

# THE PITCHER-FESTIVAL

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**Abstract:-** The cosmic conflict is configured by the gods (deva) and their rivals, the anti-gods (asura). They are sons of the same father, Kasyapa, with whom creation of the lifeforms in the reproduction mode starts. Their mothers are different, real sisters called aditi (mother of the gods) and diti (mother of the anti-gods).

**Key Words :-** Astrology, Kumbha-parva, Ujjain, congregation, Hindu mythology

## Introduction

The pitcher is a central signature in Indian thinking. There are two synonyms in Sanskrit for 'pitcher' which are in wide use. The first, Ghata, simple means 'formed'. It thus is an enclosure for a part of the nonformed, pre-existential essence, the emptiness denoted by 'space'. It represents the formed body in the standard philosophical discourse. The other, Kumbha, means 'that which is filled (by water)'. In every ritual, the pitcher filled with water is installed in the beginning; all the gods are invited to reside in it for the duration of the ritual.

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The gods and the anti-gods once churned the ocean, for riches. Amongst the yields was the amrta, the immortality elixir, in a pitcher. The two sets of brothers fought for it and Jayanta, the son of the King of the gods ran away with the pitcher. They all ran after him, the anti-gods to take away the pitcher from Jayanta and the gods to prevent the anti-gods from doing so. This continued for twelve divine days which translates into twelve human years. During this period, four times the anti-gods caught up with Jayanta and attempted

to snatch the pitcher from him; each time a drop spilled on the earth. The Sun, the Moon, and the Jupiter helped Jayanta in these crucial moments.

Therefore, whenever the positions of the Sun, the Moon, and the Jupiter are exactly the same in the Zodiac, the divine runway, the conditions of the drop of the immortality elixir spilling on the earth from the pitcher are obtained. Since the war between the gods and the anti-gods is of course eternal and the pitcher containing the immortality elixir is always changing hands, a drop from the pitcher spills on the earth whenever these particular planetary positions repeat themselves.

This happens four times in twelve years. The places where the four drops fell on the earth are (1) Prayaga<sup>1</sup>, (2) Haridvara<sup>2</sup>, (3) Ujjaiyini<sup>3</sup>, and (4) Nasika<sup>4</sup>. At each of the four places, once in twelve years, the kumbha-parva (the pitcher-festival) is held.

When the drop of the immortality elixir fell in Prayaga, the Sun was in Capricorn, the Jupiter was in Tarurus, and the Moon was eclipsed. When the drop of the immortality elixir fell in Haridvara, the Sun was in Aries, the Jupiter was in Aquarius.

The Kumbha-Parva is celebrated in Ujjain at the time when the Jupiter is in Leo and the Sun is in Aries. The name simhastha for this derives from Jupiter being in Leo. Although the Kumbha-parva in Nasik is also celebrated when

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the Jupiter is in Leo (and the Sun is also in Leo), but when one simply says simhastha, it is generally taken to mean the *Kumbha-parva* at Ujjain.

Since the Jupiter returns in Leo generally with a periodicity of 12 years, the *kumbha-parva* at Ujjain is also held generally with a periodicity of 12 years. But sometimes the Jupiter returns in Leo in 11 years also and then the *kumbha-parva* at Ujjain is held after 11 years from the preceding one. Since in India a number of considerations have to be factored into the calendrical calculations when time has to be computed for its religious significance, and since the methodologies of factoring are not universally accepted, there is sometimes a controversy about the exact year in which the *kumbha-parva* at Ujjain falls. One such controversy was in the year 1956, when many were in favour of the year 1957.

Perhaps because of the centrality of the position of Jupiter in the Simhastha at Ujjain, there is a Temple of Jupiter at Ujjain, Which may be the only temple named after this planet in India.

### **Why four?**

The choice of the number four for the celebration of the *kumbha-parva* has been speculated upon. It can be traced to a Vedic verse:

Four pitchers full of milk, curd and water in four ways do I offer to you, O Master of those that are born...

There seems to be little doubt that these 'four pitchers' are read into the 'four oceans' that are so frequently mentioned in poetic geography of the earth in the Indian literature.

### **As the great congregation**

Nowhere in the world is there a parallel to the pitcher-festival as a congregation. According to the legend, the great philosopher Sankaracharya organized the regular meeting of the monks at these four pitcher-festivals, each

with an average periodicity of three years. The historicity of these is unknown but the antiquity stretches far into an untracable past.

The sanyasi (the renunciater), or the 'Hindu Monk', derives his legitimacy technically from Sankaracharya because in the Current Age (which started some five thousand years ago), the practice of renunciation was prohibited. This was lifted by Sankaracharya (seventh or eighth century according to modern historians) and we have now an organization started by him in which there are four major seats one each in north, west, east and south. The Head of each of these seats is known as a Sankaracharya and this is the nearest that the Hindu System got to the concept of the Church, although any comparison is bound to be grossly misleading. He also established ten orders of these monks.

In any case, the monks do meet at pitcher festivals. Their order of preference is fixed. They have precedence in bathing before ordinary people and the order of preference amongst their suborganizations is fixed. The contemporary structure has seven major *akharas*; in one *akhara* however, there may be monks from more than one Order.

But this is just one section of the monks. The basic freedom inherent in the Indian religiosity permits anybody to start an organization, to step out of it, or to stay out of it. Many, many organisations of monks exist outside the pale of this structure. They all come to the pitcher festival, as do the common folk who are not monks and indeed have no special religious lifestyle.

When the Scindia dynasty made Ujjain their capital in the middle of the eighteenth century, it became a State responsibility to provide facilities to the pilgrims and ensure that an order was maintained. The priority in taking the holy dip has always been a contentious issue leading occasionally to physical fights between groups of monks and it has never been easy to ensure hygienic conditions of stay in such large

sized congregation. State management ensured that such things were managed with adequate financial backing and people-friendly regulations. The system has continued into our times and now it is almost entirely the business of the State to provide the resources and make arrangements in the pitcher-festival at the macro-level. The micro-level arrangements and resources are managed by religious organizations and institutions. Individual donors and volunteers also play a major role.

Like all large human congregations, the large human congregation at the pitcher-festival is also prone to problems of health-management, water-management, and similar things. It has been the belief that the year of the pitcher festival

brings calamities, famine and mass destruction. Some of it is indeed attributed to the presence of *candi*, the terrible form of the supreme goddess, in Ujjain, and the magical power of the *tantrik* practitioners who assemble at the pitcher-festival. With State *talking* control of management and modern myths replacing older myths, such pop explanations are gradually losing their validity.

Ecological problems raise their head in many other ways. The river Sipra of the classical literature was rich in water; so was the real river Sipra till about fifty years ago. Now, water has to be stored at few places for channelising into the Sipra to ensure that there is enough water for the pilgrims for the holy bath.

### References-

1. This city, commonly now known as Allahabad, is in the province Uttar Pradesh.
2. This city is in the province Uttaranchal.
3. This city is of course the city Ujjain in Madhya Pradesh, the city we are talking about.
4. This city is in the province Maharashtra.
5. The relevant verse is: makare ca divanathe vrsarasisthite gurau prayage kumbhayogo vai maghamase vidhankasaye.
6. The relevant verse is: madhave dhavale pakse simhe jivejage ravau tularasau nisanathe savtibhe purnimatithau ujjayinyam tada kumbhayogo jatah ksamatale
7. Atharvaveda; 4.34.7