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RathaSaptami



Rathasaptami or MaghaSaptami is a Hindu festival that falls on the seventh day (Saptami) in the bright half (ShuklaPaksha) of the Hindu month Maagha. It marks the seventh day following the Sun's northerly movement (Uttarayana) of vernal equinox starting from Capricorn (Makara). It is symbolically represented in the form of the Sun God Surya turning his Ratha (Chariot) drawn by seven horses (representing seven colours) towards the northern hemisphere, in a north-easterly direction. It also marks the birth of Surya and hence celebrated as Surya Jayanti (the Sun-god's birthday).

RathaSaptami is symbolic of the change of season to spring and the start of the harvesting season. For most Indian farmers, it is an auspicious beginning of the New Year. The festival is observed by all Hindus in their houses and in innumerable temples dedicated to Surya, across India.

Background

Sun worship is deep rooted in the Vedas of the Hindu religion and its antiquity also relates to several mythologies of the world such as that of China, Egypt and Mesopotamia. The Gayatri Mantra jap - the sacred Vedic chants to Savitr (Sun god) - is recited by the Hindus every day with great reverence. As the puranic Hinduism evolved around the early Christian era, the worship of Sun, linked to the equinoxes, was established. In the Rig Veda Mandala 10/Hymn 85, the sun god's bride seated on a chariot pulled by two steeds is mentioned. This symbolism is therefore common to both Norse mythology and Vedic history.

Religious significance

RathaSaptami marks the seventh day following the Sun's northerly movement (Uttarayana) of vernal equinox starting from Capricorn (Makara). It is symbolically represented in the form of the Sun God Surya turning his Ratha (Chariot) drawn by seven horses, with Aruna as the charioteer, towards the northern hemisphere, in a north-easterly direction. The symbolic significance of the ratha and the seven horses reigned to it is that it represents the seven colours of the rainbow. The seven horses are also said to represent the seven days of a week starting with Sunday, the day of Sun god Surya.

The chariot has 12 wheels, which represents the 12 signs (each of 30 degrees) of the Zodiac (360 degrees) and constituting a full year, named Samvatsara. The Sun's own house is Leo (Simha) and he moves from one house to the next every month and the total cycle takes 365 days to complete. The RathaSaptami festival seeks the benevolent cosmic spread of energy and light from the Sun God. RathaSaptami also marks the gradual increase in temperature across South India and awaits the arrival of spring, which is later heralded by the festival of Ugadi or the Hindu lunar New Year day in the month of Chaitra.

Legends

RathaSaptami also marks the birth of Surya to sage Kashyapa and his wife Aditi and hence celebrated as Surya Jayanti (the Sun-god's birthday). A legend is narrated of the Kamboj empire's King Yashovarma, a noble king who had no heir to rule his kingdom. On his special prayers to God, he was blessed with a son. The king's vows did not end with this, as his son was terminally ill. A saint who visited the king advised that his son should perform the RathaSaptamipooja (worship) with reverence to rid of his past sins. Once the King's son performed this, his health was restored and he ruled his kingdom well.

Religious observances

God Vishnu in his form as Surya (the Sun-God) is usually worshipped on this day. Usually, Rathasaptami begins in households with a purification bath (bathing is also done in a river or sea) by holding several Ekka (Calotropis Gigantea) leaves on their head while bathing and chanting a verse which is supposed to invoke

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the benevolence of the Lord in all that one indulges in during the rest of the year. Argyam or (Tharpanam) (water held in the palms) is offered to the Sun God on this day while chanting hymns. It also involves doing a puja with the ritual Naivedhya (food offering to God), and offering of flowers and fruits. Important prayers offered to the Sun god on this occasion are the Adityahridayam, Gayathri, Suryashtakam, Surya Sahasramnamam. The preferred time for the pooja is within one hour after sunrise. In places like Mysore and Melkote, ceremonial processions carry the Surya Mandala - the icon of Surya.

Ekka leaves (in Kannada), are also known as Arka (in Sanskrit, meaning a ray or flash of lightning) leaves, Jilledu in Telugu, Erukku in Tamil and CalotropisGigantea (bowstring hemp) in English. Arka is also a synonym for Surya or Sun. Its significance to Sun God could be compared to the significance of Tulsi (Ocimumtenuiflorum) leaves to Vishnu. Arka leaves are also used for worship of god Ganesha known by the name ArkaGanesha and also for Hanuman worship. Its stems, called samidha (sacrificial offerings of wood) are used for the Yagna ritual as a sacrificial offering to a ritual fire. Its shape is said to represent the shoulders and chariot of Sun God. Its use during the ritualistic ceremonious bath involves placement of seven leaves - one on the head, two on the shoulders, two on the knees and two on the feet. On this day, in South India, Rangoli is drawn with coloured rice powder depicting a chariot and seven horses as symbolic of the RathaSaptami. Cowdung cake is also burnt at the centre of this depiction and milk boiled on the fire is offered to the Sun God.



Rangoli of the chariot