

## The Indian Festival of 'Sharad Purnima' and its psycho therapeutic underpinnings

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Dear Lousie,

I am certain that you will be doing great. I have been receiving your posts which have been very informative and enlightening. One of the recent posts was about 'Yom Kippur' was very interesting. I thought that I must share with you and other members about some unique rituals which take place in India during this time of the year and their psychological/ philosophical leanings.

On 5<sup>th</sup> October 2017, 'Sharad Purnima' was celebrated in India. 'Sharad' stands for early autumn season in Hindu calendar and Purnima stands for 'full moon'. It is known in the west as 'Harvest Moon'<sup>1</sup>. Harvest Moon means no long period of darkness between sunset and moonrise for days in succession. In the days before tractor lights, the lamp of the Harvest Moon helped farmers to gather their crops, despite the diminishing daylight hours<sup>2</sup>. In India also the festivities have harvest antecedents. However the rituals have intriguing symbolism.

It is interesting to note that the festival takes place on a full moon. Harvest moon is likely to be the brightest moon of the year. According to ancient Ayurvedic traditions a psychologically disturbed person was referred to as 'Chand Mara' where in Chand means moon and Mara means afflicted by moon. In other words, indicating that the psychological disturbance has been due to the effect of the moon. Even in the west the term 'lunatic' means a psychologically disturbed individual. The term lunatic comes from the word lunar or moon. There is anecdotal evidence to suggest that more crimes are committed on full day than on other days. Some studies have even shown some evidence for it<sup>3</sup>. Thus the symbolism of performing these rituals on this day is very interesting.

One of the main ritual which is performed on this day is that people prepare 'kheer'. Kheer is a rice pudding from the cuisine of the Indian subcontinent, made by boiling rice, with milk and sugar; it is flavoured with cardamom, raisins, saffron, cashews, pistachios or almonds. It is typically served during a meal or as a dessert<sup>4</sup>. Then this kheer is kept in open in the night under the full moon. It is believed that 'Amrit' or nectar of immortality will fall from the moon through its rays on the kheer. This kheer is then eaten the next morning by people and is believed to have remedial effects. Many ayurvedic preparations are also made on this night.

It is intriguing to note the importance being given to the 'Amrit' or nectar of immortality. This brings the issues of existence to the center stage in the Indian ethos and philosophical construct. Since people have been mortals even after having the kheer with Amrit the ritual was a symbolism to imbibe some philosophical meanings. Night or 'darkness of ignorance' represents

an individual's unawareness of mortality and the moon or 'the knowledge of light' represents the awareness of our mortality. The act of consuming the kheer kept in moon rays symbolizes the self realization of our mortality. Paradoxically this realization frees us from the fixation for immortality and allows us to transcend it. The existential leanings of the ritual are deep and interesting. Probably a sobering, enlightening and engaging ritual was created for this special night due to beliefs or observations of more psychological disturbances on this day. Thus a psychotherapeutic act with rituals and hymns was built to imbibe some existential truths and have a mitigating effect.

regards,

**Shashwat**

1. <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2017/10/when-is-harvest-moon-october-space-science/>
2. <http://earthsky.org/astronomy-essentials/harvest-moon-2#what>
3. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1444800/>
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kheer>