a moment hope to compete with any religious native of India – Hindu or Muhammadan – who may have entered on a course of fasting, abstinence and bodily maceration.<sup>10</sup> This comparison of Monier Williams gives the Indian Christians a challenge to be authentically Christian and authentically Indian by deeply rooted in Indian spirituality and incorporating the age-old spiritual practices of fasting, abstinence and bodily maceration in their Indian Christian life. Dialogue needs to be operative and effective in this direction too.

### 7. Conclusion

Feast and festivals are essential aspects of every culture and religion. They are the experiential dimensions of life. They are the celebrations of life and death. They are influenced by the ecological, historical and ideological factors. All these experiences of life have been interpreted and re-interpreted according to the world-view of a community. The world-views of Hindu and Christian traditions tend to emphasize two different aspects of human experience. While, Hindu feasts and festivals are highly rooted in the rhythm of nature, the Christian festivals emphasize the Creator of this nature and concentrate on his saving mission. The natural phenomena are subordinated to the power of God in Judeo-Christian religions. Dialogue requires understanding all these dimensions and incorporating whatever is good and noble in cultures, which will give and enhance life, a life in abundance.

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<sup>10</sup>Monier Williams, cited in *Festivals in India*, 24.