

# HOLI: THE MANY COLOURS OF SPRING

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(English Version)

Among the dozens of festivals that Indians celebrate every year, Holi stands out as one that has the least quota of scriptures and the maximum dosage of wanton fun. This remarkable social event that occurs on the full moon of the month of Phalguna (February-March) and begins usually with the burning of a ceremonial pile called Holika dahan on the preceding night, followed by the abundant spraying of dry and wet colours the next day on willing or hapless humans, and ends with a lot of merriment and sweets. The venerable pundit S.M. Natesa Sastri had commented gravely a century ago that "there is no religious ceremony of any kind connected with this, but there is more than any reasonable amount of foolish practices".

To trace its origins, one would have to go back to several centuries, meandering through tales and practices, as precise historical records are anathema (biroktikor) to the major religion of India. It is mentioned in Dandin's Sanskrit play, Dashakumaracharita and also in Sri Harsha's Ratnavali , both of which are of the seventh century. The Puranas have also some references and Mughal miniatures also tell us lots of stories about Holi. The Oxford Dictionary seems to have been fascinated with it, right from the 17th century: calling it 'Houly' in 1687, 'Hoolee' in 1698, 'Huli' in 1798, 'Hoh-lee' in 1809 and so on.

Legends and practices differ a lot, though among this diversity, there is a strange bond of 'unity', where the main celebration and its period are concerned, thanks to centuries of Brahmanical persistence. It goes, however, by different names, like Phaguaa in Bihar, Dol-Jatra in Bengal, Odisha and Assam, while in Maharashtra it is celebrated as Shimga and in Goa-Konkan this spring

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festival goes by the name Shigmo. In the southern part of the Konkan, it is known as Ukkuli, whereas this rather low-key celebration is called Manjalkuli (turmeric bath) in Malayalam. Karnataka and Telengana insist that it is not the demoness Holika that is burnt in the sacred fire, but the naughty erotic god Kama-Devata and hence it is called Kama-dahana, but Andhra celebrates it as part of Vasant Panchami. In Punjab houses are painted afresh and rural women create exquisite artworks called Chowk-Poorana on cloth with colourful motifs. In Tamil Nadu, it is Panguni-Uthram and many pre-Hindu deities celebrate their marriage anniversaries on this date, which was obviously to assimilate them into the broad-band of Hindu worship. No Holika is burnt in here as Holi is basically Vasanta Utsavam, but it is certainly more religious than in other states.

In Gujarat, Holi is a two day festival, where raw coconuts and corn are thrown into the Holika bonfire and since the rabi crop is ripe, it calls for more intense celebrations: with dance, food and music. Mock fights between young girls and boys over a pot of butter milk adds to the general entertainment and it is here that the spirit of spring, youth and gay unrestraint comes out. The real Holi is in Mathura and Vrindavan, that have deep relations with the young romantic Krishna Kanhaiya but even here, it is the Lath Maar Holi of Barsana that takes the cake. Women literally beat up their menfolk with sticks and the poor fellows actually seem to enjoy this almost sensual act, as they sing more provocative songs in return, leading to more friendly blows on them. As we move down the banks of the Ganga, we find Holi is celebrated as the patriotic Ganga Mela in Kanpur but Benaras must have its mud wrestling. Further down, the Phaguaa of Bihar, which is a predominantly Bhojpuri version, is celebrated with wild abandon and wet mud and clay often substitute colours. Intoxicating bhaang made from cannabis, milk and spices and served as thandai has been an essential feature of the celebrations and the dances that come with the beat of

the dholak only lift the mood even higher. As one goes up to the Kumaon Hills, however, the scene changes and the Holika pyre, called Cheer Bandhan, becomes the centre-point for communities to start building them up from a fortnight before the actual day of Holi-Dhulandhi.

Odisha and Bengal commemorate Radha Krishna during their Dol Purnima or the swing festival and it is said that Chaitanya Mahaprabhu sent the Dol Purnima from Puri to Bengal, through his disciples and pilgrims. Hari Bhakti Bilas and other contemporary literature mention this Dol-otshob but there is no evidence of celebration in Nabadwip in the biographies of Chaitanya nor in the Vaishnav Padabalis. Sister Nivedita also wrote a really moving piece on the Dol Jatra of Bengal which was published from London in 1913, after her death, that extols Dol Purnima as the birthday of Sri Chaitanya and describes it as a "festival of some long pre-Hindu people".

Holi's association with the demoness Holika needs a little more mention, as she is the chief villain in the story of Prahlada, the virtuous son of the invincible but terrible demon, Hiranyakashipu. In fact, Lord Vishnu himself had to make a tour to Morta-loka, as Narasimha avatar just to eliminate him, that too with cunning strategic positioning. It was this Holika who took the child Prahlad on her lap and entered the fire, because she knew that no harm would befall her while her nephew would be burnt. Thank God: just the opposite happened, and her cloak of immunity failed, while Prahlad came out unharmed due to sheer devotion. Incidentally, this Holika or Dhundha was fond of devouring children, and scholars have interpreted her destruction as a symbolic victory over viral diseases that came up invariably with the advent of spring, and took its heaviest toll on young children. The other story refers to the god of love, Kamadeva, India's Cupid or Eros, who was burnt to ashes by Shiva and this could also be allegorical. The sudden burst of lust and frenzy during this

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free-for-all festival required control through such scorching, though frankly cold water could also do the job.

The ritual singing of obscene songs has been noted by outsiders, all the way from the Middle Ages down to European travellers. Hindus have also never shied away from this truth and it is mentioned in several texts. A hundred years ago, M.M Underhill commented on the lewd language that was used in Holi just as William Crooke had noted in the 1880s. In fact, the Pracheen Smritis mention this festival centuries before Chaitanya, and remark that the so called ‘lower castes’ uttered terrible profanities. This confirms again both the sexual undertones and the pre-Aryan origins. Underhill mentions “dancing by men and boys of the lower castes is a dance peculiar to this feast”, but also draws attention to the fact that Holi drew the people of other castes as well. He quotes an ancient authority that says “touching of the low caste on the second day of Holi, followed by bathing means that all kinds of illness are destroyed”. Was it to build up immunity?

Holi is not confined only to India and Nepal. It was carried over by our diaspora to Suriname and Trinidad-Tobago, where it is still celebrated as Phagwaa. In Guyana, it is actually a national holiday and people of all races, colours and religions participate. Indians in Fiji and Mauritius must still have their Phaag Gaain folk songs of Holi, with dholaks and cheerful dances, even centuries after they left India and also remain so far away.

The most interesting recent development is that the Indian concept of throwing colours in joy has caught the imagination of Europeans and Americans and there are several community festivals or even commercial events where thousands of white men and women outdo Indians. Holi has featured in popular reality television show on America's CBS and NBC and many musicians and bands adopted its ecstasy, like Goodluck in South Africa, Kesha

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in the USA and the Regina Spektor's 'Fidelity'. Joy, colours, merry songs and dances, thus, continue to charm humans and India has one more cultural export to its long list. Hori Bol !

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