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Bhang as a ‘gateway’ to study the carnival of Phagwa

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Introduction

Phagwa is usually described as a religious festival celebrated by the Indian Diaspora wherever they live in the world, including North America, Europe, New Zealand, South Africa, and the West Indies. The vivid, joyous images awash with colour, have become synonymous with Indian culture, becoming one of many staples. The festival is also seen as a way for the millions of Indians living abroad to convey a sense of culture and identity to future generations (Kidangoor, 2020). The roots of this global phenomenon can be traced back to northern India, where it is commonly known as Holi, to the ritual celebrations that welcome spring at the end of a dreary winter. People in villages in the states of UP and Bihar form singing teams and visit houses to sing ‘phagua’ or Holi songs (D. N. 1989: 232) as the traditional bonfire is lit. Besides, the conventional throwing of coloured powder called ‘abir’ or ‘gulaal,’ the festival is also observed by the consumption of cannabis-infused ‘bhang’ as people take a step back from reality in the spirit of carnival.

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Ernest L. Abel in chronicling the history of cannabis, described India as the ‘first marijuana-oriented culture’. Mentions of cannabis are found in the sacred Hindu texts *Vedas* (Abel, 1980: 16), thought to dispense delight among human beings and grant us release from fear and anxiety. ‘Ganja’ and ‘charas’ remain common among many ‘Hindu godmen’ today, but the milder ‘bhang’ provides a socially acceptable alternative for common people. It has been reimagined over the centuries, and is now commonly consumed as ‘thandai’, edibles like pakodas, or even as the modern bhang-booze cocktail. It is an important tool in the conception of Holi as a ‘carnival,’ a reverse ritual that normalizes ‘deviant’ behaviour (Becker, 1963: 8-9) for one day, and social roles are temporarily shrouded behind the chaos of revelry and colour. However, there is a lot to unpack in bhang’s role in suspending the principles of reality and potentially opening up opportunities for assault and violence.

This paper examines the history of cannabis rooted in Indian medicine and the importance of bhang in the lives of Indians as put forward in the colonial Indian Hemp Drugs Commission Report (Abel, 1980: 127). The idea of ‘carnival’ conventionally involves lower classes temporarily upending the social hierarchy. The paper discusses this ‘symbolic inversion’ (Pandian, 2001: 559) by looking at the lives of artisans in Banaras, citing bhang as an indispensable part of ‘banarasipan.’ (Kumar. 1988: 82). This view will be juxtaposed with Holi in a village in UP described as ‘one of the most backward districts of the country’ (qtd. in Tiwary 28). The paper will also look at how bhang as an intoxicant can uncrown higher thought and reimpose the social status quo, opening up the scene for sexual obscenity, lewdness, and even violence targeted towards marginalized communities: the so-called lower castes and women. Finally, the paper will also look at the adaptive significance of the festival of Holi.

History of Cannabis in India

The earliest mentions of ‘bhanga’ can be arguably found in several ancient Indian texts going back to 1000 CE, but scholarly debates remain about whether these references can be identified with modern bhang or cannabis. The *Rigveda* (c. 1700-1100 BCE) identifies the Cannabis sativa plant as an ingredient in the preparation of the ‘soma’ beverage in the Vedic period, an intoxicating, highly-praised ritual drink. The *Atharvaveda* (c. 1500-1000 BCE) mentions ‘bhanga’ as one of the five sacred plants that relieve anxiety, which many scholars identified as cannabis. The verse from Hymn VI, translated by Ralph T. H. Griffith (1895: 58) may be quoted as follows:

To the five kingdoms of the plants which Soma rules as Lord we speak.
Darbha, hemp, barley, mighty power: may these deliver us from woe.

The *Sushruta Samhita* (c. 600 BCE) mentions bhang as a medicinal plant and recommends it for treating catarrh, phlegm, and diarrhoea. The anti-phlegmatic has a variety of other uses in Ayurvedic medicine and is used in Indian folk medicine as aphrodisiacs and for treatments of pain. The anonymous work, *Anandakanda* (c. 1200), added 43 Sanskrit cannabis synonyms and noted the rejuvenating effects of cannabis. The first uncontested source of cannabis is the *Cikitsasarasangraha* by the author Vangasena in Bengal, in the 11th century, which included ‘bhanga’ as an appetizer and digestive, noting it as ‘a drug like opium whose mode of action is to pervade the whole body before being absorbed and digested’ (qtd. in Russo, 2006: 3). It suggested two recipes for a long and happy life. *Dhanvantariyanighantu*, another contemporary work, noted the narcotic effect of cannabis.

This shows how cannabis and bhang were an integral part of Indian culture. Ethan Russo in *Cannabis in India: ancient lore and modern medicine*, cites a medicinal concoction from the 13th century text, the *Sharangadhara Samhita*, putting forward the ‘jatiphaladichurna recipe’ quoted as follows:

This recipe known as jatiphaladichurna if taken in doses of one karpa, with honey, relieves quickly grahani (sprue [chronic diarrhoea]), kasa (cough), swasa (dyspnoea), aruchi (anorexia), kshaya (consumption) and pratishyaya [nasal congestion] due to vatakapha (rhinitis).

The medical use of Indian hemp was introduced in Europe in the 19th century, when ganja and bhangie were known as intoxicants that could also treat diarrhoea and haemorrhoids. However, the awareness of the psychoactivity of cannabis was rekindled with the writings of a Spanish Jew named Garcia da Orta, who visited India in service to Portugal in 1563. He noted descriptions of the plant ‘bangué’ and its important medical properties. He added that it caused men to be raised above all cares and anxieties, noted its stimulation of energy and appetite, and made ‘some break into a foolish laugh.’ (qtd. in Russo, 2006: 5).

Despite the West having moral qualms about including cannabis in canonical medicine, it gradually trickled into mainstream practice in Europe. William B. O’Shaughnessy, an Irish physician’s seminal work on cannabis was published in 1843, which included a review of classical Sanskrit and Unani sources, and detailed description of bhang (mature cannabis leaves), ganja (unfertilized female flowers), and charas (processed cannabis resin). His work began with an examination of Indian ethnobotanical uses and experiments of cannabis extracts in dogs, finally culminating with a series of human clinical trials. His treatise on the subject demonstrated the apparent clinical utility of cannabis in a wide range

of disorders including cholera, rheumatic diseases, delirium tremens and infantile convulsions.

Summing up his experience with cannabis, O’Shaughnessy concluded that ‘in hemp the profession has gained an anti-convulsive remedy of the greatest value’ (qtd. in Russo, 2006: 7).

The Western Perspective

Although the Western world seems to be waking up to the beneficial aspects of cannabis, for the longest time it was regarded as a ‘gateway’ that could potentially expand the consumer’s appetite for hard drugs. Several countries and US states have now legalised marijuana, where possession of cannabis was often used as a means to oppress people along racial lines and unfairly incarcerate the downtrodden, particularly in the US, the Black population. These tendencies can be traced back to the colonial times, in the 18th and 19th centuries, when the English white man took on the ‘civilizing’ mission (Shamir, 2001: 435) to divest off the ‘ganja menace’ that was allegedly inciting natives into committing acts of ‘crime and insanity’ (Abel, 1980: 126).

According to a British law in 1798, nobody was permitted to manufacture or sell hemp drugs without the official permission from administrative officials. This was adopted ‘with a view to check immoderate consumption, and at the same time to augment the public revenue’ (qtd. in Abel, 1980: 122.) However, Ernest Abel argued that although ‘professing altruistic motives’, the law included substances like tobacco in its list, indicating that ‘the legislation was clearly motivated by economic considerations’. Abel noted how England sent gunboats into Chinese waters to protect British interests when the Chinese government tried to stop the flow of opium into the country, claiming that ‘revenue, not altruism, was the Parliament’s concern’. The British Parliament mainly intended to extract as much revenue as possible from colonies like India.

The general idea was ‘curtailment through taxation’ as the belief was that drugs such as charas and ganja, along with opium and alcohol ‘are of so noxious quality, and produce a species of intoxication so violent... that they cannot be used without imminent danger to the individual as well as the public. Poverty, ignorance, disease, crime, political corruption, all of which were endemic to the country, were attributed to drug abuse, especially bhang, ganja, and charas’ (qtd. in Abel, 1980: 123). Additionally, a survey of Indian soldiers serving in the British army in 1838 claimed that ‘bhanga... was causing indigestion, coughing, melancholy, impotency, insanity, idiocy, and most alarming of all, crime’.

Indian Hemp Drugs Commission

The findings of the *Indian Hemp Drugs Commission*, appointed by the British Parliament in 1893, are key to understanding the importance of ‘bhang’ and cannabis for Indians. The Commission met for a year and heard oral testimonies from 1193 witnesses to study the method used to cultivate cannabis, the kind of drugs made from the plant, and the effects of consumption on the morality and social conventions among Indians.

The Commission noted that although no religious books of India made it a necessity, there was a longstanding tradition of such usage in connection with religious ceremonies throughout the country. Ganja was especially associated with the worship of Shiva and was believed to be a special attribute of this God. The Commission said that devotees’ partaking of ganja was akin to communion in the Catholic church; they also noted that during Dasehra, every Sikh was required to drink bhang in commemoration of their founder Gobind Singh.

The conclusions of the Commission, comprising 4 English members and 3 Indian members, upheld the ‘curtailment through taxation’ policy, but did not recommend a widespread cannabis crackdown. The members argued that the suppression of bhang would be ‘totally unjustifiable’ because its use was harmless in moderation and was part of the social and religious life of Indians. Moreover, the commission said that the ‘use of bhang would be difficult to suppress as suppression would be very unpopular, and were suppression to occur, it would have the effect of causing the people to turn to more harmful drugs.

Ganja brought in the highest revenue, but bhang was the most popular and most widely used drink among the Hindus, which was not subject to taxation. It noted that bhang was rather ‘weak’, and ‘consumed as nonchalantly as a cup of tea’. Charas was the most potent of the three cannabis drugs, but also the most expensive, whereas ganja was potent, not very expensive and usually enjoyed by the lower classes. The legal scruples cited against ganja were therefore also a means to imprison and oppress the lower classes.

The continued taxation of hemp drugs was also causing costs to go up. The report noted that ganja and charas usage was declining among the upper classes as a result of rising cost. In its place, a newly acquired taste for alcohol, which sold at a substantially lower price, had begun to develop among the well-to-do.

Cultural Context

Although cannabis was important in Ayurvedic medicine, bhang, as a milder form, presented a socially acceptable form of the drug. It was further elevated through its association with the Hindu god, Shiva, who is also known as the Lord of Bhang. He is regarded as the ‘Indian Dionysus’ (O’Flaherty, 1981:

81), with significant points of correspondence with the Greek god Dionysus: ‘wine, ecstasy, frenzied women, fertility, the imposition of an alien cult upon established orthodoxy, and finally the coincidence of opposites’. The ideas all conform with the conception of Holi as a ‘carnival.’

According to Hindu mythology, Shiva became angry over family squabbles and went off by himself in the fields. There his temper cooled down as he rested underneath a tall marijuana plant, which brought him comforting refuge for days from the blazing sun. Curious about the plant, he chewed some of its leaves and felt so refreshed that he adopted it as his favourite food. Indians’ consumption of bhang therefore has divine sanction from its association with one of the most revered gods of the Hindu pantheon. Its status may be understood in the way Hindu artisans and workers in Banaras conceive of bhang (Kumar, 1988: 100). For Hindus, bhang adds to one’s status because of its connection to Shiva and its ritualization and sanctification in tradition and symbolic connotations of the ‘good life’. The highest echelons of Hindu society will be thought the better for appreciating bhang.

Bhang usually refers to a mild liquid refreshment, somewhat similar in potency to marijuana used in the US. It can be prepared following several recipes. One such recipe (Ball 777) may be quoted as follows:

Cannabis	220 grains
Poppy seed	120 grains
Pepper	120 grains
Ginger	40 grains
Caraway seed	10 grains
Cloves	10 grains
Cardamom	10 grains
Cinnamon	10 grains
Cucumber seed	120 grains
Almonds	120 grains
Nutmeg	10 grains
Rosebuds	60 grains
Sugar	4 ounces
Milk	20 ounces

Nita Kumar in her work, *The Artisans of Banaras: Popular Culture and Identity, 1880-1986*, put forward how integral bhang was to the life of the artisans and metalworkers in Banaras. Her accounts will be considered in more detail later, but a bhang recipe she took up from a certain Tara Prasad (244), one of her informants, is given here below. It is meant to serve 10 people:

Bhang	half a fistful, one rupee worth
Almonds	25 grams
Thandai (available from Baniya's shop)	50 grams
Gulakand (preserved rose leaves)	50 grams
Black pepper	4 annas worth
Cardamom	8 annas worth
Milk	2 litres
Malai (thickened milk, cream)	one quarter kilogram
Sugar	to taste

The bhang and pepper are required to be mixed separately from other ingredients into a very fine mixture. Then, they have to be ground with other ingredients, and strained before it is mixed with milk and malai. The finished 'thandai' is meant to be consumed chilled.

Cannabis and Carnival

Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian linguist and literary critic, defined 'carnavalesque' as literature that was characterized by depiction of the temporary destabilization of prevalent power structures that may occur in traditional forms of the festival. It would therefore be imperative to look at Nita Kumar's accounts of the cultural nuances of the working class in Banaras, the artisans and metalworkers, to get into 'ritual reversal' of Holi and the role of bhang in the blurring of social boundaries and acceptable behaviour. Kumar defines Holi as:

revelry, a literal holiday from everything. The routine is one of trans-action with everyone, in all possible mediums: dry colour, water, sweets, drinks, tricks, mud, slapstick behaviour. The intensity of the occasion ranges all the way from hyperactivity... to a trancelike introspective state produced by bhang and rhythmic music. (176)

To this effect, Kumar discusses the term 'banarasipan' (82) as the deliberate consciousness of residents feeling equal to one another that stems from simplicity, contentment and a carefree attitude rooted in Banarasi things like pan, bhang, and malai or cream. The conception, Kumar says, stems from the idea of everyone being 'dependents' at Shiva's court and also from a lifestyle that apparently does not put much stock in personal wealth. The Dionysian ideals of leisure, music, celebration, and cannabis-induced intoxication, are worth mentioning, alongside a tongue-in-cheek concept or 'raisi' that comprises a self-image of acting like a lord even without wealth.

Kumar also brings up 'bahrialang' that is essential to the people of Banaras. Literally, the term 'bahri' comes from 'bahar' or 'outside', and 'alang'

meaning portion or side. However, the cultural connotations of the term involve a ritualized pattern involving too much bhang, which coalesces with the key tenets of Holi. It is a feeling of 'mauj or masti,' like the term 'phakkarpan' in the Bhojpuri of Banaras, and refers to Shiva's wild, eccentric, and unaccountable behaviour and personality. Intellectuals describe the feeling as 'the philosophy of pleasure moulded to the truth of life' (qtd. in Kumar 99), but common people understand it as the freedom and contentment that comes with an oil massage, bathing, exercise, and bhang.

The consumption of bhang is essential to this conception of Holi, as it has the backing of tradition, myth, and folklore behind it. Moreover, people's obsession with its recipe clues into another aspect of the carnival, which focuses on the lower bodily functions. The cannabis-infused drink is widely regarded as a laxative, and its recipes often include black pepper which is believed to 'reduce wind'. In *Rabelais and His World* (1968), Bakhtin focused on mobilizing humour, satire, and the grotesque in all forms, especially with regard to the body and bodily functions.

Pandian's take on 'social inversions' in the ritual context of Holi, involves behavior such as role inversion, burlesquing, clowning, inverted speech, scatology, and sexual license. This not only serves the purpose of transient entertainment, but also social catharsis. McKim Marriott observed how low-ranking castes 'reverse' their roles vis-a-vis high-ranking castes and ridicule their political and economic superiors. Marriott participated in rural Holi and wrote his observations in his essay, *The Feast of Love*, recounting how in some places women become aggressors and hit and humiliate men, while 'pure' and 'impure' castes partner in ritualistic activities. The hallucinogenic cannabis is consumed with milk, whereas animal excrement and old shoes are often used as slapstick weapons to attack and ridicule men of high status. (qtd. in Pandian, 2001: 560).

These 'symbolic inversions' in the form of status or gender reversals take on the significance of sacred, elaborating symbols that ultimately consolidate the prevalent worldview. Examples of contrary, non-normative behaviour only sort out individual psychological well-being and reimpose the social order. This 'opposition and disjunction between the ritual and social domains' validates authority structures through the enactment of symbolic rituals, enhancing the normal state where upper castes oppress the lower castes and men dominate women (Pandian, 2001: 561).

Holi and Marginalised Communities

The position of women with regard to celebrating Holi can best be understood by considering the myth rationalising Holika Dahan. Holika, in attempting to help her arrogant brother, loses her power to be untouched by fire and burns

alive. The ritual celebrates the victory of goodness (gods) over the forces of evil (demons, including Holika), but the symbolic enactments on the day chant slogans like ‘Victory to Mother Holika’ (Pandian, 2001: 560). The legend refers to the symbolic but temporary elevation of Holika, which maximises the role of women as one of ‘power and purity’ on a symbolic level, and in doing so, diminishes their role into one of ‘powerlessness and impurity’ in the real world.

In extreme rural areas, women are often not included in the day’s festivities. Gender-based discrimination keeps them out of the ‘enjoyment’ of Holi, while extracting a huge amount of unrecognized hard labour in preparation before the festivities (D. N., 1989: 231). Moreover, in the way the festival is celebrated in Bihar, Phagwa represents the subjugation of the lower castes, especially of lower caste women. The singing of sexually obscene songs, known as ‘kabeera’ songs begin after the bonfire is lit on the eve of the festival. The consumption of bhang suspends morality and potentially opens up the opportunity of an ‘orgy of violence’ (Kumar, 1988: 179) as marginalized women are assaulted sexually and often attacked with impunity.

Sanjay Tiwari, in his essay *An Unholy Festival*, claims that the ‘oft-proclaimed assumption that the celebration of Holi loosens socially rigid structures and that people forget their socio-economic differences to enjoy the festival of colours, is farcical’. He examined the social and cultural divide in Holi celebrations in the village of Charthari on the UP-Nepal border, one of ‘the most backward districts in the country’. ‘The ‘jajmani relationship’, which comprises the lower classes providing services to the upper classes for grain, remains prevalent during festivals. The different castes do not show any interest in celebrating the festival together.

He claims that the ritual inversions of Holi are actually ‘well-defined systems to keep the majority of society alienated and exploited’ and often translates to ‘more robust discrimination’ against Dalits. In this case, ‘bhang’ actually becomes a marker of the well-off who can afford to hold feasts and serve the drink with expensive dry fruits. The ‘mandalis’ or singing teams that visit people’s homes to sing ‘phagua’ songs typically do not have Dalit members, and spend longer in the homes of richer brahmins serving grander feasts.

Besides, the ‘self-cultured’ higher classes have made consistent attempts to censor the celebrations and divest it off its so-called vulgarity, like indiscriminate colour-throwing or general tomfoolery. These features of Holi have often been condemned as vulgar and indecent to control and stop ‘ritual reversal’. However, attributing these qualities to lower classes, lower castes, and illiterate people is a present-day phenomenon (Kumar, 1988: 176).

Conclusion

There are two opposed observations. On the one hand, we have the ideal where people from different social backgrounds come together to indiscriminately throw colour at one another. On the other, lived experiences of people do not match up to this ideal, and raise questions about ‘the interpretations of Holi as a carnivalesque churning of social hierarchies’. The actual challenge is realizing the potential of Holi to serve as a symbol of unity and live up to its meaning of the oneness of mankind beyond social divisions.

Anthropologists have noted the ‘adaptive significance’ of symbolic inversions of rituals associated with Holi. Dalits in rural areas, so far alienated from the festivities, began celebrating in their own communities and lighting their own bonfire. Fear of retaliation also stopped singing groups from singing sexually obscene songs with the names of lower caste women. Instead, songwriters of late have been replacing the obnoxious lyrics of some ‘phagua’ songs with revolutionary sentiment.

This is the dichotomy on how carnival is perceived. Critics of Bakhtin’s idea, including renowned literary figure Terry Eagleton, believe that carnival is only a licensed or approved social transgression, and at best, offers a mirage of change. However, Bakhtin’s carnival is a utopian antidote to repression and celebration of the possibility of affirming change, even if it is temporary. It focuses on transgressive social behaviour thriving underneath apparent social order, constantly threatening to upend convention.

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