

## AKSHAY TRITIYA: DEVOTION WITH ASSURED RETURNS

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Ananda Bazar Patrika, 21st April 2015  
(English Version)

Over a hundred years ago, British observers had noted that “Akshaya Tritiya is kept throughout India on the third day of Vaishaka Shukla-paksha. To bathe this day and to give fans, umbrellas and money to the Brahmans is believed to earn imperishable merit. The performance of it is consequentially very popular.” Celebrated in all provinces, this festival which falls on the third day of the bright half of Vaishaka, is also called Akha Teej in the Hindi belt. It is observed by Jains with equal fervor, but let us make a special note of the merit of daana, and move on.

Many religions of the world believe in auspicious moments, but none can come even close to the Hindus’ obsession with shubha muhurat and the meticulous calculations that determine it. When people question how such an unstructured religion could hold together for centuries, with neither Vatican-Mecca, nor a Pope, Patriarch, Khalifa or Grand Imam, one needs to understand the common codes that governed all believers, through an intricate and omnipresent network of a priestly class. Among these codes are the consulting the Panchanga or Panjika, where lunar and solar calibrations mix with astronomy, astrology and religious requirements into a unique discipline. Though differences do exist between ‘schools’ and in the methods of calculation, they are broadly similar where most festivals, events, good and bad periods and the best muhartas are concerned.

Akshay Tritiya is a fine example of the common core of pan-Indian beliefs and is among the ‘three and a half most auspicious timings’, the Sade-Teen Muhurtas or tithis (lunar days) of Hindus. The other two are the first of Chaitra and Vijaya Dashami, while the first day of the bright half in Karttika is the ‘half tithi. This occasion is associated with the Mahabharata as Vyasa Muni started dictating the epic to Ganesha. It was on this day that Draupadi saved her dignity as Dushasan kept trying to disrobe her because Krishna’s miracle ensured that she always had a saree draping her. Surya-deva also gave his divine Akshaya Patra to the Pandavas on this occasion so that they never ran out of food.

Let us look at the other legends about how auspicious this date is. Many believe that the Treta Yuga began on this day while others insist that the Satya Yuga commenced from this day, but they are so many millions of years ago with no witnesses left, that it makes little sense to argue still. Ganga descended on the earth on this Tritoitiya, which is also dedicated to Vishnu the great preserver. He was born as Parasurama on this tithi and claimed land from the sea, just like the Dutch did centuries later. So strong is the belief that he is still worshipped for this deed on Akshay Tritoitiya in the Konkan and Malabar regions of India. Bengal has no followers of Parasurama, perhaps because it faces the reverse problem of too much land and silt blocking its main rivers with chars: so his axe could perhaps be used to de-silt the holy river.

The driest period of the year begins with the onset of summer and as the soil dries in the fierce heat: thus farmers find it simpler to plough through and granulate the earth. This day was also fixed to remind agriculturalists to begin tilling and it is considered auspicious all the way from Odisha to the land of the Jats in Western U.P- Haryana. At dawn, elderly Jats walk to the fields with shovels and observe all birds and animals seen on the way as harbingers of the next season. Even in Gujarat, this is the day to take up the plough and Parasurama is again recalled, as he is associated with the plough. Though this was not traditionally the beginning of the agricultural season in the South, the almanacs mention it as an important auspicious date. Fasts are kept by many, to beseech the gods for prosperity.

Basically, it is a festival that stresses on bounty, whether for business ventures or for agriculture, underlining the importance of materialism in the Hindu way of life. Annapoorna, the goddess of prosperity celebrates her birthday and Kubera, the god of wealth is also a central figure in Akshay Tritoitiya. The latter is a fascinating character who hides within his many legends a lot of social history, as Brahmanical narratives are not linear like western ones, but inter-twined in legends from which we must glean the facts. Kubera is portrayed as an ugly, puny and pot-bellied Yaksha: personifying thereby the contempt with which the early pastoral Aryans viewed more prosperous settled societies of darker, shorter aboriginal Indians. Tales of the fabulous wealth of non-Aryan tribes abound in Vedic, post-Vedic and Puranic literature and one reason for this was their in-built habit of creating and converting a part of their resources from livestock and agricultural produce to more solid forms like gold and jewels. Akshay Tritoitiya's dictum runs on these lines, like that of Dhan-teras

six months later, i.e, to save and diversify one's savings, which are exactly the same that modern economists and financial advisors preach.

Kubera begins his career in Vedic-era texts as the 'chief of evil spirits', Bhuteshwara, and acquired reluctant acceptance within Sanskrit civilization and his godly status only a thousand years later, through the Puranas. By this time, the 'mixed people' that Manu talks of are widespread and quite dominant across the entire sub-continent. So much so, that he was also accepted as a god by the Buddhists and called Vaisravanta as well as by the Jains, who worshipped him as Sarvan-bhuti. Kubera would continue as an established god of wealth of the Hindus for more than a million years, until the more Brahmanical Lakshmi would slowly edge him out. His complexion would also become quite fair as the treasurer of the devas, though he continued to represent the 'backward community' of Ganas, Yakshas, Kinnaras, Gandharvas and Guhyakas. Nothing comes without a struggle and Kubera would lose an eye that was said to be mauled by the Devi, very much like Manasa's: for daring to rise from a folk-deity status to higher Brahmanical religion. Akshay Tritiya and Dhan-teras are occasions for many Hindus to pray to him, as this religion does not really believe in deletion of any divinity but only 'downgrades' to honorary status just like political parties often do with their senior leaders. Incidentally, in his Buddhist form Kubera reached many countries as religious beliefs never required visas and in Japan he is worshipped as Bishamon.

As in many states, Bengali entrepreneurs also reserve this propitious date for commencing new ventures or even to begin their annual accounts. Sudama's humble gift of simple puffed rice given to Krishna is recalled to emphasise the essentiality of making gifts, big or small. "This day is held sacred by the Hindus because the Shastras declare that the merit of alms and gifts bestowed during it are permanent", wrote Rev KS Macdonald in 1836, "and cannot be destroyed by any future sin, and therefore, even misers unloose their purse strings and are liberal on this day". This is the crux of the matter, as the winter crop was already in the granaries and unless a compulsion and an 'anticipatory bail' type of religious mandate was given, the selfish man would not part with his wealth to the Brahmans or to the destitute.