

ALL SOULS DAY: WHEN THE SPIRITS ROAM THE WORLD

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(English Version)

Did you know that on 2nd November the dead manage to unite billions of people all over the world? It is All Souls' Day and Christians visit the graves of departed family members, to lay flowers on their tombs and light candles, which brightens these desolated cemeteries like our Deepawali, which is incidentally a few days away. We hardly notice that during this October-November period, people all over the world believe that "the line between the living and dead is the thinnest, as spirits come back to living relatives". It is amazing that cultures and religions that are totally unconnected, from Latin America to Europe and India and then on to the China, believe what our Shastras said: "when the pitris are delighted with sraddhas, they bestow long life, wisdom, wealth, knowledge, svarga, final emancipation from existence, and joys and sovereignty" (Markendeya Purana, XXXII, 38).

The famous French novelist, Marguerite Yourcenar, commented that "autumnal rites are among the oldest celebrated on earth and in every country the Day of the Dead occurs after the last harvest, when the barren earth is thought to give passage to the souls lying beneath it." More than two thousand years ago, the Romans observed Lemuria with public festivals of sacrifices to propitiate evil spirits of the dead. They also visited the cemeteries to share cakes and wines with the dead and this pagan ritual was later subsumed by the Christian church into All Souls's Day in November.

Our tryst with our pitris and bhoots begins with Pitri Paksha and Mahalaya, but continues through our festival of lights that drives away dark spirits. Kali Puja harps repeatedly on the dead and cremation grounds and on the preceding Bhoot Chaturdashi, Bengalis always placed 14 lamps in every possible corner of their houses to drive away spirits, almost like mosquito repellants. They also ate 14 leafy

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vegetables at both their meals as an antidote against bhoots. Even Bhai Phota is meant to ward off Jomdoot. In Kartik, we also have a ritual of hoisting lights on top of tall poles on our terraces known as the "akash pradeep", to guide the spirits in sky to kindly return to Jam-lok. I think that this ritual has lost its popularity after some phantoms crashed into the forest of multi-storied buildings or maybe, they are do not require our help any more as they are using GPS, global positioning systems. In many parts of Uttar Pradesh, the festival of Kartik Poornima is celebrated as Dev Dipawali and Benares has a special custom of lighting thousands of lamps on the ghats, in mid November.

But, let us leave our desi ghosts and go to Mexico, where the 2nd of November is celebrated as El Dia de los Muertos, the Day of the dead. Dia, a festival that dates back hundreds of years to the Aztec worship of death. Mexicans have a lot of fun to lighten their mood and they bring out colourful processions with people dressed up as skeletons, ghosts and spirits. To make sure that the ghosts who follow them home are not angry or hungry, they leave bottles of Tequila liquor, baskets of food and sweets outside the houses, sometimes with pillows and blankets for them to rest in their long journey.

People of Portugal, Spain and Latin America make special offerings to the dead called "ofrendas" and they place selected flowers on their graves. The indigenous people of the Andes in South America venerate the tombs of their ancestors but they also preserve their skulls at home for such rituals. On the 9th of November, these skulls are dressed up with clothes and cigarettes are inserted between their clenched teeth, as alcohol is offered to them, They also keep bones of their dead with them throughout the year to protect their families. Brazil declares a public holiday called Finados, Day of the Dead, on the 2nd November and their very grand rituals combine cultural contributions of Africans, the former slaves by slaves, and also the conquered indigenous people. The Ecuadorians make a special bread

filled with sweet guava paste for their ancestors, while Guatemalan fly giant kites to reach their dead.

On the other side of the globe, the Catholics of Philippines make it a point to visit the graves of their ancestors to pay homage and many go to the extent of spending the entire night in the graveyards, by playing cards, eating, drinking and even dancing. A month before, Cambodians celebrate Pchum Ben, one of their most important holidays of Khmer religious calendar. They gather at pagodas wearing white to signify mourning and pay respect to their ancestors during this 15-day festival. The Buddhist monks help transfer their offerings of food and drink to their ancestors so as to placate them for suffering in the other world.

Celtic civilisations in Europe still hold on to several pre-Christian customs and their festival of Samhain (pronounced as Sahn-wean) is on the 1st October, which is either in our Pitri Paksha or very close to it. They remember their ancestors and believe that they return home during this phase to garner respect and food from their descendants. The Scots and the Irish believed that spirits or mischievous fairies needed to be propitiated to ensure that the people and their livestock survived the winter. After harvest, they enjoyed one last big feast, just before winter set in, where they invited the souls of dead kin and set a place at the table for them, with separate food and drink. A strange part of the festival involved people going door-to-door in costumes or in disguise, often reciting verses in exchange for food.

This became the “Trick or Treat” ultimatum that American kids give to their elders during Halloween, as they knock at each doorstep in the neighbourhood, to be rewarded with cash, candy and gifts. Americans celebrate Halloween with hollow pumpkins where the eyes and lips are cut out in crazy shapes. The American Retail Foundations estimates that over 6 billion dollars or 40 thousand crore rupees are spent each year on sweets, cosmetics and ghoulish décor.

Other cultures also have identical customs and similar events a little earlier, depending on their harvests. Buddhists and Taoists in China, Singapore and
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elsewhere who spend August as the month of Hungry Ghosts, to honour their ancestors and end it through a grand festival when millions of lamps are lit to float in water bodies. Japan also has its picturesque Obon festival of lamps in August, where food is dedicated for dead relations. In Korea, Chuseok is a major traditional holiday in September, when ancestors are worshipped and their tombs and graves are cleaned up. Even Arabs respect their dead during the night of Sab-e-Barat.

We find, therefore, a unique strand of unity that binds people across this planet, where the dead are concerned. With some special effort, can we not usher in a universal multi-cultural festival for peace among all living beings?