

The Sawan Jhula (Swing) Festival
Its significance and importance

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The Sawan Jhula (Swing) Festival

Its significance and importance

The 'Sawan Jhula' festival is an annual religious affair celebrated with a lot of fanfare and enthusiasm in India. It is the 'Swing Festival' held during the rainy season.

It starts on the Eid day and concludes on the Rakhi day. Every temple places a swing in its precincts, usually in the main hall where normally devotional songs (Bhajans) are sung and devotees gather to have a Darshan (holy viewing) of the presiding deity. The swing (called the 'Jhula') in ordinary temples is usually made of wood, but in larger and bigger temples it is an ornate affair, skillfully crafted and decorated with numerous motifs and flowery designs, often embellished with a polish or a leaf (layer) of silver and/or gold. The presiding deity of the temple is placed on it, and throngs of devotees pull the string ceremoniously while singing bhajans etc.

In the holy pilgrim town of Ayodhya, it is a fortnight-long affair. The whole town sports a festive spirit, and it is celebrated with gusto and fervour.

On the first day of the festival, the deities of almost all the important temples are taken out in ceremonious processions, to the accompaniment of music and religious slogans, to a place known as 'Mani Parvat' located on the southern fringes of the town. It is a small mound said to be formed by the hoard of gems and jewels that was sent by Sita's father as dowry for her, and which could not be accommodated in the treasury of the king of Ayodhya, King Dasrath and the father-in-law of Sita, so were dumped at this place. In due course of time the treasure was covered by earth and vegetation, and formed a small hillock. The place is surrounded by a small forest-like path of ground, and it is here that the processions from the temples are brought. The deity is put on small ceremonious swings dangling from trees, and after sometime the deity is taken back in a procession to the respective temple.

Upon return to the temple, the deity is placed on the swing made ready in the hall of the premises, and the religious festivities continue. Each day in the evening, for the next fortnight, the deity is brought out of from the main sanctum chamber and placed on this swing, with the crowd of devotees taking turns to slowly pull the string attached to the swing. The place reverberates with devotional songs and music and dance.

Usually, the 'Jhula festival' starts from the first new moon night of the Hindu month of Sraawan (roughly in mid-August) which incidentally also coincides with the Muslim festival day of Eid, and ends on the day of the full moon of the same month which is celebrated as the day of the Hindu festival of 'Rakhi'.

This festival falls during the rainy season. Hundreds of thousands of devotees assemble during this festival and celebrate it with gusto and religious fervour. The metaphysical significance of this happy and joyous occasion is that the Jiva, the living being, celebrates the Supreme Lord's magnanimity and graciousness that he has shown upon this world by showering Amrit (nectar of life) from the heaven in the form of *rain*. It is the rains during the rainy season which inject dynamic and vibrant life on earth; the seeds produce abundant harvest, there is verdant greenery all around, there is prosperity and rejoicing everywhere, and the subjects (people) of the Supreme Being's kingdom (i.e. the world) are assured of a full larder and a barn with a sufficient stock of food grains to last for the next year. The subjects of the Supreme Lord thank him for his largesse and benevolence by rejoicing, singing, dancing and hanging swings from trees as the gods express their approval by making the dark rain-

bearing clouds rumble in the sky, and shower flowers in the form of nectar of life (rain) from the heavens. Even the animals celebrate—the frog croaks, and the peacock dances with its open plumes, countless creatures, both of the winged variety as well as the non-winged, appear from almost nowhere, and the earth seems to be at its fertile and colourful best. All the merriment and celebrations mark the arrival of the rains and the harvest—and they in turn represent the Supreme Lord's benevolence and magnanimity being showered upon the world.

There is another important clue to the immense import of this festival. It bridges the gap between to different religions—the Muslim festival of Eid, and the Hindu festival of Rakhi. Now we shall discuss the symbolism of these two days vis-à-vis the Sawan Jhula festivities.

The first day is the Eid day celebrated by Muslims. The moon that is cited on this day is said to be auspicious, and since this day falls once in a year it is metaphor for 'rarity', an occasion that is 'rare and once in a lifetime occurrence'. This is because one full year symbolizes a man's full life term—starting from his birth, passing through all the ups and downs of life, and ending with his death.

Therefore the metaphoric and spiritual significance of choosing this day of 'Eid Moon' to begin this Swing Festival is to tell the world that it is a rare occasion when the Supreme Lord comes down upon earth to live amongst us mortals to share our pains and joys. The rejoicing and singing and dancing is also to mark this rare occasion, besides to celebrate the benevolence and grace of the Supreme Lord and thank Him that He has given us the nectar of life in the form of rain.

The 'rain' is indeed the 'nectar of life'. There is no dearth of water on earth—there is the huge ocean, there are umpteen numbers of rivers, streams, lakes and wells, there is an endless supply of underground water. But frankly—will any of these help the farmer to grow his crop if there is no rainfall? Will the ocean or the river or the lake or the well be able to spray water on endless tracts of land on the surface of earth so as to make it fertile and damp in a way that is similar to the spray of rain that comes from the heavens to quench the thirst of this earth and moisten its parched lips? The underground reservoir of sweet drinking water is replenished by the rain, and not by the ocean's salty water. Just imagine how thoughtful the Supreme Father is!

So, this festival of Sawan Jhula celebrates two things—one is the Lord's magnanimity, benevolence and love for his subjects in the form of the nectar of life known as 'rain' that he showers free from heaven, without 'taxes' and even for those who are highly sinful (how wonderfully merciful He is!), and second, to symbolically celebrate the arrival of the Lord himself on earth to live amongst us.

The Lord's image (a picture, an idol—any symbol representing the Supreme Being) is placed on small and big swings in each temple of Ayodhya, and devotees from far and near come to pay their respects. Of course it is true that out of many thousands who come visiting only a handful will know the metaphysical and spiritual significance of this festival. They come because it is a hoary tradition, they come because others are coming, they come because otherwise people would scorn at them, they come because it is sort of picnic and an outing for them, they come to break from the routine humdrum of mundane life, but rarely do they come seeking the Lord living amongst them. They come, throw money at this place and that place, buy this knick-knack and that, shout some devotional slogans and generally cause a nuisance, and go away littering the whole town with filth and garbage. The hordes that come during such festivals may fill the temporal temple's worldly coffers (for there is a huge economy dependent upon religious festivals in this country, and it is like a big

industry that gives two hoots for the person's spiritual well-being), but the coffers of their inner hearts remain as empty as a grave yard.

Then we have the last day when the Sawan Jhula concludes—the day of Rakhi. This day is also very significant—it is a day to cement the bond of brotherhood. It is not merely a sister tying some fashionable costly thread bought from a supermarket at an exorbitant price to show how rich the family is, but even a cheap, single and simple thread can signify the importance of the occasion. It is to mark and endorse the bondage of love and affection between two individuals of the society—to give a stamp of finality, of authority and approval to the bond of brotherhood that is purported to have been established between two souls.

In the context of the Srawan Jhula festival, the Lord seems to tell his subjects—‘Look, all of you have been enjoying and celebrating together for over a fortnight. I have been with you. But I have to go now, for I have other things to take care of. Now, once I am gone, don't fight amongst yourselves from today onwards. You have tied the Rakhi on your neighbour's hand, and you have offered Rakhi to me as well in the temple. So remember, if you expect me to afford protection to you, I also expect that you afford protection to your weaker brethren and uphold the bond of brotherhood that you yourself have proclaimed through the means of this sacred thread known as Rakhi.’

But does this really happens? There would have been no enemy on earth if this did happen. Once the festival is over and the people go back to their villages and homes, they start fighting over trifles and go to courts for long-drawn litigations, they cut each other's throat for pecuniary reasons, they put the promise that they had made to the Lord God in the cupboard to be opened the next year once again when Sawan Jhula and Rakhi festival comes!! They don't understand the real meaning of any of the components of this holy celebration.

The irony is that these same disobedient sons of the Supreme Father accuse Him of causing so much misery to them in this world by way of punishment which they nevertheless deserve for their mischief and renegading on the word of honour given by them to their Supreme Father.

One benefits from any religious or spiritual activity only when one understands its meaning, and not by mechanically doing it because others are doing it. It's like falling in a blind well because the herd is falling into it; it's like ‘I must do it because so many others are doing it’.

So in brief, the ‘Jhula Festival’ celebrates the Supreme Being's magnanimity and benevolence upon his subjects by showering Amrit, the nectar of life, in the form of rain upon the earth, the coming down of the Lord himself upon this earth to join his beloved subjects in their hour of happiness and rejoicing, and the subjects themselves exuberantly welcoming the Lord and showing their love for him by way of singing and dancing and enjoying the swing hanging from green trees, and the promise of keeping the bond of brotherhood and amity that has been established during this period even after the Lord goes back to his abode in the heaven at the end of the festivities.

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