

HINDU FESTIVALS AND SACREDDAYS

PREFACE

On the Dī pā valī (Divā lī) day we burst crackers recklessly, often endangering the life and limb of our neighbours, thereby betraying our own inability to burst the balloons of egoism in our hearts.

During the processions organized in festivals like the Durgā pū jā or the Gaṇ eś a-caturthī , our young persons boldly exhibit their `dancing' talents without being aware of how grotesque it looks in the eyes of others. Does it not, perhaps, unwittingly reveal a bit of the dancing of the six passions in their minds, which they are unable to control? Then, on the Holi Day, `most unholy' acts are perpetrated in the name of a `holy' festival though the burning up of one's lusts and passions is the most important symbolical aspect of that festival.

The cumulative effect of all these bizarre observances of our festivals and sacred days is the lowering of our prestige in the eyes of the world and earning the disdain of others, who, even as it is, may not be our admirers!

These depressing trends, the symptoms of a sick society, compelled some devotees and admirers of the Ramakrishna Order to exhort us to undertake this work.

The approach to the subject attempted here, in this book, is both theoretical and practical. On the theoretical side, it tries to give a brief history of the festivals, their meaning and symbology. On the practical side it deals with the know-how connected with the conduct of those festivals. A list of some vratas commonly observed, with brief descriptions, given in chapter six, it is hoped, will enhance the value of the work. The epilogue contains some reflections, and suggestions for the organizers of these festivals in public. The appendix will be especially useful to the devotees of the Ramakrishna tradition.

While writing this book, Sri P. V. Kane's History of Dharmaś ā stra (Vol. 5, pt. 1)

and the Festivals in India number of the Vivekananda Kendra Patrika (Vol. 6, no. 1, 1977) proved to be very useful. We are deeply indebted to the authors and editors of these works.

We are also grateful to Sri Padmavasan of Madras for the cover design and to Sri B. N. Nataraj of Sri Nithyananda Printers for the excellent printing and get-up of the book.

We earnestly hope that students of Hindu religion and culture will be benefited by this publication.

Swami Harshananda

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Key to Transliteration and Pronunciation

sounds like

अ, a-o in son,	ठ ṭ h-th in ant-hill
आ , ā -a in master,	ड ḍ -d in den
इ i-i in if,	ढ ḍ h-dh in godhood
ई ī -ee in feel,	ण ṇ -n in under
उ u-u in full,	त t-t in French
ऊ ū -oo in boot,	थ th-th in thumb
ऋ ṛ -somewhat between r and ri,	द d-th in then
	ध dh-the in breathe
ए e-ay in May,	न n-n in not
ऐ ai-y in my,	प p-p in pen
ओ o-o in oh,	फ ph-ph in loop-hole
औ au-ow in now,	ब b-b in bag
क k-k in keen,	भ bh-bh in abhor
ख kh-ckh in blockhead,	म m-m in mother
ग g-g (hard) in go,	य y-y in yard
घ gh-gh in log-hut,	र r-r in run
ङ ṅ -ng in singer,	ल l-l in luck
च c-ch in chain,	व v-v in avert
छ ch-chh in catch him,	श ś -sh in reich (German)
ज j-j in judge,	ष ṣ -sh in show
झ jh-dgeh in hedgehog,	स s-in sun
ञ ñ-n (somewhat) as in French,,	ह h-in hot
ट ṭ -t in ten,	
◦ ṁ -m in sum,	:ḥ -h in half

General Introduction

The socio-cultural life of a body of people is shaped by its basic philosophy of life. For the Hindus, it has always been religion. That is why, Swami Vivekananda was obliged to declare: '...the Hindu is a peculiar person. He does everything in a religious manner. He eats religiously; he sleeps religiously; he rises in the morning religiously; he does good things religiously; and he also does bad things religiously.' (The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, sixth edn., 1977, Vol. 8, p. 205)

Religion, again, has three aspects: philosophy, mythology and rituals. Philosophy deals with the ultimate questions of life like the existence of God, nature of man, creation of this world, the goal of life as also the path that leads to it. Mythology tries to bring these ideas from the dizzy heights of meta-physics down to the ordinary level of understanding of the common folk through myths and stories, dialogues, similes and even examples from day-to-day life. However, both these cater rather to the brain than to the bosom. Here comes the role of rituals. Though designed to reflect the basic philosophy of life, they also help to release the energies and emotions through constructive channels, since they are action-oriented. The Hindu festivals and sacred days are a very important, even an integral, part of the Hindu religion, especially its ritual system.

To understand and appreciate the spirit behind the observance of these festivals and sacred days, a basic knowledge of the concept of the four puruṣārthas (ends of human life) is necessary. The puruṣārthas are: dharma (righteousness), artha (wealth), kāma (fleshly desires) and mokṣa (liberation from the transmigratory existence).

The great sages of yore, who evolved this system, conceded the existence and the need to fulfil the natural instincts of a human being towards the pleasures of 'the here and the now.' Intuiting the power of these instincts, if unbridled, to create chaos and conflict in the society, they tried to regulate them through dharma, an iron

framework of a code of righteous conduct that would regulate these instincts, and yet allow them to be satisfied too. Controlling these instincts through dharma and by following further disciplines prescribed by it, a human being can gradually transcend them, thus rising to higher spiritual aspirations. It is at this juncture that the concept of mokṣa appeals to the heart as also the spiritual disciplines needed for the same voluntarily undertaken.

The Hindu festivals and sacred days, with their twin aspects of vratas and utsavas, are designed exactly for this purpose of achieving the metamorphosis of the human being from the mundane to the supramundane levels.

2 Vratas and Utsavas

The word vrata' ('religious vow') is one of the most widely used words in the Hindu religious and ritualistic literature. Derived from the verbal root वृ ण् ('to choose'), it indicates a set of rules and discipline with which one voluntarily binds oneself over a particular period of time, during which period he undertakes the performance of certain rituals in order to propitiate the deity and secure from it what he wants. This whole process, however, should be undertaken with a sañ kalpa or religious resolve, on an auspicious day and time, fixed as per the dictates of the Hindu religious almanacs.

The term utsava,' often used with the word vrata,' and sometimes as its equivalent also, literally means 'to cause to go upward'. But in usage, it means a joyous festive occasion which naturally buoys up the spirits of the participants. If vrata, being of the nature of tapas or austerity, tends to restrain the spirits, utsava frees it and brightens it. The two are thus complementary. Hence, invariably, almost every vrata is followed by an utsava, thus offsetting its rigours and bringing joy and happiness in its train.

An overwhelming majority of the Hindu festivals are not only vratas but also utsavas, since the latter follow the former without exception.

A classification of these vratas may now be attempted, based on the traditional

literature like the purāṇas and allied works. If in a vrata, the stress is on physical austerity like fasting, it is a 'kāyika-vrata,' a vrata pertaining to the body. If the stress is on speaking the truth and reciting the scriptures, both being a function of the organ of speech, it is called 'vācika-vrata' or vrata pertaining to speech. If on the other hand, the emphasis is on controlling the mind, by controlling the passions and prejudices that arise in it, it is a 'mānasa-vrata' or vrata pertaining to the mind. However, it should be noted that all these three disciplines are almost always present in every vrata.

The second classification is based on time. A vrata to be performed just for a dina or day is a dinavrata; one lasting for a vāra or a pakṣa (week or fortnight) is a 'vāra-vrata' or a pakṣavrata; one to be undertaken on a particular tithi (a day according to the lunar calendar) or when a particular nakṣatra (asterism) is on the ascendant, is respectively called a 'tithivrata' or nakṣatravrata'. Most of the vratas now in vogue are based on the tithis of the lunar calendar.

The third classification is according to the deity (an aspect of God) worshipped; for instance, Svarṇā-gaurī vrata or Varasiddhivināyakavrata or Satyanārāyaṇavrata (dedicated respectively to the deities Gaurī, Gaṇapati and Satyanārāyaṇa).

The fourth classification is based on for whom it is meant: those specially recommended for women are 'strī vratas;' for kṣatriyas (warrior-class), kṣatriyavratas' and so on.

Who are the persons eligible to perform a vrata? Anyone who has faith in it and wishes to perform it as per the rules, even if he be a mlechha (alien)! Whereas the Vedic sacrifices were strictly restricted to the men of the three upper castes (called dvijas), the doors of the vratas were thrown open to one and all, thus bringing ritualistic Hinduism to especially the lower castes and women, who had been denied that privilege for centuries. Historically speaking, this might have been a master-stroke devised by the liberal-minded religious leaders of the Hindu society to prevent the exodus of their flock

to the Jaina and the Buddhist folds, which were singularly free from the labyrinth of rituals and offered a simple religion of ethical conduct.

Though the rules concerning the vratas had been very much liberalized to embrace as large a segment of the society as possible, there had to be some rules guiding the whole process in order to protect and preserve the sanctity of the ritual system itself. These may be summarized as follows: During the period of the observance of a vrata, one should keep one's person clean and pure, observe celibacy, speak the truth, practise forbearance, avoid non-vegetarian foods and scrupulously perform all the rituals connected with it. Once a vrata is undertaken, it should never be left unfinished nor a new one started before completing it. But, one should never start the observance while in *as auca* (ceremonial impurity brought about by birth or death in one's family). Persons too old or too sick, can get the vrata performed for them by the close relatives if they are willing. Women are advised to take the permission of * their father or husband or son. Once the decision is taken to perform a vrata, the actual commencement should be made only as per the auspicious time, place and mode laid down by the books.

Generally, the performance of almost all the vratas starts in the early morning. The votary has to get up in the *brā hnamuhū rta* (almost an hour before sunrise), have his ablutions and bath, complete the usual daily rituals like the *sandhyā* (worship of God as the immanent power in the sun) and worship of the family deity and then, start the vrata with the *sañ kalpa*.

The *sañ kalpa* or religious resolve is the most essential, and even compulsory, part of the vrata. Sans it, the whole rite gets nullified. Though the mantras for *sañ kalpa* vary from vrata to vrata, the general context and pattern are almost identical. The performer has to mention his name, the year, month, day and date, the purpose of the vrata, the deity he is propitiating as also the special discipline (if any) he will follow. This is done ceremonially with a little water taken in the palm of the hand.

The total number of vratas and utsavas listed by the largest of the published works-Caturvarga-cintā maṇ i of Hemā dri (13th century)-comes to about 700. However, most of these are less known individual vratas.

An account of the well-known and popular festivals may now be given, followed by the others, later.

3 Major Festivals

It is rather difficult to classify the Hindu festivals into major ones and minor ones. A day, considered as extremely auspicious from the astrological point of view-as for instance, Akṣ ayyatṛ tī yā or Balipā ḍ -yamī -may not be celebrated with pomp and gaiety. A festival, like the Holi, though extremely popular, does not have much astrological significance. It is only a spring festival of revelry. However, the norm adopted here for grouping a particular festival as a major one, is its popularity and widespread celebration, though astrological and religious significance too are taken note of. While listing the festivals for a detailed treatment, chronological order as per the lunar calendars has been followed.* Relevant additional information is provided wherever needed.

1. Cā ndramā na Yugā di (Caitra ś ukla pratipad) :

The arrival of the New Year is a great event that is duly celebrated by the people of all religions and cultures, all over the world. The most widely accepted New Year's Day among the Hindus is the first day of the bright half of the month of Caitra (March-April). It is one of the 3days considered to be extremely auspicious, the others being Vijaya-daś amī , Balipratipadā , and Akṣ ayyatṛ tī yā . Brahmā , the Creator, is said to have created this world on this day and the reckoning of time begun from the sunrise of this day. Hence the name `yugā di' (beginning of an era or epoch). Emperor Ś ā lī vā hana (circa A.D.79) is believed to have been crowned on this day. Consequently this era is called the Ś aka Era or the Ś ā lī vā hana Ś aka.

Paś cā ttā pa or repentance for the evil deeds committed during the past year-whether knowingly or unknowingly-prayers for forgiveness, performance of mahā ś ā nti rites to ward off all future evils or misfortune, worship of the presiding deity of the year as indicated by the day of the week on which the yugā di falls*, worship of Brahmā , the Creator, with all the upacā ras (items showing honour), worship to other deities, to units of time and nakṣ atraś or asterisms and finally to Viṣ ṇ u-are the religious rites specially recommended. Brā hmaṇ aś of learning and good character have to be honoured on this day by feeding them with food and offering gifts of money, water-pot and a copy of the new pañcā ṅ ga almanac). One should also listen to the reading of that pañcā ṅ ga by the family priest.

Taking bath after anointing the body with oil (called abhyañjanasnā na' or 'oil-bath' in the Indian English), wearing new clothes, decorating the house, eating a mixture of tender neem leaves and jaggery followed by a sumptuous feast, giving presents to servants and dependents-these are the social aspects of the celebration.

Listening to the forecasts given in the pañcā ṅ ga can help one to prepare himself for facing the untoward incidents or circumstances. Eating the mixture of the bitter neem leaves along with the sweet jaggery is supposed to be good for health and also an antidote for the illnesses common in the spring season. Taken in a symbolic sense, it can psychologically prepare one to be equanimous under all circumstances of life, whether bringing pain or pleasure, since the new year may not be much different from the previous one!

Cā ndramā na Yugā di is observed widely as the New Year's Day in Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. In some parts of the country, especially in Maharashtra, a long bamboo is decorated with a silk cloth and a silver or copper vessel is put over it. A garland of sweets and neem leaves is tied at the upper end. This is called guḍ hi.' This is then worshipped and hoisted on the terrace of the house. It is taken down after sunset and the sweets and neem leaves are distributed among all,

especially the children, to be consumed as prasā da or consecrated food. Because of this custom of raising the guḍ hi on the paḍ hvā (or pratipad) day, the day (Yugā di) itself is christened as `Guḍ hi Paḍ vā .' According to one belief, this is actually a flag-hoisting ceremony to commemorate the killing of Vā lī , the monkey chief of Kiṣ kindhā , by Ś rī Rā ma on this day.

Yugā di is also the first day of the nine-day-Vasantanavarā tra dedicated to the worship of the Divine Mother Durgā . Why there are two Navarā tras, one in Vasanta ṛ tu (spring) and the other in Ś aradṛ tu (autumn), is a matter of conjecture. It is possible that the two festivals became popular due to the fact of the spring crops and the autumn crops being ready at these times. However, celebration of the Vasantanavarā tra has almost been given up in favour of Ś arannavarā tra.

The commencement of the New Year differs in some places. In Tamil Nadu and Kerala, following the solar calendar, it starts generally on the 14th April (first day of the month Cittirai). In Bengal, it is Pahalā Vaiś ā kh,' falling mostly on the 15th of April. In other places like Gujarat it is on the Balipā ḍ yamī day (Kā rtī ka ś ukla pratipad).

2. Rā ma Navamī (Caitra ś ukla navamī):

Eight days after Yugā di or on the ninth day of the bright half of the month of Caitra, falls the birthday of Ś rī Rā ma, one of the two most popular and highly revered incarnations of Lord Viṣ ṇ u. He is said to have been born at noon.

The Rā manavamī -vrata is nitya or compulsory for the devotees of Rā ma and optional for others. One of the highly eulogized vratas in the Hindu calendar, it can destroy one's sins and also confer even mukti or liberation.

Actually the vrata commences from the previous night itself with fasting. On the navamī day also the votary has to continue fasting, perform worship and homa to Rā ma in an image installed in a specially prepared shrine, do japa of Rā mamantra

and keep vigil in the night. After the completion of the vrata he has to donate the image to the ā cā rya (a learned brā hmaṇ a well-versed in the rite) along with other gifts made liberally.

In the modern days gifting the image of Rā ma is extremely rare. Fasting is done by the more orthodox persons only. However, people do assemble in very large numbers in Rā ma temples and enthusiastically participate in the festivities there. Pā rā yaṇ a or ceremonial recitation of the Rā mā yaṇ a (usually spread over the nine days from Yugā di), arranging religio-cultural programmes like Harikathā (musical discourse on mythological stories) and classical music or devotional songs are quite common.

Celebrations at places associated with Rā ma, like Ayodhyā in Uttar Pradesh and Rā meś varam in Tamil Nadu attract thousands of devotees.

3. Gurupū ṛ imā (ā ṣ ā ḍ ha pū ṛ imā):

Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Dvaipā yana, better known as Vyā sa-mahaṣ i, did yeomen service to the cause of Vedic studies by gathering all the Vedic hymns extant during his times, dividing them into four parts based on their use in the sacrificial rites and teaching them to his four chief disciples Paila, Vaiś ampā yana, Jaimini and Sumantu. It was this dividing and editing of the Vedas that earned him the honorific ' Vyā sa' (vyas to divide, to edit). Since he thus occupies the place of a great guru or preceptor, his birthday- ā ṣ ā ḍ hapū ṛ imā , full moon day in the month of ā ṣ ā ḍ ha, generally in July-is known as 'Vyā sa-pū ṛ imā ' or 'Gurupū ṛ imā '. The day is considered as sacred, not only to the sannyā sins ascetics) but also to the students of Vedic studies.

Since the guru or ā cā rya or the preceptor occupies a very exalted place in Hindu religious traditions, Gurupū ṛ imā is sacred to one and all. On this day people are expected to worship or honour their gurus or teachers, especially the spiritual preceptors.

In the olden days, sannyā sins used to lead an itinerant life. Since this was not possible in the four months of the rainy season (ā ṣ ā ḍ ha to Kā ṛtī ka, corresponding to July-October), they were permitted to stay at one place during this period. This was technically called 'Cā turmā sya,' meaning 'the religious rite to be observed during the period of the four months'.

The Cā turmā syavrata started on the Guru-pū ṛ ṇ imā day with the worship of Vyā sa, one's own guru and beginning of scriptural studies including their exposition to those that seek knowledge. The laity were expected to take advantage of this opportunity to serve the sannyā sins and get instructions from them about religion and spiritual values.

In the Vedic period, there were sacrifices known as Cā turmā syas. They were the three sacrifices Vaiś vadeva, Varuṇ apraghā sa and Sā kamedha performed at four-monthly intervals. This Cā turmā sya started with the performance of the Varuṇ apraghā sa on the ā ṣ ā ḍ hapū ṛ ṇ imā day, the other two being done on Kā ṛtī kapū ṛ ṇ imā Sā kamedha) and Caitra-pū ṛ ṇ imā Vaiś vadeva) days. The yajamā na or performer (of these sacrifices) was ordained to observe certain disciplines during this period, such as sleeping on the ground, avoiding luxurious food and bodily decorations, observing continence and so on.

When, over the centuries, there was a gradual metamorphosis of the Vedic sacrificial rites into temple rites and pū jā s or worship of the deity at home, the Vedic Cā turmā sya might have quietly assumed the form of the Cā turmā syavrata of the purā ṇ as, which is prevalent even now. This vrata which is open to all, commences from the Gurupū ṛ ṇ imā day. It is spread over the period of four months up to Kā ṛtī ka- pū ṛ ṇ imā . During this period, the performer had to abjure many comforts and good things of life like sleeping on a cot, consuming tasty foods (especially honey, milk, curds and vegetables) and so on. The vrata was to be concluded by worshipping God, feeding the brā hmaṇ as and giving them gifts according to one's capacity. This

Cā turmā syavrata was declared to be capable of conferring many favours pertaining to this life like good food, beauty, intelligence, progeny and so on.

4. Janmā ṣ ṭ amī (Ś rā vaṇ a kṛ ṣ ṇ a aṣ ṭ amī)

Janmā ṣ ṭ amī or Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a-janmā ṣ tamī is perhaps the most popular and the most widely celebrated festival all over India as also among the Hindus living abroad. The very fact that the word

`Janmā ṣ ṭ amī ' which has no reference to Kṛ ṣ ṇ a at all, means the birthday of Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, is a proof of this.

Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, like Ś rī Rā ma, incarnation of Lord Viṣ ṇ u, has been commanding the love and affection, reverence and devotion, of millions of Hindus for millennia.

The problem of the historicity of Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, discussed by erudite scholars over the centuries, is not at all relevant to our study and exposition of the Kṛ ṣ ṇ a festival here.* If a `person' or a `personality' has succeeded in capturing the psyche and ethos of an entire nation for numberless years, he is certainly the maker and shaper of history and not just a poor historical entity!

The birthday of Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, though mentioned as Ś rā vaṇ a Kṛ ṣ ṇ ā ṣ ṭ amī (associated with the Rohiṇ ī nakṣ atra, the 4th asterism, comprising five stars) is sometimes assigned to the month Bhā drapada or even to other months and dates, which may be assumed to refer to some older traditions. The date given here (eighth day in the dark fortnight in the month of Ś rā vaṇ a, usually in August/September) is now the universally accepted one.

If the aṣ ṭ amī tithi and the Rohiṇ ī nakṣ atra occur on the same day, it is doubly sacred and the vrata is observed only for one day. Otherwise, it is to be observed on the aṣ ṭ amī day only. If both are spread over two days, the latter day is

chosen for the observance.

Since Kṛ ṣ ṇ a was born at midnight, the observance of the vrata commences at midnight. Fasting, keeping vigil the whole night, worship of Lord Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, repeating or listening to the recitations from the Bhā gavata or hymns of praise on Kṛ ṣ ṇ a's story and exploits, and, pā raṇ ā (ceremonial breaking of the fast)-these are the main items in the Janmā ṣ ṭ amī vrata. The sañ kalpa mantra may mention the reward one wants (if the vrata is observed as kā mya or with desire) or it can be done for self-purification.

Some works giving more detailed instructions about the vrata advise the performer to devise a temporary sū tikā gr̥ ha or delivery room! This caters to the popular sentiments even as the creche in Christianity does. The pū jā includes the performance of certain sacraments to be done at the birth of a child like the jā takarma, and nā makaraṇ a or the naming ceremony.

Generally, the Rohiṇ ī nakṣ atra falls on the next day which is observed as Jayantī or Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Jayantī . It may be observed either as a vrata or as an utsava, a festival, the latter being the rule.

Coming to the social aspects of the celebrations: In some parts of the country like Maharashtra, boys and common folk hang up pots full of curds and buttermilk, play underneath them, and get drenched by the curds and buttermilk running out of the holes made by the boys, in typical Kṛ ṣ ṇ a fashion! In some of the South Indian homes, some of the eatables prepared for the occasion, are hung on a frame at the top of the maṇ ḍ apa (temporary shrine structure) and distributed among the devotees, especially the children, after the festivities.

The celebrations are held on a grand scale in all the Kṛ ṣ ṇ a temples, especially the ones in Vṛ ndā ban, Mathurā (in Uttar Pradesh) and Dvā rakā (in Gujarat). Processions with Kṛ ṣ ṇ a images in cradles are a common sight.

5. Gaṇ eś a Caturthī (Bhā drapada ś ukla caturthī):

Gaṇ eś a or Gaṇ apati, the elephant-faced god, is an extremely popular deity, not only with the masses but also with the classes. Being Viḡhneś vara-Lord of and destroyer of obstacles-he is eagerly sought by the classes. The masses try to propitiate him to fulfill their needs, since he is `Varada' and `Siddhida,' the giver of boons and success in undertakings. No venture can be started without worshipping him first. He is also the god of knowledge and wisdom as well as literature and fine-arts. Hence the supreme importance of the Gaṇ eś acaturthī -vrata.

The purā ṇ as are replete with his stories, that describe his origin or adventures, or that contain philosophical disquisitions delving into his symbology. Pundits have been battling over the years to solve the riddles concerning the origin or evolution of the enigmatic deity.* We are however interested in harnessing his grace and powers for the benefit of the devotees by describing some relevant details concerning the vrata which has been so highly extolled in the Hindu religious works.

The main time for the performance of pū jā to Gaṇ eś a on this sacred day is noon. A clay image, beautifully painted, is to be brought and installed on a suitable altar, and decorated. After the usual preliminary rites, prā ṇ apratiṣ ṭ hā (`infusing life into the image' or `invoking the presence of the deity into the image') has to be done with appropriate mantras. This should be followed by worship with sixteen upacā ras or modes of showing honour. Offering of dū rvā (grass) tendrils and modaka (a kind of sweet supposed to be dear to Gaṇ eś a), twenty-one in number, is a very important part of this pū jā . This may symbolically teach us that we have to offer in all humility (represented by the dū rvā grass), all the good things of life that give us pleasure and happiness (represented by the modaka; `modaka' literally means `that which gives us joy'). The number 21 may stand for the 21 items in our person viz., jñā nendriyas or the five organs of perception, karmendriyas or the five organs of action, the five prā ṇ as or vital airs, the five bhū tas or elements and the mind. Thus the pū jā can teach us total

dedication and surrender at the feet of Lord Gaṇeśa, who is none other than the Highest Brahman or the Absolute in that form. The image has to be ceremonially immersed in water after the completion of the vrata.

In modern times, the image is kept and worshipped for 1 1/2 days or 2 to 7 days or even up to Anantacaturdaśī (14th day of bright half of Bhādrapada) before immersing. It is taken in a procession for the immersion which is done in a well or a tank or a river or the sea.

There is a widespread popular belief that if one sees the moon on the Gaṇeśa Caturthī day, he will be falsely charged with the commission of a theft or a similar crime. The story of Śrī Kṛṣṇa being thus implicated in the theft of the famous gold-yielding gem (syamantaka) belonging to the Yādava chieftain Satrajit is cited as an example. (This story appears in the Mahābhārata as also in several purāṇas such as Vāyu, Matsya, Viṣṇu and Bhāgavata.) The problem has also been 'solved' by these works, by recommending to such inadvertent 'offenders' the recitation of a mantra* over some water and drinking it.

One more Gaṇeśa Caturthī is mentioned in some purāṇas, as falling on Māghaśukla caturthī. But it is not being observed now.

6. Śarannavarātra and Vijayadaśamī (Āśvayuja or Āśvinaśukla pratipad up to Śukla navamī and daśamī):

'Navarātram' means a period of nine nights, or for that matter, a period of nine days. Two Navarātras are mentioned in the purāṇas and dharmasāstras, as being highly auspicious for the worship of Śakti or the Divine Mother Durgā. They are: Vasanta-navarātra, the first nine days in the Vasantaṛtu or spring, from Caitraśukla pratipad up to navamī Śarannavarātra, the first nine days in the Śaradṛtu or autumn, from Āśvayujaśukla pratipad to navamī. However, in practice, the celebration of the former has yielded its place almost completely to the latter.

Though this Navarātra is celebrated all over the country in some form or the other, it is the Durgotsava or the festival of Mother Durgā that steals the show. Hence this will be considered first. As regards the antiquity of Durgā worship, it might have existed even by the beginning of the Christian era.

The worship of God as Śakti (Supreme Power) and as Devī (Divine Mother, Mother of the Universe) is as old as the Ṛgveda itself. Over the centuries it has grown into a formidable cult with its own philosophy, myths and rituals. The Durgāpūjā is undoubtedly the most important festival of this religious tradition.

As in the case of many other important vratas and utsavas, the Durgotsava is both nitya (compulsory) and kāmya (optional). It may be performed for nine days or just three days (from āśvayujaśukla saptamī to navamī). Those who want to celebrate it just for a day, can do so either on the aṣṭamī or on the navamī day. It is interesting to note that the various gods of the Hindu pantheon, including Viṣṇu, are described as going to sleep for a period of four months (āṣāḍha to Kārttikā). That the rainy season spread over this four-month period gave little scope to movement and activity or that the sun gave very little light to the Vedic āryans living the northern latitudes, may have been the origin of this myth.

Be that as it may, since Mother Durgā who went to bed on āṣāḍhaśukla aṣṭamī, is still sleeping at the time the Durgotsava is planned to be celebrated, she has to be woken up first! This is called 'bodhana' and is done on the evening of āśvayujaśukla śaṣṭhī. A ghaṭa or kalāśa (a pot with water containing sandalwood paste, dūrvā grass, leaves of five trees like mango, clay from seven places, fruit etc.) is established under a bilva tree (Aegle marmelos), the mantras of bodhana or awakening are uttered, and the bilva tree itself is worshipped as Mother Durgā. A second ghaṭa is also established there itself. Next morning (i.e., on the saptamī day), a small branch of that bilva tree is cut, placed in the second ghaṭa and ceremonially carried to the hall of worship where the clay image has already been

established, and kept at its feet. After *prāṇapratiṣṭhā*, a detailed worship is done to the *ghaṭā* (in the presence of the image) with sixteen *upacāras*, followed by *homa* (sacrifice in a duly consecrated fire).

The story goes that when *Durgā* (or *Pārvatī*) came to her mother's house from her husband's home, it was late evening. So, she decided not to disturb her parents and spent the whole night under a *bilva* tree near the house. The ritual described above is symbolic of this.

The *pūjas* done on the *aṣṭamī* and *navamī* days are practically identical with the *saptamī pūjā*. On all the days, *snāna* or bath is given to the sword or the mirror kept in front of the image reflecting it. Again, on all the days, ceremonial recitation of the famous work *Devīmāhātmya* (also known as *Śrī Caṇḍī* or *Durgā saptaśatī*) is arranged at a suitable place in the worship hall. This recitation, especially on such holy days, is considered to confer great benefits on the performer of the *pūjā*.

Part of the *aṣṭamī pūjā* is the *Kumarī pūjā*, worship of a girl-child in the age-group of 2 to 10. She should be a healthy child unblemished in body and appearance. She is to be worshipped as the embodiment of the *Devī* or goddess herself.

Another important ritual is the *Sandhipūjā*, performed at the junction of the two *tithis*, *aṣṭamī* and *navamī*. The *Devī* along with the *Yoginīs* (various emanations of the *Devī*, 64 in all) is to be worshipped then. A *balī* (sacrifice) is also to be given.

Though animal sacrifice has existed as part of *Durgā pūjā*, it is relegated as *āmāsiḥ* (bad or evil), fit for people of lower culture and evolution.

On the early morning of *daśamī*, the tenth day, the *visarjanapūjā* (worship signifying a send-off to the goddess) is done, symbolically withdrawing the deity from

the image into one's own heart. In the evening, after a simple ā rati (waving of light) the image is taken in a grand procession and immersed in a tank or a river or the sea. Much revelry is seen during the procession and afterwards, in the manner of the festivities of Ś abaras (mountain tribes or barbarian tribes). In this Ś abarotsava, as it is called, all people irrespective of their social status, were expected to join, probably emphasizing that all were equal before the Mother of all.

The evening of Vijayadaś amī , after the immersion of the Durgā image, is an occasion of great joy for the people who meet their friends and relatives and warmly greet them.

The Durgotsava described till now as the biggest festival, is mainly celebrated in Bengal, Bihar and Assam. However, now-a-days, it is being celebrated in the urban areas of almost all parts of the country, thanks to the concentration of the Bengali population there.

Celebration of the Navarā tra festival varies from place to place in other parts of the country. In South India, goddess Sarasvatī is worshipped on the saptamī day and Durgā on the aṣ ṭ amī . The worship is done in the picture and not in clay images as in Bengal. The navamī day, called 'Mahā navamī ', is celebrated as ā yudhapū jā , the instruments and implements that help us to earn our livelihood being worshipped then. This is akin to the Viś vakarmapū jā performed in the North, on the Bhā drapada ś ukla saptamī day. In almost all the homes, there will be display of dollswith decorations. This is a special attraction for children.

In several parts of North India, especially in the Hindi belt, Navarā tra is celebrated as Rā malī lā . Recitations from the Rā mā yaṇ a, enacting plays based on the several episodes of the epic and processions culminating in the burning of the effigies of Rā vaṇ a, Kumbhakarṇ a and Meghanā da on the daś amī day (also called Vijayadaś amī) are the salient features of these celebrations.

In the Mysore City of Karnataka, the Dasara festival celebrated during the Navarā tra, has been very famous. It was a royal festival celebrated by the Mahā rā jā (King) of Mysore, ending with a grand procession on the Vijayadaś amī day.

Now-a-days, an image of Cā muṇ ḍ eś varī (an aspect of Durgā) is taken out in procession.

The tenth day, just after the Navarā tra festival, called Vijayadaś amī or just Vijayā , is an important festival day. Being contiguous to the Navarā tra and often considered as the culmination of the same, it has practically become a part of that. It is, as already stated, one of the 3 days considered to be extremely auspicious in the Hindu calendar. It is on this day that Ś rī Rā ma killed Rā vaṇ a and got victory in the battle. Hence the name Vijayadaś amī . According to the Bengali traditions, he woke up Mother Durgā during the Navarā tra, worshipped her on all the days, set out on the Vijayadaś amī day after worshipping the ś amī vṛ kṣ a (Prosopis Spicigera) to conquer Rā vaṇ a and attained victory after killing him. Hence, the ś amī tree has become a symbol of victory in undertakings. Even now, people send its leaves to one another as a mark of wishing success in life, on this occasion. The tradition of worshipping Durgā during ā ś vajuja (ā ś vina) instead of during Caitra, seems to have had its origin in this.

Dī pā valī (ā ś vajuja kṛ ṣ ṇ a caturdasī to Kā rtī ka ś ukla dviṭī yā):

Being a festival of lights, decorative illuminations and fireworks, Dī pā valī or Divā lī is perhaps the most popular of all the Hindu festivals, bringing joy to the young and old alike. It is celebrated very widely throughout India and among the Hindus settled abroad.

It is very difficult to trace its origin and development. According to some scholars it was already a well-known festival by the time of the Bhaviṣ yottara Purā ṇ a said to be composed before A.D. 1000.

In some works it has been called as 'Kaumudī Utsava,' 'a festival in which people find delight on this earth among themselves'.

Dī pā valī proper is of three days' duration; and with the addition of dviṭī yā , it is spread over four days. It normally falls during the last part of October and the early part of November. The first day ā ś vajuja kṛ ṣ ṇ a caturdaś ī , is called Narakacaturdaś ī '. Originally, the celebration of this day may have been aimed at escaping from naraka or hell, by propitiating Yama, the god of death and hell. But later, it seems to have been associated with Kṛ ṣ ṇ a's killing of the demon Narakā sura, the king of Prā ggyotiṣ apura (modern Assam). On this day one is advised to take an oil-bath at dawn, pray for the destruction of one's sins, offer tarpaṇ a (satiation with handful of water mixed with sesame) to Yama and light a lamp to Naraka. After a sumptuous feast with fourteen kinds of vegetables (since the festival starts from the 14th day), rows of lamps should be lighted in the evening illuminating all parts of one's house. Temples and public places too should be illuminated in the same way. Some religious texts suggest that the day should be spent in fasting and that food can be taken only at night.

In Bengal, Kā lī is worshipped on this day in clay image, instead of Lakṣ mī , throughout the night. Hence this day is named Kā lī pū jā day or festival.

The next day, amā vā syā , is said to be the darkest day of the year. Oil-bath, worship of Lakṣ mī , the goddess of wealth and prosperity, offerings to the pitṛ s or departed manes, feeding of brā hmaṇ as and fasting by day are the main items of the rite on this day. Lighting of lamps and general illumination should continue as on the previous day. Since this is a day specially dedicated to Lakṣ mī and since there is every chance of Alakṣ mī (the inauspicious goddess, the opposite of Lakṣ mī) peeping in to ruin one's prosperity, women of the town or village are asked to create a terrible noise by beating drums and winnowing baskets around midnight !

In other parts of India, this is traders' day. They adore Lakṣ mī , worship their

account books, open the new account books, invite friends, customers and other traders and give them ā mbū la (betel leaf with betel nuts) and sweets.

Next day-Kā rtī ka ś ukla pratipad-is known as 'Balipratipadā ' or 'Balipā ḍ yamī '. It is one of the 3 days considered as most auspicious in the Hindu almanacs. Though there is unanimity in assigning great auspiciousness to Cā ndramā na Yugā di and Vijayadaś amī , there are differences of opinion regarding the third. Some give that privilege to

Balipratipadā while others do so to Akṣ ayaṭṛ tī yā . The left over day becomes the !

Worship of Bali (the powerful king of the asuras who was vanquished and pushed into the pā tā la or the nether world by Viṣ ṇ u as the incarnation Vā mana) at night, especially by the king, is the most important rite of this day. One should also keep awake the whole night spending the time in seeing religious dramas. Gifts made on this day bring inexhaustible fruits.

On all the three or four days of the Dī pā valī festival, the skies are rent asunder by the terrific sounds of bursting crackers. This bursting of crackers seems to be a universal practice all over the country. It may signify not only the expression of one's joy but also the destruction of evil personified by demons like Narakā sura.

Balipratipadā is also called 'Dyū tapratipadā '. 'Dyū ta' means gambling. There is a curious (or queer?) direction in the Brahmapurā ṇ a, issued to those observing this day, to gamble! It seems that on this day Pā rvaṭī defeated Ś aṅ kara in a game of dice and that she became very happy whereas Ś aṅ kara was distraught with sorrow. (This scene has been shown in the Ellora cave no. 21.) Hence those that win in the gambling on this day will be happy throughout the year, the opposite being the case of those that lose! This temptation naturally makes people-even today-to gamble recklessly.* May be that the writers of these purā ṇ as wanted the flock not to gamble

for the rest of the year! This is perhaps better than our modern contrivances like 'Courtesy Week' wherein people think that they need not be courteous for the remaining part of the year!

Some more observances prescribed during the celebration of the Balipratipadā may now be given. They are: worship of cows and bulls, worship of the Govardhana hill, tying of Mā rgapā lī and ā rati to menfolk by the womenfolk of the family. Cows and bulls should be decorated, worshipped and fed well. Cows must not be milked that day and bulls must not be made to work. Obviously this is a way of expressing one's gratitude to those animals which do so much for us.

Next is the worship of the Govardhana hill. The 'hill' is prepared either out of cow-dung or out of anna (cooked rice) and other cooked food. This latter, as also its worship, is called 'Annakū ṭ a'. An image or a picture of Bā lagopā la (boy Kṛ ṣ ṇ a) is also kept with it and worship is offered with 16 upacā ras. The mantras used expressly refer to the protection that Bā lakṛ ṣ ṇ a gave to the people by lifting up the Govardhana hill and sheltering them beneath it.

Mā rgapā lī ('protectress of the road') is a rope of kuś a grass and is tied to a pole on one side and a tree on the other, in the afternoon. All people including the king and the brā hmaṇ as bow down before it and pass under it. It is perhaps the 'goddess of the road,' whose grace is needed to keep the town safe and also for safety during journeys. This is then followed by a tug of war between the men of the royal families and the common folk. If the common folk win, it is said to be good for the king and the country. Obviously, this is a symbolic way of expressing the simple truth that the ruler can be successful and the country well-ruled only when the people have a say in the affairs of the State.

Next comes the festival of Yamadvitī yā or Bhrā ṭṛ dvitī yā (Kā ṛtī ka ś ukla dvitī yā). According to an ancient legend, Yama, the god of death and hell, and the river goddess Yamunā , were brother and sister. On this day of Kā ṛtī ka ś ukla

dviṭī yā , goddess Yamunā is said to have invited her brother Yama to her house for dinner and honoured him. Hence, this day has become a day of reunion of brothers and sisters. Brothers are invited by the sisters to their houses and sumptuously fed. The former give presents to the latter. Since there is separation of the sisters after their marriage, from their parents and brothers, and may live in far off places or may not meet for a long time, this festival

provides for a much-needed opportunity for a get-together.

Sometimes, the sisters worship god Yama and pray to him for the longevity of their brothers. People living on the banks of the Yamunā river, do not miss taking bath in the river on this day. In some places there is a melā (fair) on the banks of the river.

8. Mahā śivarātri (Māgha kṛṣṇa caturdaśī):

The deity Rudra-Śiva is as old as the Ṛgveda. The Śiva cult and Śaivism are of hoary antiquity. Hence religious observances on the days considered dear to Śiva, must have been existing since the ancient days.

The 14th day of the dark half of every month- kṛṣṇa caturdaśī -is called 'Śivarātri' or 'Māgha śivarātri'. The one in the month of Māgha (February- March) is christened 'Mahā śivarātri,' since it is the greatest of all.

In several purāṇas like the Skānda, Padma and Garuḍa, there are stories and passages of hyperbolic eulogy of this Mahā śivarātri-vrata. One of the common stories is how a niṣāda or a kirāta (a hunter or an aborigine) who 'observed' the vrata on the Mahā śivarātri day unknowingly, out of the force of circumstances, by fasting, keeping vigil and bathing a Śivaliṅga (the emblem of Śiva) with water, was taken to the world of Śiva. How much more would the benefit be, if it is observed knowingly, with devotion!- This seems to be the burden of such stories.

Of all the major Hindu festivals, Mahā śivarātri is the only one wherein the austerity part (as signified by the very word 'vrata') is predominant. There is practically no

festivity, revelry or gaiety in its observance, the whole thing being one of continuous solemnity. This is but natural since Ś iva is the god of the ascetics, the very incarnation of vairā gya or renunciation!

About the origin of Mahā ś ivarā tri, there are several myths. When Brahmā (the fourfaced god of creation) and Viṣ ṇ u were disputing each other's greatness to establish their own supremacy, a huge liṅ ga or pillar of fire appeared suddenly between them and a voice from the void declared that he who would find the extremities of this liṅ ga would be considered the greater one. Neither of them succeeded and were hence obliged to accept the greatness of Ś iva who had manifested as that pillar of light.

This was the origin of Ś ivaliṅ ga and Mahā ś ivarā tri.

According to the second myth, Mahā ś ivarā tri is the day on which Ś iva Mahā deva, drank the Hā lā hala poison that emerged out of the milky ocean (kṣ ī rasā gara) when it was being churned by the devas and the dā navas (gods and demons), and thus saved the worlds from destruction. A third myth attributes its greatness to its being the day of marriage of Ś iva with Pā rvatī , the daughter of the mountain king Himā laya. A fourth myth describes this day as the day on which Lord Ś iva, out of joy, burst forth into a great dance which has since been known as Ś ivatā ṇ ḍ ava-nṛ tyā.

This vrata is open to all human beings. The basic disciplines to be kept up on this day are: ahim̄ sā (non-injury), satya (speaking the truth), brahmacarya (continence), dayā (compassion), kṣ amā (forgiveness) and anasū yatā (absence of jealousy). Fasting is one of the most essential aspects of this vrata. So also jā garaṇ a or keeping vigil in the night. Worship of Ś iva throughout the night, bathing the ś ivaliṅ ga with pañcā mṛ ta (five tasty things-milk, curds, ghee, sugar and honey), homa, japa of the mū lamantra (basic mantra, viz., om̄ namaś ś iva ya) and prayer for forgiveness-are the other items involved in its observance. He can then, at the end of the vrata, do pā raṇ ā (breaking the fast by partaking of the offerings).

One may take a vow to observe this vrata for 24 or 14 or 12 years. At the end of this period he has to perform the udyā pana, a concluding rite indicating the completion of the vow.

In the modern days, fasting, visiting Śiva temples and keeping awake in the night are common, though pū jā throughout the night at homes is confined to the more orthodox sections.

The festival is celebrated with great solemnity and late in the famous temples of Śiva at Vārāṇasī (Benaras) Rāmeśvaram, Cidambaram, Somanāth, Bhuvanēśvar, Kāñāshasthi and other pilgrim centres.

9. Holi or Holikā (Phālguna pūṇimā):

Holi or Holikā, also called holikotsava, is an extremely popular festival observed throughout the country. It is especially marked by unmixed gaiety and frolics and is common to all sections of the people.

This festival is very ancient. Known originally as 'Holikā', it has been mentioned in very early religious works such as Jaimini's Pūrvamīmāṃsā-sūtras and Kāṭhaka-grhya-sūtras. It must have therefore existed several centuries before Christ. It was at first actually a special rite performed by married women for the happiness and well-being of their families and the full moon ('Rākā') was the deity worshipped by them.

There are two ways of reckoning a lunar month: pūṇimānta and amānta. In the former, the first day starts after the full moon; and in the latter, after the new moon. Though the latter reckoning is more common now, the former was very much in vogue in the earlier days. According to this pūṇimānta reckoning, Phālguna pūṇimā

was the last day of the year and the new year heralding the Vasanta-ṛ tu or spring started the next day. Thus the fullmoon festival of Holikā gradually became a festival of merrymaking, announcing the commencement of the spring. This perhaps explains the other names of this festival: Vasantamahotsava and Kā ma-mahotsava.

According to the stories in the purā ṇ as and various local legends, this day is important for three reasons:

1. It was on this day that Lord Ś iva opened his third eye and reduced Kā madeva (the god of Love, Cupid or Eros) to ashes.

2. It was on this day that Holikā , the sister of the demon king Hiraṇ yakaś ipu, who tried to kill the child-devotee Prahlā da by taking him on her lap and sitting on a pyre of wood which was set fire to, was herself reduced to ashes, while Prahlā da was unscathed!

3. It was again, on this day, that an ogress called dhuṇ ḍ hi, who was troubling the children in the kingdom of Pṛ thu (or Raghu) was made to run away for life, by the shouts and pranks of the mischievous boys. Though she had secured several boons that made her almost invincible, this-noise, shouts, abuses and pranks of boys-was a chink in her armour due to a curse of Lord Ś iva. The day itself came to be called `Aḍ ā ḍ ā ' or `Holikā ' since then.

There are practically no religious observances for this day like fasting or worship. Generally a log of wood will be kept in a prominent public place on the Vasantapañcamī day (Mā gha ś ukla pañcamī), almost 40 days before the Holi festival. An image of Holikā with child Prahlā da in her lap is also kept on the log. Holikā 's image is made of combustible material whereas Prahlā da's, of non-combustible ones. People go on throwing twigs of trees and any combustible material they can spare, on to that log which gradually grows into a sizeable heap. On the night of Phā lguna pū ṇ imā , it is set fire to in a simple ceremony, the Rakṣ oghna mantras of the Ṛ gveda (4.4.1-15; 10.87.15 and so on) being sometimes chanted to ward off all evil spirits. The next morning, the ashes from the bonfire are collected as prasā da (consecrated material) and smeared on the limbs of the body. Singed coconuts, if any, are also collected and eaten.

In some houses, the image of Kā madeva is kept in the square yard and a simple worship is offered. A mixture of mango blossoms and sandalwood paste is partaken as the prasā da.

The day-Phā lguna kṛ ṣ ṇ a pratipad-is observed as a day of revelry especially by throwing on one another gulā l or coloured water or perfumed coloured powder. Throwing of mud or earth dust was prevalent in the earlier days also, but among the low culture groups.

Instead of the gay and frenzied celebrations that are witnessed elsewhere in the country, Bengal observes it in a quiet and dignified manner as Dol- pū ṇ imā or Dolā yā trā (the festival of the swing). The festival, said to have been initiated by the king Indradyumna in Vṛ ndā vana, is spread over 3 or 5 days, starting from the ś ukla caturdaś ī of Phā lguna. A celebration in honour of Agni and worship of Govinda (Kṛ ṣ ṇ a) in image kept on a swing (dolā swing) are the important features. The fire kindled on the first day is to be preserved till the last day. The swing is to be rocked 21 times at the end of the festival.

The day is also celebrated as the birthday of Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Caitanya (A. D. 1486-1533), mostly in Bengal, as also Purī (in Orissa), Mathurā and Vṛ ndā van (in Uttar Pradesh).

Other Festivals

The festivals described till now have been classified as 'major' only in the sense that they are more widely known and celebrated in most parts of the country. There are, however, a good number of other festivals and sacred days which are equally important though they may be observed in certain parts or pockets of the country only.

Since almost all these festivals-whether vratas or utsavas-are observed as per the lunar almanac, they are being presented here in the order in which they occur, as per the tithis or the lunar days.

1. Dvitī ya (second day):

The Rathayatra festival (aṣ ṭ ha ś ukla dvitī yā) of Lord Jagannā tha at Puṛī (in Orissa) is a world- renowned event drawing lakhs of people every year.

Puṛī or Jagannā thapuṛī is one of the four 'dhā mas' (important places of pilgrimage situated in the four cardinal directions of India), the other three being Badaṛī in the north (Uttar Pradesh), Dvā rakā in the west (Gujarat) and Rā meś varam in the south (Tamil Nadu). Known as the ṣ ottama-kṣ etra' in the ancient days, the present temple of Lord Jagannā tha is said to have been built by the king Indradyumna. The temple with the wooden images of Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a (Jagannā tha), Balabhadra (Balarā ma, Kṛ ṣ ṇ a's elder brother) and Subhadrā (Kṛ ṣ ṇ a's younger sister) must have been in existence for over 1300 years. The wooden images are replaced periodically with new ones, the 'relics' inside the old ones being transferred to the new ones, before the former are disposed off according to the directions given in the concerned scriptures.

The Puṛī Jagannā tha temple is, perhaps, the only temple in India where the mū lavigrahas (original icons) themselves are shifted on to the rathas (chariots) for the rathotsava (chariot festival). In all other temples, there are separate icons, called 'utsava-mū rtis,' which are used for the rathotsava.

In the Rathayā trā festival three rathas are used: One for Jagannā tha, called Nandighoṣ a, 45 ft. in height, with 16 wheels of 7 ft. diameter; the second for Balarā ma, called Tā ladhvaja, 44 ft. in height with 14 wheels; and the third for Subhadrā , called Devī ratha or Darpadalana, 43 ft. in height and with 12 wheels.

After the ceremonial installation of the deities inside the chariots, it is the privilege of the king of Puṛī (a descendant of Anantavarma, A.D. 1075-1150) to sweep the chariot of the Lord and pay his homage. Then lakhs of devotees join in the pulling by big ropes, with shouts of 'Jagannā thakī jay,' 'Balabhadrakī jay ' and 'Subhadrā kī jay'. The procession stops at Guṇ ḍ ī cā bā rī , the garden house of the deities. After

a stay of seven days, the images are brought back to the main temple on the daś amī day.

The Rathayā trā (travel by the chariot) may be a ritual re-enactment of the journey of Subhadrā , escorted by Kṛ ṣ ṇ a and Balarā ma, to Dvā rakā . As per the mythological lore, Subhadrā expressed a desire to see the newly constructed city of Dvā rakā ; and was accordingly taken there by her brothers.

Out of the 62 festivals and 25 processions celebrated at this temple, the Snā nayā trā or the bathing procession conducted on the Jyeś ṭ ha pū rṇ imā day (the day on which Lord Jagannā tha incarnated himself in the present form) is next in importance to the Rathayā trā . On this occasion, the images are brought out, on to a platform, anointed by 108 pitchers of sacred water to the accompaniment of music and Vedic chants and dressed in resplendent clothes. After this ritual, spread over 15 days, the devotees are allowed to have the darś an or vision of the deities.

2. Tṛ tī yā (third day):

Two important festivals fall on this day, the Akṣ ayyaṭ rṇ ī yā and the Svarṇ agaurī -vrata.

Akṣ ayyaṭ rṇ ī yā (Vaiś ā kha ś ukla tṛ tī yā) is one of the Yugā dis (the day on which a yuga begins; here it is the Kṛ tayuga) and hence considered as one of the 3 1/2 days believed to be extremely auspicious, it itself being the half. The day has to be observed with fasting, worship of Vā sudeva with akṣ ata or rice grains, offerings into the sacred fire, study of the Vedas, reciting the sacred texts and japa of mantras. The religious merit acquired by the gifts made today becomes akṣ aya or inexhaustible. Hence the name Akṣ aya or Akṣ ayya tṛ tī yā . Gifts of water-jars, umbrellas and footwear to the brā hmaṇ as were highly eulogized. Since this day comes in summer (May), such gifts will be extremely useful to the recipients.

The Svarṇ agaurī vrata is observed on the Bhā drapada ś ukla tṛ tī yā day. It is mostly confined to the women of the Karnataka region. It is believed that Gaurī or Pā rvatī comes to her parents' house on this day and that Gaṇ eś a comes there the next day to escort her back!

Gaurī is worshipped in a clay image or a kalaś a installed in a maṇ ḍ apa (a small pavilion). The married women who observe it, fast for the day and offer worship with 16 upacā ras. They pray for health, sons, wealth and longevity of their husbands. At the end they have to do udyā pana by donating 16 baskets each filled with sixteen edibles and covered with a cloth, to brā hmaṇ a ladies and their husbands.

3. Caturthī (fourth day):

Gaṇ eś acaturthī which comes on Bhā drapada ś ukla caturthī day is a major festival and has already been dealt with in detail.

There is another caturthī connected with the worship of Gaṇ eś a-Saṅ kaṣ ṭ acaturthī . It is observed as a vrata on Ś rā vaṇ a kṛ ṣ ṇ a caturthī , in the evening after sunset and at moonrise. The purpose is to get rid of saṅ kaṣ ṭ as or problems and difficulties. Fasting during the day, worship of the image of Gaṇ eś a with 16 upacā ras, offering of modakas (a kind of fried sweet) and gifts to the ā cā rya (preceptor) as also feeding 21 brā hmaṇ as-these are the main items of the vrata. It may be continued for life or for 21 years or for one year. Even Ś iva is said to have observed this vrata when he wanted to vanquish the demon Tā raka!

A similar vrata is observed on Mā gha kṛ ṣ ṇ a caturthī also, the only addition being worship with 21 names of Gaṇ apati using the dū rvā grass.

The Kṛ ṣ ṇ a caturthī of every month also is called by the name 'Saṅ kaṣ ṭ acaturthī ', the procedure of the vrata being almost the same as given above.

4. Pañcamī (fifth day):

Nā gapañcamī (Ś rā vaṇ a ś ukla pañcamī) and Ṛ ṣ ipañcamī (Bhā drapada ś ukla pañcamī) are two important vratas commonly observed in many parts of the country.

Serpent worship seems to be a very ancient phenomenon in India. Fear of death due to serpent-bite, especially in the rainy season, may have been the origin of the Nā gapañcamī , in which worship of serpents-especially the cobra-is the main act. On this day, considered to be as auspicious as the Akṣ ayyatṛ tī yā , bathing the mythical serpents- Vā suki, Takṣ aka, Kā liya, Maṇ ibhadra, Airā vata, Dhṛ tarā ṣ ṭ ra, Kā rkoṭ aka and Dhanañjaya-with milk, through images, is supposed to give abhaya or freedom from dangers, especially from snakebite. Figures of snakes are drawn on the walls on either side of the main entrance door, with cowdung, and worship is offered to them. The same may be done to figures of snakes drawn with red sandal paste on wooden boards also. Images used in worship for bathing may be made of metal or clay. Worship should include karavī ra flowers, incense and the food offering of pā yasa (pudding). Inviting the snake-charmers and feeding their snakes with milk is common on thisday.

In Bengal, Manasā devī (a snake-goddess) is worshipped on Ś rā vaṇ a Kṛ ṣ ṇ a pañcamī , in one's own courtyard. The general purpose and procedure of worship are the same. Keeping the neem leaves in the house and eating a few of them at the end is the only speciality.

The Ṛ ṣ ipañcamī -vrata is dedicated to honouring the Saptarṣ is or the seven sages who are highly revered figures in our tradition. They are:Kaś yapa, Atri, Bharadvā ja, Viś vā mitra, Gotama, Jamadagni and Vasiṣ ṭ ha*. They have laid us under a deep debt by revealing spiritual knowledge and wisdom through the Vedic mantras.

The vrata can be performed by men of all the varṇ as (for all practical purposes, castes). Worship can be offered to the images of the sages. Subsisting on vegetables and observing celibacy are very important in this vrata. Freedom from sins and troubles and increase of good fortune are the promised results. Women observing this vrata are promised good bodily form, beauty, happiness and progeny. It may be observed for seven years (i.e., seven Ṛ ṣ ipañcamī s consecutively). The seven images along with the seven <Kalasa>kalaś as should be donated to seven brā hmaṇ as.

Though meant for all, it has somehow become a vrata observed mostly by women.

Śrī pañcamī (Mārgaśīrṣā śukla pañcamī) is a day sacred to Śrī or Lakṣmī and is dedicated to her worship. The worship may be offered to a metallic or a clay image or even a picture. Honouring chaste married women and donating a cow to a worthy person are recommended. It may be carried on for one full year, observing the vrata on the śuklapañcamī of every month.

Vasantapañcamī (Māgha śukla pañcamī) is a day dedicated to the worship of Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning and fine-arts. The worship is done to clay image and then immersed in a tank or a river. It is an extremely popular festival in Bengal, especially with the students. According to some authorities Vasantapañcamī is also called Śrī pañcamī, Śrī being Sarasvatī who is also Lakṣmī.

As already stated, worship of Sarasvatī is done in South India on the saptamī day of Navarātra.

5. Ṣaṣṭhī (sixth day):

āṣaḍha śuklaṣṣṭhī is dedicated to the worship of Subrahmaṇya or Skanda, the brave son of Śiva and commander-in-chief of the devas or gods. Hence it is called Subrahmaṇyaṣṣṭhī or Skandaṣṣṭhī. It is an extremely popular and widely observed festival in Tamil Nadu. Those desirous of getting a good son or desirous of health for their sickly children are specially advised to observe this festival. Offering of lamps, garments and live cocks (as playthings) is a speciality of this festival.

Devotees who want to get over great calamities in their life take a vow to carry the kāvaḍi, a wooden stick with two baskets at the end. They observe strict celibacy, beg their food and offerings for the Lord and walk barefooted all the way to a famous shrine of Subrahmaṇya like the ones at Tiruchandūr or Paḷani. After reaching the place they ceremonially offer the things they have brought.

The Subrahmaṇya temple at Tiruchandūr commemorates his victory over Surapadma or Tārakāsura. Corresponding to the six days of the war, a six days'

severe penance is prescribed for the devotees who are willing to undergo it. They stay within the temple complex and fast on all these days. On the day of the Skandaṣ aṣ ṭ hī they do not partake even water.

On that day, events leading to the conquest of the demon by Lord Subrahmaṇ ya are dramatised and enacted on the sea-beach.

According to some works the festival falls on Caitra ś uklaṣ aṣ ṭ hī , but is rarely observed on that day.

6. Saptamī (seventh day):

Those desirous of freedom from diseases and a robust health are advised to worship Bhā skara or Sū rya, the sun. Rathasaptamī which falls on Mā gha ś ukla saptamī is a vrata dedicated to the worship of the sun, to get that or fulfilment of any other desire. It consists of worship of the sun seated in a chariot-usually in image-with saffron and flowers, fasting for the whole day keeping vigil, the whole night with devotional songs and music. After bath next morning, gifts should be made to the guru (preceptor) and others.

Rathasaptamī * is the day on which Vaivasvata-manvantara started, on which the sun was born and also the day on which he started going northward (uttarā yaṇ a).

7. Aṣ ṭ amī (eighth day):

Caitra ś ukla aṣ ṭ amī , called Aś okā ṣ ṭ amī is a day sacred for the worship of Durgā with aś oka (Saraca Indica) flowers. An aś oka tree is worshipped on this day and water mixed with eight aś oka buds is drunk by the observer of the vrata. This is also the day meant for a ceremonial bath in the river Brahma-putra, the merit obtained being equal to that got by performing the Vā japeya sacrifice.

Small-pox, especially in an epidemic form, is a deadly disease striking mortal fear in the hearts of one and all. Ś ī talā devī , a terrible naked goddess, riding on an ass,

with a broom and a winnowing basket, is supposed to be the personification or the controller of that disease. If she is appeased on her day, the Ś ū talā ṣ ṭ amī (Caitra kṛ ṣ ṇ a aṣ ṭ amī) day, she will not trouble us! Women are advised to offer eight lamps fed with ghee and they should burn day and night (for 24 hours). The image (in the temple where the worship is done) is to be sprinkled with milk and cold water. Food cooked at home should also be offered. Seven small girls are fed and the prasā da (consecrated food) is distributed to all.

Worship of Ś ū talā is more widespread in Bengal. Other variants of the deity are worshipped in other parts of the country for the same purpose.

8. Ekā daś ū (eleventh day):

Even in the mind of an average ignorant Hindu, ekā daś ū and upavā sa (fasting) have practically become synonymous! Fasting as a spiritual discipline- whether as an expiation for sins committed or for gaining self-control-has been an age-old practice. When fasting reduces the sway of the flesh over the mind, it is much easier to control it and direct it towards God, so that it can 'live near Him'. In fact, this is the literal meaning of the word 'upavā sa' (upa near, vā sa living).

Ekā daś ū (eleventh day in both halves of the lunar month-ś uklapakṣ a and kṛ ṣ ṇ apakṣ a) can be observed just as a spiritual discipline or as a 'vrata' with all the concomitant rules. Again, if observed as a vrata, it can be 'nitya' (compulsory) or 'kā mya' (motivated by desires). In the former case only ś uklaekā daś ū s need be observed. As a kā mya-vrata, it can be observed on both the days.

Whenever it is undertaken as a vrata, apart from the fasting, sañ kalpa (resolve), worship of Viṣ ṇ u and jā garaṇ a (keeping vigil in the night) become obligatory. It is interesting to note that ekā daś ū is also called 'Harivā sara' (Hari's or Viṣ ṇ u's day) and only worship of Viṣ ṇ u has been prescribed. In fact, for the Vaiṣ ṇ avas (those belonging to the cult of Viṣ ṇ u) it is compulsory! Since fasting and keeping vigil on the Mā saś ivarā tri days (caturdaś ū of kṛ ṣ ṇ apakṣ a in every month) was compulsory

for the Ś aivas, they may have been omitted from its purview.

The purā ṇ as and the dharmas ā stras, though they prohibit the partaking of cooked food onekā daś ī days, have made many concessions to the general human weakness towards food. If one eats only once in the day around noon, it is called 'ekabhukta;' if it is only in the night, it is 'nakta;' if the food is taken once a day, only when it is got by chance, without begging for it, it is 'ayā cita.' The last, however, seems to apply only to prā yaś cittas or expiations for sins.

In all, there are 24ekā daś ī s in a lunar year. Each one of them has been given a special name. For instance, Caitra ś uklaekā daś ī is called 'Kā madā ' and Jyeṣ ṭ ha ś uklaekā daś ī is 'Nirjalā ' whereas the Phā lguna kṛ ṣ ṇ aekā daś ī is 'Pā pamocanī '.

Among these, however, ā ṣ ā ḍ ha ś ukla ekā daś ī called 'Ś ayanī ' and Kā rttī ka ś uklaekā daś ī named as 'Prabodhinī ' are important since Viṣ ṇ u is supposed to sleep on the Ś ayanī day and wake up on the Prabodhinī day, as the very names indicate. Ś ayanī is also called 'Prathamaikā daś ī '. A very big festival is held at Phaṇ ḍ harā pur of Maharashtra on this day. Devotees (called Varkarī s) come from different parts and assemble in thousands to do bhajans (devotional singing).

Theekā daś ī of Mā rgaś ī rṣ a ś uklapakṣ a is known as Pauṣ a ś uklaekā daś ī (Vaikuṇ ṭ ha-ekā daś ī). On this day, thousands of people gather in Viṣ ṇ u temples. One of the main doors called 'Vaikuṇ ṭ hadvā ra' which is normally kept closed throughout the year, is thrown open on this day. The devotees who pass through this door for the darś an of the Lord are believed to go to Vaikuṇ ṭ ha, the abode of Viṣ ṇ u. It is said that long back, the devotee Rukmā ṇ gada who was being forced by an ogress to break hisekā daś ī fast against the norms of the vrata was saved by Viṣ ṇ u and was taken to Vaikuṇ ṭ ha on this day. Hence the name. There is a very big festival on this day at the Raṅ ganā tha Temple of Ś rī raṅ gam in Tamil Nadu, which goes on for 21 days.

This day is also the day on which the Bhagavad-gī tā was taught by the Lord Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukṣ etra before the Mahā bhā rata

war. Hence, it is celebrated as Gī tā -jayantī even now. Apart from fasting and worship of the Gī tā cā rya Kṛ ṣ ṇ a, there will be ceremonial chanting of the text and sometimes discourses expounding the same.

9. Dvā daś ī (twelfth day):

Dvā daś ī is the day following ekā daś ī and hence known for pā raṇ ā , ceremonial breaking of the fast, which includes worship of Viṣ ṇ u, celibacy, avoiding a second meal as also non-vegetarian food.

Some of the purā ṇ as specially mention eight kinds of dvā daś ī s like Jayā , Vijayā , Jayantī and Pā panā ś inī , associated with certain nakṣ atraś (asterisms). Fasting is enjoined for these days also.

One of the most well-known festivals that falls on advā daś ī is the Utthā na-dvā daś ī (Kā rttī ka ś ukladvā daś ī). On this day Lord Viṣ ṇ u who had gone to sleep on the Ś ayanī day (ā ṣ ā ḍ ha ś uklaekā daś ī), gets up. Hence it is called `Utthā nadvā daś ī (utthā na getting up).

It is again on this day that Tulasī or Vṛ ndā was married to Hari or Viṣ ṇ u. So, it is also called Tulasī vivā ha day. Ceremonial marriage of the Tulasī plant (holy basil) with Lord Hari is performed on this day. In some houses images of Hari and Tulasī are kept for three days (from the navamī to ekā daś ī) and worshipped. They are married on the dvā daś ī day.

Vaikuṇ ṭ ha-dvā daś ī or Mukkoṭ i-dvā daś ī is another festival observed in the South. It is the next day of Vaikuṇ ṭ haEkā daś ī . Details of the festival are the same as for the Ekā daś ī .

10. Trayodaś ī (thirteenth day):

In some regions of India like Gujarat (including Saurashtra) the Dī pā valī festival begins on the trayodaś ī of ā ś vajuja (ā ś vina) kṛ ṣ ṇ apakṣ a itself. This

is observed as the jayantī (birthday) of Dhanvantari, the physician of the gods, the first physician in creation, an incarnation of Viṣṇu. Since he brought the amṛtakalāśā or the pot of ambrosia out of the milky ocean, by drinking which, devas or gods became amartya or immortal, it is but proper that the day of his appearance is celebrated in his honour for overcoming death-at least accidental or untimely death-and getting health and longevity. Since this needs the cooperation from Yama, the god of death, a lighted lamp is kept at the main gate of the house in the evening, in his honour. Pleased by that, he will not enter that house nor send his merciless assistants!

Fasting during the day and feasting in the night after lighting lamps is a special feature of this festival. Also, each member of the family is advised to purchase a new vessel and put it at the place of worship, to be used later during the Dīpāvalī days. Keeping the whole house clean and polishing of all the vessels is another feature noticed on this day. It is also called Dhanteras in North India.

11. Caturdaśī (fourteenth day):

In Bengal, Sāvitrī Caturdaśī is celebrated on the Jyēṣṭhākṛ̥ṣṇā caturdaśī day. It is a vrata for women to secure blessed wifehood and longevity for their husbands. Once started, it has to be continued for 14 years. It seems to be a substitute for the Vaṭasāvitrī-vrata performed in other parts of the country.

Of all the vratas assigned to caturdaśī, the Anantacaturdaśī-vrata (Bhādrapadaśuklacaturdaśī) seems to be the most important and widely observed. It is also called

‘Anantapadmanābha-vrata’. Lord Viṣṇu is believed to have appeared on this day as Padmanābha lying on the couch of Ananta (the thousand-hooded serpent). It is more an individual vrata for happiness than a socio-religious festival. An icon of Ananta the great serpent, and manifestation of Viṣṇu, has to be prepared in dūrvā grass, kept on a jar and worshipped. A thread dyed in saffron or turmeric-technically called ‘doraka’-with 14 knots (symbolizing the fourteen worlds created by God) is to be offered to Ananta with a mantra* and then worn. Women should wear it on the left wrist and

men on the right. It may also be worn round the neck.

In times of yore, Yudhiṣṭhira, the eldest son of the Pāṇḍava brothers, is said to have observed this vrata for 14 years on the advice of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, to overcome all his difficulties and get back his kingdom.

Anyone doing the same, is assured of living in the abode of Viṣṇu.

Another vrata observed on the caturdaśī day is the Vaikuṅṭha-caturdaśī vrata during Kārtika śukla-pakṣa. The legend goes that Lord Viśveśvara (Śiva) established the Viśveśvara liṅga at Vārāṇasī (Banaras) on this day after a bath in the Gaṅgā river and observing the Pāśupatavrata. According to another myth, Viṣṇu is said to have worshiped Śiva with 1008 lotuses and got the Sudarśana Cakra (the famous discus weapon) from him. Worship of Viṣṇu in the night is the main item of this vrata. Devotees of Śiva are advised to have a darśana of his liṅga on this day in the light of 720 oil lamps.

12. Pūrṇimā and Amāvāsya (fifteenth day-Full moon and New moon days):

The moon, being the planet nearest to this earth, has always fascinated man for aeons. His phases, the changing faces, have helped man to reckon time. His fully-blossomed countenance, pūrṇimā or the full moon, has inspired men to burst into joyous poetry whereas his 'total absence' on the amāvāsya day, the new-moon day (or rather the no-moon-day!) has struck awe and fear into his heart.

From the Vedic times, these two have been observed as important days, the Pūrṇamāsa and Darśana sacrifices being performed then.

In the later literature, medieval and otherwise, a number of festivals and sacred days have been earmarked for these two lunar days. Some of them may be dealt with now, the pūrṇimā festivals being taken up first.

Caitra Pū ṛṇ imā , also called Citrā Pū ṛṇ imā , is a day celebrated in honour of Citragupta, a lieutenant of Yama, the lord of death and hell. He is supposed to keep an account of our virtues and vices which will decide our fate at the time of death. If he is propitiated now itself, he may help us at the time of death, by being a little more sympathetic and compassionate! There is an ancient temple at Kā ṅcī puram near Madras, dedicated to him. On this festival day, a bronze image of this deity is carried in a procession by thousands of his devotees. A bath in the Citrā river in Kuṭ ṭ alū ru hills in the Tirunelveli district (Tamil Nadu) is also prescribed for this day to get rid of one's sins. On this day, food must be taken without salt!

This day is also observed as Hanumajjayanī ,* the birthday of Hanumā n, the matchless devotee of Ś rī Rā ma. Worship of Ś rī Rā ma and Hanumā n, singing of Rā manā masāṅ kī rtana as also the recitation of Hanumā n-cā lī sā , the famous hymn on Hanumā n by the saint Tulasī dā s (A.D. 1532-1623) are an integral part of this observance.

The pū ṛṇ imā in Vaiś ā kha is the thrice-blessed day, the birthday of Bhagavā n Buddha. It was on the Vaiś ā kha pū ṛṇ imā day that the prince Siddhā rtha was born at Lumbinī in Nepal, attained bodhi or enlightenment at Bodh Gayā and parinirvā ṇ a (final dissolution) at Kuś ī nā rā (both in Uttar Pradesh). Buddhists all over the world observe it with fasting, worship of the Buddha at home or in the temples and recitation of their scriptures. Big processions are taken out at places associated with Buddha like Bodh Gayā , Sā rnā th (near Vā rā ṇ asī), Sā ṅcī (near Vidiś ā in Madhya Pradesh) and Kuś ī nagar (near Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh).

Then comes another important day-Jyeṣ ṭ ha Pū ṛṇ imā -famous for two things: the Snā nayā trā (already described under the Rathayā trā festival) and the Vaṭ asā vitrī -vrata.

The story of Sā vitrī , the very embodiment of all the grand wifely virtues like chastity and extreme devotion to the husband, is well-known in all the Hindu homes.

Her memory has been cherished for ages by the women of India as an ideal of a pativrata (of wifely devotion to husband). This vrata has its origin in her legend.

The Vaṭ asā vitrī -vrata that is now in vogue must have been in existence long before the 10th century A.D. The main features of this vrata, observed by sumāṅ galī s or married women (whose husbands are alive) are: saṅ kalpa or resolve, worshipping a vaṭ a tree (banyan tree) with several upacā ras, worship to Sā vitrī (either in image or mentally), worship of Yama and Nā rada and giving presents to the priest. The fast is broken the next day.

Satyavā n, the husband of Sā vitrī , took the support of a branch of the vaṭ a tree, then lay down under it and died. Sā vitrī who sat with his head on her lap under that tree, accompanied Yama, the lord of death, all the way and succeeded in bringing back her husband to life, which again was under the same tree. Hence the importance of the vaṭ a tree, worship to it and the naming of the vrata itself after it.

On the Ś rā vaṅ a Pū ṛ ṇ imā , we have two more important festivals: Upā karma and Rakṣ ā bandhana.

Upā karma is the ceremony of changing the oldyajñopavī ta (sacred thread worn during the upanayana sacrament, signifying the commencement of Vedic studies and studenthood, as also a life of sacrifice for the community) into a new one. It is a sacred festival for the dvijas ('twice born' class; viz., brā hmaṅ as, kṣ attriyas and vaiś yas). People of other communities like the viś vakarmas and devā ṅ gas who undergo the upanayana sacrament, also observe this festival of changing the sacred thread. The ceremony itself is quite simple and is generally conducted by a priest, though one can do it by oneself if he knows the mantras. Japa of the Gā yatrī mantra, both before and after wearing the new thread, is important.

The days of Upā karma may sometimes vary for persons following the different Vedas.

The purā ṇ as describe how Indra, the king of the gods, who had been languishing after a particularly humiliating defeat at the hands of the asuras or demons,

was able to regain his sovereignty due to the power of the amulet tied on his hand by his queen Śacī devī after some austerities. This is the origin of the Rakṣā bandhana festival. The rakṣā s or rā khī s, prepared out of golden or yellow threads, with amulets, are first worshipped and then tied on the right hand. This tying may be done by priests who should be offered some money as dakṣiṇā (fees) or by one's sisters, or even by sisterly ladies. The brothers should offer them some presents on the occasion. The famous mantra uttered on this occasion seeks protection from it: yena baddho balī rā jā dā navendro mahā balaḥ tena tvā m abhibadhnā mi rakṣe mā cala mā cala ('I tie on you that whereby Balī, the very powerful king of demons, was bound. O protective amulet! don't slip off, don't slip off!')

On this day people of all religions, on the west coast, are in the habit of offering flowers and coconuts to the sea. It is a prayer and a request to make the sea voyage for merchant-vessels, safe and smooth.

The pūṇimā of āśvayuja (or āśvina) is called 'Śaratpūṇimā' and is auspicious for the Kojāgarī Lakṣmī pūjā. On this day Lakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, is believed to come late in the night and bless all those who are awake to receive her, uttering the words, 'ko jā grati?' ('Who is awake?'). Hence the adjective 'Kojāgarī'.

Those who are interested in acquiring wealth are advised to undertake this vrata. Worship of Lakṣmī and Indra (the king of gods) riding on his royal elephant Airāvata (in image or in a picture) and lighting of ghee or oil lamps on a large scale (from one lakh, up to 100) are the special features of this festival. The whole town or city is expected to be lighted up this way throughout the night. Keeping awake the whole night is an essential aspect of this vrata. People are advised to drink coconut water and play with numerals (i.e., dice marked with numerals).

The festival is also called as 'Kaumudī-utsava' or 'Kaumudī-jāgara utsava'.

The Kārttikā Pūṇimā is observed as an extremely sacred and popular day in South India, especially in Tamil Nadu. It is called 'Kārttikai Dīpam' festival. Lord Śiva

is said to have manifested himself in the form of the Aruṇ agiri or Aruṇ ā cala hill (Tiruvaṇ ṇ ā malai, hallowed by the recent memories of Ś rī Ramaṇ a Maharṣ i) on this day. A huge beacon is lit on the hill on this day which is witnessed and worshipped by thousands of devotees. It burns for several days.

Throughout the month of Kā rtika, generally, oil lamps are lit up in all the houses and arranged in rows in places like the front verandahs. People make bonfires in front of temples in the evening to celebrate Ś iva's burning of the chariots of the demons conquered by him. As in the Bhrā tṛ dviṭī yā festival, sisters pray for the well-being and longevity of their brothers on this day; and, brothers reciprocate by giving them presents.

This is also the day on which the great bathing festival is held at Puṣ kar (near Ajmer in Rajasthan) in the lake there.

Mā rgaś ī rṣ a Pū ṇ imā is observed as Dattā treya Jayantī in some parts, especially in Maharashtra. Pleased with the chastity of Anasū yā , the wife of the great sage Atri, Brahmā , Viṣ ṇ u and Maheś vara were born in her as her son. The child having three heads and six hands, was named 'Dattā treya,' 'One given to Atri'. Fasting, meditation, prayer and recitation of the famous text Avadhū tagī tā are part of the observance on this day.

Now the amā vā syā s or new-moon days may be taken up for consideration. The 15 days of the dark fortnight of the month Bhā drapada, are called 'Pitṛ pakṣ a' or 'Mahā layapakṣ a' and the new-moon day as 'Mahā laya Amā vā syā '. These days are considered to be extremely auspicious for performing the obsequial rites to the departed ancestors. The story goes that Karṇ a, the great hero of the Mahā bhā rata, could not get any food to eat when he went, after his death, to the higher regions, though he could get plenty of silver and gold there. This was because he had donated plenty of gold and silver but not food! Distressed much, he prayed to Yama, the god of death, and through his grace returned to this earth during this Mahā layapakṣ a, gifted plenty of food and then returned. Hence, annadā na or giving food to the hungry, is an

important duty enjoined in the observance of these days. On all the fifteen days, offerings are made to the departed manes, including those whose names or manner of death are not known. Men of the family, generally observe some austerities during this period, like not shaving the hair or the beard, not pairing the nails and so on. Feeding the priests with khī r or pā yasa (pudding) during this period is considered to be highly pleasing to the pitṛ s or manes.

The amā vā syā during the month of Mā gha, is called `Maunī Amā vā syā '. On this day people are advised to keep mauna or observe silence or behave like munis or sages, observing spiritual disciplines like satya or speaking the truth, brahmacarya or celibacy and so on. However, this day is held to be extremely auspicious to have a dip in the Sañ gama or Triveṇ ī sañ gama, the confluence of the rivers Gañ gā , Yamunā and the subterranean Sarasvatī of Vedic fame, situated in Prayā ga or the modern Allahabad (in Uttar Pradesh). Every year, lakhs of people gather on the banks of the rivers Gañ gā and Yamunā at Allahabad during the month of Mā gha (January) and the religious fair goes by the name `Mā ghamelā .' Once in 12 years is held the biggest religious fair of the whole world, called `Kumbha-melā '.

As per a legend widely believed by the devout Hindus, the Amṛ ta Kumbha or the pot of nectar that emerged out of the milky ocean during its churning* was carried away by Jayanta, the son of Indra, to heaven, being hotly pursued by the asuras or demons. In the process of this carrying, which took him 12days (of the gods, being equivalent to 12 human years) Jayanta is said to have dropped a little of it in four places: Prayā ga (Allahabad), Haradvā ra or Haridvā ra (now Hardwar) (both in Uttar Pradesh), Ujjaini (in Madhya Pradesh) and Nā sik (in Maharashtra). That is why the Kumbha-melā fair is held, once in 12 years, in all these places by turns.

During the period of Mā ghamelā , hundreds of persons live on the banks of the river, practising austerities-this is called `Kalpavā sa'-like taking bath in the river thrice a day, living on simple food or even fruits, doing a lot of japa (repetition of God's name) and meditation and giving gifts to deserving persons.

On the special days earmarked for the bath-like the Makara Sañ krā nti or Maunī Amā vā syā -the pilgrims take a complete shave. After the ceremonial bath and offering prayers, they make gifts according to their capacities.

During the periods of Kumbha Melā thousands of sā dhus and sannyā sins, mendicants and religious persons of various denominations, cults and groups congregate at the sites of the melā . Apart from ceremonial processions, religious discourses, discussions, kī rtans (devotional songs) and other religio-cultural activities are also organized by them in their camps.

Incidentally, this takes us to the next group of festivals-the bathing festivals.

Water is the greatest gift of God to the living beings. Rivers and lakes are the lifeline of a nation. According to the purā ṇ as, a sage Tundila by name, worshipped Ś iva, the great God, and became one of his aspects, viz., water. He came to be called Puṣ kara or Water-god. When Brahmā created this world he took the help of Puṣ kara, as also Bṛ haspati, the sage-preceptor of the gods. According to the arrangement arrived at among them, whenever Bṛ haspati (represented by the planet Guru or Jupiter) enters a particular zodiacal sign, a particular river becomes a 'Puṣ kara', charged with the divine power of all the gods. This happens once in 12 years for each of the twelve rivers mentioned in the purā ṇ as. And, that power will last for 12 days. So, whosoever takes a dip in that river at its puṣ kara-period, is benefited immensely in the spiritual sense.

The following table serves as a guide for the <Puskar>puṣ karas of important rivers:

When Bṛ haspati Puṣ kara enters the zodiac commences for

1. Meṣ a (Aries) Gañ gā
2. Vṛ ṣ abha (Taurus) Narmadā
3. Mithuna (Gemini) Sarasvatī
4. Karkā ṭ aka (Cancer) Yamunā

5. Simha (Leo) Godā varī
6. Kanyā (Virgo) Kṛ ṣ ṇ ā
7. Tulā (Libra) Kā verī
8. Vṛ ś cika (Scorpio) Tā mrapaṇ ī
9. Dhanus (Sagittarius) Sindhū
10. Makara (Capricorn) Tuṅ gabhadrā
11. Kumbha (Aquarius) Bhī marathī
12. Mī na (Pisces) Praṇ ahitā (Tapaṭī)

Naturally, during these periods of puṣ kara of a particular river, thousands of devout people gather there, to have a ceremonial dip in that river and earn religious merit.

Another important festival, connected not only with bathing but also with the harvest season, is Makara Saṅ krā nti (or Uttarā yaṅ a Puṅ yakā la). Saṅ krā nti means 'the (apparent) passage of the sun from one rā ś i (sign of the zodiac) to the next following one' and hence the rā ś i in which the sun enters is designated as the saṅ krā nti of that name, like Meṣ a Saṅ krā nti, Vṛ ṣ abha Saṅ krā nti and so on. However, out of these, Makara Saṅ krā nti (which usually falls on January 14) from which the northern journey (udagayana) starts and Karkā ṭ aka Saṅ krā nti (generally occurring on July 16) from which the southern journey (dakṣ iṅ ā yana) starts are considered as more important and -auspicious.

Saṅ krā nti is sometimes deified and identified with Durgā herself.

The 'puṅ yakā la' (auspicious time) in a saṅ krā nti is generally spread over 16 ghaṭ ikā s (6 hours and 24 minutes), 8 ghaṭ ikā s on either side of the actual moment of crossing of the sun from the previous rā ś i into the next. This time is to be used for fasting, japa and dā na (giving gifts) only and not for anything else.

The rites prescribed for Makara Saṅ krā nti are: bath in a holy river like the Gaṅ gā , tarpaṇ a or offerings with water to gods and manes, fasting, homa (oblations into a sacred fire) and gifts to worthy brā hmaṇ as and other deserving persons.

In Tamil Nadu, the Makara Sañ krā nti is a harvest festival and is called Poñ gal. Poñ gal is a kind of sweet preparation, made out of sugar or jaggery, rice, ghee and milk. It is prepared from the newly harvested crops and offered to the Sun-god. The day prior to the Poñ gal day, is called Bhogi. It is a day dedicated to changing the old articles in the house for the new (especially old clothes) and consigning them to flames. The day after the Poñ gal day is reserved for the observance of the `Cattle Day' with bull-fights or taming the wild bulls by the strong young men of the village.

In Karnataka, exchanging of sesame preparation (called eḷ ḷ u) and blocks of sugar (sakkare accu) is a pleasant social aspect of the festival. Washing and decorating the cattle and making them jump over a burning fire specially lit up for the occasion as a sort of exorcising the evil spirits that may harm them is also a common feature.

Since ancient times, grahaṇ as or eclipses of the sun and the moon have been looked upon as sacred occasions. Bath before and after the grahaṇ a, fasting, worship of one's deity, giving gifts and breaking the fast only after cooking the food afresh after the eclipse are generally prescribed for all the eclipses. Bath in a sacred river like the Gañ gā or Triveṇ ī or Godā varī is specially recommended and eulogised.

A few other festivals, mostly regional in character, may now be taken up. First comes the Oṇ am, the biggest festival of Kerala, practically its national festival. It occurs in the month of Ciṇ gam (the first month of the year according to the Malayā ḷ am Calendar) (Ś rā vaṇ a/Bhā drapada, August/September) when the sun is in Siṁ halagna (Leo). Mahā balī or Balī , the great Asura king, who once ruled this land, was pushed into the pā tā la or netherworld by Viṣ ṇ u as Vā mana (5th incarnation in the Daś ā vatā ras) because of his pride. He was however permitted to revisit his kingdom once a year and Oṇ am is the day on which he does it. Oṇ am is a festival of flowers. Decoration with flowers of various kinds and colours, in the form of concentric circles, in front of the houses is a sight to see. These decorations start ten days earlier. On the day of the Oṇ am itself clay images of Balī and Vā mana are kept, instead of

the floral decorations, and worshipped. A dance called Kaikoṭ ṭ ukali by the womenfolk in the evening adds to the festive atmosphere. Another attraction is the regatta or boat-races conducted at different places in the State, the one at Aranmula being the most celebrated.

Next is Bihu, the biggest festival of Assam. This word is probably derived from the Sanskrit word Viṣ uvat. Though three Bihus are celebrated, the Bahā g Bihu (or Bohag Bihu), also called Sout (or Caitra) which comes in the spring season-April-is the biggest of the three festivals. It falls on the last day of Caitra. This is celebrated over seven days. The first day is reserved for the worship and special care of the cattle. The second is a day of big feast for friends and relatives. On this day it is usual to patch up differences by social calls. The tribals celebrate it with special songs and dance, called Husari Bihuna. Next in importance is Mā gh Bihu, also called Bhogā li Bihu, celebrated on the last day of Puṣ ya and the first day of Mā gha. Piling up firewood to form a temple-like structure (called meji) and setting fire to it is an important part of this festival. The whole day is spent in feasting. Last comes the Kaṭ ṭ i Bihu or Kā ñ gā li Bihu in autumn (in Kā rtī ka). A special feature of this celebration is the worship of the tulasī (basil) plant and placing of lighted lamps at its base. A `sky lamp' is hung over a high bamboo pole, not only to light up one's yard, but also to guide the dead to the next world!

On the last day of the month Puṣ ya (called Poh in Punjabi) is celebrated a very popular festival called Lohsi in Punjab. It marks the end of winter and offerings are made into the fire. Boys and girls in the teen-age group go round from house to house, collect cowdung cakes and then arrange them in a pyramidal shape (often 5 ft. in height) in the courtyard of the headman's house. Usually the headman's wife sets fire to it. People of the village gather there in their best clothes. Sesame and sticks of sugar-cane are also thrown into the fire. There will also be a feast. Next morning the leftover pieces and ashes are taken by the people to their homes as a gift from the gods.

The Haritā likā -vrata (Bhā drapada ś ukla ṭ ṭ i yā) of Maharashtra and the Teej (in the month of Ś rā vaṇ a) of Rajasthan are very similar in nature. Both are performed by women, to please Pā rvatī or Umā , to get good husbands or longevity and health for

their husbands. Fasting for the whole day, worship of Umā and Śiva and breaking the fast after the moon is seen, are the common aspects. A grand procession of an image of Pārvatī taken out from the city palace of Mahārājā Mān Singh in Jaipur is a special feature of this festival.

One more regional vrata for women, commonly performed in the South, especially in Karnataka, is the 'Varamahālakṣmī vrata'. It is observed on a Friday prior to Śrāvṇa Pūrṇimā. Only married women whose husbands are living, are entitled to do this. Worship of Mahālakṣmī, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, invoked in a kalāśa established on a maṇḍala (sacred diagram) is the main item. A doraka (thread) is also offered in pūjā and later worn on the right hand. Gifts to other married women should be done at the end. As usual, the health and longevity of the husband, progeny and wealth are the results assured by this vrata.

Another regional festival is the Huttari-habba (huttari new rice) observed by the people of the district of Koḍagu or Coorg in Karnataka. The Koḍavas or the Coorgis are a martial race. This is their harvest festival, celebrated on the pūṇimā day of Mārgaśīrṣa, associated with the nakṣatra or constellation Rohiṇī. It is generally spread over a week. Worship of the paddy fields, bathing the ears of corn with milk and honey before harvesting them, firing in the air to express their joy, decorations of temples and houses, offering the new rice to God and partaking of it, apart from the wearing of new clothes, music and regional dances which are usual on such occasions—these are the main features of this festival.

Another important sacred day is the day on which the river Kāverī descended on this earth. It is called 'Tulāsaṅkramaṇa' or 'Kāverī Saṅkramaṇa'. When the sun enters the Tulāraśi (Libra) (generally in October) at a particular moment of the day, there is a sudden bursting forth of water in the small pond at Talakāverī (in the Coorg district of Karnataka), the birth-place of the river. Thousands of people gather there on that day to offer worship and bathe as also take a little of that holy water.

A similar and very important sacred day in North India is the 'Daś ahara' (destroyer of ten sins). It is the day on which the river Gaṅ gā came down to this earth. It occurs on Jyeṣ ṭ ha ś ukla daś amī , associated with the nakṣ atra Hastā (the 13th asterism comprising five stars). A bath in the river Gaṅ gā , especially in the Daś ā ś vamedhaghā ṭ of Vā rā ṇ asī (Banaras) on this day is said to destroy ten kinds of sins associated with the body, speech and the mind. Actually the festival is celebrated on the banks of all the big rivers such as Kṛ ṣ ṇ ā , Godā varī and Narmadā also.

Mention should also be made of the famed Karaga festival of Bangalore (in Karnataka) held during the period Caitra ś uddha saptamī to Caitra kṛ ṣ ṇ a dviṭī yā , for a total of nine days. Karaga means kalaś a or kumbha, water jar. The whole festival is an aspect of the worship of ā diś akti (the Original Divine Power, Divine Mother) in the form of Draupadī , the spouse of the Pā ṇ ḍ ava heroes. It might have originated in the Tamil country and is still very popular there, being extensively observed. However it is the Karaga festival of Bangalore that is the grandest.

The temple flag in the temple of Dharmarā ya (the eldest of the Pā ṇ ḍ ava princes) is hoisted on the night of saptamī . On the night of dvā daś ī there will be dī pā rati, festival of waving of lights. On the night of trayodaś ī , the wet Karaga (jar of unbaked clay) is established in the devī pī ṭ ha (place of Ś akti or Devī) in the temple and worshipped. On the caturdaś ī day poṅ gal (a special preparation of rice) is distributed as prasā da. On the pū ṇ imā night, the Karaga is taken out in procession through predetermined routes, to reach the temple before sunrise. It is a big procession comprising the dance parties carrying brass kalaś as decorated like a crown, sword-wielding young men exhibiting their talents, a number of rathas or temple chariots and others. The chief Karaga dancer performs astounding feats almost humanly impossible to do.

The festival is said to have originated by the command of Draupadī herself, on her way to heaven.

5 Jayantī s or Birthdays

Most of us live in this world in such a way that very soon we are consigned to history. But there are a few, who are the `salt of the earth' who create history! It is but natural for the posterity to remember them with gratitude and pay their homage, especially on their birthdays.

One of the prominent characteristics of the Hindu race is hero-worship, especially if they are religious or spiritual persons. Hence, the number of such birthdays celebrated in our country by the Hindus is legion. Out of that, only a few can be mentioned here since they are, comparatively speaking, a little more known than the others.

First comes the celebration of the jayantī s of the avatā ras, especially the Daś ā vatā ras. Since most of the avatā ras are mythical personalities and a few of them are of the non-human form, the only data that is available and has to be relied upon, is the one provided by the purā ṇ as. The usual dates of these jayantī s are:

1. Matsya - Caitra ś ukla pañcamī
2. Kū rma - Vaiś ā kha pū ṇ imā
3. Varā ha - Bhā drapada ś ukla tṛ tī yā
4. Nṛ sim ha - Vaiś ā kha ś ukla caturdaś ī
5. Vā mana - Bhā drapada ś ukladvā daś ī
6. Paraś urā ma - Vaiś ā kha ś ukla tṛ tī yā
7. Ś rī Rā ma - Caitra ś ukla navamī
8. Balarā ma - Bhā drapada ś ukla dvitī yā
9. Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a - Ś rā vaṇ a kṛ ṣ ṇ a aṣ ṭ amī
10. Buddha - Vaiś ā kha pū ṇ imā or Kalki - Bhā drapada ś ukladvā daś ī

From this list, it is seen that Paraś urā ma jayantī falls on the Akṣ ayyatṛ tī yā day, Kū rma jayantī and Buddha jayantī fall on the pū ṇ imā of

Vaiś ā kha and that even Kalki-an avatā ra yet to come-has been assigned a day of birth.

Kalki seems to have replaced Buddha from the list of the

Daś ā vatā ras from the 15th century onwards.

Out of these, the jayantī s of Ś rī Rā ma, Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a and Buddha have already been dealt with.

The jayantī of Paraś urā ma, the brā hmaṇ a warrior who exterminated the wicked kṣ attriyas who were abusing their power and tyrannizing the populace, is celebrated in the evening of the Akṣ ayyatṛ tī yā day. Worshipping his image and offering an arghya (water mixed with sandal paste, dū rvā grass, flower and rice-grains, to be poured from a ś aṅ kha or a conch) are important items in the rite.

There are a few temples erected in honour of Paraś urā ma, particularly in the Konkan region of Maharashtra such as the one in Chiplun, where this jayantī is celebrated in a big way.

Though it is sometimes mentioned which of the avatā ras has to be worshipped for the fulfillment of which desire, not much material is available on these jayantī s.

Mahā vī ra (5th cent. B.C.) jayantī which falls on Caitra ś ukla trayodaś ī is an important festival day for the Jainas, since he was the last of the Tī rthaṅ karas (originators of Jainism). It is performed in a solemn way by all the Jainas wherever they are.

Jayantī s of the three ā cā ryaś, Ś aṅ kara (A.D. 788-820), Rā mā nuja (A. D. 1017-1137) and Madhva (A.D. 1238-1317), the prominent and pioneering leaders of the three systems of Vedā nta (Advaita, Viś iṣ ṭ ā dvaita and Dvaita) are celebrated with great clat by their followers and the maṭ has (monasteries and religious institutions). Ś aṅ kara-jayantī falls on Vaiś ā kha ś ukla pañcamī , Rā mā nuja-jayantī (more popularly called the tirunaṅ atra) on any Vaiś ā kha ś ukla pakṣ a day

associated with the Aridrā or ā rdrā (Betelgeuse) nakṣ atra and that of Madhva on the Vijayadaś amī (ā ś vayuja ś ukla daś amī) day. Apart from a simple worship, devoted study of some of their writings-especially on the prasthā natraya (Upa-niṣ ads, Gī tā and the Brahmasū tras)-and discourses form part of their observance.

The jayantī s of great religious leaders, especially those who started new religious movements or reform movements are also observed widely among their followers. Mention should be made of Basavaṅ ṇ a or Basaveś vara (Vaiś ā kha ś ukla dviṭī yā or tṛ tī yā , asso-ciated with the nakṣ atra Rohiṇ ī , the fourth group containing five stars alpha, theta etc.) who was the top-ranking reformer of his times (12th cent. A.D.) and who was primarily responsible to give a definite shape to the cult of the Liṅ gā yats (or Vī raś aivism). His jayantī is practically confined to the Karnataka region.

Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Caitanya (A.D. 1485-1533) is another great figure who laid the foundation for Bengal Vaiṣ ṇ avism. His jayantī is observed on the Holi or Dol Pū ṇ imā day (Phā lguna-pū ṇ imā), mostly in Bengal.

The Sikh community celebrates on a grand scale the birthdays of their gurus, especially of Guru Nā nak (A.D. 1469-1539) (Kā rtī ka pū ṇ imā) and Guru Govind Singh (A.D. 1666-1708) (Mā rgaś ira kṛ ṣ ṇ a caturdaś ī). Sant Tulasī dā s (A.D. 1532-1623) of the Rā mcarit-mā nas fame is another saint highly revered as second Vā Imī ki in the Hindi heartland of North India. His jayantī (Ś rā vaṅ a ś ukla saptamī) is also observed with traditional fervour and devotion.

Tyā garā ja (A.D. 1767-1847) the musician-saint of South India is another highly revered person who is remembered-not on his birthday but on the day of his departure from this world (called puṇ yadina or ā rā dhanā dina)-especially by the musicians and lovers of music. A great annual festival is held on that day (Puṣ ya kṛ ṣ ṇ a pañcamī) at Tiruvayyā r in Tamil Nadu, the place where he lived, when all the assembled musicians take part in it by singing a song or two composed by the

musician-saint.

Similar is the case of Purandara Dā sa (16th cent. A.D.) another musician-saint, considered as the father of Carnatic music. His puṇ yadina is observed on Puṣ ya amā vā syā day. Harikathā s (musical discourses based mostly on mythological stories) and singing of his songs are very much a part of the celebration.

Celebration of the birthdays of saints of recent past, like Ś rī Rā makṛ ṣ ṇ a, Ś rī Sā radā Devī , Svā mī Vivekā nanda, Ś rī Nā rā yaṇ a Guru, Ś rī Ramaṇ a Maḥarṣ i and Ś rī Aurobindo is also gaining ground. This shows that the list of festivals of Hinduism has not yet been completed!

6. A Few Vratas Commonly Observed

Most of the Hindu festivals and sacred days popularly observed, either in all parts of our country or in some regions only, have been described so far. However, there are still quite a large number of them, belonging more to the category of vratas than utsavas, which are even now being observed in all seriousness. An assortment from the same will now be presented here. They are listed in the English alphabetical order with brief descriptions.

Acalā saptamī :* It is observed on Mā gha ś ukla saptamī . It is dedicated to the worship of Sū rya or the sun. Partial fasting on theṣ aṣ ṭ hī and complete fasting on the saptamī are recommended.

ā malakyekā daś ī : It falls on Phā lguna ś uklaekā daś ī . Ś rī hari and Lakṣ mi are believed to reside in the ā malaka (Emblic myrobalan) tree. Hence worship is offered to them at the base of the tree. Sometimes Rā dhā is worshipped instead of Lakṣ mī .

Ambuvā cī : Mother Earth (Bhū devī or Dharaṇ ī) when expecting the rains (i.e. just before the starting of the rainy season), is called `Ambuvā cī '. It is also the name of the fertility rite normally observed in Bengal. During this period of four days- ā ṣ ā ḍ ha kṛ ṣ ṇ a daś amī to trayodaś ī (June/July)-the Mother Earth is said to

be unclean and hence no ploughing or sowing or any other type of farm work is done.

Ardhodayavrata: When in the month of Puṣya, there is amāvāsyā with the nakṣatra Śrāvā and Vyāthī-pāta-yoga (a special conjunction of the planets) then that day, called 'Ardhodaya,' is considered extremely holy. A bath at Prayāga (Allahabad), in the Trivenī, on that occasion will bring the greatest religious merit. Worship of Brahmā, Viṣṇu and Maheśvara are also part of this vrata.

Ārdra-darśana: It occurs on the Mārgaśīrṣā-pūrṇimā day. There is a great festival held on this occasion at the Naṭarāja temple of Cidambaram (in Tamil Nadu). People flock in large numbers to have darśana of Naṭarāja.

Arundhatī vrata: It is observed at the beginning of the Vasanta or spring, solely by married women desirous of sons and freedom from widowhood. The main features are the worship of Arundhatī (the paragon of wifely virtues and the wife of the great sage Vasiṣṭha) and fasting at night for three days.

Bakapañcaka: The five days from Kārttikā-Śuklaekādaśī (called Prabodhinī, the day on which Lord Viṣṇu wakes up from his sleep) to Pūrṇimā are so called, because even a baka or a crane would not eat fish on these days! Therefore all are expected to abstain from meat-eating.

Bhīmadvādaśī: This vrata has come to be known by this name since Bhīma, the second of the Pāṇḍava princes, was instructed in its performance by Vāsudeva (Kṛṣṇa) himself. On the Māgha-Śukla-dāśamī, one has to perform the worship of Viṣṇu with the aṣṭākaṣārī mantra (Om namo Nārāyaṇāya), fast on theekādaśī day-thisekādaśī is called Bhīmaikādaśī-and perform homa on thedvādaśī day after taking bath in a river, with the help of twelve priests well-versed in the three Vedas. On the trayodaśī day the priests have to be honoured with gifts of cows. This vrata is considered superior to some Vedic sacrifices like Vājapeya.

Bhī ṣ mapañcaka: This vrata is recommended for attaining freedom from sins. It is to be performed for five days, from Kā rttī ka Ś uklaekā daś ī (Prabodhinī) to Pū ṇ imā . Bathing three times a day applying pañcā mṛ ta, pañcagavya and water mixed with sandal-wood paste, tarpaṇ a to the pitṛ s or departed ancestors, japa of the famous mantra Om namo Vā sudevā ya during worship and of the mantra Om namo Viṣ ṇ ave during homa-these are parts of the vrata.

Bhī ṣ mā ṣ ṭ amī : Bhī ṣ ma, the grandsire and a great hero of the Mahā bhā rata died a bachelor. On the Mā gha ś ukla aṣ ṭ amī of every year those who offer Ś rā ddha and tarpaṇ a to him get freed from sins committed during the past year and also secure progeny.

Gaṇ gā saptamī : It occurs on Vaiś ā kha ś ukla saptamī . River Gaṇ gā is worshipped on this day. Sage Jahnu is said to have drunk the waters of this river on this day, since Gaṇ gā , out of the arrogance of her power, flooded his hermitage. Later, after she apolo-gised, he let off the waters through his right ear.

Indradhvajothā notsava: This festival of raising a dhvaja or banner for Indra, called `Devarā ja' or the king of gods, on the Bhā drapada ś ukla aṣ ṭ amī , is specially recommended for observance by kings. The pole for the banner was to be brought or made of sugar-cane and worshipped with the attendant deities. Later, it was to be taken down and immersed in deep waters. The king, by the grace of Devarā ja Indra, could retain his kingdom and rule it well.

Kā rttī kasnā navrata: If a person takes bath in the early morning, in a river or a tank or a lake, engages himself in the japa of the Gā yatrī mantra and partakes of Haviṣ yā nna (sacrificial food) only once in the day during the whole month of Kā rttika, he will be freed from all sins committed during the previous year.

Mahā mā ghi: Mā gha Pū ṇ imā is considered to be a very sacred day for the bath in rivers and tanks. When Ś ani (Saturn) is in Meṣ a (Aries), the moon and Guru (Jupiter) in Simha (Leo) and the sun is in Ś rā vaṇ a-nakṣ atra, then the day is called `Mahā mā ghi'. A bath at Prayā ga (Allahabad) and other holy rivers or in holy tanks in

the early morning is said to remove all sins. In Tamil Nadu, the Mā gha Pū ṛ ṇ imā is called Mā si-Mā kham and the special one when Guru (Jupiter) is in Sim ha (Leo) and moon in Makha nakṣ atra that occurs once in twelve years, is called Mahā mā kham. A very big bathing festival is held on this day at Kumbhakoṇ am when lakhs of people take bath in the tank called `Kanyā tī rtham.'

Mā rgaś ī ṛ ṣ akṛ tyā: Since ancient times, the month of Mā rgaś ī ṛ ṣ a or Agrahā yaṇ a (November-December) has been considered as especially sacred and appropriate for adoring the Lord. This tradition is very much alive in South India- especially in Tamil Nadu-even now. Parties of devotees-both Ś aivas and Vaiṣ ṇ avas- get up early in the morning, bathe and then go round the local temple and the tank singing devotional songs, popularly called `bhajana'.

Mathurā pradakṣ iṇ ā : Circumambulating the deity in a temple as also circumambulating a holy place is recommended as a very sacred act earning religious merit. A Pradakṣ iṇ ā (going round) of the holy town Mathurā (the place associated with the boyhood days of Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a) on the Kā rtī ka ś ukla navamī day is believed to confer great spiritual merit.

Nirjalaikā daś ī : Theekā daś ī during the ś ukla-pakṣ a of Jyeṣ ṭ ha is named thus. One is expected to fast from this morning to the next day morning without even drinking water. Then he is to gift a water-jar full of water, some sugar and gold (or money) as Dakṣ iṇ ā to a worthy Brā hmaṇ a and then only break the fast.

Pavitrā ropaṇ avrata: It means investing the image of a deity with the pavitra or the sacred cord. This ritual is supposed to set right all defects and mistakes committed in all the Pū jā s performed during that year. The putting on of the pavitra in the case of several gods is done on different days. It may be made of gold, silver, copper, silk or even kuś a or cotton thread. It must have knots, the maximum number being 100 and a minimum of

8. Rā dhā ṣ ṭ amī

It is the birthday of Rā dhā or Rā dhikā , the gopi dearest to Kṛ ṣ ṇ a and falls on Bhā drapada ś ukla aṣ ṭ amī day. On this day worship should be offered to Rā dhā and Kṛ ṣ ṇ a together. One should subsist on fruits only. Apart from hearing and singing devotional music, one should also listen to certain episodes from the Brahma-vaivarta-purā ṇ a, related to Rā dhā and Kṛ ṣ ṇ a.

Rā manā malekhana-vrata: Writing Rā manā ma (name of Ś rī rā ma) has been considered to be extremely meritorious since many centuries. It can be begun on Rā manavamī day or, for that matter, on any day. It should be written a lakh of times or a crore of times. The book is then worshipped with 16 upacā ras.

Sampū ṇ avrata: This vrata renders perfect every vrata that is rendered defective by some mistake or obstacles. An image of the deity worshipped in the vrata should be prepared and bathed for a month with milk, ghee, curds, fluids (like sweetened water) and water as also worship with flowers and other materials used in Pū jā . Finally an arghya is to be offered from a jar full of water mixed with sandalwood paste.

Saptarṣ ivrata: The Saptarṣ is* or the seven great sages-Marī ci, Atri Añ giras, Pulastya, Pulaha, Kratu and Vasiṣ ṭ ha-are to be worshipped for seven days from Caitra ś ukla pratipad (i.e., Cā ndramā na Yugā di) with fruits, flowers and cow's milk. The performer of the vrata should eat only once, in the night. Homa with Mahā vyā ḥ ṛ tis (bhū h, bhuvaḥ etc.) using sesame should be done. Gift of a Kṛ ṣ ṇ ā jina (hide of a black deer) is recommended at the end of the vrata. Mokṣ a or liberation is the fruit.

Ṣ aṭ -tila-Dvā daś ī : It occurs on Phā lguna Kṛ ṣ ṇ advā daś ī with Ś rā vaṇ a-nakṣ atra. Since tila or sesame has to be used six times (ṣ aṭ six), it is called so. One has to worship the gods with sesame, perform homa with sesame, light lamps with sesame oil in temples, donate sesame, offer water mixed with sesame to the pitṛ s and eat sesame. The pitṛ s will be highly pleased by this act.

Satyanā rā vaṇ a-vrata: This is an extremely popular vrata, almost all over the country, especially among the lower middle class people and women. It can be done on any day, preferably on Pū ṇ imā , Saṅ krā nti Orekā daś ī days, the places being a temple, bank of a river, below the vaṭ a or aś vattha trees or one's own house. The quantity of naivedya (food offering) is fixed at 1 (for e.g., 1.25 kgs.). The ingredients of this special naivedya are: plantains, ghee, milk, wheat or rice flour, jaggery or sugar. They are all to be mixed up to prepare the naivedya.

Apart from the elaborate worship of the deity, listening to the stories about the greatness of this vrata, keeping vigil the whole night with devotional songs and devotional dances are also recommended.

Ś ī talā vrata: It is a vrata for women only. It can be performed either on the kṛ ṣ ṇ a saptamī or ś ukla saptamī of Ś rā vaṇ a. Worship of Ś ī talā 's image, offering naivedya mixed with ghee and curds and feeding seven maidens (age-less than 8 years) are the important features. It confers freedom from widowhood.

Sī tā pū jā : Since it falls on Phā lguna ś ukla aṣ ṭ amī , it is also called Sitā ṣ ṭ amī (sita ś ukla or white). It is considered to be the birthday of Sī tā , the divine consort of Ś rī Rā ma. On this day both ī tā and Lakṣ mī (whose incarnation Sī tā is) are worshipped together.

Sī tā also means cultivated land. The Sī tā ṣ ṭ amī ritual falls on Phā lguna kṛ ṣ ṇ a aṣ ṭ ami. Ś rā ddha is offered to the gods and pitṛ s on this day with apū pas (a special kind of sweet).

Somavatī -amā vā syā : When amā vā syā falls on a Monday, it is considered very holy. On this day if a woman worships Viṣ ṇ u and Lakṣ mī under an aś vattha tree and circumambulates it 108 times, she will get good children and also destroy her sins.

Ś rā vaṇ a-dvā daś tī -vrata: It is also the jayantī of Vā manā vatā ra. It falls on Bhā drapada ś ukadvā daś tī , with Ś rā vaṇ a nakṣ atra. The votary of the vrata has to fast on Theekā daś tī day, take a bath in the Triveṇ tī -saṅ gama (at Prayā ga or Allahabad) or in any river, worship Vā mana and donate an earthen vessel full of boiled rice and curds. Fasting may be done on the dvā daś tī also.

Umā maheś vara-vrata: It is performed on the Pū ṇ imā of Bhā drapada. Worship of the images of Umā (Pā rvatī) and Maheś vara (Ś iva) is the main item. Destruction of sins and attainment of the desired object are the fruits promised.

Varada-caturthī : On Mā rgaś tī ṛ ṣ a ś ukla caturthī , Vinā yaka or Gaṇ apati is worshipped as `Varada' (giver of boons). Kunda flowers (a kind of jasmine) are specially recommended to be used in the worship.

Viṣ ṇ upaṅcaka: The last five days of Kā rttī ka are called Viṣ ṇ upaṅcaka. Worship of Hari and Rā dhā with five upacā ras will lead to destruction of sins and attainment of Viṣ ṇ uloka, the abode of Viṣ ṇ u.

Viṣ ṇ utrirā travrata: The performer of this vrata has to worship Hari and Tulasī in image for three days, from Kā rttī ka ś ukla navamī to ekā daś tī and perform their marriage on the dvā daś tī , which is Utthā na-dvā daś tī .

Vṛ kṣ otsava-vidhi: In the ancient days great importance was attached to the planting of trees. Some of the purā ṇ as give the procedure for vṛ kṣ otsava or tree festival. Worshipping the trees in one's house or garden by sprinkling water containing the essence of herbs as also fragrant powders, decorating with flowers and cloth, offering of homa to gods Indra, Lokapā las and Vanaspati, letting loose a milch-cow through the trees, feeding of brā hmaṇ as-these are some of the items of the ritual.

Yugā di-vratas: The four Yugas-Kṛ ta, Tretā , Dvā para and Kali-started respectively on Vaiś ā kha ś ukla tṛ tī yā , Kā rttī ka ś ukla navamī , Bhā drapada kṛ ṣ ṇ a trayodaś tī and Mā gha Amā vā syā . On these days one is advised to observe fast, worship the Trimū rtis along with their spouses, as also the pitṛ s and make a gift of

cows to worthy Brāhmaṇas.

7. Epilogue

The festivals observed by a people or a community are based on the philosophy of life they believe in. Consequently it is but natural that that philosophy is reflected in every aspect of the festival. As already pointed out in the General Introduction in the beginning itself, religion is not only the basic note of the Hindu ethos but also its warp and woof. Hence it is that practically every Hindu festival is a vrata much more than it is an utsava.

If this is kept in mind, then, we are obliged to maintain the dignity and solemnity of the various festivals. The disciplines like fasting, keeping vigil in the night, ritualistic worship and so on, voluntarily imposed upon ourselves, will cleanse our minds and hearts, making us get greater joy and peace. After all, this is what we want in life; and, these festivals observed in the right spirit are effective aids in achieving this.

Again, there is the social aspect also to these festivals. No festival, whether celebrated at home or in public, can be effectively organized without the willing cooperation of all concerned. This spirit of cooperation can engender other virtues like a sense of belonging, attenuation of ego and selfishness, and greater coordination to achieve the main purpose of the festival. If all are inspired by the basic spirit of the festival, then, a 'levelling up,' or greater social cohesion can also result, in spite of the various differences that may exist, brought about by extraneous factors like caste, economic status or education.

At this point, it is very necessary to point out the unhealthy, and even hideous, aberrations that have crept into the conduct of our festivals and sacred days during the recent years. To mention only a few: arranging of music or dances or dramas of the profane type in the pandals erected for Durgāpūjā or Gaṇeśa festival; ugly dances, reflecting a cheap imitation of the seamy side of alien cultures during the processions of

the images of the deities; throwing dirt and filth, tar or paint (instead of coloured water or harmless colour powder) which is nothing short of goondaism, during the Holi festival; keeping `vigil' the whole night on the Śivarā tri day by seeing lewd films or by taking part in activities of unbridled license; blocking of public roads by erecting pandals and beaming high decibel `music' through the loudspeakers with the scantest regard for the neighbours; forcible extraction of money in the name of collections for the festivals, and so on.

These aberrations are having a two-fold deleterious effect. In the eyes of the people of other faiths, especially of the Semitic group, the Hindu society is becoming a laughing stock! This is the first point we have to note. It is good to remember here that the people of these faiths never do anything that lowers the dignity of their religions. Even if someone errs, their society will take severe note of the same and chastise them.

The second point is the disastrous effect it is having on our children. They are being brought up in an atmosphere that is reducing even sublime festivals to ridiculous proportions. This is giving them the impression that on festival days they can behave as they like: They are the days when they can have `freedom of the senses' instead of the `freedom from the senses' originally intended!

If this trend is to be reversed, the remedy has to start in the homes of everyone of us. First comes a correct understanding of the meaning and significance of these festivals. Then comes imparting that knowledge to the others in the family. This should be followed by the correct observance of the festivals both in letter and in spirit.

By now, it should be clear to the minds of the readers, that organizing a Hindu religious festival in public, is a very serious and responsible job since it involves the sanctity of these festivals and the dignity of the Hindu society. For the benefit of those who voluntarily accept such a responsibility, a few helpful suggestions will now be given:

1. It is always safer to conduct such festivals under the auspices of a recognized institution or organization, especially the registered ones.
2. There should be absolutely no coercion in the collection of funds. All accounts connected with the celebrations should be scrupulously maintained. Wasteful expenditure and ostentation must be shunned.
3. Rules of public health and sanitation as also morality should be meticulously adhered to.
4. Arrangements should be made with due respect to the laws of the land and public convenience. If people of other religions can be lovingly persuaded to participate in the festival-without of course hurting the Hindu religious sentiments in any way-it will conduce to greater communal harmony.
5. Sanctity of the place used for Pū jā and other rituals should be jealously guarded. Only competent priests and assistants should be employed. They should be generously rewarded.
6. All the programmes arranged should be in consonance with the central aim and spirit of the festival. Educating the public on the significance and observance of the festival should be an integral part of the whole programme.
7. Exhibition and sale of religious articles and literature can be a useful part of the festival.
8. Suitable volunteers should be recruited and properly trained for the occasion.

9. Acts of charity and activities of service to the poor and the needy should also be a part of the programme.

10. The occasion may also be utilized to conduct competitions among children and youth, the items being related to religio-cultural subjects in conformity with the essential theme of the festivals.

11. If by chance, a temple of the deity involved in the festival, is in the vicinity, the celebrations may be organized in the precincts of the temple itself or in an adjoining area, with the full cooperation of the authorities and devotees of the temple.

The primary purpose of this monograph on the Hindu festivals and sacred days is to give some elementary and essential ideas about the same, so that the votaries can observe them more meaningfully and derive greater spiritual benefit. If this purpose has been achieved we feel blessed.

Appendix

Festivals and Sacred Days of the Ramakrishna Order

The various centres of the Ramakrishna Math and the Ramakrishna Mission run by the monks of the Ramakrishna Order have, over the years, developed their own traditions of celebrating different festivals. Except the celebration of Christmas Eve (December 24) which has its own peculiar history, almost all the other festivals are Hindu festivals. This is but natural when we look at the following declaration of Swami Vivekananda: 'Bhagavan Sri Ramakrishna incarnated himself in India, to demonstrate what the true religion of the Aryan race is; to show where amidst all its many deviations and offshoots... lies the true unity of the Hindu religion... and, above all, to hold up before men, for their lasting welfare, as a living embodiment of Sanā tana Dharma, his own wonderful life into which he infused the universal spirit and character of this Dharma, so long cast into oblivion by the process of time.' (The Complete Works of

Swami Vivekananda, tenth edition, 1978, Vol. 6. pp. 183-184).

Among these festivals, pre-eminent place is given to the celebration of the birthdays of Sri Rama-krishna, Sri Sarada Devi and Swami Vivekananda. The celebrations include ṣ oḍ aś opacā rapū jā and homa, apart from arranging religio-cultural programmes like devotional music and discourses, in which eminent persons are invited to participate.

The birthdays of all the other direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna are also celebrated with elaborate Pū jā and homa at the Belur Math, the Head Quarters of the twin organizations. The other (branch) centres also do it though on a much smaller scale. However, the centres situated at the birth places of some of the disciples or centres very closely associated with a particular direct disciple, conduct the celebrations there in a more elaborate way.

The other festivals and sacred days normally celebrated at the

Belur Math are: the jayantī s of Ś aṅ karā cā rya, Buddha and Ś rī kṛ ṣ ṇ a Caitanya, Rā manavamī , Ś rī Kṛ ṣ ṇ a-Janmā ṣ ṭ amī , Gulpū ṛ ṇ imā , Phalahā ṛ ṇ ī Kā lī pū jā , Snā nayā trā , Gaṅ gā pū jā , Durgā -Pū jā , Kā lī pū jā , Sarasvatī pū jā (Vasantapañcamī) and Mahā ś ivarā tri.

Out of these, the Durgā pū jā , started by Swami Vivekananda himself, is celebrated in an elaborate and grand way, in image, the details of the rituals being taken from the Bṛ han-nandikeś vara-Purā ṇ a. Kumā rī pū jā is one of the special attractions during this celebration. The image is worshipped from saptamī to navamī and the immersion done on the Vijayadaś amī , in the evening.

Many branch-centres, especially in West Bengal, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and some northern States, celebrate the Durgā pū jā in image with elaborate rituals. Other centres perform the pū jā in a picture, in a smaller way, mostly on the aṣ ṭ amī or navamī day.

Like Durgā pū jā , Kā lī pū jā is also done in image on Kā rttī ka amā vā syā , the whole night, the immersion taking place the next day.

Apart from the Belur Math, Sarasvatī pū jā in image is performed on the Mā ghaś ukla pañcamī (Vasantapañcamī) day in many educational centres in Bengal and some North Indian States too.

On the Vaiś ā kha amā vā syā , called the `Phala-hā riṇ ī -Kā lī pū jā ' day (the day on which Sri Rama-krishna performed Ṣ oḍ aś ī pū jā to Sri Sarada Devi) worship is offered at the main shrine of Belur Math in the night. It is said that Mother Kā lī , being pleased with the worship offered on this day, will destroy the effects of karma causing future births. Hence the name `Phalahā riṇ ī ' .

On the Snā nayā trā day (Jyeṣ ṭ ha Pū riṇ imā) the relics of Sri Ramakrishna are given a ceremonial bath.

On the Gaṇ gā pū jā day (Jyeṣ ṭ ha ś ukla daś amī with Hastā nakṣ atra) a simple worship is offered to the river Gaṇ gā , on the bank of which, the Belur Math is situated.

On the Mahā ś ivarā tri day, worship is offered the whole night to Ś ivaliṇ ga. The sā dhus and brahmacā rins fast and keep vigil throughout the night. Devotional singing, dance by the brahmacā rins dressed as Ś iva and his goblin-assistants, meditation in front of the dhuni (a sacred fire) and chanting of Vedas and hymns will go on continuously, helping the Sā dhus to keep vigil.

Though this pattern and tradition is generally followed by the branch-centres, local variations are often made. The birthdays of other ā cā ryaś , saints and prophets like Rā mā nuja, Madhva, Basaveś vara, Guru Nā nak and Tulasī dā s are also observed in some centres because of their importance as part of the local traditions.

Some centres in Maharashtra and South India observe Gaṇ eś acaturthī in a

big way with the worship to the clay image of the deity, which is later taken in a procession and immersed in a tank or a river or the sea. Viś vakarmapū jā (Bhā drapada ś ukla saptamī) is performed in some centres by worshipping his image as also the various instruments and implements used in daily life.

The only non-Hindu festival celebrated by the Ramakrishna Centres is the Christmas Eve (December 24). It was on this day in 1886 that Swami Vivekananda and a few of his brother disciples had taken mental vows of renunciation and dedication to spiritual and monastic life. Swami Vivekananda had spoken inspiringly on Jesus Christ, without being aware that it was December 24! It is celebrated with a simple worship of Christ, readings from The Bible (on nativity) and devotional music.

Special mention should also be made of the simple worship of Ś rī Rā macandra and Mā ruti (Hanumā n) on Everyekā daś ī day throughout the year, along with the singing of Rā manā ma-saṅ kī rtana. This was introduced by Swami Brahmananda (a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the first President of the Ramakrishna Math) after he had had a vision of Mā ruti during the singing of Rā manā ma on a day which happened to beekā daś ī . On this day, a seat is spread out for Mā ruti to come and sit on it. A copy of the Rā manā ma (book) is also kept there for his use!

The following list of birthdays may be useful to the followers of Sri Ramakrishna. The dates, according to the Viś uddha Siddhā nta almanac, are given as per the lunar reckoning of days:

Sri Ramakrishna Phā lguna ś ukla dviṭī yā Sri Sarada Devi
Mā rgaś ī rṣ a (Agrahā yaṅ a) kṛ ṣ ṇ a saptamī Swami Vivekananda
Puṣ ya (Pauṣ a) kṛ ṣ ṇ a saptamī

2 Other Disciples

Swamis

Abhedananda	Bhā drapada kṛ ṣ ṇ a navamī		
Adbhutananda	Mā gha pū ṇ imā		
Advaitananda	Ś rā vaṇ a kṛ ṣ ṇ a caturdaś ī		
Akhandananda	Bhā drapada Amā vā syā		
Brahmananda	Mā gha Ś ukla Dvitī yā		
Niranjanananda	Ś rā vaṇ a Pū ṇ imā		
Premananda	Mā rgaś ī ṛ ṣ a (Agrahā yaṇ a)	Ś ukla	navamī
Ramakrishnananda	ā ṣ ā ḍ ha Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Trayodaś ī		
Saradananda	Puṣ ya (Pauṣ a) Ś uklaṣ aṣ ṭ hī		
Shivananda	Mā rgaś ī ṛ ṣ a (Agrahā yaṇ a)	Kṛ ṣ ṇ aekā daś ī	
Subodhananda	Kā rtī ka Ś ukladvā daś ī		
Trigunatitananda	Mā gha Ś ukla Caturthī		
Turiyananda	Puṣ ya (Pauṣ a) Ś ukla Caturdaś ī		
Vijnanananda	Kā rtī ka Ś ukla Caturdaś ī		
Yogananda	Phā lguna Kṛ ṣ ṇ a Caturthī		

The Belur Math, as also many of the bigger centres, publish a list of festivals every year. The devotees can avail of them to get accurate information.