

GURU PURNIMA

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Though gurus have been an integral part of ancient Hinduism, the celebration of a specific purnima in their honour in the month of Ashadha is a contribution of Buddhism and Jainism. There is no doubt that gurus were mentioned in very respectful terms in the Rig Veda, as in hymn 4.5.6 and in the Upanishads — as in chapter 4.4 of the Chhandogya and in chapter 3 of the Taittiriya or even in chapter 6 of the Shvetashvatara. Even so, the fact remains that there was no mandate under ‘Hinduism’ to set aside any particular date for guru-worship. Gurus and their ashramas or pathshalas were the ‘boarding schools’ usually for the entire period of their childhood and early youth, i.e., the Brahmacharyya phase of the life of the student. There is, however, no evidence of any fixed date or month on which the students joined — and the only deciding criteria was that they had to be Brahmans. There were, of course, some gurus like Dronacharya who taught specific skills to other select upper caste boys from Kshatriya families such as the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The sheer caste bias of education in ancient India is best exemplified by the story of Eklavya, the tribal youth, who had to chop off his right thumb just because he had mastered archery which was considered ‘illicit’, because he was not from the upper castes.

Buddhists were, however, quite clear that that Guru Purnima marked the beginning of the season of Varsha or Vassa as it is called in Pali, when both young and old monks had to leave human habitations and seek refuge in distant caves and monasteries. Popularly known as the ‘rains retreat’, this full moon was the definitive day for the monsoons to have reached all parts of India, even though the coastal areas surely receives their rains much earlier. This small but significant practice indicates that the entire subcontinent followed certain common protocols and that there was a definite recognition of the ‘idea of one India’. It also speaks of the principles of ‘adjustment’ and ‘accommodation’ that united far flung people, separated by vastly differing agro-climatic zone. Where Buddhism and Jainism were concerned, some of the courses were open to other devotees who were interested in pursuing religious

studies or select scholastic disciplines or were just keen to meditate — for the benefits it conferred.

In a manner of speaking, Guru Purnima marked the beginning of the mandatory thirty-six week ‘trimester courses’ under the guidance of Buddhist experts. Contemporary Jainism also began their Chaturmaas or four month period of piety and incidentally, strict Jains continue to do so even today. Jains believe that it was on this very purnima that Tirthankara Mahavira ordained Gautama Swami of Gandhara as his first discipline. There is an equally strong Buddhist tradition that a month after receiving his 'enlightenment', the Buddha delivered his first sermon to his five former companions, which is called the Dhamma-Cakkappavattana Sutta on the full moon day of Ashadah at Sarnath and that he spent the first four-month Vassa at Mulagandhakuti. The Sinhalese Buddhists still practice Vas or ‘rains retreat’ though their calendar is adjusted suited to their monsoons, while the Thais call the period from July to October as Phansa and observe it rather religiously. Other Theravada Buddhists like the Burmese also observe Vassa, and Mahayana Buddhists like the Vietnamese Thiens and the Korean Seons fix themselves to one location, just as the Tibetans are supposed to.

Hindus have, however, been rather adept in adapting the best practices that the other two better organised religions conceived. After all, these two monastic religions had the benefit of subsided, resident intellectuals — to debate regularly on sacred texts and on societal issues. Hinduism was less organised as a religion and it lacked a proper definitive structure — before Shankaracharya and other great acharyas arrived more than a thousand years later. The story of Vyasa Muni came in much later, along with the Guru Gita, a 216 verse ode to gurus. We also have Adi Shankara's Upadeshas but historians date it to almost one and a half millenia after Buddha and Mahavira. Other texts glorifying Guru Purnima, like the Varaha Purana appear to be even later. But even if Hinduism caught up later, we have evidence that Guru Purnima as a festival was in vogue to at least three centuries before the arrival of the Christian or present era.

Monastic Buddhism and Jainism realised that it was best that non-producing classes and peripatetic monks stay away from the dangers of venturing unnecessarily into wet, snake-infested fields and forests during the monsoons. The four months of Shravana, Bhadrapada, Ashvina and Kartika could even be trimmed to three months

depending on the regional character of the rains and local needs. We would do well to note that gurus also required economic sustenance for their very existence and the emphasis on the practice of dana or gifts was, therefore, essential. And, we must remember that the Bhakti movement, which was at its peak in north India between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, was also led by gurus of all castes. They helped in truly endearing popular 'non-Brahmanical' Hinduism to the masses and this also led to reinforcing Guru Purnima as a universal festival.

Another utility of the gurukul system was that it nurtured music and dance to a degree that no other educational arrangement could ever achieve. There is no doubt that for almost eight centuries, the differences between Hinduism and Islam were removed or narrowed down — where music and dance were concerned. Sufi Silsilas in India followed systems akin to gurukuls and their Khanqahs, where teachers (Murshids or Sheikhs) taught generations of Mureeds in theology and culture were often better-organised than gurukuls and less personalised structures. In culture, as distinct from education, the term Ustad is usually the Muslim counterpart of the Hindu Guru or Pandit. There is no doubt that this guru-shishya tradition or parampara was really instrumental in sustaining and nourishing our musical and performing art traditions — through the vagaries of political and societal upheavals. The democratisation of culture that took place in twentieth century after the patronage of nawabs and rajas ceased could also never have been achieved without the highly personalised system of gurukuls. It is, therefore, not surprising that while educational institutions have switched to 'Teachers' Day' to honour the teaching community, Guru Purnima is celebrated with greater enthusiasm in our gurukuls. We need to understand the real India that is personified by these gurukuls when on Guru Purnima no difference is made between Muslim Ustads and Hindu Pandits. Both are deeply revered and respected with equal sincerity by their students — who consider them as almost divine.

Another interesting fact to note in the context of Gurus, is that Indian history is replete with examples of how Rakshasas and Asuras have periodically disturbed the tapovanas and gurukuls of sages and their students, which prompted Brahma and

putras to kill them and, of course, expand their civilisation. Why they needed to court danger is not the point, but what is fascinating is how the indigenous people were systematically dominated through such conflicts, that usually resulted in the victory of so-called Aryandom. Without gurus and rishis venturing deeper into unknown terrains, the kshetras of Sanskritic way of life could not replace the vana-based cultures, in such a determined manner, over several centuries and millennium.