

An Introduction to the Fairs and Festivals of Bengal in Kāśī

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Festivals are expressions of joy in life. *Utsava*, *Uddharṣa* and *Uddhava* are the synonyms and etymologically mean – *Udgataḥ harṣo'tra* – उद्घर्ष – where happiness abounds; उद्दुनोति दुःखम् – उद्भव – which removes sorrow; and उत्सुवति प्रेरयति–उत्सव – what enthruses or provides impetus to people. As such, *utsava* or festival signifies an urge to dispel sufferings and providing an energetic disposition. The idea of *mokṣa*, however, which stands for renunciation, appears opposed to the idea of festivities. In our opinion, Hindu festivals signify observations of certain rites, prescribed by the Śāstras, which urge the people to proceed hopefully to the path of ultimate deliverance through material prosperity. The purpose of all the festivals, it may be noted, is to ward off the worldly fear and suffering by securing the grace of Godhead.

भूतप्रेतपिशाचेभ्यो रक्षोभ्यश्च महेश्वरि ।
देवेभ्यो मानुषेभ्यश्च भयेभ्यो रक्ष मां सदा । ।

That is why, it may be said that the Hindu festivals aim at achieving both – अभ्युदय – prosperity and निःश्रेयस – deliverance.

Varanasi has ever been a centre of pilgrimage. Pilgrims and wandering mendicants have been visiting this holy city since time immemorial. But pilgrims and *sanyāsins* do not form a society. As such, so far as our record goes, Bengalee festivals in Varanasi can be traced from c. 1750. It may be assumed that by the middle of the 18th century, a sizeable number of Bengalees settled in Varanasi following the advent of the rich landed gentry – Rājās, Mahārājās and Zamīndāras. Starting with the Mitra family of Caukhambhā, which acquired property here in c. 1750, the great Rānī Bhavānī of Natore (1737-1802) and Raja Jaya Narayana Ghosal (1752-1820), many Rājās and Zamīndāras, notably the Rājā of Vardhamāna, Kasimabāzār, Kūca Bihar, Rānī Rāsamaṇī, the estates of Putia and Muktagacha, Panchakota, Rangpur and others came over to Varanasi and established *mathas*, *mandiras*, charitable alms houses (सत्र) and other religious and charitable institutions.

Of these, Rānī Bhavānī (a contemporary of Ahalyā Bāi (1726-1795) and Raja Jaya Narayana Ghosal deserve special mention as the promoters of the Bengalee community. The Rānī, during 1752-58 and 1785-87, lived in Varanasi and built the temples of Kālī, Tārā, Bhavānī, Gopāla, Rādhā-Kṛṣṇa and Śiva at the locality known as Pandey Ghat. The Rānī was a great donor and helped to repair many old temples and *kuṇḍas*. She donated all her income from other landed properties for the maintenance of these temples. Raja Jaya Narayana Ghosal came to Varanasi by 1791 and acquired big property. He built a grand symbolic temple of the Guru, the Gurudhāma and established the Jaya Narayana School in 1818, the earliest English School in this part of India. He was a deeply religious man and translated the **Kāśī-Khaṇḍa** in Bengalee and composed the **Kāśī-Parikramā** in 1809. By 1846, the kings of Kūch Bihar built two temples of Kālī-Karuṇamayī and Dayāmayī by name, Rādhā-Govinda and five Śiva temples, which are still maintained by the state. The Raja also repaired the Lolārka-Kuṇḍa and established a *Śivaliṅga* and an image of *Mahiṣāsūramardīnī*. The establishment located at Sonarpura, arranged for regular

reading of the Purāṇas and provided free food to a certain number of people. Many *satras*, charitable alms houses, viz. the Puṭiā, the Vidyāmayī, Rāṅgāmāṭi, Rājarājesvari (1850), etc. among others, provided free food to the students of Sanskrit and indigent people.

By 1850, thus the Bengalee society got well-established in Varanasi and consisted of *sanyāsins*, for whom *maṭhas* were there (the Kāmarūpa Maṭha at Daśāsvamedha claims to have been founded 400 years ago; Sumeru or Rājaguru Maṭha also claims a similar antiquity); priests; Sanskrit *paṇḍitas* of great repute and diverse people of all sorts of professions.

Bengalees in Varanasi, following the establishments of Rānī Bhavānī, concentrated in the so-called अन्तर्गृह (inner sanctum) of Kedāranātha, which stretched generally from the Śivālā locality to Daśāsvamedha, on the eastern bank of the holy river Gaṅgā.

Bengalees, wherever they went outside Bengal, took with them their Godheads, religious rites, social customs and cultural distinction. The favourite Gods are (1) Kālī, (2) Durgā, (3) Kṛṣṇa-Rādhā and (4) Śiva. Religious rite includes the earthen image of the Godhead, the *ghaṭa* with *pañca-pallavas* and the green coconut, and the Tantric procedure of worship along with some Vedic mantras. The social customs were reflected in their dress, which normally consisted in a *dhotī* and *uttariya*, especially in the case of *paṇḍitas*; *pānjābī* or shirt as the upper garment in the case of others and a shawl in the winter. In the course of time, this has undergone a change, and the European dress has mostly taken its place. The marriage, as well as the funeral processions and the rites relating to these, are also typical. One would easily perceive these as belonging to the Bengalees.

With this bare sketch of the social milieu of the Bengali-speaking people in Varanasi, we may look at the festivals observed by them. Two types of festivals have been noted – social and religious. The religious festivals may be divided on the basis of the Godheads. Thus, we have:

Festivals related to Goddess Kālī:

- (a) The earliest known image of Kālī is that established by Rānī Bhavānī (1752-58).
- (b) The Śavaśivā-Kālī (1789) in Devanāthapurā.
- (c) The Kālī at Prahlād Ghat (1840), said to have been established by the *Sāhās*, dealers of wine and liquor.
- (d) The Kālī images of Kūca Bihar Temple (1846).

In addition, many other Kālī temples are there, e.g. Daśāsvamedha, Pañcakoṭa, Jaṅgamabāḍī, etc. In all the temples, daily worship is held and special *pūjā* is held on specific days. There are families of Brāhmaṇas who worship Kālī daily and have the image made of metal, installed.

Festivals related to Goddess Durgā:

Durgā is worshipped in the two *navarātris* – Āśvina and Caitra. The *pūjā* of Durgā is held for five consecutive days – *ṣaṣṭhī*, *saptamī*, *aṣṭamī*, *navamī* and *daśamī*. There were families, which worshipped the Goddess at their own houses. In the course of time, however, personal family-*pūjās* have fallen to disuse and public-*pūjās* have taken over. Durgā, Jagaddhātrī, Annapūrṇā and Vāsantī are the four separate forms of

the Goddess; but the autumnal *Durgāpūjā* is mostly held. Jagaddhātṛī and Annapūrṇā are worshipped for only one day. There are families, which have the metallic image of Durgā installed in their houses, which are worshipped daily.

- (a) The earliest known image is dated 1767, known as old Durgābārī, located at Garuḍeśvara. The same earthen image continues till date.
- (b) *Durgāpūjā* at the Mitra House in Chaukhambā started since 1773.
- (c) The earliest public *Durgāpūjā* started since 1922. The *pūjā* is organized by the Varanasi Durgotsava Sammilani. Many other public bodies also organize the annual *pūjā* festival.

Festivals related to Viṣṇu/Kṛṣṇa:

Devout Hindus worship Nārāyaṇa in the form of Śālagramāśilā at their houses. Special *pūjās* are held on *Janmāṣṭamī*, *Jhūlana*, *Rāsa* and *Dola pūrṇimā* days. Festivals are observed in the temples, as well as by the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava Maṭha and by many householders. The *snāna* and *rathayātrās* are also observed with zeal and devotion.

Worship of Śiva:

Śiva, like Nārāyaṇa, is a household deity, worshipped daily by devout Brāhmaṇas. For worship, the *Bāṇaliṅga* or clay-*liṅgas* are used. There are innumerable temples where people go and worship. For Śiva, only one special *pūjā* is held on *Śivarātri*, which is a *vrata*, and devotees keep fast and worship the God in the night for four times.

Other Gods and Goddesses:

The popular Gods and Goddesses of the Bengalees are Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī and Kārttika. Lakṣmī is the goddess of prosperity and almost all the Hindus worship her on the Kojāgari *pūrṇimā*. Sarasvatī, as the goddess of learning, is also widely worshipped. Beautiful images are installed and worshipped on the Vasanta Pañcamī day. This *pūjā* is a must in most of the Bengalee schools, colleges and literary clubs.

It may be pointed out that in the religio-cultural sphere in Varanasi, Bengal added a new dimension. Images of Gods and Goddesses were introduced by the Bengalee artists (*pālas*) from Bengal. The Goddess Durgā, with ten hands killing the demon Mahiṣāsura, flanked on either side by Lakṣmī, Sarasvatī, Kārttika and Gaṇeśa, is typically Bengalee in character. The clay images may be considered as a remarkable contribution of Bengal to the festivals of Varanasi.

The Goddess of the snakes and poison, the Manasā Devī is a completely new addition to the Hindu pantheon by the Bengalee Hindus. Manasā is worshipped either in the month of Śrāvaṇa or in Bhādra on the Nāga Pañcamī day. Her exploits are sung for a full month in the form of Padmā-Purāṇa. It is called a *pāñcālī*, a special variety of Bengalee poetic literature. In Varanasi also, the month-long recitation of the *pāñcālī* used to be undertaken in some temples and some houses as well, till recently, where a social gathering took place to listen to the exploits of Manasā and her adversary Chand Sadagar.

If *Manasā-pāñcālī* is a religio-cultural contribution of Manasā Devī, *Hari-kīrttana*, *Nāma-gāna*, *Bhāgavata-pāṭha* and *Yātrā*-theatrical representation of the exploits of Kṛṣṇa are so of Kṛṣṇa. The *Hari-sabhās* are a regular feature in the religio-cultural life of Bengal. Varanasi also had *Hari-sabhās*, where local as well as great

singers from Bengal, used to assemble on the occasion or *Rāsa*, *Jhūlana* and other festivals. The earliest *Hari-sabhā* is the Harināmapradāyini, founded in 1889 at Jaya Bhavāni Mandira of the Rāni Bhavāni, which still continues. *Kathakas*, the reciters of *Kṛṣṇacarita* and singers of *kirttana*, a typical variety of Bengalee music, recite and sing in praise of the noble exploits of the God on festive occasions. The *yātrās* on Dhruva, Prahlāda, Rāvaṇa, etc. are staged by dramatic parties. The practice, however, has now been discarded. Other *Hari-sabhās*, viz. Ānandāyini Sabhā, Oudhagarbī Hari-sabhā also functioned for a long time.

The festive occasion of the 5-day *Durgāpūjā* festival provided impetus to the Bengalee community to enact Bengali plays on the occasion. One of the earliest dramatic clubs dates from 1885-86. It was the Harihara Samiti. Later on, other dramatic clubs followed suit – the Lalita Cakra still continues and organizes staging of plays. The earliest Bengalee public library, Banga Sahitya Samaj, perhaps the earliest in the city, also was founded in 1866, which has been carrying on its literary activities till this day, showing up the literary awareness of the Bengalees of Varanasi.

Thus, the religious festivals united the Bengalees on humanitarian, cultural and dramatic spheres and provided them with an energetic sense of fellow-feeling, the essence of all festivals – उत्सव.

This introduction is necessary in as much as festivals cannot be viewed in isolation. These are deeply linked with the life of human beings. As such, the background of the Bengali-speaking people of Varanasi has been reviewed here in the historical perspective. Though the review required greater space, it has been dealt in a nutshell, which is hoped to be useful for understanding the subject-matter.

Dr. Pranati Ghosal, my collaborator, has provided in the following pages a detailed and cogent account of the fairs, festivals, *yātrās* and *vratas* prevalent among the Bengali-speaking people of Varanasi. She is right in neglecting the fairs, which essentially are the localized events. Bengalees could not bring with them the fairs, which are related to special areas of Bengal. She has given all the details of the festivals, *yātrās* and *vratas* along with all pieces of information regarding their dates and sāstric procedure. The account will definitely throw welcome light on the Bengalee religio-cultural contribution to the cosmopolitan culture of Varanasi.