



Raja Sankranti : The Festival of Swings

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Festivals of any state reflect the culture, tradition and history of the people. Festivals in India are mostly associated with seasonal phases of the sun, the moon, birth of divinities and agricultural operations. Legends have grown connecting these festivals with mythological events recorded in the Puranas and other religious literatures. They intend to inspire faith and virtuous life among the people as a result of which religious impact pervades the celebration or observance of all the festivals.

Though festivals are deeply associated with religion (faith), the main purpose seems to be recreational. They mitigate the monotony of life. Man and women tired of hard routine work need change or relaxation which festivals provide. Thus festivals promote a common cause, develop social solidarity, fellow feeling and mutual co-operation. They also instill self-discipline and emphasizes the spiritual value of human existence besides providing enjoyment and recreation.

In ancient days most of the celebrations were agricultural in their basic character having festivals mostly related to various agricultural operations. People thought certain divine powers were associated with various aspects of human life and festivals were scheduled in honour of Gods and Goddesses, who were

supposed to control agricultural operations. The tradition of such festivals have also come down to the people of Orissa in the form of Raja-Sankranti (swing-festival), Akhaya-trutiya, Gamha-purnima, Manabasa-gurubara, Nuakhai etc.

Raja is an agriculture oriented festival, mostly observed in the coastal districts of Orissa for three days. The last day of month "Jestha" is known as "Pahili Raja" and the first day of month "Asadha" is Raja Sankranti (Mithuna Sankranti) from which rainy season starts. It also inaugurates the agricultural year all over Orissa which marks the moistening of summer parched soil with the first shower of monsoon making it ready for productivity. The second day of "Asadha" is known as "Bhuin Dahana". To celebrate the advent of monsoon the joyous festival is arranged for three days. Even in some places of Orissa the fourth day of Raja festival is also celebrated in the name of "Basumata Puja". During this festival Mother Earth or "Basu Mata" is considered to be a menstruating woman. Hence digging of soil or tempering it in any way is strictly prohibited. The Mother Earth is said to undergo pollution due to menstruation and given rest just like a woman imposed with several restrictions.



Raja is also considered as one of the chief festivals of un-married girls or the potential mothers. The women folk, especially the virgins, forbid all kinds of manual works during these three days of Raja-festival. They don't carry water, cut vegetables, sweep the houses, sew clothes, grind grains, comb hair, walk in bare foot etc. So, all kind of restrictions are imposed both for the land and the women-folk.

Although Raja Sankranti is celebrated all over Orissa, it is more enthusiastically observed in the coastal districts of the State. The un-married girls or virgins observe the restrictions prescribed for a menstruating woman. On the first day of Raja Sankranti they rise before the dawn, do their coiffure, anoint their bodies with turmeric paste and oil, then take the purification bath in the river or tank. Bathing for rest two days of the festival is strictly prohibited. During these three days girls are seen in the best of their dresses and decorations, eating cakes and rich food at the houses of friends and relatives. They move up and down in the swings rending the village sky with their joyous impromptu songs. The swings are tied to the branches of Mango or Banyan trees and decorated with garlands of different flowers. The virgins of the village gather there on this festive occasion and one of them is elected as Dolo-rani (queen of the swing). When the queen takes her seat on the swing, the virgins move her forward and backward with chorus of charming songs. These songs are full of jolly spirit of girl-hood days and refer to glorious future, happy love and would be marriage with suitable husbands.

Special varieties of cake prepared out of recipes like rice-powder, molasses, coconut, camphor, ghee etc goes in the name of Podapitha (burnt-cake). The size of the cake varies according to the number of family members. Cakes are also exchanged among relatives and friends. Young girls do not take rice during this festival and sustain only with different

types of cake, fried rice (mudhi) and vegetable curry.

While girls scatter beauty, music all round moving up and down on the swings during this festival, young men give themselves busy in various types of country games including Kabadi competition. While 'Yatras' and 'Gotipua' dances are arranged at night in prosperous villages; plays and other entertainment programmes are also conducted by amateur artists in relatively less prosperous places.

The communal mode of worship, from time immemorial, has taken the form of festivals. All communal worships have tended to assume the form of festivals. Festivals always involves the community, a gathering, a mela or a fair. It is the expression of a community on a festive and relaxed mood. Festivals are an inextricable part of Indian society. There are some festivals like Rakhi-purnima, Holi, Diwali, Durga-puja, Shiva-ratri, Makara-sankranti which are observed all over India though their mode of celebrations are different from state to state. On the contrary, there are also certain festivals which are purely regional and sectarian. In India the months are counted on the basis of solar or lunar movements. While the month is calculated, in solar system, from Sankranti to Sankranti, that is counted in lunar system from Purnima to Purnima (full-moon). The number of festivals observed in Orissa are many compared to other regions of the country. Amongst them Raja-sankranti, Kumara-purnima, Prathamastami are some of the festivals which are specifically meant for the young.

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