



ASHADA

THE HINDU HOLY MONTH >

**A month of austerities that brings out
an innate sense of thanksgiving.**



July-August is the *Ashada* month according to Hindu calendar. It heralds the arrival of *Dakshinayana*, the six-month period when the sun begins to trace a southward movement. *Dakshinayana* is a sacred period in the *Vedic* calendar. Symbolically, it is the night time of the *Devas*.

It is believed that during this time of the year, Lord Siva as Dakshinamurti transmitted the fundamentals of the *yogic* science to his first set of disciples, celebrated as the *Saptarishis*. The Lord turned south to impart the teaching as the sun turned south.

It is considered a sacred month for spiritual activities. People avoid new undertaking or new purchases and auspicious functions such as weddings

and house warming
(*Gruhapravesha*).

Temple festivals, especially in Devi shrines, abound during the month, with community feeding as an integral part of the celebrations. All Fridays in this month are particularly dedicated to Devi worship in celebration of womanhood. Married women (*Sumangalis*) are reverentially offered bangles, piece of cloth and other auspicious materials on the Fridays.

Sri Andal, one of the twelve great *Alvars* and the only female saint in the *Vaishnava* tradition, was born in *Ashada* in the birth star *Pooram*. She wrote the famous musical offering, *Tiruppavai*, and is considered a manifestation of the Divine Mother. *Aadi Pooram* (falling on August 2 this year) is celebrated with great piety in Devi shrines.

Nature as Mother

The month witnesses the celebration of nature as mother, especially the water resources. *Aadi Perukku* is the monsoon festival celebrated on the 18th day of the month (this year on August 2). The festival is a thanksgiving to the river Goddesses.

Perukku means rising, indicating the rising water in rivers. The Cauvery river, the lifeline of the south, is supposed to be in spate during the month. Women cook different forms of rice as an offering and set off on a picnic to see the surge of the first waters of the river pounding against the banks.

Vyasa Puja and Chaturmas

The full moon day in the month of *Ashada* is celebrated as *Guru Purnima* or *Vyasa Purnima*. The great sage Vyasa, who codified the *Vedasastras* is remembered on this day. *Sannyasis* observe the four-month period of *Chaturmas* beginning from this day, which corresponds with the rainy season.

They engage in intense spiritual practices and teaching, and refrain from travelling in order not to unwittingly trample on little creatures that abound on the soft sod.

The *Skandha Purana* refers to the significance of *Chaturmas* and the benefits from observing austerities during this period.

There is an interesting reference to *Chaturmas* in the *Varaha Purana*.

Lord Varaha (Lord Vishnu's third incarnation) had explained to Goddess Earth (Dharani Devi) the significance of *Chaturmas*, saying the period is holy and dear to him. Whoever performs sacred deeds during these months would reap immense benefits.

Chaturmas is also a designated period for householders to renew their faith in *dharma*, meditating and observing *vratas* (fasts and penances). Fasts and eating restricted food items in this period help maintain the physical well-being as the digestive system is sluggish in the monsoon period and diseases spread rapidly.

Many people, especially from the *Vaishnav* tradition, refrain from eating onion and garlic during *chaturmas*, while people in Maharashtra avoid eggplant (brinjal/aubergine).

Palki Yatra

Symbolising the spiritual significance of the month of *Ashada*, the famous *Palki Yatra* in Pandharpur in Maharashtra concludes on *Ashada Ekadasi*, falling this year on July 15. A custom that dates back to over thousand years, lakhs of people

in organised groups trek a long distance from Dehu over a 21-day period, carrying the sacred *palki* of Saint Tukaram and arrive at the temple town of Pandharpur on this day, singing and dancing with chants of '*Jai Hari Vitthala*'.

The picturesque small town of Pandharpur is considered the sacred abode of Lord Vitthala. According to legends, Vitthala once came to visit his devotee, Pundalik, who lived in Pandharpur.

Pundalik was busy attending on his parents, and as a result, Vitthala had to wait outside his doors for sometime. While Pundalik later came and sought the pardon of Vitthala, impressed by his dedication to parents, Vitthala decided to stay by his devotee forever.

Puri Ratha Yatra

This month also witnesses one of the most celebrated festivals in India, the *Ratha Yatra* in the temple town of Puri, on 6 July this year. The 18-wheel, 45.6 feet high chariot of Lord Jagannath, known as *Nandhighosa*, along with the chariots of Balabhadra and Subhadra, all decorated with



various designs and colours, are pulled by a large assembly of devotees.

During the festival, a descendant of Gajapatis, the medieval Hindu dynasty that ruled over Kalinga (the modern Odisha) sweeps all around the deities and chariots. He cleanses the road with a broom and sprinkles sandalwood water and powder. The custom showcases that in the eyes of Lord Jagannath every devotee is equal, be it the king or a commoner.

Ashada heralds the monsoon season. The monsoon rains bring water, an important element of the *panchabhutas*.

Rains bring joy, greenery and fresh air and kindle an innate feeling of thanksgiving to the Supreme source that nourishes all beings 🙏

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