

SUNDAY

Your Companion for a Funday

Holi — Festival of Colours

Holi, the Hindu Festival of Colors, is a cheerful and joyous celebration of prosperity and well-being. Aside from being celebrated widely in India, it is also quite popular in the Caribbean colonies which have a large populations of Hindus. Over the past few decades, the global Hindu diaspora has made this festival popular in Western countries as well, welcoming local non-Hindus in the revelry. It's hard to resist, with its stunning, vibrant visuals and community spirit. Without understanding its roots and appreciating the intent of the festival, however, an indigenous festival like Holi can easily lose the beautiful depth of its reverence and morph into an exotic caricature. Even worse, xenophobic and ignorant myths are often written over the authentic significance of these holidays.

Holi is celebrated in the spring, which is a very auspicious season for Hindus from all over India. Other important springtime festivals include Basant Panchami, Shivaratri, Ugadi, and Rama Navami. In the largely agrarian communities of North India, Holi, also known as Phagwa, is perhaps the most widely celebrated springtime festival. The Holi bonfire is lit on the Purnima (full-moon night) of the Phalgun month of the Hindu luni-solar calendar and the celebration with colors happens on the next day. Holi's special popularity in North India, is partly due to its unique timing in the spring, a few days before the vernal equinox, when the wheat harvest is at the peak of its maturity, making Holi, the beginning of a month long festivity which includes the Hindu New Year.

Holi also finds numerous mentions in the life stories of Sri Krishna, and thus has a very special association with the various Vaishnava Bhakti traditions. The significance of Holi in Sri Krishna Bhakti traditions and the unique 7-day Holi of Vrindavan and Nandgaon, the birth place of Shri Krishna is very well documented. Thus, we shall focus on the more rural and tribal celebrations of the North Indian agrarian society, which is not as widely known.

**Holi Bonfire - "Chhoti Holi"**

The Holi celebration has two parts. The first is the day of the bonfire, "Holika Dahan" (the burning of Holika), also known as "Chhoti Holi". Householders wear new clothes, clean their houses, and take ritual baths on this day. Mud-huts are freshly coated and decorations are drawn on the walls and front of homes. Household trash is removed and taken to the ritual bonfire at night. This offering to the bonfire symbolizes the banishment of evil from homes. Because of its connection to the agricultural season, the Holi bonfire is also regarded as a harvest festival. Farming families pray for a healthy crop and protection from all evil, just as Lord Vishnu's devotee Prahlada was protected against evil.

People gather around the bonfire, often singing folk songs in Prakrit-based local rural languages and regional dialects, such as Brij, Awadhi, Bhojpuri and Maithili, rather than Sanskrit, a more priestly language. In fact, an entire genre of agrarian folk music exists around the festival of Holi, known as Phagva (Phaag or Phagan) songs whose primary themes are not just the Holi festival and associated Gods but also crops, love and relationships, nature, community and the joy of spring. These songs are especially popular in the agrarian swatches of UP-Bihar states of North India. We can see parallels for the sacred Holi bonfire in several other nature-worshipping indigenous traditions. Indigenous tribes of the Americas, Australia and even the pagan tribes of pre-Christian Europe often celebrate bonfires in and around harvest season. They are considered to have an apotropaic (averting evil influence) effect on the health of crops and the overall prosperity of agrarian societies. These rituals are often conducted on full-moon or new-moon nights. In addition, solstices and equinoxes are considered to have special importance.

**Holika**

Contrary to popular perception, such simple rituals that can be conducted by anyone are not uncommon in Hinduism and they seamlessly co-exist with the more comprehensive rituals such as Yajnas. This seamless integration of the local, regional, community-specific and the universal rituals is one of the reasons that makes



boost to the local economy, especially for nomadic tribes that specialize in folk storytelling through dances, songs and musical plays. Entire villages are decorated for the festival and stay vibrant for days in advance. Rural (and semi-urban) households begin preparation for Holi for weeks in advance. A wide variety of snacks and sweet-meats such as chips and papad (made of pulses, millets, potato and sago) are prepared. A special semi-circular sweet-meat made for Holi, called gujhiya, and other special delicacies are prepared with great enthusiasm and excitement.

**Tribal Holi**

Holi is the primary festival for most tribes from the northern states of Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Uttarakhand, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, as well as the western border states of Rajasthan and Gujarat. For some, it is perhaps even more important than Diwali, the other major Hindu festival. For many of the nomadic tribes such as the Banjara tribe of Rajasthan, Holi marks the festival during which they return to their native villages for celebrations and practice traditional dances and prayers to local and community deities. Many of these tribes also have local legends associated with the Holi bonfire in addition to the legend of Holika.

**The Laman Banjara tribe of Rajasthan**

"During the Holi, two young boys or Geria, are selected as principle Geria. They lead the song and dances. Drinking and merrymaking continues the entire night. In the morning, atleast one man from every house takes a garland of cow dung cakes and places it on the Holi pyre. After this, the Naik commands the lighting of the Holi (a symbol of the demon). Pitri Puja or ancestor worship too is also done in the early morning. After the Holi pyre is kindled, the men folk return to their homes. In the evening, sweets, sheera, kheer and coconut etc. are thrown in the Holi fire by the women. The women blow their tongues and make a sound."

(Burman, 2010). After the Holi bonfire is lit, a ceremony called Dhund is performed during which women Lengri songs are sung.

Like most tribes of India, the Laman Banjara tribe primarily worships Shakti, or the Divine Mother. Any celebration is incomplete without praying to the Goddess but especially because harvest festivals are associated with fertility and prosperity, appropriately, the divine Mother is worshipped during this day. For the Laman Banjara tribe, that goddess is Hingala Mata, which they often refer to as Holi mata.

It is to be noted here that while Hingala Mata is called Holi Mata, this deity is not the same as the demoness Holika, since the same tribe also "burns the demon symbol Holi". This is a separate entity that has been given a colloquial name in connection to the festival. (This is a critical distinction that will surface again in a later section.)

**For the tribals of Kumaon area**

The unique Holi celebrations of North Indian tribes is a topic vast enough that can cover an entire book, if not several volumes! These are simply some illustrative examples. Other noteworthy tribal celebrations of special interest can be the Navsari tribe of Gujarat area or the Nata nomadic tribes that have beautiful story-telling traditions through song and dance. Some comprehensive sources of the various tribal rituals can be found in the reference section of this article.

The wide diversity of Holi traditions across North India's rural and tribal hinterlands is often overshadowed by the more urban representation depicted by Bollywood and other urban pop-culture references that often cater to the sensibilities and tastes of the urban, suave crowds. To many unfamiliar with the tradition, the western-style parties of mirthful youngsters dancing, drinking and playing with colors in well-groomed lawns or rooftops, often becomes the quintessential image of Holi. This overshadowing, understandably, leads to wild generalizations which find its way into the internet, and sadly even academic commentaries on the festival.

However, we would do well to remember, that most of India is still rural and their beautiful unique traditions are more authentic and representative of Holi than the relatively recent urban experience.

Hinduism, so beautifully diverse.

**Celebration with Colours - "Badi Holi"**

On the second day of the festival, also known as "Badi Holi" or "Dulendi", people transcend all boundaries of class, caste, gender, language, and creed, and gather together to play with colored powder (and colored water). Applying colors is considered auspicious on Badi Holi, and so the day begins with all members of the family applying tilakam to the Gods and to each other, including pets and even house plants. Holi is an inclusive celebration – it is believed that no one should be left out of this auspicious festival. People play with colors alongside total strangers on the street, accompanied by dancing and partaking of snacks. Often, groups of young children go around the neighborhood from house to house (not unlike Halloween in America), playing with members of each family. This underlines the festival's role as a tradition where all by-gones are forgiven and forgotten. The adults, too, have their own celebration which is often associated with reckless abandon. Men and women play with each other, laughing, singing, and dancing.

In fact, the reckless abandon and rejection of social boundaries during Holi was one of the things that quite irked the British colonialists about this festival not only in India, but also in colonies where large Hindu populations were enslaved on plantations under the oppressive system of indentured labor, such as Fiji.

The late afternoons, as one can imagine, are spent on removing powdered color from one's body. Indigenous methods include using a paste of wheat- or chickpea-flour; or oil and turmeric (ubatan) to absorb the color from the skin, much like a sponge. In the evenings, people dress up in new clothes, prepare delicious dishes and invite their neighbors, friends, and family for dinner. Holi celebrations are one of the best opportunities for people to connect with family members and friends.

**The Diversity of Holi**

**Rural Holi**

In rural and semi-urban areas, Holi brings forth week-long mela (or fête) which feature indigenous sweet treats, clothes, and indigenous entertainment. Everyone, young and old, male and female, participates in the mela, which provides a major

Colourful and vibrant ways to decorate your home for Holi



As Holi, the celebration of colours, approaches, it's the ideal time to mix your home with dynamic colours and cheer! From brilliant decorations enhancing doorways to beautiful rangolis gracing floors, there are various ways of celebrating this happy event.

Celebrating the festival of colours doesn't need to spend more or need complex preparation. Whether you're hosting a get-together or just need to add a festive touch to your home, these DIY Holi decoration concepts make certain to impress.

**A Colourful Rangoli**

These customary themes aren't simply a visual pleasure yet in addition addresses bliss, energy and enthusiasm of a family. Make lovely eco-friendly rangolis and designs utilizing flower petals and colored rice to invite everybody to this joyous event. Adding little candles and lights can add a remarkable appeal to your entrance.

**Fancy Floral**

New flowers are an incredible method of decoration for Holi. Garlands stay near the entrance, windows, and along flights of stairs, get a fragrant and beautiful touch. Moreover, floating flower petals in water bowls look outwardly engaging as

well as upgrading the environment.

**Colorful Fabrics**

Adding brilliant curtains and drapes can light up your home. Drape them from the roof, doorways or trees. This adds tone and can make your space fun and cool. Likewise, upholstery and cushions highlighting bold prints and patterns in shades of pink, yellow, green, and blue can mix a bubbly energy into your space.

**Holi Artwork**

Painted pots and earthenware give a minimal expense and stylishly pleasing choice carrying a creative touch to your holi decorations. Moreover, Show craftsmanship, for example, paintings portraying vivid festivals, customary Indian themes, or abstract designs with sprinkles of vibrant colors can make a happy feel.

**Lanterns and Lights**

String lights make an exciting energy in your home. You can drape strings of bright fairy lights or paper lamps around your home and outdoor spaces to make a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Use multi shaded lights to ensure your home continues to radiate with energy.

**DIY Decors**

You can lift your holi decorations with your customized style. Get inventive and make your own Holi decors utilizing a mix of various colors, shapes and sizes. You can make colorful paper chains, tissue paper pom-poms, or fabric buntings to make a statement. These hand tailored embellishments not only add the vibrancy of your space as well as make essential minutes with friends and family.

**Build a Fun Spot**

Make a fun interactive photograph booth with a beautiful backdrop with curtains, balloons. Incorporate fun props like sun cap, astounding glasses and water guns for connecting with visitors where they can take selfies and keep the memories alive.

**Building colorful walls**

Inside decorations or tapestries including energetic colours and traditional Indian themes are a few choices to bring energy and color into your home without any permanent changes. These will be centres of attraction in your home and give it a lively look.

Happy Holi !

