

## VALENTINE'S DAY: STORIES OF VALENTINE'S DAY

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Indian Express, 14th February 2015  
(English Version)

As Valentine Day arrives on the 14th of February, controversies break out in India and passions run high, in more senses than one. But why is it so? Who or what is this Valentine? Is this Valentine just a heart and a symbol of love that purists are so bothered about, or is it a 'western pollution' of our culture? Maybe, it is just a marketing strategy of greeting card producers.

Well, frankly speaking, the original Valentine's Day was on "the ides (middle) of February as Rome's Lupercalia, a festival of sexual license: a pre-Christian practice of young men choosing women partners for erotic games through a system of 'billets' or slips". It was denounced by the Christian Church which tried to substitute and insert the names of saints to appropriate and sanitize popular festivals: as most religions in the world have historically done. The month of February was actually sacred to Roman Goddess Juno Februata, the 'fever of love', but the Church replaced her with a range of martyrs, all named St. Valentine. He came in with tales of heroism and sacrifice and even the sterilized version was still rooted to practices that would shock not only those who oppose such 'open license' nowadays, but was found equally revolting many centuries ago. Yet, a millennium later, we find that St. Valentine was regularly invoked in love charms and potions: and during the Middle Ages, he was treated as a sketchily Christianized version of pagan love-gods like Eros, Cupid, Priapus, or even Pan.

The central origin story recalls a Saint Valentine of Rome who was said to have been imprisoned because he performed weddings for soldiers who were prohibited from marrying during service. He was also reportedly persecuted by the Romans for ministering to the members of the banned Christian sect and killed:

hence he qualified as a full-fledged saint. The interesting part of the tale is that when Valentine was taken away for execution he left an impassioned note to the daughter of his own jailor signed as “Your Valentine”, as a sign of love and farewell. The present practitioners of such feelings use the occasion for intensifying their endearment rather than say good-bye and would be horrified at the very preposterous thought of going to the gallows. Christianity celebrates unity in diversity and this is manifest when the Anglican and Lutheran churches celebrate it on the 14th February, while the Eastern and Orthodox churches commemorate two valentines in July, one on the 6th July and the second on the 30th. In many Latin American countries, Valentine Day is celebrated as a day of love and friendship with a more universal applicability, but Brazil’s ‘Lovers’ Day’ is on the 12th of July.

The 14th century English chronicler of the famous ‘Canterbury Tales’, Geoffrey Chaucer, played a role in popularizing this day with “romantic love” in the Middle Ages when the courtly traditions of England picked up this craze. We see in the 18th century, lovers in that tiny island kingdom expressed their profuse love for each other on the 14th of February by presenting flowers and sweets and little cards inscribing ‘Valentine’. It is clear that the western card industry would simply take over this profitable venture with countless exciting variations and the American industry association estimates that a billion cards are circulated each year on this day. But somewhere down the line the two-way traffic of presents gave way to single “male to female” acts of gifting. Not bad! The heart symbol, which looks so pleasant actually differs a lot from the actual complex human organ that it represents. It came to acquire greater popularity in the love department, trouncing other medieval symbols, like the dove and the cupid.

The ‘physical remains’ of the ‘mainstream’ Valentine, whose exact year of martyrdom was fixed at AD 496, were interred in the Church and the Catacombs of

St. Valentino in Rome and was an important pilgrimage throughout the medieval period. There is even a flower-crowned skull exhibited in the Basilica of Santa Maria in another part of Rome while other 'relics' are found as far away as Dublin and Winchester. Emperor Ashoka's dispersal of the Holy Buddha's relics all over India in so many stupas appears to have been replicated with more gusto in Europe. The 'Catholic Encyclopedia' actually speaks of three Valentine saints who are all connected with the 14th of February: and the third of them was martyred in remote Africa. This is not unusual at all as most organized religions all over the world either subjugate or subsume 'primitive' and folk traditions that appeal to the masses or appear repugnant to purists. Yet, many popular traditions survive through odd celebrations, like the character of Norfolk called Jack Valentine who knocks at rear doors of houses and leaves presents and sweets for children. Valentine's association with the arrival of Spring, fertility and rejuvenation are evident from some enduring festivities. In some countries of Eastern Europe like Slovenia, flowers and plants are revered and the first work of cultivation starts in vineyard and the fields on this day.

Poetry, verses and songs have always been the most popular currency among love-struck youngsters and these come out in full bloom on this occasion. Even Shakespeare's Ophelia rued in 'Hamlet', more than four centuries ago: "And I a maid at your windows, To be your Valentine". The nursery rhyme in 'Grammar Gurton's Galands' of 1784 mentions "The rose is red, the violet's blue" that goes to jingle with "I love you".

But now, let us return home: India, which has now gone beyond Kama-deva and the amatory sculptures of Khajuraho. At present, many conservatives feel rather strongly that more moral traditions that have led to stable, arranged marriages are now threatened by indecent, western-inspired depravity. Year after year, self-appointed guardians of morality patrol parks and public spaces for

couples celebrating free love. Cases of violence against alleged obscenity are becoming more pronounced as after several years of unchallenged thrashing of loving pairs, a counter-challenge has been started recently in the form of 'Kiss for Love' and 'One Billion Rising' campaigns. It is easy to ignite debates on the issue and say, for instance, that if Saudi Arabia and other countries have criminalized such celebrations, why not India? Even Thailand with its rather grim record in favour of extreme openness has now begun to toughen its stance. But others argue that none of these countries have any glorious history of real democracy or tolerant societies like India has. Besides, bans if any are by their governments and not by incensed individuals or groups. If India has to decide on Valentine's Day, it may be better for legally-elected governments to have participatory debates on this issue and then take a considered call, with all its accompanying consequences.