

Celebrating Divinity in Pāñcarātra Tradition

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सुधीरकुमारलालमहाभागः वैखानसपाञ्चरात्रयोर्विशेषं विशदीकृत्य
पाञ्चरात्रागमानुसारेण रत्नत्रयातिरिक्तायाः ईश्वरसंहितायाः साहाय्येन
मेलकोटेस्थितनारायणस्वामिमन्दिरे भगवतो विष्णोः पञ्चदिनात्मक-
महोत्सवस्य अनुष्ठानं यथाशास्त्रं यथाप्रयोगं च विवृणोति।

Introduction

Viṣṇuism has Two Major Āgamic Schools – the Vaikhānasa and the Pāñcarātra. Although both the school are exclusively dedicated to the worship of Viṣṇu as the supreme lord, there are different sets of philosophical and ritualistic observances, which make them stand on separate pedestals. One major point of difference is Vaikhānasa's strict adherence to the Vedas, while the Pāñcarātras have a rather flexible and accommodative outlook. The famous temple of Tirupati Balaji in Andhra Pradesh is guided by the Vaikhānasa tradition and the Cheluva Narayanasvami temple at Melkote follows the Pāñcarātra code.

Festivals at temples form an integral part of the annual calendar of the temple and play an important socio-religious role for the people of that area. During the festivals, there is great pomp and show all around and they provide a grand platform for the people of all castes, creed and faiths either; to be a part of the festivities, or; savour the environment and ambience, silently as a spectator. But the sheer grandeur of the observance of the festival leaves the people spell-bound; and thus the festivals are a powerful expression of the collective consciousness of the devotees and act as a major vehicle of re-affirmation of their faith in divinity.

The Pāñcarātra textual tradition is based on its three gems or the ratnatraya, viz., the Sāttvata Saṁhitā, the Pauṣkara Saṁhitā and the Jayākhya Saṁhitā. However, these three main or esteemed texts do not shed much light on the topic of observance of festival, with the sole exception of Jayākhya, which hints at the need to conduct the Mahotsava (20.384-386) and also the procession of the icon in a chariot (191-193b.) Our elaboration is based on the ĪśvaraSaṁhitā (or IS), another important Pāñcarātra treatise, which follows the tradition of the Sāttvata Saṁhitā and is the guidebook for the above-mentioned and many more temples of Karnataka.

Definition

Defining the term *utsava*, the *IS* says, “*sava* is said to mean misery by scholars, O eminent sages! That misery (*sava*) is removed (pulled out) and therefore, *utsava* is the name (for the festival).”¹ *IS* categorizes the festivals in three kinds: *nitya*, *naimittika* and *kāmya*. The festival which is conducted annually is known as the *nitya* festival.² The *naimittika* festivals are the ones which are conducted to alleviate the effects of natural calamities (such as earthquakes etc.), and to propitiate the deity with a view to avert or mitigate the evil influence in the event of serious portents, disease, danger from enemies or when there is some metaphysical phenomena, such as the icon laughs, cries rotates or moves its limbs.³

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1. सव इत्युच्यते दुःखं विद्वद्भिर्मुनिपुङ्गवाः।
उद्धृतः स सवो यस्मात् तस्मादुत्सव उच्यते॥ 10.3॥
 2. नित्यो नैमित्तिकः काम्यस्त्रिविधः स महोत्सवः।
वत्सरे वत्सरे यस्तु क्रियते स तु नित्यकः॥ 10.4॥
 3. भूमिकम्पे दिशां दाहे महोत्पातेषु सत्सु च।
दुर्भिक्षे व्याधिते राष्ट्रे तथा वै शत्रुसङ्घटे॥
अनावृष्टौ च सर्वत्र नक्षत्रपतने च खात्।
हसने भगवन्मूर्तेरङ्गानां चलने सति॥
रोदने चासनाद् बिम्बे परिभ्रमति सत्तमाः।
व्यत्यासे शशिसूर्यस्य तथान्येष्वेवमादिषु॥
शान्त्यर्थं यत् प्रकुर्वीत स नैमित्तिक उच्यते॥ 10.5-7॥

The *kāmya* kind of festival is done on behalf of the people in order to achieve the four prescribed pursuits of life, viz. *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *mokṣa*.⁴

Mahotsava

Mahotsava, also known as *Brahmotsava* is a *nitya* kind of festival and is generally conducted once in a year. It further states that the festival is divinely supreme, when it lasts for nine days, is of middle kind, when it lasts for a week, and is of low kind, when it lasts for five days.⁵ This festival is nothing short of a symbolic creation, maintenance and dissolution of the cosmos. Day-by-day, for all the nine days of the festival, right from the first ritual of the *ankurarpana* to the last one of *mah ākumbhaprokṣaṇam*, the act unfolds, is enlivened and finally the curtains are drawn, like a magnificent play. Out of its extant twenty-five chapters, the *IS* devotes two chapters (chapters 10 and 11) comprising 852 verses, to this important topic of the *Mahotsava*. In these chapters, it provides us with an extremely detailed data about the steps to be followed while performing the *Mahotsava*, along with exhaustive description of rituals and procedures, instructions and invocations, and, modes and materials; on a day-to-day basis for these nine days. One can virtually create the spatio-temporal ambience of the festival, if one studies this portion of the *IS* carefully, such is the vividness of the description. What follows is a gist of these two chapters, in which an attempt is made to understand the procedure for performing the *Mahotsava*.

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4. चतुर्णां पुरुषार्थनामुद्दिश्यान्यतमं फलम्॥
उत्सवोऽनुष्ठितः काम्यः सङ्कल्पितफलप्रदः॥ 10.8b, 9a॥
 5. नवाहं दैविकं प्रोक्तं सप्ताहं मध्यमं भवेत्।
पञ्चाहमधमं विद्यात् त्रिविधं चोत्सवं स्मृतम्॥ 10.14॥



Procedure

First of all, the *mṛtsaṅgraha* or the collection of the sacred soil and *aṅkurārpaṇa* (sowing of seeds) are undertaken on the eve of the commencement of the festival. On the first day and in an auspicious *muhūrta*, the beginning of the festival is marked by *dhvajārohaṇa* or the hoisting of the flag, is made of a fine cloth and its length is equal to the height of the *mūlabera* (main icon) and its width equivalent to the half of it. Garuḍa's figure is drawn on it, and it is to be consecrated. The power of the *mūlabera* is infused in the *utsavabera* and then the same is brought to a pavilion near the flagstaff. The flag is then raised to the top and tied followed by the thunderous beating of the kettle drums, which signify the commencement of the festival.⁶ It is to be noted here that the hoisting of the flag is done according to the star on the day of the *avabhṛtha* or the sacrificial bath, i.e., the day for the commencement of the festival is fixed taking into consideration the day of *avabhṛtha*. This ritual has the grains of the *śrauta* rites, which lasted for a period of beyond a day. On the last day, the priest performing the rite and the *yajamāna* along with others would proceed to some water-body and take a bath thereby signifying its completion. Similarly, in the *Mahotsava* also, a ceremonial bath is taken by the priest and everybody else on the ninth day of the annual festival, marking the culmination of it.

Not only mortals, even gods are invited to be a part of the festivities. In true Pāñcarātra fashion, *IS* says that the invitation to gods could be sung in either Sanskrit or Prākṛt or Dravidian

6. देवताह्वानवेलायां सर्ववाद्यानि घोषयेत्।

language.⁷ The invocations are done by the priest, his son or pupil should be sonorous and are to be performed in proper manner. After the hoisting of the flag, the deity is taken round the village and brought to the *yāgaśālā* or the ritual space of the temple. The four Vedas and the Ekāyana Veda are recited by trained scholars, who occupy their appointed spaces. Then the *kalaśa* (ceremonial pitchers) are placed in the *yāgaśālā*, which are consecrated and *proksana* (sprinkling) is done all around. The *abjanābhabhuvana-maṇḍala* is drawn there.⁸ The mention of this particular *maṇḍala* is not to be found in any other text, lending a special status to the IS.

God is then requested to alight there and is to be worshipped. The Agni (holy fire) lit here is to be worshipped by the priest for all the festival days and is to be tended till the day of *avabhṛtha*.⁹ *Bali* is offered to *dikpālas* (guardians of the directions) and at the *balipīṭha*. The *bali* shall be done twice a day up to the last day i.e. till *avabhṛtha* (ceremonial bath).¹⁰

The *icon* (processional icon) is to be mounted on vehicles and taken around the locality in the morning and the evening. This is a grand procession to be observed twice every day. The *utsavabera* is specially decorated with variegated robes, various ornaments and numerous garlands and is placed on the particular vehicle (different on each day) and taken in circumambulatory way, round the village, city or commercial place. The lord is lifted and surrounded by devout Vaiṣṇavas from all the castes. The Brahmins walking along should be steady-minded, wearing long robes, turbans, and host of beautiful things

7. देवतावाहिनीं गाथां संस्कृतां प्राकृतां तु वा॥ 11.36॥

8. IS. 11.134-170

9. प्रत्यहं धारयेदग्निं यावत्तीर्थदिनान्तिमम्।
अहोरात्रं प्रतिदिनं जुहुयादुक्तवर्त्मना॥ 11.177॥

10. एवं कालद्वये कुर्याद्बलिं तीर्थदिनान्तिमम्।
आरम्भदिवसे रात्रौ समाप्तिदिवसेऽहनि॥ 11.213॥

such as pearl strings, umbrellas, peacock plumes, fans(with golden handles), silken chowries and decorated staff etc.¹¹



The retinue of the god should also be accompanied by chorus of bards, sound of *vīṇā*, and flute, golden horns, and presence of courtesans, nautch-girls, well dressed citizens, chanters of the Vedas and Āgamas, scholars of classical and vernacular languages, singing eulogies of lord and people of all castes. The entourage should be majestic and along the course of circumambulation, the lord is offered *tāmbūla* as the mouth freshener and sandalæpaste mixed with camphor, various garlands, cool water and coconut water etc. to mitigate the fatigue.¹²

After the circumambulatory procession, the lord is led to the pavilion outside the temple, where offerings of *arghya*, *pādyā*,- *ācamana*, sandal-paste, garlands, lamps, incense, *nīrājana*, flour-cakes, *ṛthūka*, coconut water, *ācamana* and

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11. वहेयुर्ब्राह्मणा यानं ध्यायन्तो विहगेश्वरम्।
 अथवा वैष्णवाः शूद्रा वहेयुर्भक्तिसंयुताः॥
 ग्रामे वा नगरे वापि पट्टणे वा मुनीश्वराः।
 प्रदक्षिणक्रमेणैव परिभ्रमणमाचरेत्॥
 ब्राह्मणैर्ध्रियमाणैश्च कञ्चुकोष्णीषधारिभिः।
 मौक्तिकैरातपत्रैश्च मायूरैश्च सुशोभनैः॥
 हेमदण्डसमायुक्तैस्तालवृन्तैस्तथाविधैः।
 पट्टनैर्विविधैश्चापि चामरैश्च सितासितैः॥ 11.222-225॥
12. IS. 11.226-242

tāmbūla etc. are offered to him, along with various gifts. A curtain is drawn so that the lord can relish the offerings without any visual disturbance. After this, he is taken inside the temple and the Vedas and Āgamas along with Tamil hymns are sung to him. Following a circumambulation inside the temple, he is placed on his designated place.¹³

The IS also prescribes the use of different vehicles for different days. God will mount on the following vehicles on respective śibikā, (palanquin) - first day; śeṣapīṭha (the serpent Ādiśeṣa) -second day; *candrabimba* (halo of the moon, at night) and *sūryamaṇḍala* (halo of the sun in the day time) æ third day; *puṣpamaṇḍapa* (floral pavilion) -fourth day; *Garuḍa* -fifth day;¹⁴ *yāna* (vehicle) -sixth day; *ratha* (chariot) -seventh day; and horse -eighth day.



It is to be noted here that on the eighth night, when the lord is mounted on the horse, the procession is carried out in a swinging motion, which is a visual feast. A happy lord could be seen indulging in royal yet, mundane activities like hunting, inspection of the town, love and quarrel between his two consorts, etc.¹⁵

13. IS. 11.243-253

14. वाहनारोहणं त्वेवं कुर्याद्देवस्य नित्यशः।
प्रथमे शिबिकायानं द्वितीये शेषपीठिका॥
तृतीये चन्द्रबिम्बं च दिवा चेतसूर्यमण्डलम्।
चतुर्थे दिवसे प्राप्ते पुष्पमण्डपवाहनम्॥
पञ्चमे दिवसे प्राप्ते गरुडारोहणं भवेत्॥ इत्यादि- 11-260-263a॥

15. अष्टमेऽह्नि तु तद्रात्रौ डोलारोहणपूर्वकम्।
अश्वारोहं ततः कुर्यात् मृगयां चापि कारयेत्॥

On the ninth day, the *avabhṛtha* (ceremonial bath) is taken in a lake or tank or some water-body. The priest takes the *tīrthabera* of the lord, worships it, stands in the navel-deep water and takes a dip with the *tīrthabera*. All the accompanying people also take bath simultaneously to be absolved of their impurities and sins.

En fin

On the tenth day, the *puṣpayāga* (worship with flowers) is held, in which the *tīrthabera* is brought and placed on the *cakrābjamaṇḍala*, duly decorated by a delightful spread of flowers. The flowers are sprinkled on him by the priest amidst the chanting of *Puruṣasūkta*. Routine rites of offering *arghya*, *pādya*, *ācamana* etc. are performed, complemented by the sounds of musical instruments and chants from the Vedas and the major *Āgamas*. This is repeated twelve times.



The lord, along with his consorts, is taken round the village in a majestic procession and brought near the flagstaff. After offering *bali* to the lord, *Garuḍa* is worshipped and the ceremonial flag is brought down. The gods who were invited for the festival are honoured suitably and are given an endearing send off. The *utsavabera* with *Srīdevī* and *Bhūdevī* is taken inside the *sanctum sanctorum* and all of them are placed on their respective pedestals. All the priests, chanters etc. are duly honoured with generous gifts in cash and kin, and thus the grand *Mahotsava* comes to a close.

भक्तसन्त्राणलीलां च ब्राह्मे नगरशोधनम्।

प्रणयः कलहश्च स्यादेव्योर्देवेन वै मिथः॥ 11.312, 313॥

The Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), Delhi, is resolutely pursuing the investigations into the inter-linkages between the śāstra and *prayoga* prevalent in ancient Indian traditions and has done extensive documentations of Vedic and Āgamic systems. This included documentation of temple rituals as prescribed by the *IS*, at the Varahasvami temple, Mysore, where all the said rituals were seen, observed and experienced by the author of this paper, urging him to write down this unique living tradition.