

Festivals and Fairs



Paper: Cultures in the Indian Subcontinent

Lesson: Festivals and Fairs

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Festivals and Fairs

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5.6: Fairs and Festivals

Fairs and Festivals are seen as popular occasions for social intercourse and enjoyment. Since long they have become occasions of self-expression without restraint. However, they have a religious side too. Religion played an important role in the origin and growth of the tradition of fairs. Holy places like Mecca where people flocked as pilgrims became centres of great fairs. Certain important days like the birth or the death of a saint or even fertility rites were celebrated as festivals and fairs. Legends and myths too played an important role. The re-enactment, retelling and repetition of myths is quite evident in most of the celebration of festivals across India. For e.g. the celebration of Holi is a way to repeat the legend of Prahlad and similarly the legend of Rama and Ravana is enacted on the occasion of Dussehra and Diwali. If journeys recreate, symbolise and enable participants to relive the divine sport of the deity, ritual performances of divine scenes bestow on an ordinary place the attributes of a pilgrim site. The Ramlila of Ramnagar transforms the town into a sacred field—the site of Ram's lila. Through the enactment and watching of the Ramlila, actors and observers become participants in the life of Ram, and ritually construct his divine world and actions anew. Though different faiths have apparently different fairs and festivals, no water tight compartments can be made in many a fair. The common participation of the masses is quite visible.

5.6.1: Origins of the 'folk' festival

A prominent tribal religious practice which gained prominence in the Puranas was the observance of seasonal festivals. Known as *parb* in tribal tradition, these were generally related to the cycles of the sun, of vegetation and of animal life. Festivals are known to perform a seminal role in integrating diverse cultural strands and groups. This according to Vijay Nath is well demonstrated by D.N. Majumdar in the case of Dussehra festival as celebrated in the state of Bastar. It was introduced there by the ruling family and participation in it by all tribes and castes belonging to that state was regarded more or less obligatory. The festival was held in honour of goddess Dhantesvari and lasted for fifteen days. But along with the chief deity a host of lesser deities and spirits such as Patdeo, Kesadeo, Barimata were also worshipped. The festival, thus, proved instrumental in bringing Hindu castes and pre literate tribes within a common religious fold. Importance of festivals in tribal life is attested even as early as Vedic times, when festivals held in honour of a deity were known as *maha*. Realising the importance of festivals in the life of tribes undergoing acculturation as well as their infinite potential in blending and synthesising diverse cultural elements, the Purana composers not only recognised some of the current festival traditions but also tried to Brahmanise and popularise them with the help of Puranic myths. That many festivals, especially those celebrated by acculturated tribes had prominent Puranic overtones is evident from the ceremonial rites connected with them. During the course of the festival the participants are required to bathe twice daily, completely abstain from eating. Infact, bathing and fasting

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constituted integral features of most Puranic festivals which became popular with the acculturated groups. Moreover, since such seasonal festivals clearly represent the pre-literate mode reckoning time and maintaining the annual calendar, by trying to link festivals of tribal origin with the calendar based on the traditional astronomical system, the Purana composers were perhaps attempting to steer the pre-literate groups closer towards the Brahmanical belief-system.

The primary concern when Brahmanism invaded in most of the peripheral regions was how people steeped in their tribal values were to be made to abandon their traditional method of growing food and instead adopt a system based on intensive field cultivation. What added to the complexity of the problem was that the pre literate mode of earning livelihood had its roots in a firmly entrenched and vibrantly alive religious tradition which was continually being reaffirmed and reinforced through ritual enactment of its mythical lore. Hence the challenge lay in first the erosion or deconstruction of the existent belief system and then reconstructing in its place another system which could prove more conducive to such a transition from a more predatory form of cultivation to field agriculture.

5.6.2: Celebrating the 'folk'

In order to understand the nature of most of the festivities in India and the reason for why it is celebrated, it is important to look at some of the important ones. Among the folk festivals in India, Holi occupies a prominent place. Known as Holi or Phagua in Northern India and Shimga or Hutashana across western India and Deccan, it is celebrated at a full moon of the month Phalgun. Holi takes place when the important crops of the spring harvest are approaching maturity which is why it commences with burning of fire. The rites are purely animistic or pre-animistic and show no connection whatsoever with orthodox Hinduism. The otiose legends which profess to explain the rites are fragments of a later age invented to bring it in line with Brahmanism. Like other festivals, Holi too has a legend of its own that talks of Hiranyakashyap and his son Prahlad and also Holika. What is important at this point about Holi is that it is an occasion which allows people to behave in any manner they want to, something that is otherwise not allowed in a social space. The topsy turvy behavior that it reveals reminds one of the Carnival festival in Europe which again was an occasion where all kinds of social relations were turned upside down. Drinking, teasing, abusing are some of the inevitable characteristics of the festival and everything seems to pass with the excuse "*bura na mano holi hai*". The license and relaxation of moral control display the apotropaic power of indecency familiar in primitive rituals. The fertility of men, animals and crops seems to be the basis of the rites associated with Holi. However, Holi serves as the same example here as Carnival does for Europe. Though celebration of most of the festivals in India is not the exclusive preserve of the elites and the everyone participates in it, Holi is a festival when this identification of the elite and the common gets blurred.

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Another cult that catches everyone's imagination is the cult of Jagannath Puri, also a kind of pilgrimage. The study of Jagannath cult has already demonstrated that regional traditions form the most essential and the truly central portion of an interrupted continuum of mutual influences and socio-cultural processes which link the little tradition of India with the pan Indian great tradition. The Jagannath cult is of tribal origin. The legend of the Puri temple, the Indradyumna legend, narrates that the deity was originally worshipped by the aboriginal Sabara chief Viswvasu in the woods and only later on miraculously appeared in Puri. Accordingly, the Jagannath figures still display what seems to be a 'tribal look'. The wooden figures are "crude" and certainly differ considerably from the images worshipped in other great Hindu temples.

Interesting detail

The Jagannath legend



(Source: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Surroundings.jpeg>)

In satyuga, King Indradyumna, the ruler of Malwa, yearning for a sight of Lord Vishnu, sent Brahman emissaries in four directions to look for the Lord. One of them, Vidyapati, travelling east through forests came to the land of the Savars. Here he found shelter in the home of Viswabasu. Deep at night Viswabasu left on a secret mission. Vidyapati who was curious, requested Viswabasu to let him accompany him. At night the two went together to offer fruits and flowers to Nilamadhav, the god in the form of a blue stone. The offerings, however, were not accepted. In despair Viswabasu prayed to his Lord. A voice was heard from heaven: "O faithful servant, I am wearied of thy jungle flowers and fruits, and crave for cooked rice and sweetmeats. No longer shalt thou see me in the form of thy blue god. Hereafter I shall be known as Jagannath, the Lord of the World". Vidyapati returned to Malwa to tell the king of his discovery. A happy king set out with vast army, cut a road through the dense forest, and arrived at the holy spot only to find that the blue stone had disappeared. Indradyumna then performed penance to appease the Lord. He was rewarded with a message from heaven :Vishnu would appear before him not in the form of the blue stone, rather a log of wood if he performed a thousand asvamedh sacrifices. The king followed the instructions and a log of wood bearing the marks of Vishnu came floating in the sea. The king summoned all his carpenters and ordered them to carve out

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an image of Jagannath from the log. However no one could do it. Finally Jagannath himself appeared as a feeble carpenter and undertook the task on the condition of not being disturbed. The queen Gundica could not restrain herself, she peeped in, and so the three figures remained unfinished

Source:



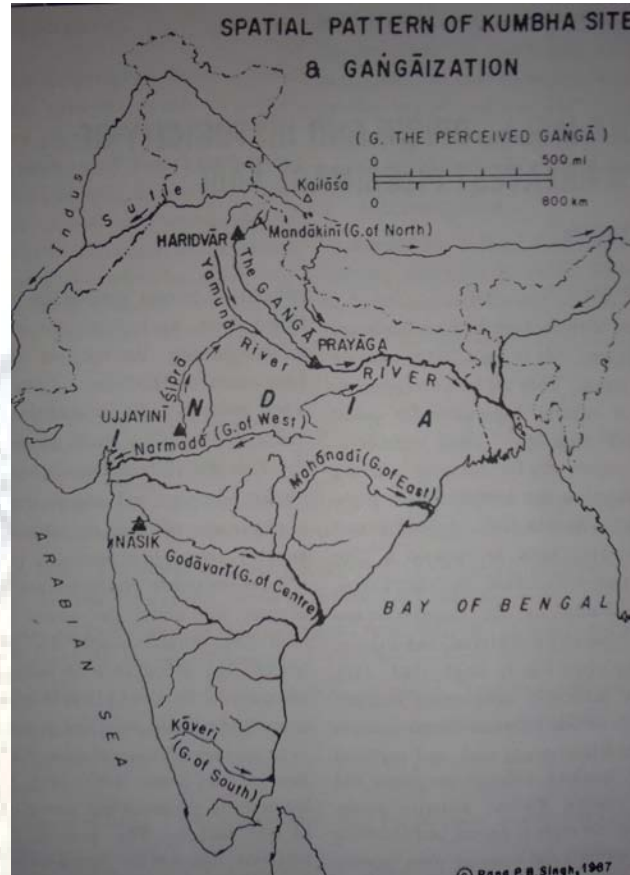
(Balabhadra, Subhadra and Jagannath, the triad associated with the Jagannath cult)

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Balabhadra_Subhadra_Jagannath.jpg

Jagannath figures are the typical outcome of a process of Hinduization where uniconical symbols of aboriginal religions are combined with a Hindu deity and at a certain stage of intensive Hinduization changed in their iconography such as to represent a rudimentary anthropomorphic image. Moreover, clues such as “jungle fruits and flowers”, “cutting a road through the dense forest” and the need for the “performance of aswamedha sacrifices” themselves speak of a myth that involves penetration of the Hindu religion into the tribal areas and the accommodation and acculturation that accompanies the process. The tribal origin of the figures is emphasised by the existence of a special group of priests, the Daitas, who are thought to be the descendents of the original tribal worshippers.

5.6.3: Fairs and the myth of the ‘immemorial’

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(The four triangles in the map indicate the four places: Haridwar, Prayaga, Ujjayini and Nasik where the Kumbha mela takes place).

By far the most imposing bathing festival is the Kumbha Parva, popularly called the Kumbha Mela. It is celebrated in a twelve year cycle by rotation at four sacred places- Haridvara on the Ganga, Prayaga/Allahabad on the Ganga-Yamuna Sangama, Nasik on the Godavari, and Ujjayini on the Sipra whenever a particular astronomical conjunction(yoga) occurs. The mela is remembered and interpreted upon an abstract notion of time and history – as inferred from the phrase so often used to describe the mela's continuity "from time immemorial"(*prachin kaal se*). According to Kama Maclean, "The agelessness of the mela in combination with its enchanted puranic origins and related stories— such as the presence of the unseen Saraswati river which converges with the Ganga and Yamuna to form the three braids of the famed triveni— combine to inform pilgrims of the festival's sanctity". One is here confronted with the notion of intersection of the trajectories of cosmic forces, symbolised by the moving planets and constellations, and flowing rivers and human lives. The Kumbha Mela, attracting millions of devouts periodically to the above sacred places, has had immeasurable influence in strengthening the religious and cultural foundations of Hinduism. According to D.P.Dubey, "It denotes the most distinct, elaborate and ancient ritual tradition of pilgrimage reflecting the ultimate sense of sacrality related to a place and time; infact it shows the sacred emergence and integration of space and time". The mela brings to life in an organic and cosmic

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way a personal experience of the Indian Folk and Sanskrit traditions on a scale never seen elsewhere.

According to the orthodox view, the antiquity of the Kumbha Mela goes back to the Vedic times. It is notable however, that none of the Vedic verses refers, even in the slightest way, to the Kumbha Mela.

The Kumbha Mela myth



Source: <http://www.uttarpradeshlive.com/2012/05/kumbh-mela-2013-date-schedule-place-how.html>

According to the epico-Puranic tradition, the gods and demons churned the milky ocean at the beginning of time to wrench from it its divine treasures. Following all the treasures, the pitcher filled with (amrta-kumbha), the potion of immortality emerged finally from the milky ocean. Immediately a fight for its acquisition began between the gods and the demons. In the scramble, the gods were baffled and the demons succeeded in getting hold of the nectarine pitcher. When the cause of the gods was thus lost, Jayanta, the alert heir apparent of the Paradise, at their incitement, changed himself into a rook and escaped with it into the heights of heaven. The fraud was brought to the notice of the demons by their preceptor Sukracharya, consequently they chased Jayanta but in vain. By way of precaution the gods sent four planets to accompany Jayanta: the Moon to protect the pot from flowing forth, the Sun to protect it from bursting, Jupiter to protect it from the attack of the demons, and Saturn to protect it from the fear of Jayanta lest he should devour its contents. The nectar is said to have splashed the earth in four places as it was whisked away to heaven by Jayanta: Haridvara, Prayaga, Nasik and Ujjayini, the sites becoming especially sanctified by its very touch for all the times to come. As Jayanta took twelve days to complete his flight and a divine day is equal to one human year, the Kumbha Parva recurs at these four places every twelfth year in a cyclic order. The sun, moon, Jupiter

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and Saturn were on the vanguard and had protected the jar, therefore the festival is celebrated only on the conjunction of these planets in the special zodiacal sign, Aquarius.

The above account has been mentioned in no text. In another telling, Garuda or Indra in the form of Mohini, lets the kumbha fall to the ground, "thus sprinkling the amrita at many places on the Earth". A somewhat different story is also in vogue. It is said that Garuda brought nectar from heaven to release his mother Vinata from the bondage of the mother of serpents, Kadru. He placed the pot of nectar before the sons of Kadru and Vinata was freed. But Indra stole away the pitcher and fled towards heaven being pursued by the serpents. Four drops of nectar fell down from the jar on the four places, and these places became fit for celebrating the Kumbha Parva. The relation between the pitcher containing divine liquid and the Kumbha Parva is, therefore, highly fanciful and imaginary. It may appear then, that this epicopuranic legend has been verbally grafted on the Kumbha Mela to provide it with an antiquity.

Source:

The antiquity of the Kumbha Mela is shrouded in mystery. It is sealed with reference to the account of Huien Tsang in the seventh century. However, his account of the religious festivities he witnessed at Prayaga may not be referring to the Kumbha at all since he describes the festival as that of alms giving rather than that of bathing in the holy river. While some like G.S.Ghurye have suggested that it came to be organised sometime after the twelfth century A.D., during the heyday of the Bhakti movement, Kama Maclean suggests that it was an invented tradition made by a combination of actors, responding to the aggrandizement and growth of the modern state and preference for well controlled, predictable, orderly and traditional manifestations of religion.

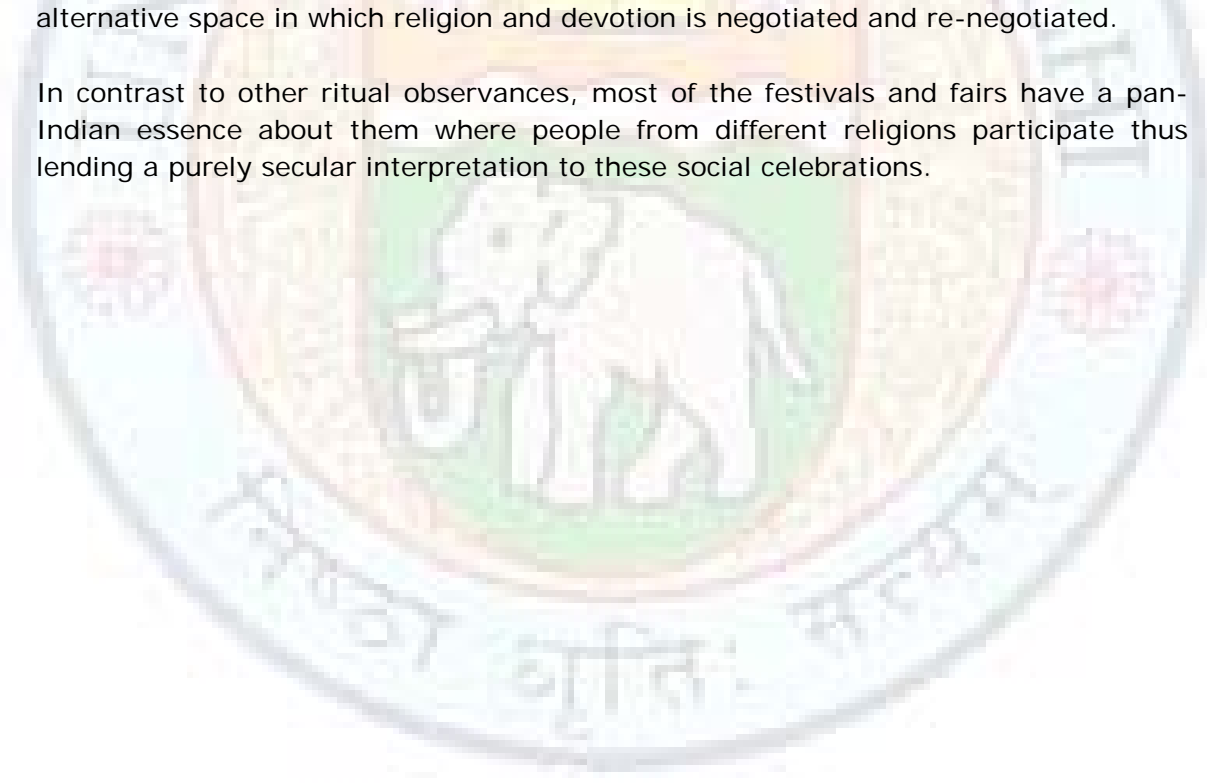
5.6.4.: Muslim festivities: Re-reading the 'folk'

Muslims are believed to be performing pilgrimages or festivities that remain by and large very austere and somber for example the pilgrimage to Mecca and the Id prayers. However, a look at local festivals would tell us that they too contribute immensely to what are known as 'social festivals' and are equally vibrant and celebratory. The most notable of these is the Moharrum held in the commemoration of the martyrdom of Hassan and Hussein, the two grandsons of Prophet Mohammed, who suffered tragic deaths at the hands of rival claimants to the Caliphate. The Sunni muslims observe a period of mourning during the first ten days of the month of Moharrum. On the tenth day a large procession is held. A large paper made mausoleum of Hassan and Hussein, called Tazia, is carried along the streets with wailing and the beating of breasts by hundreds of Muslims, to a place called Karbela.

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Another place to look for Muslim festivities is the shrines. According to Richard Eaton, muslim shrines displayed, theatre style and in microcosm, the moral order of the Islamic microcosm. Apart from its economic, political and social functions, the shrines also had a religious function. Through its rituals the shrine made Islam accessible to nonlettered masses, "providing them with vivid and concrete manifestations of the divine order, and integrating them into its ritualized drama both as participants and as sponsors". It was believed that the saint was closer to God and that the saint's spiritual power to intercede outlasted the saint's mortal lifetime and adhered to his burial place. Hence shrines came up as an important centre of pilgrimage for people seeking divine intervention in their personal, health or other problems. As such the '*Urs*' celebration at most of such shrines were in a form of a pageant which commemorated not so much the death of the saint as his everlasting union with God. Eaton shows how shrines like that of Baba Farid in Pakpattan provide a striking example of how Islam, the religion 'of the Book', has been mediated among common villagers most of whom were illiterate. For them it was the shrine and not the Book, which manifested the juncture 'where the contrasted poles of Heaven and Earth met'. Its elaborate rituals, grand processions and colourful pageantry made it the Court of God. Hence festivals also provide an alternative space in which religion and devotion is negotiated and re-negotiated.

In contrast to other ritual observances, most of the festivals and fairs have a pan-Indian essence about them where people from different religions participate thus lending a purely secular interpretation to these social celebrations.



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Summary

- Religion plays an important role in the origin and growth of festivals and fairs.
- Most of the festivals and fairs have tribal and indigenous antecedents, grafted upon by Brahmanism as part of a long drawn process.
- Brahmanical influence over most of the rites was evident from the Puranic overtones and myths that came to be associated with most of the indigenous festivals.
- A simultaneous 'deconstruction' and 'reconstruction' of religious system was deemed necessary.
- Rites associated with most of the festivals in India show that they are later inventions by Brahmanism to bring indigenous rites in line with them.
- Regional traditions play a crucial role in the socio-cultural processes where the little tradition and the greater tradition continuously influence each other mutually. The Jagannath cult serves as the best example for this.
- A constant overlap between the two traditions also take place as in certain festivals like Holi where most of the socially constructed differences are blurred.
- Fairs bring to life in an organic and cosmic way the personal experiences of the Indian folk and Sanskritic traditions.
- While there is a sense of 'agelessness' associated with most of the fairs in India, it is interesting to determine that most of them again are part of an invented tradition and hence a relatively modern phenomenon.
- Local muslim festivities around the sacred shrines provide a means by which the non-lettered have an access to God. Hence instead of the Holy Quran, performance and celebrations of festivals around such shrines then made access to the 'Court of God' accessible.
- Apart from the religious, there is also a secular side by which festivals and fairs may be approached considering the participation in them from people across religions.

Exercises

Essay questions

- 1.1 What role does religion play in the origin and growth of festivals and fairs?
- 1.2 What transformation has Brahmanism brought in indigenous rites?
- 1.3 Elaborate with examples how festivals and fairs are part of an invented tradition.
- 1.4 Does the performance of festival provide an alternative space by which religion and the ways of doing it is negotiated?

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Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	Match the following	

Question

Match the following:

- | | |
|-------------|-------------------------|
| a) Haridvar | i) Ganga-Yamuna sangama |
| b) Prayaga | ii) Ganga |
| c) Ujjayini | iii) Godavari |
| d) Nasik | iv) Sipra |

Correct Answer / Option(s)

- a) and ii)
b) and i)
c) and iv)
d) and iii)

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

The four places which are associated with the Kumbha mela which occurs once in twelve years are situated on the banks of important rivers. Haridwar is situated on the banks of the Ganga, Prayaga is located at the meeting point of Ganga and Yamuna, Nasik is on Godavari while Ujjayini is on the banks of River Sipra

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Other combinations are false due to reasons mentioned above.

Reviewer's Comment:

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	True or False	

Question

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True or False?

- The origins of the folk festival had the purpose of steering the tribals towards the Brahmanical belief system.
- The festival of Holi is known as Phagua in Western India and the Deccan.
- The officiating priest in the Cult of Jagannath is necessarily a high caste Brahmin.
- Moharrum is an important festival of mourning of the Shia Muslims.

Correct Answer / Option(s)

- The origins of the folk festival had the purpose of steering the tribals towards the Brahmanical belief system: True
- The festival of Holi is known as Phagua in Western India and the Deccan.: False
- The officiating priest in the Cult of Jagannath is necessarily a high caste Brahmin: False
- Moharrum is an important festival of mourning observed by the Shia Muslims.: False

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

The indigenous festival traditions were Brahmanised and garnished with Puranic myths. This was done because the pre-literate modes of living was deeply entrenched in their vibrant religious tradition. In order to absorb these people into the Brahmanical tradition, it was also felt necessary to bring most these religious traditions also into the Brahmanical fold and to popularize them. Puranic or Folk festivals fulfilled that very purpose.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

The festival of Holi is known as Shimga or Hutashna in western India and deccan. It is known as Phagua in Northern India.

The officiating priest at the Jagannath temple is not a high caste Brahmin, rather a group of Brahmins called Daitas, who are supposed to have tribal linkages and are related to the original early worshippers of Jagannath.

Shias and Sunnis form the two primary divisions of the Mohammedans and it is primarily the Sunnis who observe the ten day period mourning during Moharrum followed a large procession

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question Number	Type of question	LOD
3	Multiple choice	

Question

Choose the correct answer:

- Which of these places does not organize the Kumbha Mela (a)Puri (b)Haridwar (c)Prayaga (d) Nasik.
- The god not associated with the Cult of Jagannath (a)Subhadra (b)Jagannath (c) Bhairava (d) Balabhadra
- *Urs* are celebrations related to (a)the birth of a muslim saint (b) saint's death (c) the day he acquires sainthood (d)none of these.

Correct Answer / Option(s)

- Which of these places does not organize the Kumbha Mela (a)Puri (b)Haridwar (c)Prayaga (d) Nasik.
Answer: (a)
- The god not associated with the Cult of Jagannath (a)Subhadra (b)Jagannath (c) Bhairava (d) Balabhadra
Answer: (c)
- *Urs* are celebrations related to (a)the birth of a muslim saint (b) saint's death (c) the day he acquires sainthood (d)none of these.
Answer: (b)

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

The Kumbha Mela does not take place at Puri. It is the Jagannath cult which Puri is famous for. Hence (a).

Jagannath cult is not associated with Bhairava which is a form of Shiva. Lord Jagannath is seen as an avatar of Lord Vishnu and revolves primarily around him in the form of Jagannath. Hence (c)

Urs are celebrations related to the death of a muslim saint and his direct communion with God such that now he becomes closer to God.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

The Kumbha Mela takes place at four places: Haridwar, Prayaga, Ujjayini and Nasik. Cult of Jagannath is associated with three Gods: Jagannath, Subhadra and Balabhadra.

Reviewer's Comment:

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Glossary

Animism: the belief that all natural things such as plants, animals, rocks etc. have spirits and can influence human events.

Anthromorphism: the showing or treating of animals, gods and objects as if they are human in appearance, character or behavior.

Otiose: describes a word or phrase, or sometimes an idea, that is unnecessary or has been used several times.

Further readings

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