

GURU PURNIMA: WORLD'S OLDEST TEACHERS DAY

Teacher's Day in Ageless India

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(English Version)

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. *Gurus* and their *ashramas* or *pathshalas* have served as boarding schools or even for day-time education of students for the entire period of their childhood and early youth that covered the *Brahmacharyya* phase of their life, but there is no unanimity on the exact date of entry. Those *Gurus* who taught specific skills, like Dronacharya did to the young Kauravas and Pandavas, did not mention any specific entry date for their academic year or semesters, while other adult- life spiritual *Gurus* were and are rather open ended on their admission policies. Buddhists, however, were quite clear that *Guru Punima* 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 huddle together in distant caves and monasteries. Some courses were open to other devotees who were interested in pursuing courses in theology, scholastic disciplines or even in pure meditative discipline for the benefits of naturopathy. 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 receive their rains earlier than others. It was the day for the flock of teachers and students to get together and begin the mandatory thirty-six week Trimester courses. Contemporary Jainism also began their *Chaturmaas* or four month period of piety and both religions continue to do so even today rather strictly. They believe that it was on this very purnima that Tirthankara Mahavira ordained his first disciple, Gautama Swami of Gandhara as his first disciple and this reminds us of the 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 Mula-gandha-kuti. It was the period for all followers of Buddhism and Jainism to give up meat, fish and certain other food items. The Sinhalese still practice Vas or rains retreat though the calendar is suited to their monsoons, while the Thais call it Phansa from July to October and adhere to 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 not been slow in adapting the best practices that these two organised religions conceived as the two had the benefit of subsided intellectuals who met periodically in central committees and debated texts at universities, mega monastic conclaves and mathas. Let us not forget that the unorganised religion lacked a proper definitive structure before Shankaracharya and other great acharyas arrived, which was more than a thousand years later. Though gurus are mentioned in very respectful terms in the Rig Veda, as in hymn 4.5.6, or in the Upanishads, like in chapter 4.4 of the Chhandogya and in chapter 3 of the Taittiriya or even chapter 6 of the Shvestashatara, the fact remains that there was no mandate to set aside any particular date for guru-worship. 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 cannot date it till almost one and a half millenium after Buddha-Mahavira. Other texts glorifying Guru Purnima, like the Varaha Purana appear to be even later, but there are solid reasons to date the universal acceptance of this festival to the pre-Christian era.

After all, it did not take that long to realise the utility of keeping the non-producing castes away from the dangers of venturing unnecessarily into wet, snake-infested fields and forests, especially during the mating season of many species. In fact, Hinduism gained the most from this mandatory semi-organised, open-ended institution of annual Trimester knowledge and skill upgradation courses, as it did not have centrally-organised teaching centres or definitive mathas, till the late medieval period. 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. More important was the fact that gurus required economic sustenance for their very existence and the compulsory practice of dana or gifts were, indeed, useful. The other mandates of vrata, japa and homa or discipline, meditation and ritual practices, exist in every educational system till the present day. The Bhakti movement, which was at its peak between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, truly endeared Hinduism to the masses and were led by Gurus of all castes. It helped in reinforcing the Guru Purnima festival to the extent that we now witness.

Another utility of the Gurukul system was that it helped in nurturing music and dance to a phenomenal degree that no educational arrangement could ever surpass, mainly there was never any debate on whether an Ekalavya was to be permitted or not. For a thousand years, the Sufi Silsilas in India have followed similar but often better-organised structures like the Khanqahs, where Murshids or Sheikhs have taught generations of Mureeds in theology and culture, which explains why the largest population of Muslims is located on the Indian subcontinent. Today, the term Ustad is usually the Muslim counterpart of the Hindu Guru where music is concerned and without this guru-shishya parampara, the democratisation of culture that took place in twentieth century, after the patronage of nawabs and rajas ceased, could never have sustained itself.

Another interesting fact to note in the context of Gurus, is that Indian history is replete with examples of how Rakshasas and Asura have periodically disturbed the tapovanas and gurukuls of sages and their students, which prompted brave Arya-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 the Sanskrit way of life could not replace the vana-based cultures of indigenous India, in such a determined manner, over several centuries and millennia.