

VALENTINE'S DAY

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(English Version)

As Valentine Day arrives on the 14th of February, the question arises : who or what is this Valentine? Is 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.

The original Valentine's Day was in the middle of February as Rome's Lupercalia, a festival of sexual license. It was a pagan, 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 of who were named Saint Valentine. They came in with tales of heroism and sacrifice and even the sterilized version was still rooted to pagan practices.

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. They would be quite horrified at the very preposterous thought of going to the gallows. Christianity also practiced 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. Latin American countries like Brazil, Valentine Day is celebrated as 'Lovers' Day' on the 12th of July.

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. It became 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. This reminds us of how Emperor Ashoka dispersed the Holy Buddha's relics all over India in so many stupas all over. 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.

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".

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. Many popular traditions survive in England through odd celebrations, like the character of Norfolk called Jack Valentine. He knocks at rear doors of houses and leaves presents and sweets for children.

By the 18th century, lovers, both males and females, started expressing their profuse love for each other on the 14th of February by presenting flowers and sweets and little cards inscribing 'Valentine'. In the 19th and later in the 20th centuries, the western card industry simply took over this profitable venture with countless exciting variations. Flowers and candy became compulsory. 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.

But now, let us return home: India, where Hindu extremists have been on the rampage for the past several years, condemning this western show of immortality— and thrashing up love couples. They forget that is also the land that celebrates the open love of Radha and Krishna. India actually has an ancient manual called the Kama Sutra. Conservatives who feel rather strongly that India's moral traditions are now threatened by indecent, western-inspired depravity need to visit the holy temples of Khajuraho — that are as much a part of our tradition that Manu is.