

Indian Festivals and Christian Celebrations-1

V. F. Vineeth, cmi*

Lecture.1

Part I: The Structure and Dynamics of the Hindu Festivals

1. The need of festivals in Human life :

Men and women are living in this world which is a world of time, and are looking forward to transcend time and participate in the world of gods. Everything in this world is characterised by finitude and therefore our desire to transcend time is actually the desire to enter into that state of existence beyond time, the time of gods, the so-called sacred time. For this purpose we create mythological time in which we bring God down from the sacred time and we ourselves ascend from the ordinary time.

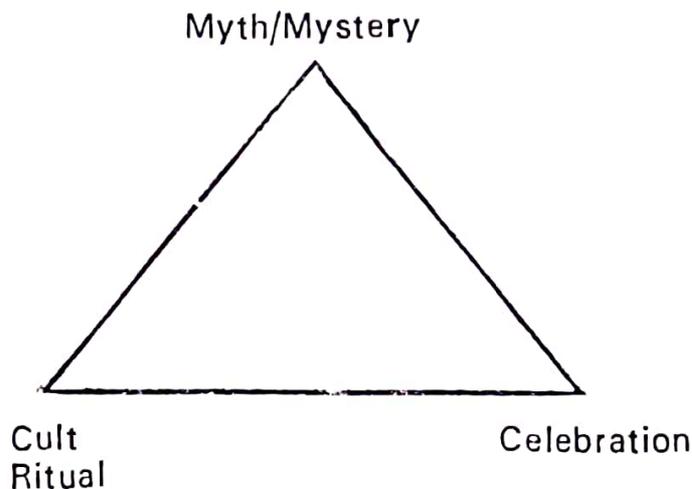
Festivals are celebrations during which human beings enter into this sacred time. As we need sacred time, we also need sacred space. Sacred space is always considered the centre of the world where the celebration takes place. Sacred spaces are often related to events, mythological or historical. Mount 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 any longer ordinary space. It is the space in which he/she comes in touch with God, moves from this

* Fr. Vadakethala F. Vineeth, cmi is Professor of Philosophy and Comparative Religion at Dharmaram Pontifical Institute, Bangalore. He holds a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Gregorian University, Rome and a Doctorate in Theology from Oxford University. He is at present the Director of the Centre for the Study of World Religions at Dharmaram and the associate editor of the International Quarterly, *The Journal of Dharma*.

world to the other world and participates in the life of God. Festival is thus the human entry into the divine rhythm of life; we forget at least for a moment our ordinary life of pains and tears.

2. The dynamics of the Hindu Festivals

The Hindu festivals, as any other festival in the world are centered around a triangle of myth, cult and celebration,



1) *The Myth*: Festivals are always associated with the ritual celebration of a mythical story. The mythical story is the factor that takes a person beyond time. The *Satapada Brahmana* says: "Let us do what gods did in the beginning"¹ What gods did in the beginning, according to a hymn in *Rig Veda*² the *purushasukta*, 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 so on.

3) *The Celebration*: The newly awakened consciousness or newly obtained life free from evil is what is celebrated.

(1) *Satapada Brahmana*, vii. 2, 1, 4.

(2) *Rig Veda*, x. 90, 1-16.

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 (*Navarathri*). The same dynamics may be seen in Christian festivals as well; they are prepared by 9 days (novena) of vigils, prayers, fasting and so on,

3. The utsava character of the festival

The Hindu festival is generally known as *utsava*. The sanskrit word for festival is '*utsava*'. 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 :

- a) the remembrance of the fallen stage of man : Mahishasura's reign, Rama in the forest.
- b) Rites of expiation to atone for our sins because the present state is considered as a punishment for our own *karma*, action. Hence vigils (*jagarana*) and fasting (*upavasa*).
- c) the appearance of the deliverer God (Durga comes as Mahishamardini), Real *utsava* is the liberation of mankind which is celebrated,

A parallelism of this dynamics of festival may be seen in the celebration of the Pasch ordered by God :

- a) the slavery in Egypt is remembered;
- b) the lamb is ritually slaughtered;
- c) the act of liberation from slavery is celebrated (*utsava*);
- d) the commandment is given to remember this act of liberation continuously.

According to the Hindu tradition every festival is expected to be; a) *sadhana*, namely a means of *utsava*, centered around : b) *Sat* (God) or Reality for : c) *moksha* = immortality through : d) *yoga* = union.

- c. ad a) *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*. The chief elements of the *sadhana* are : *Upavasa vrta* (the vow of fasting) and *Jagarana* (vigil).
- a. ad b) *sat* : By *Sat* is meant Reality in all its dimensions. Primarily Reality is God who manifested himself in manifold forms. So festivals 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 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 are 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.

- ad c) *moksha — liberation* : Moksha is understood as the final bliss (*ananda*) into which people are called to enter. 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.

- ad d) *yoga* : Yoga means union and is derived from the word *yug-yog* which means to unite. *Utsava* or celebration is the celebration of our union with 'Reality'. This union is four-fold :

- i. Union with God through the favourite deity who is remembered and whose story is re-enacted.
- ii. Union with fellow-beings; humanity as a whole is delivered from the bondages that keep human persons separated; very often festivals end up with a day of greeting and meeting one's own friends and relations.

- iii. Union with nature : festivals are fixed taking into consideration the course of planets and their effects on people and their earth. Thus the harvest festivals fall on the full moon day in the spring season.
- iv. 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 about deeper harmony and rhythm between the human and the divine.

Thus a Hindu festival becomes

- a potent means (*sadhana*)
- to elevate men and women (*utsava*)
- uniting them (*yoga*)
- with the divine (*sat*)

4. The Hindu Calendar

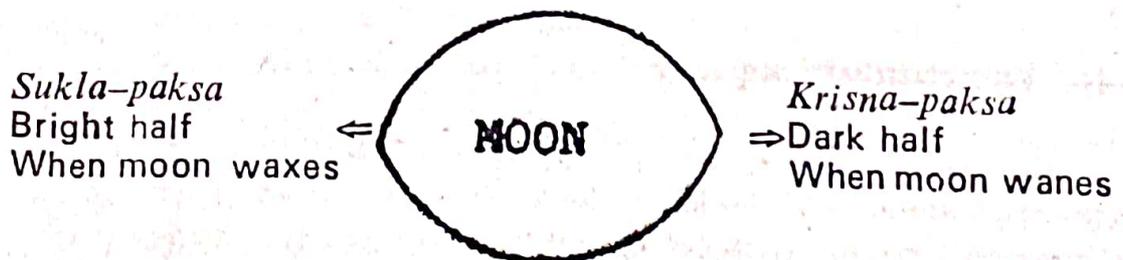
1). *The Hindu concept of time* : The Hindu concept of time is generally understood as cyclic in contrast to the Christian concept which is said to be linear. Though this contrast is basically valid, it is not as simplistic as it appears to be. Hindus consider the time in which we live now as a part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

From the stand-point of a Hindu the Christian linear concept of history is only a flash which could be very well accommodated into the huge period of *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 like Egypt, Mesopotamia, Israel and so on follow lunar months. India also knows the solar months based on the zodiac system. *Shankaranthi* is the day the sun enters into the mansion of each zodiac (*Rasi*). Lunar months are the following :

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| 1. Caitra (March-April) | 7. Asvina (Sept-Oct) |
| 2. Vasakha (April-May) | 8. Karttika (Oct-Nov) |
| 3. Jyesta (May-June) | 9. Margha-sirsa (Nov-Dec) |
| 4. Asadha (June-July) | 10. Pansa (Dec-Jan) |
| 5. Sravana (July-Aug) | 11. Magha (Jan-Feb) |
| 6. Bhadrapada (Aug-Sept) | 12. Phalguna (Feb-March) |

Each lunar month is divided into two halves known as the bright and the dark half.



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 *Krsna*. The 11th day (*ekadasi*) of each half is dedicated to Vishnu. Hence *ekadasi* fasting. The 4th of each month is dedicated to Ganesa, the 8th to Durga and the 13th to Siva.

Ganesa's feast falls on the 4th bright half of *Bhadrapada* (Aug-Sept). Hence *Ganesh Chadurthi*.

Krishna's birthday falls on the 8th dark half of *Sravana* (July-Aug). Hence *Krishna Janmastami*.

A similar system is also found in Christianity : Sundays are dedicated to the Lord, Saturdays to Mary and Wednesdays to Joseph.

(to be continued)