

The Significance of Gudi Padva

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Every year, mostly in Maharashtra, on a certain day we see poles being hung in front of the houses with a *gudi*. It indicates the celebration of the first day of the Hindu New Year called Gudi Padva or Dhvajropan Day which falls on the first day of the month of *Chaitra* and is regarded to be very auspicious. Usually it comes in the month of March-April.

Gudi Padva is also called the Varsha Pratipada, Shakera or Shalivahan and marks the beginning of the New Year of the Shalivahan era. On this New Year Day, Hindus display a long pole wrapped with a flag of

cloth or silk adorned with a wreath of flowers and topped with a silver or brass *lota* or vessel to which homage is paid. It is said the erection of the pole is symbolic of the banner of Indra unfurled in heaven in his honour. It marks the beginning of the solar year too.

On Gudi Padva day, it is customary to eat the bitter leaves of the Neem tree (*Melis azadirachta*) as it is supposed to prevent diseases during the year. This is followed by the distribution of sweets. The neem leaves being bitter, eating it first and then sweetening the mouth signifies that whatever troubles we may face



Gudi Padva Procession

first in life, happiness would follow next. On this auspicious occasion, it is customary for a priest or a proficient person to read out the new Almanac or the *Panchang* foretelling the good and bad events of the year and the favourable days for starting new ventures and arranging marriages.

It is said, in the *Sinhasan-battishi* an account of King Vikram and Shalivahan, the founder of the Shaker, is mentioned. Legend has it that there lived in Purandharpur a rich merchant who, before his death, gave to each of his four sons a sealed earthen pot with instructions to open it only after his death.

Later when the pots were opened, the first was found to contain earth, the second coals, the third bones and

the fourth bran. King Vikram was approached and asked to explain the meaning of this but he failed.

However, a brilliant child, the son of a Brahman widow, solves the enigma. The widow conceives by a Nag-kumara (or Takshak) and after being deserted by her brother, is given shelter by a potter, where she delivers this child, who is named Shalivahan.

The wonderful child Shalivahan answers the riddle as follows: The first pot containing earth entitled the owner to his father's landed property, the second containing coals gave the second son all the timber and wood possessed by the father, the third pot gave the owner cattle and animals of his father's estate and the fourth son gained all corn and grain of his father.

King Vikram was wonderstruck, and sent for the child but Shalivahan refused to go. King Vikram angry at Shalivahan's behaviour advanced with a large army to kill him. However, Shalivahan, the Nag-Kumar, it is believed, made clay figures of soldiers and animated them and by fighting Vikram's army overthrew them. So to commemorate the victory, the Hindu New Year Era is celebrated.

Another version has it that Shalivahan was a son of a potter who by means of sheer struggle rises to become the chief of a powerful monarchy in Maharashtra and rules at Mungi-Paithan. He overthrows Vikramaditya, the last of the Gupta rulers of Malwa, and the year of his coronation is reckoned as the Shalivahan Era, that is from A.D. 78.

We also get the significance of Gudi Padva from a story in *Mahabharata*. King Vasu, a descendant of Pururava, leaves his capital for hunting but, instead of returning home, becomes a recluse and performs penance. Indra, the King of Gods, is pleased and bestows on him a celestial car and riches with a virtues of Aegis that makes him invincible. He is said to have returned to his kingdom on the first day of *Chaitra* when his subjects decorated their houses as

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a mark of welcoming the King.

Amongst the Andhras and Chitrapur and Gaud Saraswats, the New Hindu Year is called Ugadi, meaning the beginning of the yuga (an age). Like Gudi Padva it is observed on the first day of *Chaitra* and is celebrated by eating neem leaves, followed by sweets. At times, the bitter neem leaves are roasted in ghee and mixed with sugar and eaten. Likewise the new Almanac or the *Panchang* is read and the favourable and unfavourable days for starting new pursuits and fixing alliances are explained.

Needless to mention that Gudi Padva or Ugadi hailing the New Year is observed by wearing new clothes and exchanging happy greetings. On this auspicious day all new enterprises are commenced with the hope that the New Year would bring prosperity and happiness to all. ●