

BAISAKHI: INDIA'S NEW YEAR

Jawhar Sircar

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(English Version)

The best evidence of India's splendid diversity is so evident in the celebration of so many calendars and 'new years'. No uniformity could ever be imposed upon different languages and cultures, that slowly came together over several centuries into one great nation. But, as we shall see, amidst this confusion of dozens of 'new years', there are indeed emerging unities.

If we leave aside exceptions like Gujarat, we will see that all others celebrate their new year within a 'time band' that starts with Holi and ends in the first days of Baisakh, which means just about three to six weeks. The Gangetic belt and its offshoots in Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh and Jharkhand, usually take Holi as the beginning of their 'religious year' and the Saka Samvat, during Spring equinox as the official new year. More than a century ago, MM Underhill stated in his knowledgeable book *The Hindu Religious Year* that "several eras are reckoned among the Hindus, but the great majority follows one of the two". He spoke about the Saka and Vikram samvats, but their new year dates are very close to each other, and over the next hundred years, it became clear that most states start counting either in March from the first of Chaitra and the Spring equinox, or in mid-April, as 'Baisakhi'. Thus, even without a single common date, more than a hundred crore Indians celebrate new year on either of just two main dates. Isn't it remarkable?

The first date, i.e., the Spring Equinox (Chaitra Shukla Pratipada) is the Gudi Paadwa of Maharashtrians, the Ugadi or Yuga-adi of Kannadigas and Telegus, the Cheiti Chand of Sindhis, the Nowroz of Parsis and Kashmiris and

Thapna of conservative Marwaris. Though Himachalis observe it as Chaitti and Sikhs as the Nanakshahi New Year, both actually celebrate the 'Baisakh' date with more gusto. So, while about half of India, i.e., the north west, north and upper Deccan celebrate new year in March, the rest of India concentrates on 'Baisakh', like the Bengalis. It used to depend on the winter Rabi crop being ready which called for the celebrations. Maharashtra and the upper Deccan start festivities in March as their traditional crop was ripe then, while others wait till Baisakh for their harvest and new year.

Punjab's Baisakhi congregation at Jalianwala Bagh in Amritsar on unlucky 13th of April in 1919 will never be forgiven or forgotten and it is on the same date exactly 220 years earlier that Guru Gobindji instituted the Khalsa Panth. But Punjab tops all in religious fervour, as millions take an early bath and line up at hundreds of gurudwaras: for prayers, sips of sweet Amrita and parsada as also for devotional music sung by the famous Ragis. The Panj Pyaras, i.e., "five beloved and blessed priests" head the holy processions, but once this is over, the energetic Sikh engages in all types of contests, from wrestling and sword fencing to mock duels. Animated dances like the Bhangra and Gidda are obviously a must but where we are concerned we would much rather watch these bursts of phenomenal energy, on TV.

Coming to Bengal, Poila Boisakh of the Surya Siddhanta began during the reign of Raja Shashaka of Gour 594 years after the Christian era but popularization, was done by Akbar and his astronomer, Fatehullah Shirazi. The Islamic lunar Hijri calendar was difficult for marking agricultural harvests for Mughal taxation, thereby a new solar-lunar calendar called the Fasli San or Tarikh-i-Ihali was started. Economics remain the hidden factor behind religion and culture and we may choose to recall that during the Middle Ages, our Mangal Kavyas of

that period focus around Saudagars or businessmen, not on Brahman-Baidya-Kayastha Bhadrals. The latter actually arose as the most powerful group in Bengal only in the late Mughal and British periods, when they dwarfed the local Baniks so terribly that trading groups from other states rushed to fill in the vacuum. This pushed Bengali enterprise even further down, so just long queues outside temples and sanctifying hal-khataas on Poila Boisakh can hardly bring back what appears to have gone forever. Anyway, Bangladesh celebrates this month with more sincerity nowadays, it may be a good idea for western Bengalis to use the auspiciousness of this month mainly for conducting marriages and events.

In neighbouring Assam, the last day of the year is called Goru Bihu, as the cattle are bathed thoroughly and smeared with a paste of turmeric and other ingredients, probably for medicinal reasons. The new year begins with Rongali or Bohag Bihu and lasts for almost a month, combining the best of three major traditions: the Sino-Burmese, Indo-Aryan and Austro-Asiatic. Innately connected with agriculture and fertility, this Bishu or Bihu is a call to young men and women to be at their resplendent best: as they dance with soft sensuous movements of the limbs, swaying to lilting tunes of Bihu-geets. Bengal's other neighbor, Odisha also observes its new year on the first of Baisakh or Vishu as Maha Vishuva Sankranti. It is famous as the Pana Sankranti after the sweet drink made from bel, fruits, yoghurt, paneer and other substances that is offered to all. Even the sacred Tulsi plant is nourished with drops from a pot hung above it, with a small hole in its bottom. Odisha has several other unique Yatras to celebrate the occasion, like Jhamu, Patua, Hingula, Patua and Danda, with each contributing its own rites and colour.

Crossing over now to deep southwest, a thousand miles away, one comes to Kerala where Vishu is celebrated with fireworks and a million lights. 'Kani' or the

first auspicious sight of the new year is ensured the night before by carefully arranging the traditional Vishukkani: placing money, jewellery, holy texts, lamps, rice, fruits, betel leaves, areca-nuts, bananas, vegetables, lemons, metal mirrors, yellow Konna flowers and so on. Sadhyas or feasts are compulsory as are Kanjis made of rice, coconut milk and spices, along with Vishu Katta rice cakes and sour mango drinks.

In Tamil Nadu, as among Tamil-speaking people in all parts of the world, Puthandu on the 14th of April marks the new year and the same Kani or first sight of auspicious objects is mandatory. As in other parts of India, cleanliness of the body through the ritual bath and donning new clothes are insisted upon, while the home is done anew with colourful Kollam floral designs on the floor. Even in Karnataka where Ugadi comes in March, the Tulus and Kodagus of the south west celebrate Vishu and strictly observe the auspicious Kani rite during the Vishu of mid-April.

India is too complex to analyse, but with some effort it becomes easier to appreciate at least the broad patterns, as we have just done. Though about half of India celebrates new year in Baisakh, while the others do it in Chaitra, if counts the overseas celebrations, then 'Baisakh' wins as the most popular New Year. Not only do Bangladesh and Nepal observe this date, but Sri Lanka, Myanmar and South East Asia also observe 'Baisakhi' with religious passion.

Laos celebrates the middle of April as Sonkan (derived from Sankranti), where ritual cleanliness, perfumed waters and obeisance to monks and visits to Buddha temples are compulsory. Thailand also calls it a similar name 'Sonkran' with almost the same rituals. But both countries organise massive "water fights" on this occasion and people come out on to the streets and spray each other with

water in every possible manner including hose pipes and buckets. Cambodia celebrates as Maha-Sonkran and all the three South East Asian countries pass through their hottest period during April, as it is just before the rainy season. Thus, water is obviously welcome.

What is more interesting is that the insistence of these countries on paying respect to the elderly and releasing living creatures from bondage, whether it be tortoise or tiny fish or even birds, This is a Buddhist contribution and another one is the dictum to give alms to the needy which is something that Indians could emulate.

We end with a round-up of our two neighbours and Myanmar celebrates ‘Thingyan’ during this period. The same Theravada Buddhist rites and rituals, like respect to monks and elders, release of caged animals and the compulsory alms giving to the needy are followed. But after all this piety is over, the evenings are meant for song and dance, as also for getting ready for the next day’s water fights. Sri Lanka celebrates Aluth-Avurudda more seriously, as the zodiac changes from Pisces to Aries, but Dravidian customs like ‘Kani’ appear in the celebration: as the auspicious time for starting business and other ventures. Sinhalese also believe in big bangs and crackers like the Malayalees.

As one traverse the entire spectrum, one is amazed to see the tremendous variety, colour and forms of celebration in India and the world: of different yet close “New Year Days”. They are so unlike the almost mechanical rigidity that surrounds the “Happy New Year” of the West.