

Fairs and Festivals of Kāśī

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When we decided to look at the Radiance of Kāśī through the binocular of Fairs and Festivals, we did little realize that we are looking into a subject of vast dimension- instead of a pond we are looking at a sea. And then we realized the truth of the proverb that Varanasi celebrates "thirteen festivals every week". Any one can count them if he so desired - there are 24 *Ekādaśīs*, *Rāmālīlā* 31 days, Lakṣmī worship 16 days, Ancient *Pitṛ* worship 15 days, *Durgā-pūjā* and *Daśamī* 11 days, *Holī* for a week, *Rāma-navamī* and *Gaurī-pūjā* for 9 days, 56 days of Gaṇeśa, 12 days of Sun, 8 days for *Bhairobābā*, 12 *Saṅkrāntis*, more than 200 days for Śiva, many festivals of Viṣṇu and Kṛṣṇa, one extra holy month every third year, days of ten incarnations, birth and death anniversaries of saints and V.I.P., lunar and solar eclipses, National days, World days, Buddha, Jaina, Muslim and Christian festivals, provincial festivals and festivals of demigods, especially in rural areas, of *Bīrs* and *Pīrs*. List is very long and if one puts them on paper, the proverb will come true.

The question may be asked: are these festivals unique and meant for Kāśī only? Of course, other places celebrate many of these festivals and organize fairs on large scale but they have their selected ones. While Varanasi celebrates each and every festival, sure this city is micro-cosmopolitan. Kāśī has the proud privilege of lodging all the deities of Hindu Pantheon and also that of other sects and religions. Again it is not dogmatic about following one Hindu calendar - it takes into account all the calendars like *Hizri*, *Gregorian*, *Śaka* and others. If a calendar says today is our festive day, the city celebrates. We have all the colours of rainbow.

A very pertinent inquiry is why do we have a fair or festival? What is the need of this *haṅgāmā*. The question will have to be answered by Psychologists, Sociologists and Anthropologists. A friend of mine suggested and also wrote an article, suggesting that festivals, like *Durgā-pūjā*, *Divālī* and *Holī* should be banned legally. They are noisy, barbaric and hooliganistic and they disturb the peace of the city and its gentle citizens. I do not dispute the right of the gentleman to express his views and agree that when they come in power they may ban all the Hindu festivals. Of course the anti-festival feeling is not against the special days of other religions because they do not disturb the peace of people. The experiment of banning peoples' aspirations has been tried many a times but has not succeeded, left Government in Bengal has not succeeded in banning *Durgā-pūjā*. I remember Nero, who burnt Rome and to appease the people he organized sport festivals.

In a wider perspective, celebration of Fairs and Festivals are common all over the world and can be seen even in ancient times. Forms have changed but not the spirit.

If we look at the 'Family of Man' anywhere in the world, we will find events like the birth of a baby, marriage and anniversaries are celebrated with great joy, there is eating, drinking, music and dancing. Banaras is unique because here even Death is a festival. If looked into the Hindu household, many *vratas* and *utsavas* may be noticed. They fast on a particular weekday like Tuesday fast, Friday fast; they keep fast on particular *tithis* (the Hindu calendar-dates), like *ekādaśī* (the eleventh every fortnight). Then they fast on the birthday of incarnations like *Janmāṣṭamī*, *Śivarātri*. One can find similar observances everywhere and in various communities. This mini-seminar will throw light on some of them. It seems that the spirit of festivity is an essential feature of human life and seers of psychology and social science can throw light on this aspect of life.

Now the question is- Did the people of Kāśī celebrate festivals in the past and what were they? We do not have much information from Vedic or Puranic literature probably because they were so common and routine things. Of course *Smṛtis* do tell us of the celebration of *saṁskāras* - another name of religio-social celebrations.

Dr. Moti Chandra in his famous book **Kāśī kā Itihāsa** writes - 'Banaras has been famous for its *mauja-majā* in all the ages. And to satisfy their festive desires, they designed many festivals and fairs. And other people may not call them lazy, work shy and itching to enjoy a holiday, so they (the *Banarasīs*) associated most of these festivals with gods and goddesses.

Very little light has been thrown on festivals observed in Banaras, but there is no doubt that they are very old.

So now let us look at some of the ancient festivals, though the information available is very meager.

(1) Hasti Maṅgala

We find the description of this festival in the Jātaka tales of Pre-Christian era. *Jātaka-tale* No. 2/33 tells us that on this day elephants were decorated, they were covered with golden *jhūlā* made of golden net; the head was covered with gold ornaments. On this occasion, people recited *Hastī-sūtra*. The palace was decorated with flowers and leaves and with lighted lamps; Ladies wore new clothes and beautiful ornaments. Elephants with glistering white ornamented tusks came out in procession. The Brahmins enjoyed feast.

The present form seems to be the elephant decoration on *Vijayā-daśamī* day at Ramnagar Palace where the Raja performs Śastra-pūjā.

(2) Chatra Maṅgala

This again finds mention in the *Jātaka* tales. It seems it was a coronation festival. On this day the city was delightfully decorated. The king sat on the throne under a white umbrella (*chatra*). People paid tributary gift to him (*nazarānā*).

To date the *Rājagaddī-līlā* is probably the reminder of that. *Tulasīdāsa* after finishing the epic **Rāmacarita-Mānasa**, organized his first *Rāmalīlā* at Assi-ghāt and it was 'Coronation-Līlā'. In Kudiattam repertory, there is Bhāsa' play **Abhiṣeka Nāṭakam**. Again *Vijayādaśamī* also seems to be a prototype of this festival.

(3) Jalotsava (The Water Festival)

The *Jātaka-tale* No. 1/280 tells us that Banaras people celebrated *Jalotsava*. It appears to be a forerunner of the present day *Gaṅgā-Daśaharā*. Jains also observe *jalayātrā*. People, to appease the Rain god, fill up pitchers from Gaṅgā and bathe Lord Viśvanātha. It is called *Kalaśa-yātrā* or *Jala-yātrā*. At present the city organizes a *Kalaśayātrā* every year on *Nirjalā-ekādaśī*. Banaras has a Jagannātha Temple, and on *Jyāiṣṭha Pūrṇimā* the lord is bathed with water and this is *Snāna-yātrā*.

On the day of Gaṅgā-Daśaharā - the day is celebrated with *Gaṅgā-snāna* and *Gaṅgā-āratī*. It is the day of advent of Gaṅgā in plains. On this day unmarried girls used to bring their dolls in a basket and immerse them in Gaṅgā to appease the Water god. Then for four months they kept away from dolls (a similar ritual is observed in Maldives and Barbon countries). It was also observed as a day of prayer to Sea god, as the businessmen prepared to go on a trip to other lands across the seas.

(4) Madirotsava (Surā-Saṁrakṣaṇa)

Jātaka tale (1/208) informs us that the city observed *Madirotsava*. The King of Kāśī once served lots of wine to ascetics and the intoxicated *sādhus* started singing and dancing and became unruly; they uprooted the rice plants and indulged in hooliganism. *Jātaka* tale (4/73) says the king prohibited the sale of alcoholic drinks, but relaxed the order for this one day. So on this day people drank to their full. Still later, it led to brawls and many people were injured. The festival is also called *Surā-rakṣaṇa* (preservation of wine). It still remains in the fair called *Piyāle-kā-Melā* (the festival of cup). This is held on 1st Tuesday or Saturday of *agrahāyaṇa* at Shivpur and Chauka Ghat. Here they worship rural deities or demigoddesses - Kālakā (the *Brāhmaṇī* and Sahajā (the *Chamārin*) with offerings of wine. The participants are of lower caste, especially *dhobis* (Washer-men). This occasion reminds people of the Graeco-Roman festival - Bacchalia to honour the Wine god - Dionysus and there was unlimited drinking and orgy.

(5) Pakṣi-Utsava (Bird Festival)

From time immemorial, Banārasīs have shown kindness and special attention to animals and birds. This festival finds mention in the *Mahājanapada-yuga*. It was celebrated by offering seeds (birds feed) and water in clay pots hanging from balconies (still seen in some old houses). They made square holes in the building walls as homes for birds. They put a bamboo *chattrī* for pigeons and often put a bamboo floating in the river for birds to rest. It is still a custom to feed the fish with flour-pills. There is a way to symbolize the festival on the *lalai-chaṭ* and that is sale of a *ciḍiyā* (bird).

This kindness sometimes becomes troublesome, especially with naughty monkeys (because it was custom not to hit the monkey) or an obnoxious bull.

(6) Varṣā Maṅgala (Rain Festival)

Here we are reminded of the great Kālidāsa, who on 1st day of āṣāḍha welcomes clouds. In recent times, another poet Gurudeva Rabindra Nath started Varṣā Maṅgala celebrations at Shanti Niketan. In Banaras also some institutions celebrated Varṣā Maṅgala. For *Banārasī* - the rainy season is the time for fairs and festivals and everyone eagerly awaits *Sāvana* - which comes *jhūmke* or with zoom. During this season there are *jhūlā*, *jhūmar*, *ṣṅgāra*, *kajali-birhā*, *daṅgala* and picnics (*bahri-alang*) and *melās* at Sarnath and Durgājī. Since when these started, nobody knows but definitely since the time of Lord Buddha and his sojourn for four months (*cāturmāsa*) in rainy season.

Another interesting story comes from *Jātakas* (3/20). It is about a police chief, the *Kotawāla* named Nagarguettik. Once the king of Kāśī was pleased with an untouchable (Buddha in a previous birth) for his deep knowledge, that king garlanded him and made him the *Kotawāla*. The garland was of red flowers. Does this story remind us of the current festival called *Bhairava-aṣṭamī*?

(7) Buḍhavā Maṅgala

This is a unique festival of Banaras in which for 4 days - a number of music conferences are held on houseboats floating on Gaṅgā. Called *Vṛddha Aṅgāraka*, it was celebrated on Tuesday after *Holī* to bid goodbye to the old year and to welcome the New Year. It was a typical New Year eve of Banaras. How old it is, we do not know, it is said it was certainly during the time of Tulāsidāsa. It did continue upto the Nineteenth century but has now disappeared in its original form due to financial stringencies and vandalism.

(8) Kaumudī Mahotsava

We read about it in the history of Candragupta Maurya- (~300 B.C.). It was celebrated on the full moon night of *Kunvara* - it still is with us as *Kojāgari*, *Śarad-pūrṇimā*. It is said that on this night Lord Kṛṣṇa organised the *mahārāsa*. Vaiṣṇava temple observe the night with gaiety.

(9) Madanotsava and Kāma-Rati Pūjā

Probably, this was a spring festival in ancient time - a season of fertility. There was a worship of Kāma and Rati on *Vasanta-pañcamī* day. Later it became the day of worship of the goddess of learning - Sarasvatī. Again it seems that *Holi* was observed as *Madanotsava* and even today it is so. *Holi* has its erotic elements. Greece and other countries also organized such festivals.

(10) Vasantotsava (Welcome to Spring)

This spring festival is now observed as *Sarasvatī-pūjā*. It is a season of warmth, with flowers blooming and mother earth putting on green and yellow dress. 50 years ago, the people wore light yellow (*Basantī*) dress. The musicians sang *Rāga Basanta* and *Bahāra*.

(11) Dipāvalī

It is one of the four main festivals. It is associated with end of rainy season. Rice harvest is in godowns and wheat has been sown. It has been described in *Jātaka* tales (1/312-13), which says the city was decorated like *Indrapuri*. Woman wore saffron colored dresses with a lot of ornaments. Jaina *sūtras* (JS 1/page 296) say that *Dipāvalī* is celebrated as a great festival. It was the night when *Tīrthaṅkara Mahāvīra* died and his instruction was that one lamp of knowledge may have gone out but the darkness must be dispelled by lighting myriad lamps. It is also said this was the day of Rāma's Coronation.

(12) Other Festivals of ancient times are-

(i) Nandotsava

(ii) **Vṛkṣa Pūjā** - Still observed as *Vaṭa Sāvitrī Pūjana* - It has now taken a new meaning with stress on ecology and environment.

(iii) **Gau Pūjā** - *Govatsa-dvādaśī* and *Gopāṣṭamī* - This also has taken a new meaning in the era of prevention of cruelty to animals.

(iv) **Nāga Pañcamī** - Remembers Pāṇini and Patañjali. We do not know its relations with *Nāgas* and *Pāṇḍava* king - Janamejaya. It is at present a festival of Health and Gymnasium and of snake charmers.

(v) **Pitṛpakṣa** is the fortnight of our homage to forefather. It probably is as old as the proto-history.

(vi) **Varṣapati Pūjana** - New year of Hindus, *Saṅkrānti* and eclipses, new moon and full moon days are in vogue since calendars came into existence.

A special feature of Hindu festivals is their association with seasons, which are six number. As already pointed out, the great festivals occur as welcome to new season and also to the harvest. Of these, Spring-Rainy Season and Autumn (*śarad*) are very famous.

Looking at the calendar, one has to take note that most of our festivals are

according to lunar calendar - but some, like *saṅkrānti* and eclipse follow the solar one. Christian festivals follow the solar calendar. Islamic festival come according to lunar dates, but due to non-correction of calendar, the important events do not match with solar calendar. Hindus, every third year add an extra month and correct the dates and so the solar dates vary 10 to 20 days at the most.

Another feature of festivals of Banaras is its association with clay toys. During most of these festivals it was customary to buy a toy of the day. We can quickly look at them but this tradition is dying fast.

Festivals and Toys

No.	Month*	Date (Tithi)	Festival	Toy
1.	Caitra Śukla	1-9	Navarātra	Durgā, Gaurī
2.	-do-	3	Gaṇagaur	Gaurī Guḍiyā
3.	-do-	9	Rāma Navamī	Rāma Pañcāyatana
4.	Vaiśākha Kṛṣṇa	0 (Solar)	Satuā Saṅkrānti	Janjhara
5.	Vaiśākha Śukla	3	Akṣaya Tṛtīyā	Gaṅgā & Makara
6.	-do-	7	Gaṅgā Saptamī	Boat
7.	-do-	14	Narasimha Caturdaśī	Narasimha
8.	-do-	15	Buddha Pūrṇimā	Buddha
9.	Jyeṣṭha Kṛṣṇa	13-15	Vaṭasāvitrī	Banyan Tree
10.	Jyeṣṭha Śukla	10	Gaṅgā Daśajarā	Gaṅgā Bhagīratha
11.	Āṣāḍha Śukla	2-3-4	Rathayātrā	Jagannātha, Subhadrā, Balabhadra
12.	-do-	15	Guru Pūrṇimā	Guru (Śiva)
13.	Śrāvaṇa Śukla**	5	Nāga Pañcamī	Nāga, Picture-Nāgas, Pahalavāna
14.	-do-	11-15	Jhulā	Jhulā
15.	-do	15	Rakṣā Bandhana	Rākhī
16.	Bhādrapada Kṛṣṇa	3	Kajalī Tīja	Kajalī Singing, Cosmies
17.	-do-	6	Lalai Chaṭha	Bird
18.	-do-	8	Janmāṣṭamī	Large number of Toys
19.	Bhādrapada Śukla	3	Haratālikā Tīja	Unbaked Clay Śiva-Pārvatī

* As per Vikrami Calendar.

** In Śrāvaṇa, every Sunday there is 'Vṛddha Kal Kā Melā; every Monday - 'Sarnath Kā Melā and every Tuesday - 'Durgājī Kā Melā, On Karka Saṅkrānti day (Solar) - 'Śaṅkudhārā Kā Melā'.

20.	-do-	8	Sorahiya Fair (16 days)	Lakṣmī in various styles of ornaments
21.	-do-	12	Vāmana Dvādaśī	Dwarf
22.	-do-	14	Ananta Caudasa	Ananta
23.	On 17 th September	-	Viśvakarmā Pūjā	Huge idols of Viśvakarmā
24.	Āśvina Kṛṣṇa	8	Jiutīā	Babuā
25.	-do-	9	Mātr Navamī	Mother & Child
26.	Āśvina Śukla	1-9	Navarātra	Huge clay idol of Durgā, Kālī, Hanumān, Ghaṭa
27.	-do-	10	Vijayā Daśamī	Rāmalilā Masks & Toys
28.	-do-	11.	Bharata Milāpa	-do-
29.	-do-	15	Śarad Pūrṇimā Kojāgarī	Lakṣmī & Kubera
30.	Kārttika Kṛṣṇa	4	Karavā Cautha	Karvā
31.	-do-	4	Chetgunj Nakkaṭaiyā	Lot of Toys
32.	-do-	12	Govatsa Dvādaśī	Cow & Calf
33.	-do-	13	Dhanaterasa	Utensils, Dhanvantarī, Demons of Disease
34.	-do-	14	Kālī Caūḍasa	Kālī, Hanumān
35.	-do-	15	Dīpāvalī	Gaṇeśa, Lakṣmī, Dīpa Dhā- raṇī, Bhāṇḍar, Large num- ber of Toys, Sugar Toys
36.	Kārttika Śukla	1	Govardhana Pūjā	Annakūṭa
37.	-do-	1	Gujarati New Year	Gifts
38.	-do-	1	Jāmaghaṇṭa	Cards & Dice (Gambling)
39.	-do-	2	Bhāidūja	-
40.	-do-	8	Gopāṣṭamī	Cow
41.	-do-	9	Akṣaya Navamī	Picnic under Āmlā Tree
42.	-do-	11	Hariprabodhinī Ekādaśī (Devotthāna)	Tulasī (Marriage) Sugarcane
43.	-do-	15	Kārttika Pūrṇimā (Deodivālī)	Diyā, Mukki Daṅgala
44.	-do-	10	Nāga Nāthaiyā (Kṛṣṇa Līlā)	Lākhā Melā

45.	Mārgaśīrṣa Kṛṣṇa	8	Bhairva Aṣṭamī	Bhairon with Dog
46.	Mārgaśīrṣa Śukla	14	Loṭā-Bhaṅṭā kā Melā	Brinjal
47.	Pauṣa Śukla	15	Badrī Nārāyaṇa	Badrīnātha
48.	Māgha Kṛṣṇa*	4	Gaṇeśa Cautha	Gaṇeśa
49.	Māgha Śukla	5	Vasanta Pañcamī	Sarasvati
50.	-do-	12	Bhīṣma Dvādaśī	Huge idols of Bhīṣma on Ghats
51.	Phālguna Kṛṣṇa	13	Mahāśivarātri	Śiva
52.	Phālguna Śukla	11	Rangabharī Ekādaśī	Colours (Dry)
53.	-do-	15	Holikā Dahana	Effigy of Holikā & Prah-lāda, Cow-dung Toys
54.	Caitra Kṛṣṇa	1	Dhuli Vandana	Colours, Sweets & Toys
55.	In Māgha		Pyāle kā Melā	Where Bamboo products- Ḍaliā, Sūpa, Fans are sold
56.	First Tuesday after Holī		Buḍhavā Maṅgala	A Music Festival on Boats
57.	In Caitra		Gulāba Bārī	Another Music Festival with Caitī Rose & Caitī Songs
58.	On the 4th of Bhādra- pada Śukla**		Great Gaṇeśotsava for 10 days begins (especi- ally in Maharashtra)	Huge Gaṇapati idols

Here we come to the end of a short resume of festivals and toys.

At the end it may be concluded with a short note on *Ratha-Yātrā*. On the first three days of Āṣāḍha-śukla, icons (wooden) are brought from Jagannātha Temple at Assi and put on a chariot at Mehmoorganj. This festival started in the first decade of 19th century when the chief *pujārī* of Jagannātha Temple at Puri came to live in Varanasi. Beni Ram and his brother with the help of Rājā Bhonsle built the Temple and gave instructions to celebrate the *melā* along with the Puri car-festival. This is the first festival of the season after summer. Fifty years ago, this area had small population and there were lot of open places and garden lawns. People from villages came to Varanasi and stayed here for three days enjoying a full-length picnic and village fair. Now with growing population and growing concrete jungle, the fair is losing its lusture and sanctity - and other fairs and festivals are also not in a better position. Will they add any Radiance to Kāśī in the 21st century is posing before us a big question mark.

* Every Monday of Māgha - Vedavyāsa kā Melā

** On this day, if you see the Moon; throw a stone and get abused - it is called Ḍhelā Cautha.