

RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF HINDU FESTIVALS

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1. Introduction

In India, religious festivals play a significant role of exalting and integrating man to higher levels of experience. The Indian religion is termed 'Hinduism' or "Hindu Religions Tradition." It is based on Vedas. Hence, it is more correct to refer Hindu religion as "*vaidika-dharma*" or "*sanatana-dharma*" (eternal religion).¹ The distinguishing feature of *sanatana dharma* is that it is more a name for the cultural tradition of Hindus than exclusively for their beliefs, which are narrowly religious and sectarian. In it there is an organic relation between religious ideals and social practices. This organic relationship is expressed through the fact that all forms of life – social, political, and aesthetic have a religious touch (to Gandhi, for instance, even the struggle of Indians in South Africa was a struggle for religious liberty). Hence, we see that one of the functions of religions is to sanctify the ways of society and make it a part of the sacred tradition by various religious as well as social observances.

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¹Vivekananda explains the word 'Hindu' thus: This word Hindu was the name that the ancient Persians used to apply to the river Sindhu. Whenever in Sanskrit there is an 'S' in ancient Persian it changes into 'H', so that 'Sindhu' becomes 'Hindu'. Now this word 'Hindu' as applied to the inhabitants of the other side of the Indus, whatever might have been its meaning in ancient times, has lost all its force in modern times; for all the people that live on this side of Indus no longer belong to one religion. There are the Hindus proper, the Mohammedans, the Parsees, the Christians, the Buddhists and Jains. The word 'Hindu' in its literal sense ought to include all these; but as signifying the religion, it would not be proper to call these Hindus. It is very hard, therefore, to find any common name for our religions, of various ideas of various ceremonials and forms, all gathered together almost without a name, and without a church, and without an organization. The only point where, perhaps, all these sects agree is that we all believe in the scriptures – the Vedas. *Selections from Swami Vivekananda*, Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1976, 215.

2. Hinduism and Its Efficacy

Aurobindo explains clearly the efficacy of religion. He makes a distinction between two aspects of religion, they being true religion and religionism. True religion, according to him, is Spiritual Religion, which is beyond the intellectual, moral, aesthetic and practical nature of man. It exhorts man to live in spirit. On the other hand, religionism is narrow devotion and exaltation. To quote the words of Aurobindo,

True religion is Spiritual Religion that which seeks to live in the spirit, in what is beyond the intellect, beyond the aesthetic and practical being of man and to inform and govern these members of our being by the higher light and law of the spirit. Religionism, on the contrary, entrenches itself in narrow pietistic exaltation of the lower members, or lays exclusive stress on intellectual dogmas, form and ceremonies, on some fixed and rigid moral code, on some religio-political or religio-social system.²

But religious symbols, ceremonies, moral codes and social systems are not negligible. Human beings need them. The lower members are to be exalted and refined before they can be spiritualised. These ceremonies and festivals help the ordinary man to feel the spirit and obey its laws. The thinking man needs an intellectual formula, the aesthetic temperament of man needs a ceremony and the vital nature of man requires a set of moral codes for fulfilment. The only thing is that they belong to the rational or infra-rational part of man. They are mere aids or supports for spiritualization of man.

In India, religion or *sanatana dharma* has an integral outlook. It teaches the oneness or reality or existence (*ekam-sat*). The Rgveda teaches, "That which exists is one: sages call it by various names" (*ekam sat: viprah bahudha vadanti*). *Sanatana dharma* emphasizes that not only all gods and goddesses and living beings but also the whole universe is a manifestation of the one divine reality. The special feature of this religious tradition is that it is based on *Sruti*, *Yukti* and *Svanubhuti*. Its teachings are revealed truths (*sruti*) discovered by rsis in harmony with reason (*yukti*) and continually confirmed by direct experience

²Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle: The Ideal of Human Unity War and Self-Determination*, Pondicherry: Sri. Aurobindo Ashram, 1970, 166; hereinafter referred to as *Human Cycle*.

(*aparokshanubhuti*) or rsis, sages and saints. It is open to all competent persons. This religious tradition stands unrivalled in the depth and splendour of its philosophy and is the oldest of all religions.

Dharma is defined as "that which supports, that which holds together the peoples of the universe."³ Dharma is not a set of beliefs having no necessary connection with the daily life of humanity. But it is a set of principles of healthy and prosperous life. To know these principles and to live and act upon them is to become a true Aryan or a follower of *vaidika dharma*. The etymological meaning of religion is also the same, "that which binds together."

Religion binds us by rules and laws and saves us from regression. Yogananda Paramahansa observes: "Religion binds us by rules, laws and injunctions in order that we may not degenerate, that we may not be in misery – bodily, mentally and spiritually."⁴ Thus, religion seems to have two functions: negative and positive. Negatively, it consists in the avoidance of pain, misery and sufferings. Positively, it enables the individual to attain peace of mind and bliss. Gandhi holds the same view. According to him, religion is that "which changes one's nature and which binds one to the truth within, and which ever purifies."⁵ Along this line Aurobindo asserts that the regulating and harmonising principle of life is to be discovered in religion. He points out the inadequacy of reason and culture as the directing principles of man. Thus, he says that "to make all life religious and to govern all activities by the religious idea would seem to be the right way to the development of the ideal individual and ideal society and lifting of the whole man into the Divine."⁶

3. Dimension of Religious Integration

The Hindu religions culture is composite and pluralistic in nature. It retains within one fold many types of religions perceptions and insights. The religious scriptures exhort that the purpose of religion is integration of man with God, the creator of the world. This integration takes place

³Dharanath *dharmā itiyahu dharmo dharayiti praja. Mahabharata*, Karnaparva, 69.59.

⁴Yogananda Paramahansa, *Science and Religion*, Calcutta: Yogoda Satsanga Society of India, 2000, 13.

⁵M. K. Gandhi, *Speeches and Writings of Mahatma Gandhi*, Madras, 1992, 807.

⁶Aurobindo, *Human Cycle*, 162.

through different levels – social, individual, and cosmic. Man has to realize his oneness with nature and fellow creations. This gradually results in the awareness of his oneness with God, the Indweller, and, finally, leads to cosmic integration. In this context it is relevant to quote the words of Pratima Bowes:

The human need for integration with religious reality operates on three different levels and in two different dimensions. Three levels are cosmic, social and individual; three planes of existence to which man can believe himself to belong, and the dimensions are the temporal and the timeless, that is, the here and now values of every day life, such as are involved in the practice of polytheism, and eternal values embodied in the quest for immortality such as we find in monotheism and monism.⁷

At the cosmic level the individual has to be integrated with all existence. The whole world with its living and non-living creations is seen to be the expression of one eternal principle, Brahman. "Verity, this self is the overlord of all things, the king of all things. As all the spokes are held together in the hub and felly of a wheel, just so in this self, all things, all gods and worlds, all breathing things, all these selves are held together."⁸

In Hindu religion, the search for integration operates in another level also. The manifold powers of nature are conceived as divine and are being worshipped. Here man recognizes his unity with nature through worship and adoration of natural forces. Rivers, mountains, trees and animals are worshipped as sacred. At this level, man does not transcend his finitude but remains satisfied by the favours that come to him from the natural forces. The polytheistic gods are worshipped for health, wealth, success and prosperity in life. For instance, we see that in Hindu religion Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth is worshipped for material prosperity. Collectively done, it is more a celebration and a good thing for all to enjoy rather than an expression of selfish desire.

There is another dimension of the search for the sacred, which is stimulated by man's social existence. This is expressed through belief and

⁷Pratima Bowes, *The Hindu Religions Tradition: A Philosophical Approach*, Bombay: Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1976, 86-87.

⁸*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 11.5.15.

practice. The *Purusha Sukta* of Rgveda teaches that man's social existence, its division into four categories (*varna*) and their functions, is not just a convenience but a divine self-expression, and, therefore, sacred. It also emphasizes that human family and society here on earth are copies of the divine family and society in heaven. Father Sky and Mother Earth are the parents of both men and gods of whom there are several groups. Rituals, ceremonies, communal prayers and festivals also belong to this dimension or approach. They bind the members of the community. This is the social function of religious festivals as they integrate individual in the social plane. The rites and ceremonies connected with birth, death and marriage have another function in sanctifying and giving it a religious touch. These can unite people more closely than any other social occasion.

Public religious ceremonies connected with religious festivals have another function. They bring collective enjoyment to people. There is a lot of merry-making and rejoicing. People of all communities participate in the cultural activities. These seem to have a double function. The participants get a chance for the expression of their creative talents and also to cultivate a deeper bond between them and onlookers. This naturally paves the way for social unity, tolerance, harmony and peace. This is a vital social function of religious festivals.

It is to be noted that the Hindu tradition or *sanatana dharma* has not any organized clergy. The Hindu priests have no institutional status or any organized institution through which people can be integrated in the social sphere. This purpose is served through religions rituals and festivals. An examination of some important religious festivals will reveal these ideas clearly. Durga Puja, Dussehra and Deepavali are three important festivals.

4. Durga Puja

Durga Puja or *Navaratri* is celebrated all over in India. This festival is important not only for its social appeal but also for its spiritual significance. There are three main ideals underlying the worship of Sakti or Mother Durga. (a) Mother Durga symbolizes the source, repository and sum total of all powers. From the lowest crawling amoeba to the galaxies in the outer space there is only one source of energy. (b) The source of power does not discriminate between good and evil. (c) It is inseparable from Brahman (Universal Soul) but it is sentient and manifest to its worshipper. She is Sakti, the power of Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara.

She takes the form of their consorts, without whom none of the Gods can achieve anything.

The rituals of *Durga Puja* starts with the construction of the clay image of Durga Devi for worship on Janmashtami, the day Devi is born to Yasoda, Krishna's foster-mother. The actual worship is held during the bright lunar fortnight of the month of Aswina (October). The worship begins with the establishment of a specially designed or decorated jar (*ghata*) on a specified altar. The deity is then ritually awakened and invited to appear first in a Bilva tree, and, subsequently, in the image with offerings of various articles. Next, she is formally invoked in the image, which is worshipped in each of the following three days along with associated deities. The use of a variety of articles from gold to cow dung symbolizes her universal presence. The deity is also given a very elaborate bath (*mahasnana*). Water collected from rivers all over India, various juices, other liquids, and soil obtained from a variety of places are used for this purpose. This is symbolic of unity of land. A sheaf of nine shoots (*navapartika*) representing Devi's manifestation in the plant kingdom is kept beside the image and elaborately worshipped. The Kumari Puja acknowledges the Divine Mother's presence in all women. At the 48 minute long junction of the *ashtami* and *navamy thithi* (day), Devi is worshipped in her terrible aspect of *Camundi*. This worship is known as *Santi Puja*. On the *navamithithi*, the worshipper surrenders himself to Devi through a sacrificial cutting of pumpkins, bananas, etc. This is *balidana*. The priest performs *homa* with offerings in a fire representing Durga. The *puja* concludes on the *ashtami thithi* with the immersion of the image in a river symbolizing Devi's reversion to her elemental forms, and her spirit is enshrined in the heart of the worshipper. The devotees then exchange greetings and sweets. The entire ritual is replete with symbolism. It is accompanied by devotional singing, chanting of *Devi Mahatmya*, daily *arati* in the evenings and distribution of *prasada*. All these create a joyous atmosphere and the devotees are imbued with the feeling of presence of Divine Mother.

The Spiritual significance of *Durga Puja* is that the only dedicated and energetic are likely to succeed in work. Men are able to control animal passions only by Mother's grace. The worship of Divine Mother with *navapatrika* is likely to produce great agricultural wealth. All the accessory rituals aim at concentration of mind. The significance of

Kumari Puja is in that it inspires men to look all women as manifestation of the Divine Mother. Women are to evince the dignity and power associated with the Divine Mother. Ultimately, all these practices and attitudes help to realize one's identity with Divine Motherhood within oneself, which, in fact, is inherent in all beings.⁹

5. Dussehra

The tenth day of *Durga Puja* is Dussehra. It is believed that on this day, in the *Treta Yuga*, Sri Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, killed the great demon Ravana who abducted Rama's wife, Sita, to his kingdom of Lanka. Sri Rama along with his brother Lakshmana and the devoted follower Hanuman and his army of monkey's fought a great battle to rescue Sita. The battle lasted for 10 days. Rama was a great devotee of goddess Durga and he prayed her for 9 days before he himself entered the battlefield. On this day Rama killed Ravana, Meghanada and Kumbhakarna. The story of Rama and Sita is recounted with affection and love in the great epic *Ramayana*. The whole of *Ramayana* is enacted in dramas staged in huge *pandals* and maidens in cities, towns and villages. Beautiful tableaux of actors in costumes of ancient times are taken around the city. These tableaux and enactments are known as *Ramleela*. The young and the old alike enjoy this big *mela*. In Bengal, this occasion is celebrated as the day on which Durga Devi killed the terrible demon, Mahishasura. On Dussehra all articles that are used for progress and prosperity of mankind are worshipped. All vehicles – cars, trucks, buses, etc. are worshipped by individuals using them. In army, police and paramilitary organizations, the drivers clean and polish their vehicles with great solemnity and patience.

6. Deepavali

The Deepavali is one of the biggest and grandest celebrations in India. It is also known as the Festival of Lights. It comes exactly 20 days after Dussehra on Amavasi (new moon). It is believed that on this day Lord Rama along with his lovely wife, Sita, brother Lakshmana returned to Ayodhya after the exile of 15 years. The evildoer Ravana has been eliminated. To commemorate the return of Rama, Sita and Lakshmana to Ayodhya people celebrate Deepavali with the bursting of crackers and lighting up their houses with earthen lights or other lamps in the grandest

⁹*Ya devi surva bhuthesu, matru rupena samsthita.*

style. Thousands of years have passed and yet the ideal kingdom of Rama (*Rama Rajya*) is remembered on this day.

On the Deepavali day a morning bath is very essential. In South India to bathe before sunrise after a good oil massage is considered as very auspicious. In North India gambling is freely allowed during the festival. Usually, card games are allowed. The children are also given money to play and join the fun. People drop in with sweets and crackers and other presents. Some visit the elders of the family and community out of respect. On this day, business people also give presents to those working for them. The businessmen do *Lakshmi Puja* in their shops and offices. It is believed that Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, visits very one during Deepavali.

7. Car Festival

Car festival (*Ratha Yatra*) held on the second day of the bright fortnight in Asada (June-July) every year. Puri in Orissa is the abode of Lord Jaganatha. It is believed that by seeing Lord Jaganatha in his chariot Nandighosa, one is freed from rebirths. For ages, Jaganatha is attracting devotees from distant places.

The legend part of it is this: Lord Jaganatha, along with his elder brother Balabhadra and Sister Subhadra – all riding on separate chariots – visit Gundica Grha, the house of Gundica – situated about three and a half kilometres away to the north west of Jaganatha temple. Gundica's house was the place where the images were made. Therefore, car festival or the sojourn of the Lord to Gundica's house is considered to be Lord's homecoming to have a free chat with his kinsmen away from the busy schedule of temples. Three wooden chariots are made every year. Nandighosa, the chariot of Lord Jaganatha, is covered by red and yellow clothes. Taladhvaja, the chariot of Balabhadra is decorated with red and green clothes. Devadalana, the chariot of Subhadra Devi is decorated with red and black clothes. Balabhadra who is fair in complexion represents the white people of western world. Subhadra Devi who by her yellow colour symbolizes the yellow people like those of China, Japan Korea, etc. Jaganatha, the black-god symbolizes the swarthy races all over the globe, including Indians. Tracing the historicity of *Ratha Yatra* is a bit difficult. However, it is ascertained that Lord Jaganatha continues to be the centre, around whom the integrity, culture, spiritual life and socio-economic life

of Orissa revolve. This car festival helps to cultivate universal harmony as it makes all faiths come closer physically, psychologically and culturally. This makes the excellent job of creating human equality.

8. Conclusion

It is a notable feature of Hindu religious tradition that it stands for the whole way of life of people. The problem of the nature of ultimate reality, the manifestation of reality in all aspects of life, the ways and means of integration with reality are found discussed in it. It has a liberal and tolerant attitude towards all other religions. In it the devotees enjoy the freedom to choose one's own path to perfection. Those who aspire for higher spiritual experience can follow and practice the clear-cut paths enunciated in it. Those who have not reached the heights of wisdom but aspire for higher and nobler life can choose paths suited to their own temperaments. The religious ceremonies and festivals are recognized for men in the lower level of religious experience. They tend to unite people for common purpose of worship. The rites and rituals associated with the religious festivals help to accentuate concentration on the deity worshiped. This, gradually, leads to steadiness of mind, inner purification and refinement. The members of all communities, irrespective of caste and creed, come together, unite and experience the thrill and joy. They forget their differences, worries and tensions and find fulfilment in their religious and aesthetic temperaments. The Divine presence is experienced though for a short while. This results in social cohesion and integration. This social integration leads to individual integration, and, finally, results in cosmic integration. Thus, in and through the rites and rituals in connection with the feasts and festivals, an individual is refined mentally, morally and spiritually.