

COLOURFUL TALES ABOUT CHRISTMAS

Jawhar Sircar

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(English Version)

Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells, Jingle All The Way !

Well, Christmas was not jingling all the way, as early Christians were a persecuted lot who were literally thrown before hungry lions. Such poor souls were just too preoccupied to think in any celebration, not even of the Lord's birthday. It was only after Constantine permitted Christians to pray in the open in 313 AD, was this subject raised. But till today, there is a lot of confusion in the Christian world on when exactly was the Saviour born, as not all accept the 25th of December. The New Testament gives no particular date and even the Gospel of St Mark begins only with the baptism of an adult Jesus. The De Pascha Computus that was written in North Africa in the third century struggles with this problem, and a large amount of research on the exact year was done, both before and after Dionysius Exiguus (Dennis the Small), a sixth century Schythian monk dug out a whole mountain of data. Still there is no unanimity.

There is no consensus also on the exact date of birth, and the Encyclopaedia Britannica states, that it differed a lot in the first five centuries, "from the 6th of January or the 25th of March or the 25th of December". It is generally believed that the Roman festival of Saturnalia was absorbed into Christmas, so that ethics and order could be introduced into celebrations that were rather wild and often quite inappropriate. The 'official date' was also quite close to the pre-Christian, Mithraic Winter Solstice festival called Dies Natalis Solis Invictus (birthday of the unconquered sun), but the Eastern Churches refused to honour it, for centuries.

Now, what about the Christmas tree, which is the most visible symbol of the season? Well, the Judea of Jesus Christ was just too warm for a fir tree and hence its adoption can only be attributed to the northward movement of Christianity, to Europe. Early man has long worshipped trees, as many Indians do even now, and branches were often broken and brought home during this season, well before Christ

appeared. In many parts of northern Europe, even cherry and hawthorn plants were brought home during Christmas. The triangular shaped 'pyramid' or 'paradise' trees were used in medieval German 'Mystery' or 'Miracle plays', that were acted out in front of Churches on Christmas eve.

The first historical mention of a Christmas tree is found from the records of Riga, the capital of Latvia, in 1510 and there is also a record of it in Bremen, Germany in 1570 that was "decorated with apples, nuts, dates, pretzels and paper flowers". The credit for popularising the Christmas tree as a mandatory part of the ritual is ascribed by some to Martin Luther, the 16th century German Protestant but others give credit to St. Boniface. In England, it only in 1830s when Queen Victoria's German husband, Albert, brought it to Windsor. From there, it spread to the the rest of the British Isles and to America: where everything is always overdone. The holly was to represent the thorns of Christ, while wreaths, 'kissing boughs', or the mistletoe, the ivy and the yule logs are remnants from the pagan past.

Christmas trees remind us of gifts and here again, we have wonderful origin tales. The 'Three Wise Men', who were said to have brought presents of frankincense, gold and myrrh to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem, are said to have begun the custom of giving gifts during this season.

But when did Santa Claus come in, and who was he? Legends say that he was a 4th century bishop in Turkey, who was not only born rich, but very generous too. He had a reputation for helping the poor, and even making gifts secretly to people who needed help, but would not ask. There is an interesting tale about how St. Nicholas went up the chimney of a really 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, with a lot of expectations and scrawly notes.

By the 16th century, sailors carried his story to different parts of the world, where he was called 'Father Christmas', 'Pere Noel', 'Christ Kind' and so on. Later, Dutch settlers took old stories of 'Sinter-klaas' to America: who became 'Santa Claus'. Victorian era stories of this generous saint were revived through poems,

about his sleigh and the song of 'Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer' became a hit from 1949. Santa Claus thus moved from Turkey to the North Pole, and now roams around, with neither passport nor visa!

Through the 19th Century, Americans visualised St. Nick wearing 'Stars and Stripes' but it was only on the 1st of January 1881 that Harper's Weekly published now famous image of Santa, complete with a big red belly, and an arm full of toys: Commerce and religion have often fed on each other all over the world, and by the 1931, Coca Cola came up with its 'Coke Santa', who was even more larger and jolly red.

The original Christmas pudding of the 14th century was actually a porridge called 'frumenty' and consisted of meat with raisins, currants, prunes, wines and spices. This slowly evolved by the early 17th century, into the famous plum pudding, after it was thickened with eggs, breadcrumbs, dried fruit and given dashes of beer and spirits. The Puritans banned it in 1664 as 'bad', but half-a-century later, King George I re-established it and it has got even better.

Christmas Carols and groups of children singing in the neighbourhood are very sweet customs developed all over the world with local lore and piety. "Here We Go A-Wassailing" is a common refrain, and the last word a distortion of the German 'Wass-heil!', which is close to the English word 'hale and hearty'.

Innumerable pre-Christian and folk stories, tales and rituals have been intertwined into this wonderful celebration, but on the whole, it is sheer jubilation after crossing Winter Solstice on the 21st-22nd of December. The sun then moves up northwards (Uttarayan in India), which means that the worst is over and the survivors would live through the rest of the winter.

It is time to return to Jingle Bells. It is just about 150 years old and was composed by James Pierpont, who was an organist in a Church in Georgia. As one can guess, its name was: "One Horse Open Sleigh". So, hold on tight, folks, here we go! (1109 words.)