

## GUDHI PADWA: SHINY POLE ON NEW YEAR

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(English Version)

Many Indians sincerely believe that the 'Indian New Year', as distinguished from the western date of the first of January, begins with Baisakh in mid-April as it is celebrated from Punjab to Bengal and Assam and all the way up to Tamil Nadu. This is not true as a large number of Indians actually celebrate new year a few weeks earlier on Shukla Pratipada, the start of the bright lunar fortnight of Chaitra, the month preceding Baisakh. This new year is observed as Gudhi Padwa in Maharashtra and Goa; Ugadi in Andhra, Telengana and Karnataka and the Sindhis call it their Cheti Chand. In western India, this phase marked the end of the Rabi season when the crop was ready and this certainly called for festivities. Surely, religion had also to step in and the Brahma Purana mentions that on this day the Lord created the world after the great deluge.

The lunar calendar date for Chaitra Shukla Pratipada often coincided or came close to Spring equinox and India's official Saka calendar also begins on the 22nd of March, coinciding with Spring equinox. This equinox has been respected for several millennia and the ancient Egyptians and Persians started their new year from it. Even Easter was always quite close to it and so is Navaratri. The popular Hindu almanac, the Panchanga (panjika), follows the Saka reckoning but, frankly, India has special problem of Eras. The Hindu tradition believes in colossal yugas or cycles of millions of years, through several stages of 'formation' or kalpa and 'dissolution' or pralaya. There was also a 'Vedic' new year that began Agrahayan, in celebration of the Vernal equinox. Astronomers Aryabhatta, Varahamihira and Bhaskara also contributed to the "Indian calendar". Yet, more than a century ago, British

commentator, MM Underhill observed in her excellent treatise 'The Hindu Religious Year' that there were still "several eras reckoned among Hindus, but the great majority follow one of two, either the Saka or the Samvat". This Vikram-samvat is popularly believed to have been started by one Vikramaditya of Ujjain in 57 BC, but Kielhorn says that this era was hardly known till the 9th century AD. India had so many different calendars based on either solar or lunar days and months and finding a uniform calendar with a common starting point was thus a Herculean task. Attempts were made at different times to unite the solar and lunar calendars, to determine days and hours for the observance of fasts and other religious rites, but they failed.

Most common Indians, however, do not bother as they remember dates in terms of important events, like "my son was born in the year of the great flood". Nevertheless, we still needed an agreed date for the year to begin, at least for accounting purposes. It is interesting that India's official calendar had to be triggered by invaders from the Kazakh steppes of Central Asia, the dreaded Sakas or Indo-Sythians, who swarmed into this land in the first century B.C.. They settled here and one of the by-products was the Saka era, reckoned from 78 A.D. After Independence, Nehru was keen to settle this vexatious problem of finding a common "Indian Era" and he entrusted the task to Astrophysicist Meghnad Saha. After several debates, the Saha Committee decided to end the long journey from the Vedas to Vikramaditya in favour of the Saka calendar. But India's official new year has flopped as even officials hardly know or care about it. Even so, it travelled to Bali without a passport and stayed back with more respect. Indians prefer Chaitra or Baisakh as religious dates matter more than babu directives.

But we need to be clear that, despite convergences, the Chaitra lunar-based new year does differ from the solar Spring equinox and this year, for instance, the Chaitra new

year is as late as the 8th of April, so close to the Baisakhi new year. A hundred years ago, Underhill noted two interesting practices in western India during the Chaitra new year day. One was the the mandatory eating of neem leaves. This must have been for some immunity against deadly small-pox and for the same reason, many worship Sitala at this time. Even now, this paste of neem leaves with jaggery and tamarind is passed around, to purify the blood and strengthen the immune system. The second was the erection of a pole (dhwaja) on this Gudhi Padwa, where Padwa is a derivative of Sanskrit Pratipada. The gudhi or pole is what distinguishes the Marathis style of celebration and even the poor stick little rods out from their windows as Marathis believe that these ward off evil and invite prosperity into the house. The poles are ornamented with bright green or yellow cloth and shining brocades or even sugar crystals, neem leaves, mango twigs and colourful flowers. People take out time to spruce up their homes and draw intricate rangoli designs near the doors.

While raising the gudhi, the 'Shiva-Shakti' principle in the universe is invoked because the orthodox insist that this enables all the constituents of the gudhi to accept divine principles. My interpretation of why Marathas stuck victory poles outside their homes at the end of harvest and the beginning of the dry season is that it was a "call to arms". The dreaded Maratha light cavalry was a lightning force that struck havoc in Bengal, Odisha and the southern states in the 18th century. It was based largely on the voluntary services of two classes of peasant soldiers, recruited by the ruling Peshwas, the Shiledars who were given arms and stipends by the State and the Bargis who joined in for whatever they could get. The dry season after Chaitra was most conducive to light cavalry as horses could sweep over the dry soil of the east in summer and the same ground became wet and soft from the first rains. The gudhi was probably a sign that the peasant was ready to join as a part-time raider, the Bargi.

Chaitra Shukladi is another name for this new year, while Ugadi can be

explained as 'Yuga', the word for 'epoch', and 'adi' stands for 'the beginning'. The festival marks the new year day for people between the Vindhyas and the Kaveri river, who follow the South Indian lunar calendar. The day usually begins with ritual showers (oil bath) followed by prayers. In Karnataka, a special dish called Obbattu or Puran Poli is prepared on this occasion which is a paste of gram and jaggery is stuffed into a flat, roti-like bread and topped with ghee or milk. In Andhra and Telengana, special dishes called Polelu or Puran Poli are prepared on this occasion. An interesting mixture called Ugadi Pachhadi is made of six tastes, including bitter neem, sweet jaggery or ripe bananas, hot green chilly or pepper, salt, sour tamarind juice and unripened tangy mango. It will be clear that this is a medicinal potion, as the season of spring brought in not only joy but sorrow as well: because it carried deadly viruses and diseases.

As we study Indian festivals more and more, we wonder how Brahmanism managed to bring such varied and often conflicting rituals into one common refrain: unity in diversity. Diversity is quite clear when we see so many different dates and celebrations, but 'unity' is also evident from the fact that more than a hundred crores celebrate their disparate new year all within a band of just one month, or even less. Amazing !