

DIWALI, THE 'MAGNA CARTA' OF HINDUISM

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If we are to select one festival that every Hindu in every corner of India celebrates in some form or the other, we would invariably mention 'Diwali'. It epitomises the operational plurality of Hinduism that has thrived for millennia without a high command, headquarters or one designated holy book.

Historically, each region, sub-region, cult or sect chose, from a long list of options, those festivals or rites that it would be observing and, more importantly, the manner in which it would do so. As explained in my previous article on October 30, Navaratri and how Indic religions are intrinsically federal, we really need to stop viewing local-level celebrations as 'regional variations' of some pan-Indian universal model—because it never existed.

Each unit selects those components from a mega festival (or a part of it) that represent the socio-religious needs of its specific region and also reflect its own histories and aspirations. For a sharp example, let us turn to Bengal and large parts of Assam and Odisha as well as the Maithil quarter of Bihar, which were once united for several centuries by a common tongue, Magadhi Prakrit.

It morphed into Apabhramsa and Avahatta before giving birth to four distinct languages of the East in the 14th century. It is fascinating that much of this region worships the fearsome, blood-drenched Kali on the darkest moonless Amavasya night—not Lakshmi's Diwali, the 'festival of lights'. Incidentally, like Kali puja of the East, the South's Deepavali is basically a one night-long festival—quite different from the North's five-day Diwali calendar, from Dhanteras to Bhai Dooj.

Thanks to Hindi films and the commercial media, different regions have started emulating components like Dhanteras from others, which demonstrates once again that religious cultures are not stagnant but move, adopt and accommodate. The second day is Chhoti Diwali in the North, but it is Narak Chaturdashi in the Deccan, which celebrates Satyabhama's (and her husband Krishna's) victory over the demon Narakasura. Kali came in to help and many in the West observe the day as Kali Chaudas.

It appears that older regional beliefs had to be factored into the pan-Indian celebration. Incidentally, Narakasura has now started emerging as a historic symbol of 'depredation' upon heroes of indigenous origin as a new component of the existing 'social treaty'. Bengalis call it Bhoot Chaturdashi and place 14 lamps in different corners of their homes to take care of the many ancestors who revisit them as ghosts on this fearsome night.

The South also believes in praying to ancestors and, incidentally, celebrates its Festival of Lights on this night—a day before the main Diwali and Lakshmi puja of the North. During this phase, oil is rubbed on to the body (by seniors, in the South) and a ritual bath is mandated, that even Malayalis observe, though they stay away from the rest.

It is quite intriguing that the core Diwali legend of the North, the victorious return of Ram to Ayodhya, hardly finds mention in the South and East. Even the rite of the annual cleaning and repainting of one's house that is compulsory in the North is not enforced in

many other parts of India. The bursting of firecrackers, however, appears universal but few know that there is no historic connection between Diwali and fireworks.

Royalty had revelled in grand pyrotechnic displays in the past, but their democratisation through affordable firecrackers began only after the British amended their Explosives Act in 1940 and Ayya and Shanmuga Nadar seized the opportunity at Sivakasi. But this culture may also disappear soon as environmental dangers are realised and laws become tighter.

In many regions, festivities are over that night, but several others in the North and West move on to celebrate Govardhan Puja or Annakut, worshipping Krishna with the choicest of foods. This day also marks the beginning of the Vikram Samvat New Year in Gujarat and some other pockets and it is observed as Bali Pratipad or Bali Padayami. In the South, Mahabali is thus honoured, but Kerala retains its special relationship with its king by a more sumptuous celebration held earlier—during Onam.

All societies open small windows for the redistribution of wealth through gambling or gifting and the South legitimises the roll of the dice on this occasion. Cleaning and decorating cattle is also a must in many parts of India. The last of the series, Bhai Dooj, is celebrated all over except the South. Sisters place an auspicious black tilak on the forehead of their brothers to ward off danger and death, recalling the deadly Yama's love for his sister, Yami or river Yamuna.

We have patiently noted how widely different rituals and festivities were brought together under a very wide 'Diwali' umbrella, obviously with adroit Brahmanical encouragement. The emerging postulate is that each pick-and-choose observance and rite selected from the 'multi-option offer' must have represented the 'social pact' that best suited the local community. Quaint local customs probably represent pre-existing social rituals that were dovetailed.

A mega-festival like Diwali basically provided the overarching Magna Carta, the 'great treaty' of the people, that accorded legitimacy, piety and comfort to all sections. Any attempt to standardise or impose elements will surely destroy the painstakingly established but delicate Hindu equilibrium.