

Indian Festivals: Voices of Cultural Identity

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Abstract

Festivals are undoubtedly culture specific, undying, life throbbing entities that carry on traditions and practices, political, social and religious views across generations. Festivals have carved a space for themselves in the realm of Culture and have played a significant role in propagating its richness. Most of the festivals revolve around a myth or a story that is transported down the lane in an oral tradition. They are subjected to 'change' and 'growth' which are the characteristics of modern perspective. Therefore, over the years a festival has the possibility of becoming a medium of imparting ideologies to evolve as a genre with a 'voice'.

From the point of view of Cultural Practices, Festival Research is identified as a space where negotiations of cultural identity takes place as festivals are a part of the sub cultural artwork and spectacle. This paper purports to throw light on the culture embedded in the less explored festivals of India, namely, **Sammakka Saralamma Jatara** of Telangana, **Koovagam** of Tamil Nadu, **Ambubachi Mela** of Assam, **Karsha Gustor** Festival of Ladakh, and **Hola Mohalla** of the Sikh community. A journey through these festivals will help to attain a better understanding of the involvement of indigenous communities in achieving an Indian 'identity' of multicoloured 'culture'.

Keywords: Festivals, Culture, Identity, Indigenous Communities

The word 'Culture', the most frequently used term in a simpler sense is about good taste and refined manners. But in a broader sense it is said for material embodiments of good taste and refinement. According to S. Abid Hussain, the term Culture has sometimes really a still more general and abstract connotation-a system of ultimate ends or norms of life. When people make the disputable assertion that eastern culture is more spiritual than western they use the word in this most general and abstract sense. But while saying about Indian culture it is something spell binding.

“Indian culture has a long and continuous history. It extends over 5000 years. India developed a way of life, which she modified and adjusted as and when she came into contact with outside elements. In spirit, however, it was quite in keeping with the indigenous doctrines and ideas. This accounts for the long and continuous period of Indian culture. It is this characteristic of Indian culture that enabled it to withstand many vicissitudes and to continue to mould the life of Indians” (Murthi P. Kamath, 1976). India is the only country with such a vast and most diverse mixture of tradition and culture. Martin Luther King Jr, has once said during his visit to India, “To other country I may go as a tourist, but to India, I come as a pilgrim”. But what makes India or Indian culture completely exemplify is by some of the unique festivals celebrated cross India.

Celebrations could be considered as an integral and immeasurably important fabric of India’s culture. India is known for its celebration of festivals and fairs. Festivals symbolize peoples cultural, social and religious aspirations which, besides helping them to lead a fuller and better life and also remove its monotony by providing physical diversion and mental recreation. In these days Festivals in India are of special significance, different from ordinary days, designed to serve a specific purpose. For the aspects of the country’s civilization and culture preserving they help, promote social unity and mutual cooperation. Thus Fairs and Festivals became the embodiment of Indian people’s cultural unity.

Festivals play an important role in connecting people, building nationhood and cultural identity and maintaining the delicately balanced system of ‘unity in diversity’ in India. These are possible only with the element of ‘togetherness’ that festivals hold within them beyond mere celebrations. Therefore the concept of ‘Ubuntu’ or ‘I am because we are’ can be applied appropriately in the cultural context of India .Togetherness is the core spice that passes on the hue of festivals down the ages to generations of Indians across the globe. Many of the Indian festivals also carry out a social responsibility of voicing out strong opinions that brings the marginalized sections of the community to the forefront. To understand all these characteristics and multiple roles of festivals let’s venture into a journey through the less explored festivals of India which are a celebration of all things human, natural and divine.

Sammakka- Sarakka Jathara is a tribal festival of Medaram village in Telangana . The festival also known as *Medaram Jathara* is celebrated once in two years in Magha masam (January/February) for a period of four days.The term ‘jathara’ means a mela or a temple festival. *Medaram Jathara* celebrates the valour of two goddesses, Sammakka and Sarakka. Many tribal women consider the four day jathara to be an auspicious occasion to give birth. They consider it as a blessing from the two goddesses. Thus this biennial festival attracts thousands of people, especially pregnant women from Andhra Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand to the Warangal district of Telangana. It is said to be the second largest religious gathering in the country after Kumbh Mela and it has been taking place over thousand years now. It was only in 1968 that the state government took the initiative in organizing the festival and later in 1996, it was declared to be a state festival. During the festival the state government makes provisions to take care of the mothers and their newborns. It is recorded that in 2018, there were two deliveries on the first day of the festival.

The devotees offer jaggery equal to their weight to seek blessing from their goddesses. The festival has the characteristics of a mystical and wild one. Legend has it that about six to seven centuries ago, tribal chieftains who went for hunting found a baby girl with an aura on Chilkalgutta hill. The chieftains adopted her, raised her as Sammakka and got her married to Pagididda Raju who was the head of the Koya tribe. The Koya tribe was a feudatory of the Kakatiyas. Sarakka and Pagididda Raju had two daughters, Sarakka and Nagulamma, and a son, Jampanna. During a severe drought season, their lakes dried up and thus Pagididda Raju failed to pay the tax to the Kakatiya King Prathapa Rudra. The King sent his army to collect the due tax from the tribe. This in turn turned out to be a battle between the Kakatiyas and the Koya tribe. Except Sammakka, everyone in her family lost their lives in the battle. Later she joined the battle and fought valiantly against the Kakatiya Army. She refused the truce offered to her by the Kakatiyas and continued to fight with the rage in her. She cursed the Kakatiyas for destroying her family and pledged to protect her tribe as long as she lived. It is believed that after she was severely injured in the battle, she rode her horse to Chilkalgutta hill where she was found as a child and disappeared. When her army forces went in search of her, they found a vermilion box, bangles and pug marks. She might have turned into a tigress. It is said that while she was born she was surrounded by tigers. She might have taken the human form then to save the Koya tribe. There is this mystery which surrounds the appearance and disappearance of Sammakka but the story ends with the destruction of the Kakatiyas who were cursed by Sammakka.

Later Sammakka became the warrior goddess of the Koya tribe. She stands as an embodiment of strength. People also believe that she has the power to destroy as her curse on the Kakatiyas led to their downfall.

Everybody is not allowed to carry out the rituals of the jathara. There are a few families or 'gothras' who have the legacy of conducting it. The festival is a confluence of four processions. The first procession starts from the temple of Pagididda Raju in Ponugondla village. The second procession carries a relic belonging to Govinda Raju, a relative of Pagididda Raju who also died in the war, from a temple in Kondayi village. In the third procession Sarakka is brought from her temple in Kannepalle. She is represented by bamboo sticks smeared by turmeric. On the first day of the festival, the idols and relic are placed at the altar in Medaram. On the second day, Koya priests climb Chilkalgutta hill to bring Sammakka to the altar in the form of a vermilion box. Therefore no idol of human form is worshipped in this jathara. In the fourth procession the priests proceed from the hill to the altar. People go into a state of trance during this time. On the third day the goddesses are worshipped and on the last day they are taken back to their respective abodes.

Koovagam Transgender Festival is celebrated annually in Koothandavar Temple of Villupuram district of Tamil Nadu. Every year, between April and May, thousands of transgenders from across the country converge at this temple for their festival which runs for over eighteen days. The temple is dedicated to Aravan/ Koothandavar, son of Arjuna. Legend has it that during the Mahabharatha war, Lord Krishna became a woman named Mohini to grant the last wish of Aravan. During the Mahabharatha war, on the eighteenth day there came a scenario where the Pandavas had to sacrifice someone from themselves to Goddess Kali to please her and win the battle. Aravan offered himself to be sacrificed but he asked Lord Krishna

to fulfil a wish of his. He wanted to be married before his death. With just one day's marriage and a lifetime of widowhood ahead, no woman was willing to marry Aravan. So Lord Krishna took the avatar of Mohini and married Aravan. After spending a night with his wife, Aravan sacrificed himself the next day to ensure the triumph of the Pandavas.

Most transgenders who visit the temple believe that they are the Mohinis. They follow the ritual the rituals of marrying Lord Aravan. There are all kinds of celebrations songs, dances, games and even beauty pageant. The winner of the pageant is crowned 'Miss Koovagam'. The festivities reach their zenith on the seventeenth day, in the evening when all the transgenders dress up as brides and wear bangles. The priest, representing Lord Aravan, ties the thaali or the mangalsutra in the night. The conclusion of the festival is by the beheading of an effigy of Aravan on the eighteenth day. After the beheading these brides mourn the death of Aravan by breaking their bangles and thalis, symbolizing the end of their one day marriage.

When transgender community is battling for recognition and acceptance, the Koovagam festival has become one of the major platforms to present their issues and problems to the society.

Hola Mohalla is an annual fair that is organized at Anandpur Sahib in Punjab on the day following the festival of Holi. There is the robust display of weapons, martial arts skills and stimulated war activities (mock encounters/ gatka), horse racing, archery and sword play. This is followed by music and poetry competition to lighten the charged up atmosphere. Holla Mohalla highlights the military prowess and bravery of soldier –saints, and also reminds the community of the need to keep itself ready for battle. Hola Mohalla attracts more than five million people all over the world every year to Punjab.

The practice of holding such a fair was initiated by Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth guru of the Sikhs, who was also a witness of the brutal onslaught by the Mughals on the Sikhs. The fair was started with the purpose to physically strengthen the Sikh community by holding military exercises and mock battles. A number of religious lectures were also conducted in his presence. He invested all his personal, temporal and spiritual concerns into developing his community to have a recognisable identity. He wanted to mould his community into a militant one but with a moral purpose. Hola Mohalla is thus a clarion call for unity among the Sikhs.

Ambubasi Mela/ Ambubachi Mela is celebrated in Guwahati, the capital city of Assam. It is a celebration of fertility and rejuvenation. It is the most important festival of the Kamakhya temple in Guwahati. The presiding deity of the temple is goddess Kamakhya and this temple is one of the most ancient pilgrimage sites of goddess worship in Asia. The festival is based on tantric cult rituals. According to various beliefs, after the famous fire sacrifice of King Daksha, where his son-in-law Lord Shiva was insulted, Daksha's daughter Sati immolated herself. Shiva roamed around the universe with her charred body thrown over his shoulder, performing his vigorous dance(ugra tandava). In order to stop this and to regain world order and peace, Lord Shiva ordered his loyal discus, Sudarshana to cut Sati's body into many pieces. This resulted each of her body parts to fall on the earth and become holy spots of worship for devotees of the mother goddess. Her vulva fell in the Nilachala Hills in the ancient kingdom of Ahom(present day Assam) and today this venerated place is known as the holy shrine of goddess Kamakhya.

The four day *Ambubasi Mela* is considered to be holy and auspicious for all those immersed in Shakti or mother goddess worship. It is the time when ‘the goddess bleeds’. Water springs forth from the idol of the goddess inside the Kamakhya temple and this happens for four days. This is seen as the proof of the goddess undergoing ‘menses’ and rejuvenating her menstrual cycle. Every monsoon, during the four-day mela, devotees from different parts of the country crowd the surroundings of the Kamakhya temple. The temple remains closed for three days as it is believed that the Mother Earth is unclean for three days. It is considered inauspicious to light kitchen fires in homes, do farming, read any holy books or conduct any rituals and therefore everything comes to a grinding halt. Everyone is out on the streets chanting prayers during the mela. After three days, on the fourth day of the mela, the temple doors are reopened after goddess Kamakhya is bathed and rituals are performed. It is then believed that the Mother Earth is retrieved in purity and the devotees are allowed to enter the temple to worship Kamakhya goddess. The *Ambubasi mela* is an acknowledgement of nature as the mother goddess. It is a prayer to a living, rejuvenating and breathing goddess. She is prayed to for her power of revitalisation.

The *Gustor* festival is a three day festival celebrated every year in Ladakh at various monasteries of Thiksey, Spituk and Karsha Nanzkar. The festival begins on the seventeenth day of the ninth month of the Tibetan lunar calendar (October-November). The Buddhist legends say that the Tibetan king Lang Darma was possessed by demons and under his four years rule (AD 838-842), Buddhism suffered heavily. He closed down temples and monasteries, destroyed Buddhists texts and also executed many monks. To ‘free’ the King from the evil spirit and thus liberating the Buddhists from his reign of terror and bloodshed, the Buddhist monk Lhalung Pelgyi Dorje donned a ‘cham’(ritualistic dance performance) dress, picked up a bow and arrows and rode to Lhasa. There he performed his cham in front of the king and while holding the audience in a moment of trance, he shot the king with his arrow in the middle of his dance. This led to a complete liberation of the Buddhists as the King’s evil reign ended with his death.

Lang Darma symbolises evil in Buddhist traditions. The killing of Lang Darma or the ‘evil’ is the central theme of the *Gustor* festival in Ladakh. The Tibetan form of Buddhist tradition believes in non-violence and the killing of Lang Darma takes a rational connotation of non-violence rather than that of violence. During this festival there is a re-enactment of the assassination of the evil king. The Buddhist monks perform the ‘cham’ wearing different masks representing their Saviour Lhalung Pelgyi Dorje. The central feature of Thiskey *Gustor* festival is the Black Hat ritual dance. The enactment of the killing of Lang Darma is done by the Black Hat dancers. This ceremony is called ‘argham’. An effigy of Lang Darma is made and is infused with evil spirits through some rituals. The killing of Lang Darma is marked by the breaking of ‘torma’(a sacrificial cake) by the head of the Black Hat dancers and burning of the effigy. Towards the end of the festival the torma is distributed by the Black hat dancers celebrating the triumph of good over the evil.

The Indian Festivals discussed here are representations of India’s varied culture and its richness. *Sammakka- Sarakka Jathara* of Telangana is a festival full of mystique and frenzy celebrating birth and life. *Koovagam* festival of Tamil Nadu is the voice of the transgender community. *Hola Mohalla* of Punjab stands for the unity and camaraderie of the Sikh

community. The *Ambubachi Mela* of Assam celebrates Mother Nature or 'Prakriti' as goddess and thus voices out that the true worship of nature is in protecting and safeguarding it. The festival roars against every exploitation that creates an aberration in nature. The *Thiskey Gustor* Festival of Ladakh proclaims the victory of good over all evil powers.

Festivals, no wonder, have become a part of our culture, our being. The concept of the Festival of India was simply to present the living essence of Indian Culture through Indian eyes. Culture here being defined as the total life style of a people and the ethos behind it and also the changes taking place in it under the impact of progressive thought. It was indeed a challenging task to present the culture of India as a living continuous tradition-dating back nearly five thousand years and synthesizing all the time. The theme of continuity and change was to bring home the point that India is a living civilization. Here the past continues into the present and the present illumines the past.

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