

History of Indra-mahotsava in ancient India and traces in current Asia

Manisha Deepak Puranik*

Abstract

From an ancient period celebration of festivals become a cultural need of society. With the evolution of concept of God, festivals start celebrated in the name of these Gods. Among them, *Indra-mahotsava* was the most important festival in ancient India. This festival was celebrated for the god Indra, the most important deity from the Vedic period.

This festival was celebrated in memory of Indra's victory over *asuras*. There are references of this festival in the texts like *Atharva-veda*, *Mahabharata*, *Brihata samhita*, *Devipurana* etc. Many texts give the rituals for this festival also. Along with *Vedic & Pauranic* texts we get references of this festival in Buddhist and Jain literature also. After the degradation of Indra as a god, the popularity of this festival decreased. But even today, in some part of Asia this festival is still celebrated by people.

In this paper attempt is made to trace the history of *Indra-mahotsava* in ancient India from different literary sources. Also an effort is made to find footprints of this festival in some part of current Asia like Nepal and Indonesia.

Indra-mahotsava was one of the most important festival in ancient India, which also called as *Indramaha* or *Shakramaha*. This festival was celebrated in memory of Indra's victory over *asuras*. A tall wooden pillar was erected in honor of Indra, which was called as *Indrayashti*. This festival was celebrated not only by kings but common people also. In this paper attempt is made to trace the history of *Indra-mahotsava* from different literary sources.

* Research Scholar, Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune, Maharashtra.

Indra most commonly acknowledged as the king of gods. The references of Indra are throughout *Rigveda* and other Vedas as he was the most powerful god¹. Both the parties in battle worshiped Indra for success. In *Rigveda* there is a concept that, the party wins in battle whose supporter is Indra². The tradition of worshipping *Indradvaja* is probably the concept of having Indra in a symbolic form with us for victory.

There are many stories about this festival. Out of them two stories are related with *Uparichara Vasu*, the King of Chedi.

1) As described in the *Adipurana* of *Mahabharata*, *Uparichara* was a monarch of the Chedi kingdom. He performed a long and onerous meditation. Pleased with this, Indra gifted *Uparichara* with an aerial vehicle and the *Vaijayanti* Garland of ever-fresh lotuses (which always ensured victory over enemies). *Uparichara* also received the gift of a tall bamboo pole having the power of destroying enemies. Then the king returned to his capital and inaugurated a *Indradhvaja*. The festival of this pole was made an annual feature to serve as worship of Indra³.

2) As per narrative in *Brihat-samhita*, the banner staff did not originate from Indra but was gifted to him by Vishnu to frighten away the *asuras*. Once after defeated by *asuras*, Indra came to Brahma. Brahma send him to Vishnu. Vishnu gave him a flag and by the effect of this flag Indra defeated *asuras* in the battlefield. In later period Indra handed over this flag to Chedi king Vasu. By worshipping this flag Vasu got prosperity⁴.

Rituals -

Varahamihira states that king *Uparichara Vasu* inaugurated the Banner Festival on earth. *Brihat-samhita* prescribes auspicious stellar and

¹ Rigveda 2.12.9

² Ibid 2.12.8

³ Bharatiya Samskriti Kosha, 534

⁴ Brihat Samhita, 43

planetary conjunctions on which the king should send an astrologer and a carpenter to a forest for selection of a tree, preferably the *arjuna*, *chapha*, *sanvar* or *kalamba*. On eighth day (*ashtami* the bright half - *Shuklapaksha*) of *Bhadrapada*, after worshipping the selected tree, a prayer is made to the tree to give a shaft for *Indradvaja*. The tree is felled the next day. It is brought to the capital for erection on the eighth day of the bright-half of *Bhadrapada*. On *ekadashi* (eleventh day) of the same fortnight, that is three days later, the stem is pared and chiseled into shape. If the height of shaft is 52 *hasta* it is of best grade, 32 *hasta* middle grade and 22 *hasta* lower grade. It is decorated with ornaments, garlands of fragrant flowers. Idol of Indra is installed at the bottom of shaft. It should be erected at the entrance of city or palace. It is raised by the king on the next day i.e. *dwadashi* with (or even without) lunar conjunction with *shravana nakshatra*. The celebration concludes on the first day of the dark-half of the same month when the *dhvaja* is lowered. In *Sanskrita* drama *Mrichchhakatika*¹ there is a reference of *Indradhvaja*, that it should be installed with proper celebration but *visarjana* of *dhvaja* should be made secretly in forest.

Kalikapurana also have the same reference.

उत्थापयेत्तूर्यरवैः सर्वलोकस्य वै पुरः ।

रहो विसर्जयेत्केतुं विशेषोऽयं प्रपूजने ॥

Meaning - Erection should be done in front of all people with celebration but *visarjana* should be done secretly, this is its specialty².

The festival commences with ceremony, in which *Brahmanas* worshipped with food, drinks and clothes, recite Vedic mantras invoking auspiciousness. The banner is then raised to the accompaniment of sounds of *mridanga*, *bheri* and *shankha*. Mahabharata also describes this

¹ Mrichchhakatika, 10.7

² Bharatiya Samskriti Kosha

celebration. People in cities and villages dress in colorful clothes with flower-garlands. Dramas and dances are performed. The king also enjoys the festival, dressed colorfully and ornamented with queens and ministers¹.

We get references of *Indra-mahotsava* in different texts.

*Atharva-veda parishista*² gives the rituals to be performed by King and his *purohita* to perform this festival. The prayer is made for prosperity of the king, to get support from Indra in the battlefield and for protection from enemies³.

*Kaushika-sutra*⁴ explains the rituals of *Indra-mahotsava*, which is performed for the prosperity of the king. *Indradhvaja* is erected on eighth day of bright half of the month of *Bhadrapada* or *Ashvina*⁵.

According to *Parashara grihyasutra*⁶, at the end of this festival, a *naimittika yaga* called as *Indra-yaga* is to be performed on full moon day of *Bhadrapada* month⁷.

Bhagavata purana also mentions *Indra-yaga*. In *Gokula*, every year *Indra-yaga* was performed in honor of Indra for rain. One year Krishna refuses to do *Indra-yaga* as rain is a natural phenomenon. Instead of that he told people to do *puja* of cows, mountains, *brahmanas* etc. So the *Gopas* did not performed *Indra-puja*. Indra got angry and he started raining heavily. At that time Krishna lifted *Govardhana* mountain on the tip of his finger to keep safe all *gopas*⁸.

¹ Adiparva, 64.23-33

² Atharva-veda parishista, 19

³ Gonda, p.414

⁴ Kaushika-sutra, 140

⁵ Kane, p.825

⁶ Parashara-grihyasutra, 2.15

⁷ Bharatiya Samskriti Kosha

⁸ Bhagavata Purana, 10.24 (Bharatiya Samskriti Kosha)

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According to *Vishnudharmottara purana*<sup>1</sup>, king has to perform this festival to destroy his enemies and to get victory, to get prosperity, growth in his kingdom. Also there are references about how to erect *Indradhvaja*, how to decorate town, how to perform music and dramas and celebrations<sup>2</sup>.

In *Natyashastra*, *Bharata muni* emphasizes that first performance of drama should be done on occasion of *Indra-mahotsava*. *Bharatanatyashastra* gives the reference that the first play '*Samudramanthana*' was performed in theatre of *Svarga* on the occasion of *Indra-mahotsava*.

अयं ध्वजमहः श्रीमान् महेन्द्रस्य प्रवर्तते ।

अत्रेदानीमयं वेदो नाट्यसंज्ञः प्रयुज्यताम् ।<sup>3</sup>

In the drama '*Nagananda*', written by *Shriharsha* (king Harshavardhana), *sutradhara* says that, this show is being played at the time of *Indra-mahotsava*<sup>4</sup>.

*Mitakshara*, a commentary on *Yajnavalkasmriti* from 12th cent. CE, gives the reference of *Indradhvaja*. It says, King can erect the *dhvaja* on the 12th day of bright half of *Bhadrapada* month and at that time moon should be in *uttarashadha* or *dhanishtha nakshatra*. *Dhvaja* can to be lowered on full moon day of same half and in *bharani nakshatra*<sup>5</sup>.

Jain literature also mentions of *Indra-mahotsava*. In *Avashyaka churni*, once Indra shows his divine finger to Bharat, son of first

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<sup>1</sup> Vishnudharmottara purana, 2.154-157

<sup>2</sup> Gonda, p.3

<sup>3</sup> Bharata Natyashastra, 54

<sup>4</sup> Nagananda, 1-2

<sup>5</sup> Kane, p.825

Tirthankara Rishabhadeva. Bharat made an image of Indra of the same size of that finger and celebrated *mahotsava*<sup>1</sup>.

*Paryushana shataka*, a Jain text in *Magadhi* language also mentions *Indra-mahotsava*. *Acharya Kalaka* once visited Satavahana king in Pratishthana. They discussed about the celebration of *paryushana parva* in the month of *Bhadrapada*. *Acharya Kalaka* told that, *paryushana parva* will start on *panchami*. Satavahana king explained that on the fifth day there is *Indra-mahotsava* in Pratishthana, so *paryushana parva* cannot be start on *panchami*. *Acharya Kalaka* then shifted date of *parva* from *panchami* to *chaturthi*<sup>2</sup>.

*Sthananga sutra*, a Jain agamic text states the period of this festival from 9th day to full moon day of bright half of *ashvina* month<sup>3</sup>.

Jain text like *Uttaradhyayan-sutra* narrates the stories of *Pratyeka Buddha*. There is a story of king Dvimukha. After celebration of *Indra-mahotsava*, he saw *Indra-dhvaja* laying down on the road, seeing this he got self enlightened.

Normally this festival is celebrated from 8th day to full moon day of *Bhadrapada* month. But the famous Tamil text '*Shilappadhikaram*' mentions the celebration of festival till 28 days from full moon day of *Chaitra* month.

We also get reference of *Indra-mahotsava* in following texts :

| Writer      | Text                                           |
|-------------|------------------------------------------------|
| Bhasa       | Balacharita (1.8), Madhyamavyayoga             |
| Ashvaghosha | Buddhacharita (1.58), Saundarnandakavya (4.46) |

<sup>1</sup> Avashyaka churni, p.213

<sup>2</sup> Manikar, p.169

<sup>3</sup> Bharatiya Samskriti Kosha, p.534

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|            |                               |
|------------|-------------------------------|
| Bhavabhuti | Mahaviracharita (1.11)        |
| Somadeva   | Kathasaritsagara              |
| Kalhana    | Rajatarangini (170, 182, 495) |

Prakrit texts *Nayadhammakahao* and *Bhagavatisutra* also mentions *indalaththi (indrayashti)* which refers to *Indradvaja*.

In different regions this festival was celebrated in different periods. Generally from texts we get the references that this festival was celebrated in the month of *Shravana*, *Bhadrapada* or *Ashvina*. Indra is a deity associated with the rain and these are months from rainy season. This shows that the celebration of *Indra-mahotsava* is associated with the rain. In some regions this festival was celebrated in the month of *Chaitra*. This may be referring to the celebration of *Gudhipadava*. More study on this topic is to be done.

### **Indra-mahotsava outside India**

#### **Nepal :**

The eight-day long *Indra Jatra* festival falls in September and is one of the most exciting and revered festivals of the Newar community of the Kathmandu Valley. This also marks the beginning of a month-long festival season of autumn. It begins with the erection of a wooden pole made of pine at Basantapur Sqaure in front of the old Hanuman Dhoka Palace.

The eight day long annual festival is observed to worship the god *devraj* Indra, the lord of rain and good harvest. King with his royal family attends this festival with traditional costumes. The priest erects the

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Indra-dvaja after *puja* rituals. Idol of Indra riding on golden elephant is kept at the bottom of *dvaja*¹.

It also marks end of monsoon and beginning of harvest season and festivity. The chariot procession and mass dances are the main attraction of *Indra Jatra*. The festival commemorates the time when Indra came down from heaven in human form to look for an herb. The festival of *Indra Jatra* ends with the lowering of the (lingam) pole bearing Indra's flag amidst religious ceremonies.

Indonesia :

There is no direct reference of celebrating *Indra-mahotsava* in Indonesia. But a festival called as *Galungan* from Indonesia is similar to *Indra-mahotsava*. *Galungan* symbolizes the victory of *Dharma* over *Adharma* or virtue over evil which has its origin in the mythology of “*Mayadenawa*”. During the festival, all across island sprout tall bamboo poles called “*penjor*” – that are decorated with fruit, coconut leaves, and flowers, and set up on the right side at the entrance of every home.

The last and pinnacle event in the ten day festival is called *Kuningan*. It is believed that on this particular day, the Supreme God *Sang Hyang Widi* descends to earth to give blessing for all the people.

Summary

With reference to the information about this festival from different texts, one can understand that this festival is familiar with the Indian society from Vedic to Pauranic period, from North to South India and in Hindu, Jain and Buddhist traditions also. Upto 11-12th cent. there are literary references of *Indra-mahotsava*. This festival has approximately 1800 years continuous tradition in literature.

¹ Anderson, p.98

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*Indra-mahotsava* was a popular festival in ancient time but from medieval period its popularity decrease. Indra was worshiped as being mainly vedic deity, but from pauranic period as importance of Indra decreases and other deities became popular, then may be this festival lost in the mists of time.

Being a very popular festival all over India since ages, now a days there can be some references of this festival in local traditions only. More study is required to be done by scholars, to find the traces of *Indra-mahotsava*, in India and also outside India specially where we get footprints of Hinduism or Buddhism.

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