

# THE STORY OF CHRISTMAS

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(English Version)

When the beautiful paper stars and coloured lights are up over Park Street, it is the jolly season in Kolkata where ‘Burra Din’ is still celebrated in a big way. Many revel all evening in the Saheb-para, while the pious from all religions attend the midnight mass at St. Paul's Cathedral. The birthday of Jesus Christ marks the week-long celebrations that go on till ‘Happy New Year’.

But was Jesus Christ really born on this date? Without meaning to offend any sensibility, let us take a quick historical overview. Irvin and Sunquist have mentioned in their very well-researched book, History of the World Christian Movement that “prior to the year 300 AD there had been no consensus among Christians concerning the date on which to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. Some argued for a spring date, but others suggested December 25...the day celebrated in honour of the ‘Invincible Sun’. Most Christians came to accept December 25, as the birthday of Jesus, integrating thereby elements of the solar monotheism of Solstice and Roman festival of Saturnalia with Christianity”. In Man and His Gods, Homer Smith wrote that “this December 25 nativity blended with the Greek sun-festival of the Helia and also honoured such gods as Attis, Dionysus, Osiris, Syrian Baal, and ... bore such titles as Light of the World and Saviour”. For freezing Europeans, the crossing Winter Solstice on the 21st-22nd of December, when the sun moved northwards meant that the worst is over and the survivors would live through the rest of the winter. This is the root of the winter festivities.

While the Church of Rome adopted December 25 as the birthday of Jesus to coincide with this immensely popular pre-Christian festival, the eastern churches refused to honour it until 375 AD. Even then, several scholars note that the Church of Jerusalem continued to ignore the official date until the 7th century and the Armenians still celebrate Christmas on the 6th of January. The New Testament of the Bible gives no particular date and right from the early days, a large amount of research has been done to locate the exact date and year of Jesus.

This does not diminish the stature of Jesus at all. There are conflicting dates about Gautam Buddha but we worship him, nevertheless. The idea here is to show how a great religion absorbs many elements from the past, sanitises those rites that require cleaning and thus invigorates itself. The central figure of the world's largest religion deserves devotion more than scientific analysis. But then, this is also the perfect occasion for questions like, where did the Christmas tree come from? Judea or Palestine, where Jesus was born, was certainly too warm for such conifers to grow, so it is clear that this pine entered when Christianity moved northwards and became the religion of Europe. Christmas trees evolved from the pine groves attached to pagan temples of the Great Mother in Europe. The first historical mention of a Christmas tree is found in Latvia in 1510 and then in Germany in 1570, but it is said that Martin Luther, the German Protestant, popularised this ritual in the 16th century. It went to England only in the 1830s when Queen Victoria's German husband, Albert, brought it to Windsor Palace. From Britain, it spread to the colonies and to America: where everything is always overdone.

Other motifs and rituals from pre-Christian worship in Europe were soon grafted into the new religion, to make it more popular among the masses. Among these are the green wreaths of holly and red cherry with the sharp mistletoe leaves, which are the trademarks of Christmas. The major Roman festival of Saturnalia that was celebrated on this date centuries before Christmas arrived was marked with joy, public events, feasts and worship and all these elements flowed effortlessly into Christmas. The

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multi-thousand crore greeting-cards and gifts industries should thank the ancient Romans for introducing customs like wishing all and giving presents. Christmas rituals like burning yule logs, lighting lamps and singing carols were also drawn from age-old customs.

Purists often denounced these so-called heathen elements in Christmas celebrations as “unholy pomp and jollity”. Polydor Virgil declared that “dancing, masques, stage plays, and other such Christmas disorders now in use with Christians, were derived from these Roman Saturnalian and Bacchanalian festivals; which should cause all pious Christians eternally to abominate them”. In the 17th century, the American Puritans of Massachusetts tried to ban Christmas altogether because of its overt heathenism, says Claudia de Lys, but this obviously failed. Most Western cake makers would shut down if the Puritans who banned Christmas cakes and puddings in 1664 as self indulgent had succeeded, but King George I reintroduced them and they became even more sinfully sweet.

When did Santa Claus come in, and who was he? Legends say that he was an extremely generous bishop of 4th century Christian Turkey called Nicholas. He used to give gifts secretly to people who needed help, but would not ask. There is an interesting tale about how this Saint Nicholas went up the chimney of a very poor man’s house and dropped a few gold coins down, which fell into the stockings that were hung up by the fireplace to dry. The harassed man was overjoyed and could marry his daughters off, but the stockings are still hung up by children who write endearing letters to Santa. Poems, songs and stories of this generous saint spoke of how he flew in his sleigh drawn by his reindeer all the way from the North Pole to deliver Christmas gifts to countless children. Parents fill up these stockings with toys and goodies when their kids sleep on Christmas eve, and one of the greatest joys during this season is to share in the excitement and thrill of innocent children, who rush in next morning to show what Santa has left for them. When sailing improved in

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the 16th and 17th centuries, sailors carried his stories to different parts of the world, where he was soon called 'Father Christmas'.

Later, Dutch settlers imported this legend into America, and their 'Sinter-klaas' became 'Santa Claus'. Colourful advertisements placed by the gigantic toy industry only strengthened this interesting tale. Through the 19th Century, Americans visualised Santa wearing 'Stars and Stripes' until 1881, when Harper's Weekly published the now famous image of Santa, with a big white beard in a red gown, a cheerful belly and an arm full of toys. Commerce and religion have often thrived on each other all the world over, and by the 1931, Coca Cola came up with its gigantic, bright red 'Coke Santa', whose model adorns shopping plazas even today. The song of 'Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer' became a hit in 1949 as did songs like "Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells". In this manner, the Christmas moved from Bethlehem to Rome and to the whole world, while Santa Claus travelled from Turkey to the North Pole, and now roams around freely, with neither passport nor visa, spreading happiness and cheer.