



## THE SHAP CALENDAR OF RELIGIOUS FESTIVALS

---

Peter Woodward

Senior Lecturer, Religious Studies, Homerton College, Cambridge

The first Shap Event took place in the spring of 1969 when the initial Shap Conference was held at a hotel in Cumbria, the Shap Wells Hotel. It was organised through the extra-mural department of the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, who often used the Shap hotel for such Conferences. In the same year the Religious Studies Department of Borough Road College, Isleworth, produced and distributed three cyclostyled aids for R.E. teachers, one of which was a calendar of religious festivals. The newly born Shap Working Party and the College subsequently joined forces to produce the initial Shap Mailing, of which the Calendar has since been an integral part.

From these early beginnings the Calendar has developed and modified from a brief descriptive leaflet with annual dates into the present glossy production, accompanied now by a separate, colourful chart, designed for classroom and staffroom notice boards, etc. The price has risen too, from its original thirty pence to its current figure of £3.50 but we still believe this to be good value for money in the present climate.

Increasingly the type of customer making use of the Calendar has diversified from school, college and university use, where it has proved a valuable tool both in organising R.E. and in contributing to school assemblies and collective worship, into other fields. These include leisure organisations (the Scout Movement has taken copies for many years), social services (hospitals and prisons), industrial and office based uses, where the prediction of absenteeism for festival observance (Eid and Divali in particular) has important commercial functions, and political parties (Conservative Central Office regularly placed a bulk order for many years). At one time several Local Education Authorities placed orders for all their schools and colleges, although subsequent changes in school funding have placed severe limitations on this practice.

The role of the Calendar has in part fulfilled the obvious function of enabling readers to know in advance when particular festivals occur. It has also served to provide accurate information about the nature of festival celebration in specific cases and about the diversity of such celebrations in different countries and areas. Equally important, however, has been the influence on attitudes that has emerged with the spread of a 'Let's find out how and why Sikhs celebrate Baisakhi' approach. The desire to understand is an essential element in the search for an antidote to racism and hostility, and recent editorials in the Calendar have regularly emphasised this aspect. In this



way its use has been a practical foil to and support for the more intellectually challenging articles carried in the Shap Journal.

To extend this element of its work further the Working Party organised and published in 1986 the Shap book of Festivals in World Religions, edited by Alan Brown (for further information see the introduction to this year's Calendar). This provides far more detailed material (both about festival custom and practice and about the nature and logic of each celebration) than the Calendar can contain. It is an invaluable tool for every user of the Calendar.

Much to our surprise the questionnaire distributed in the 1995 Calendar evoked the information that two thirds of those replying had not heard of the book. A soft covered reprint undertaken in 1992 is still available and a revised version is now under consideration, but how much more useful the Calendar will be if every purchaser uses it alongside the book. Nearly three quarters of those replying to the questionnaire indicated they would welcome cross-referencing of the Calendar with the book and this year's Calendar attempts to do this for the first time.

Other information gleaned from the questionnaire indicated a desire for more text in the Calendar itself, alongside a sense that the Calendar was already fulfilling a useful role in its present form. There was also firm evidence of a need for additional supportive material of a visual nature, but only limited support for a glossy, commercial type of Calendar where picture predominates over text.

One off responses returned with the questionnaire suggested:

- i) the separation of the Wall Chart from the Calendar proper, the latter only being bought once and without dates, which would be provided by the annual purchase of the Chart;
- ii) an indication of events where time off was likely to be needed from school or work;
- iii) cross referencing to Channel 4's Teletext Page 687 Godnotes.
- iv) provision of a diary in conventional or Filofax form; and
- iv) help with the pronunciation of certain names and festivals.

This leads us to consider afresh the role of the Shap Calendar, and how it is distinctive and different from others in the Field. It is clear that Shap's initial attention to this area stemmed from the role of festivals in the school R.E. curriculum. Festivals together with weekly celebrations of



worship and rites of passage (which are sometimes known as family festivals) feature widely (one is almost inclined to say universally) in Local Authority Agreed Syllabuses. The religious interpretation of celebration was therefore to the forefront in the early days, and still is a major and crucial emphasis.

With the passing of time an emphasis on (multi-) cultural aspects and their role in combating prejudice and racism has grown up and this is now of nearly equal significance. More recently still the diversification of Calendar users, to which reference has been made earlier, has extended this aspect into practical situations where hospital staff need insights into the nature of appropriate care for patients from ethnic minority backgrounds, while employers and social workers, along with many other groups, need support and information to help develop positive attitudes to cultural diversity. Shap's approach has been particularly formative here.

A further safeguard in the preparation of the Shap Calendar and in ensuring its accuracy is the pluralist nature of the Working Party and of the team working on the Calendar's preparation, as well as the academic expertise available in its membership in a wide range of fields. Currently a team including Christian, Jewish and Muslim viewpoints is working together on its production, with expertise in Buddhist, Hindu, Parsee and Sikh traditions readily available for advice. Contact with the Catholic, Christian Orthodox and Rastafarian representatives has also been helpful. While one hundred per cent accuracy is always difficult to maintain in such matters, we know of no comparable production that can outperform the Shap Calendar in fulfilling these functions and many requests are received to replicate either the text or the dates (or both).

This leads to mention of copyright, which has been held by the Working Party for over 25 years now. Shap has always been happy for school and college staff to use passages from the Calendar for educational purposes, and is usually willing to allow other organisations to reprint material as long as Shap's copyright is clearly acknowledged and an appropriate fee is paid to the Working Party for commercial use. Approaches for permission to reproduce its text should be made to the current Secretary, giving full details of what is proposed.

Correspondence between the Working Party and its readership has been a regular feature and many of the suggestions made have been incorporated in both the Shap Journal and the Calendar of Festivals. To give a recent example, the phrase 'the last human Guru' has been used for several years in connection with the Sikhs' tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh. His leadership of the community was, of course, subsequently taken over by the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh community's holy book. In relation both to Baisakhi (Vaisakhi) and to Guru Gobind Singh's Birthday the word's 'last human Guru' are mentioned and accepted by the majority of Sikhs in this country and abroad without demur.



The Namdari Sikh community in the U.K. has, however, a theological problem with this, associated with their belief in a continuing line of Gurus. The Festivals sub-group of the working party has needed to make a decision as to whether (a) mention should be made of this minority group and its wishes, and (b) of whether to include the 'offensive' words or not. Is the compromise answer that has been adopted the best solution? Much of the correspondence the Calendar has evoked has been as controversial as this. If ever a Solomon was needed, it is here!

Clive Lawton, Chief Executive of Jewish Continuity, who has edited the Calendar for many years now, has poured a wealth of thought and creativity into his editorial introductions and tactful decisions, ensuring that the Calendar is much more than a collection of facts and figures. He will continue to collect and collate the dates for the Calendar, but is now sharing other editorial duties with a team of Shap members. One of his recent paragraphs is typical of the impact of his approach:

"If we wish to be properly aware of the outlook of others it is important to recognise that a month can last nineteen days, that there is nothing natural about a seven day week, that there is nothing obvious about starting a day at midnight and that we are not only in the twentieth century but at one and the same time also in the fifteenth century, the second century, the twenty sixth and the fifty-eighth."

We owe Clive a great debt of gratitude for his inspiration. Readers may well find a rich fount of half-remembered ideas in the re-reading of his past editorial introductions.

Equally our grateful thanks are due to Cherry Gould, who has undertaken the bulk of the work in refurbishing and enlarging the text of the Calendar booklet. This has proved a major task, and would not have been possible without her skill and dedication. Thanks are also extended to Riadh el Droubie, who has served faithfully on the revising committee and has contributed so much with his skills in graphics and printing, as well as in ensuring the sensitivity of the revisions.

Finally a word about the future. The Calendar and Wall Chart is expected to continue in the expanded/modified form that is circulated with this year's Journal. It is available together with other 'tools' (photographs, festival cards, religious symbols) that may be purchased at the prices quoted. If these show they are meeting a need, further developments may follow in future years. The market we seek to reach will clearly relate to schools (issues germane to R.E., collective worship/school assembly, etc.) but also to medical, social and reform fields. Suggestions for further usage and comments on the new format will be welcome - see the Calendar itself for details of where to write.