

Human societies are characterized by cultures and traditions, and parts of culture are the festivals which are celebrated from time to time. To know the importance and relevance of a festival for a group of people, it is sufficient to observe the impact it has on their day to day existence especially as a community. Of course there are different types of festivals which may be broadly categorized as “ritual” and “cultural” festivals. In most societies, ritual or religious festivals occupy the most prominent place.

From an anthropological perspective, the structure of a festival can be described as follows (Audrey C. Shalinsky, 1985):

- a) General description – How often does it take place? How long does it last? What are the events that are included in the particular festival? What are its content and symbolism? How are these symbols presented outwardly? Has the content undergone a change and what are the factors leading to such a change?
- b) Setting of the festival – Where does the festival take place usually? What is the significant relationship between the festival and the location? For example, the Nongkrem Festival of the Khasis takes place always in the vicinity of the Nongkrem *Ingsad* and not anywhere else.
- c) Type of festival – Is it calendric, religious, ethnic or cultural? Often there are festivals of a mixed character where the religious and the cultural elements are both present.
- d) Performers – Who are responsible for the festival and its organization? Who are usually the participants in such a festival?
- e) Mood – How do the people behave in such celebrations? What are their moods and their emotions?
- f) Ultimate purpose – What does a particular festival aim at? Is the purpose of the festival to teach something, to foster some values, to create a memory or to arouse faith response?

In every festival there is a deliberate attempt to establish a relationship either with the divine reality, with the natural elements, with the ancestors or past historical events etc. In fact, this relationship forms the core dimension of a festival. In a religious festival for example, there is an effort from the part of a human community to connect itself to God. Just take the *Holy Week* festival of the Christians. It is a way of re-establishing their relationship with Christ the redeemer who becomes the central symbol in the entire festival. The *Durga* festival of the Hindus is a manner of connecting themselves through the rituals that surround the festival, to the goddess who defeated the demon *Mahishasura*. *Holi*, another Hindu festival is another way by which the believers connect themselves to the deity especially by remembering the victory of good over evil (*Prahlad* over *Hiranyakshyap* or *Krishna* over his enemies). Most agrarian communities have festivals centered round Mother Nature. The Assamese *Rongali Bihu*, *Kongali Bihu* and *Bhogali Bihu* are typical agricultural and cultural festivals. It is a way by which people connect themselves with Mother Nature. The *Shad Suk Mynsiem* of the Khasis and the *Behdeinkhlam* of the Pnars, are religio-cultural festivals where two types of relationship are fostered: a relationship with *U Blei* (God) or the deities (*ki blei*) and the bonding of people as a community.

For all these reasons, festivals play a vital role in the life of any community because they keep it in touch with the divine reality/realities and so nourishing their faith life; they connect people to their natural environment so as to foster a symbiosis with nature; they connect people to their ancestors and past significant events so as not to lose touch with tradition and finally they bring persons of the community together in order to strengthen community bond and thus ensure its identity and survival.

Many of these articles in this issue, bring to light the role and significance of various festivals of the tribal communities of North-east India, namely, the *Wanchos*, the *Nagas*, the *Riangs*, the *Khasis*, the *Garos*, the *Kukis*, the *Rongmeis* and the *Hmars*. There is a sort of revival of traditional festivals seen among many tribal

communities of this region. This is a positive development considering the irreplaceable role festivals play in the life of a community. However, the integration of certain secular elements of commercial character, into some cultural festivals can do more harm than good. Sometimes, this can digress from the focus of a festival and may lead people away from the core to the periphery. A community that upholds the value of festivals and their sacredness is a wise and promising community. Let me conclude with a quote about *Diwali*: “*Diwali* is the darkest night of the year. And our ancestors have taught us to overcome darkness with light. When the moon is not shining, neither the sun, sky is dark, India glitters. I’m proud of being part of such a wise and one of the finest traditions” (anonymous).

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