

Festivals and Religious Traditions in Medieval Mithila

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Abstract

The study of Festivals and Religious Traditions in Medieval Mithila highlights the cultural and spiritual life of the region during the medieval period. Life there carried a rhythm shaped heavily by faith, where celebrations weren't occasional but woven into daily existence. Instead of jumping straight into theory, the work leans on writings like Candeśvara Thākura's Kṛtya Ratnākara for real insight. From spring's start in Caitra onward, each season marked fresh rounds of observance, turning time itself into something sacred. Gods like Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva, Durga, plus Surya received devotion through these events-showing exactly how belief guided community rhythms. Looking closely at big celebrations-Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Krishna Janmashtami, Durga Puja, Diwali. Though rooted in Hindu practice, events like Id, Muharram, and Nauroz show layers of shared life across communities. More than worship alone, these times pulled people together through music, stories, and familiar routines. Often beginning quietly, ceremonies grew into large movements, drawing crowds toward sacred sites or village centers. Held year after year, such acts kept the spirit of Mithila alive without fanfare. Festivals in medieval Mithila did more than mark rituals-they stitched communities together through shared belief and tradition. What stands out is how these gatherings carried faith forward while shaping identity across generations. Not just moments of worship, they pulsed with life, revealing a society rich in variety yet deeply connected. Seen closely, each celebration held echoes of an evolving past, alive in custom and collective memory. The rhythm of these events mirrored both stability and change within the culture itself.

Keywords: Festivals and Religious Traditions, Holi, Raksha Bandhan, Krishna Janmashtami, Durga Puja, Diwali

Introduction

During the Middle Ages, religious views, rituals, and group festivals were very important to the people of Mithilā. As a bigger term, culture wasn't just art; it was a way of life that was shown through fairs, pilgrimages, and regular celebrations. A strong religious personality was present among the people of Mithilā, and it was most noticeable in the way they celebrated holidays all year long. Not only were these holidays times of worship, but they were also important social institutions that strengthened community ties, ensured cultural continuity, and offered ways to have fun and work together. From the complex Hindu religious calendar written about in works like Kṛtya Ratnākara to the celebration of Muslim holidays like Id and Muharram, Mithilā had a wide range of cultures that were all welcome. So, this essay looks at the religious and holiday customs of Mithilā, focusing on their social importance, history, and part in shaping the region's culture (Mukherji, 1972, p. 86). Culture, which is separate from but an integral part of civilization, is concerned with the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of communal life. This includes things like religion, philosophy, ideas, laws, traditions, morals, the arts, architecture, theater, dance, and music. It also encompasses things like individual values, interpersonal norms, ethics, etiquette, and patterns of behavior. When we talk about a people's culture, we're referring to their way of life. During the Middle Ages, Mithilā, which has been appropriately called the "cultural seat of India," was home to several cultural traditions (Candeśvara Thākura, n.d.).

Festivals

Currently, there is a different holiday every month, which suggests that the people who live in Mithilā have always been religious. The academic Caeśvara Thākura wrote a book in the 1400s called Kṛtya Ratnākara that lists all kinds of celebrations. Caṇeśvara seems to have been at all of the events that were common in Mithilā in the 1400s. Some people think that the month of Caitra could be the start of this run of festivals (Chaudhary, n.d.). During the birth of the world, which happened on the first day of the bright half of Caitra, many gods are worshiped, such as Brahma and Maheza. The "Homa," or sacrifice practice, was the second thing that had to be done to get ready for the holiday. Worshiping Bhāratvarśa as a saving part of this event shows that the Mithilā people valued the idea of India's basic unity, even though there wasn't a central authority in the country at the time. People thought of Bhāratvarśa as one of the gods who should be worshiped at certain times (Alberuni, n.d.). Skanda was made leader of the deva troops on the sixth day of the bright half of Caitra. He was honored with gifts like lambs, clothes, jewelry, and live cocks. When used in this way, "cock" meant play, not sacrifice. People also believed that the sixth and seventh days of the month of Chaitra were important for worshipping the Sun. Alberuni has also talked about this feature. It was thought that getting eight Azoka flower buds on Caitra Śuklaṣṭamī would make people feel better when they were sad (Pandey, n.d.). In honor of Rukmi, the Caitra Śukla Ekāda was celebrated. The twelfth day of this week, which was called Madan-Dvādaśi, was seen as holy

because it was a day for honoring Kāmadeva.

This event was commonly known as Madan or Kama Mahotsava, and it seems to have been well-liked. For Hindus today, Holi is a very important holiday. Smṛiti writers have different ideas about when the Holi event should be held. I didn't see a lot of people spraying colored water and dust during the time of Caṅśvara Thākura. He said that during his time, the Holi event was held on the day of the full moon. People dressed up in clothes and jewelry and ate meat and drinks etc. From modern folk songs, too, it sounds like Holi was a very big and exciting holiday in Mithilā during the time period we are looking at.

Kṛtya Ratnākara says that worship of Irā was the first act of Vaikha. Vishnu was to be offered barley on the third day of the bright half as a celebration for Vāsudeva. Śankara, Gangā, and Himālaya were also to be worshiped. Today was the holiday of Akśaya tritīyā. The Vaiśākh Śukla Saptamī was a day to honor the river Gangā (Abul Fazl, n.d.). The Śarkarāsaptamī was a day to honor the Sun. On the same day, a picture of Buddha was to be made and the temples were to be decorated. The monks were to be respected, and the meeting went on for three days. On the day of Vaiśākh Purim, tila was given to Vāsudeva, Dharmarāja, and other gods. Caṅśvara talked about the Gangā Daśahara festival, Matsya Dwādaśī or Rāghava Dwādaśī, and Vata Sāvitrī festivals as some of the most important events in Mithilā during Jyestha Pūrnimā. A lot of love is still shown for it. Caṅśvara said that the event kept women from becoming widows. The author says that during this holiday, a jar should be given out with rice, sweets, and sugarcane plants in it. A copper plate should then be put on top of the jar with a picture of Brahmā and Sāvitrī on it (Rakesh, n.d.).

According to Kṛtya Ratnākara, the worship of Ganecā or Vināyaka²³ happened on the eighth day of the month of Āsadh. On the seventh bright day, people ate and drank as part of a ceremony to honor the Sun, or Bhāskara. On the ninth day, a golden figure of Dūrgā was worshiped, and food was given to unmarried girls (kumari) and Brāhmanas. It is written here that Che Guevara suggested stopping food at night during this month (Candeśvara Thākura, n.d., pp. 103–108). If girls want good husbands, they should worship Vishnu in the month of Rāva, when the stars Rohini and Rāva were in their best positions. The Brāhmanas loved another great event called Rakshā Bandhan, which took place on the last day of the month of Śrāvana. On this day, the Brāhmanas put Rākhi strings, which are bands made of silk thread, around the right wrists of wealthy and respectable people. In exchange, they were given nice gifts (Grierson, n.d.).

It was Lord Kṛṣṇa birthday on the eighth day of the month of Bhādra. Still, the Kṛṣṇāṣṭami event is very well-known in Mithilā (Chaudhary, n.d., p. 293). The ninth day of the dark half of the Bhādra was when the ratha (car) parade of Durgā began. Caṅśvara said that only kings observed it, and the Brāhmanas were fed on that day. On this day, animals were also killed as sacrifices. The Vedic Brāhmanas then started to pray, and the people of the city gathered at the eastern gate. The Śudras could worship, but they couldn't alight on the ratha. The celebration went on for 14 days (Mukherji, 1972). Of the month. On the day of amāvasyā, there was to be a special event. The dark part of the Bhādra is also known as pitṛpakśa. It also talks about how the flagstaff of Indra was raised on the eighth day of the bright half of Bhādra. The Indrapūjā method is still used a lot in Mithilā (Asraf, 1959).

A lot of women in Mithilā liked Kathā during the month of Āświna Jitīyā or Jimutavāhana Vrata. Even now, during the

Jitīyā holiday, mothers of Mithilā are expected to fast so that their children will be safe in the future. The Durgā Pūjā event took place during the Devīpakśa. This is when Caṅśvara says to worship Durgā: from the seventh day to the tenth day of the bright half. On the tenth day, a Saturnalia was held. People from all walks of life who were Hindu really liked the Vijayādaśamī event. The worship of the goddess Durga was done with the same enthusiasm as it is today. In Mithilā, people took part in "tantricism" during this holiday. During this time, people were practicing all different kinds of Siddhas. 36. The Durgā Śaptasati Pātha, Jayanti, and Iṣṭamantra were used a lot during the holiday (Mīśra, n.d.). From what Caṅśvara said about this festival, we can guess that a lot of other events used to happen on the day of the full moon. People stay awake all night to honor Lakshmi and Indra on this day, which is also called Kojāgarapūrnimā. When this happened, dice were played, and on this day, women still do cowrie sports, especially newlyweds (Jha, n.d.). Che Guevara told them to That month, on the second day of the bright half, there was a holiday of harvest that lasted for seven days.

On the day of Amāvasya in Kārtika, another important event called Dīpāvalī was held. These events were celebrated as Sukhasuptikā, according to Caṅśvara. In fact, Dīpavālī was one of the most famous and colorful Hindu holidays for people from all social groups. Caṅśvara also tells us that people gambled, and whether they won or lost meant good or bad luck for the coming year (Jha, n.d.). The Dīpavālī festival is held in honor of Laksamī and Kālī. Jamadvitīyā (or bhrātridvītiyā) was seen for the second day of the bright half. Another great event this month was the DevotthānaEkāda. Large celebrations were held for the first day of the month of Agraha or Agrahāya. Ketya Ratnākara tells us that Gauri was worshiped on the third day of the bright half and the sun was honored on the seventh day with Mitrasaptamī. On the fourteenth day of the full moon, "Caṅśvara" can also mean the Himapūj. People paid attention to Tila in the month of Māgha. On the twelfth day of the dark half, Caṅśvara talks about Tiladwādaśī. There were 50 Maghsaptams (Akbar, n.d.).

The most important festival in this month. Several kinds of dāns such as 'vastradāna', 'tiladāna', etc. were performed. Saraśwatīpūjā (the worship of the goddess of learning) was celebrated in the Śukla Pakśa of this month (i.e. bright half of the month).

During the month of Phālguna the birth anniversary of Sīta was celebrated on the eighth day of the dark half of the month.⁵³ On the fourteenth day, people used to go on fast on account of Śivachaturdaśī.⁵⁴ This is also called Śivarātrī (Blochmann, n.d.).

These are, in brief, the details of the festivals celebrated in Mithilā during the period under review. Caṅśvara does not speak of the festivals like Chhatha, Sāmāchakevā, etc. However, it appears that Chhatha⁵⁵ was also a very important festival of medieval Mithilā, like other parts of the country, which fell in the month of Kārtika when the Sun is worshipped. In the same month Samā or Śyamā Chakevā festival also celebrated especially by the boys and girls of Mithilā. It appears from the folk songs that the worship of King Salhesa was an important festival of Mithilā. (Storia, n.d.).

The Hindus of Mithilā used to make occasional pilgrimages to the shrines of popular saints and to the sacred cities or holy rivers like the Ganga, the Saraśvatī, the Yamuna etc. There were several holy places which has popular pilgrimages of the

Hindus. Among these mention may be made of Kasi, Ayodhya, Avantika, Dwaraka, Haridwar, Prayag, etc.⁵⁸ Some of these places of pilgrimage are also mentioned in Vidyaapati's Bhūparikramā.

Mention may also be made here of the important Muslim festivals. An important festival of 'Nauroz' among Muslims was a kind of state festival which was held on the Persian New Year's Day. This was a mirthful festival observed by all sections of the society. Id (Id-ul-Fitr) was observed by the Muslims by offering prayers continuously.⁶⁰ Its actual date of celebration depended upon the visibility of the moon. Another important festival was Shab-I-Barat. This festival provided the people with occasion for great jubilation (Ojha, n.d.).

Muharram (the festival of mourning) was also one of the most important festivals particularly of the Shias. Tajia's (imitation mausoleums of the martyrs of Karbala) were brought out in procession on this occasion. In Mithilā we have several folk songs relating to Muharram and Tajia (Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, n.d.).

Frequent visits to the towns and the shrines of renowned saints from another source of amusement for the Muslims also. The visitors, while visiting such places, spent the whole day in amusements and merry makings.

Thus, it is apparent that festivals were frequent in Mithilā and many people seem to have valued their importance as popular means of pastimes.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that festivals occupied a central place in the life of the people of Mithilā. They were not merely ritualistic observances but vibrant expressions of faith, social cohesion, and cultural identity. The detailed festival calendar, as preserved in texts and corroborated by folk traditions, reflects a society deeply engaged with religious practices across all seasons. Equally significant is the coexistence of diverse traditions, where Hindu and Muslim festivals were observed with equal enthusiasm, indicating a shared cultural space. Pilgrimages to sacred centres and rivers further reinforced the spiritual outlook of the people, linking Mithilā to the broader religious geography of India. Thus, festivals in medieval Mithilā functioned as a unifying force, blending devotion with social interaction and leisure. They provided continuity to tradition while also adapting to changing times, thereby sustaining the dynamic cultural fabric of the region.

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