

# Indenture Dialogue

Vol. 2022-2

Journal First Published: 11 Oct 2021

© Girit Partners

www.girit.ac.fj

[editor@girit.ac.fj](mailto:editor@girit.ac.fj)

## Myriads of Cultural Cosmos: A Brief overview of Similarities between Chinese New Year and Phagwah Festival

Neha Tripathi

**To cite this article:** Tripathi, Neha. (2022) 'Myriads of Cultural Cosmos: A Brief overview of Similarities between Chinese New Year and Phagwah Festival', *Indenture Dialogue*, 2(1): 133-139, @ <https://girit.ac.fj/id-2022-tripathi/>

Date Published: 30 September 2022

Other articles in this volume: <https://girit.ac.fj/current-issue/>Editorial Board: <https://girit.ac.fj/editorial-board/>Notes for Contributors: <https://girit.ac.fj/notes-for-contributors-2/>

*'Aiso Basant nahi baar (spring like this doesn't occur again and again)*

*Phagun k din hai chaar (The twelfth month of Hindu calendar only lasts for four days)*

*Holi khel k mana re (celebrate it by playing Holi)*

*Seel santokh k kesar gholi (the contentment is dissolving in soul like saffron colour)*

*Prem preet pichkaar re (lets sprinkle love and happiness)*

*Urut gulaal laal bhaiyo ambar (the sky seems to be red in colour with so many colours)*

*Barsat rang apaar re' (it's raining like inexhaustible colours) - Mira Bai*

*\* Gulaal (colours), the word itself brings the contours of colours to our mind and it immediately traverses us to one of the most popular and celebrated festivals for Hindus of India- Holi.*

*Indenture Dialogue* Vol. 2 © Girit Partners. [Girit Partners: Global Girit, NCIC-Heritage Centre, BHU, TISS, IIT(Patna), University of the South Pacific]. *Indenture Dialogue* is a non-refereed publication of Girit Partners, aimed at providing an outlet for lighter works on Indenture with the purpose of stimulating preliminary discussion on indenture which may give rise to serious academic work on the subject.

Holi or Phagwah, as it's known in Trinidad and Tobago is originally an Indian spring festival that takes place during the months of March-April annually. It was introduced in Trinidad by indentured labourers of East India in 1845. The festival is celebrated with high fervor and energy. The Chinese New Year is also an annual celebration which originally marked the beginning of New Year for Chinese people. Today almost every major ethnic community partakes or has an understanding of these two festivals. These are a major cultural attraction in the immigrant communities which celebrate this festival zealously. It is safe to say both the festivals have successfully transcended borders and barriers beyond celebration.

The root of the word Holi is from the Sanskrit word 'Holika', meaning 'parched grains'. Hence the festival is also considered as spring festival, which marks the month of harvest or celebration of crops and produce. Holi is ideally celebrated on 'Chaitra maah ki pareva'. According to Hindu Vedic calendars, Chaitra begins with new moon in March/April and is considered the first month of the New Year. That also explains the vivid celebration on the day of the festival.

The Chinese New Year, also called Lunar New Year, is a fifteen-day annual festival in China and for Chinese communities around the world. It begins with the occurrence of new moon, appearing somewhere between January and February according to Western calendars. Festivities last until the following full moon. Like Holi, it also doesn't have a fixed calendar date, as its date depends on the religious calendars. It calculates the date according to the moon of the month. Holi is also known as the 'Spring Festival' and just like Chinese New Year it also celebrates the spirit of harvest, arrival of spring and celebration of produce. Both the festivals mark the onset of spring in their respective cultures and countries.

Holi and Chinese New Year both are big, bold and bright festivals in spirit and soul. They are celebrated in grandeur. People participate from all age groups, castes and creed. They are community celebrations. Preparations for both are done in advance, starting days before the main festival.

Interestingly, both these festivals enlist a mythological significance attached to the celebrations which commemorates the triumph of 'good over evil'.

Holi has a deep-rooted religious significance; foremost among the legends associated with Phagwah, is the story of Prahlad, son of evil king Hiranyakashipu. According to the ancient legends, there existed an evil king called Hiranyakashipu, who had God like powers with which he ruled the world. He demanded that everybody worship him. To his ire, Prahlad was an unflinching devotee of Lord Vishnu. The King made several attempts to get rid of his son but all were unsuccessful. To kill his son, he finally asked his equally ignoble sister Holika (who had a boon to be unscathed and was immune by the harms of

fire) to help him with his plan to get rid of the son. The King ordered her to take the boy into a large fire to end his life, but due to his committed devotion, Prahlad came out unscathed while Holika's power was reduced and she was burnt to ashes. Today's observance of Phagwah incorporates aspects of this story. An effigy of Holika is burnt on a night prior to Holi as a symbol of purification and triumph of devotion and goodness over the evil.

The origin of the Chinese New Year is also steeped in legends. One such legend is that, thousands of years ago a monster named 'Nian' (meaning 'Years') would attack villagers at the beginning of each New Year. People used to hide in their homes until one boy bravely decided to chase the beast away. He used firecrackers, red colour, bright lights and loud noises to do so. The next day, all the villagers decided to celebrate their survival by setting off more firecrackers and using red décor to scare the beast. Since then firecrackers and bright red lanterns have become crucial part of the Chinese new year celebration.

The significance of colours is another similarity in the two festivals. For the Chinese, red colour symbolizes auspiciousness, purification and purging from evil. According to the Vedas, the colours on the spectrum (red, orange, blue, green, yellow, violet) are used for medicinal purposes. They are used to cure diseases focusing on the essence of cosmic colour therapy. The theory is rooted in the understanding that in human body, different organs are associated with different colours; any deficiency of colour causes particular illnesses. In Phagwah, red colour signifies fertility, blue is the colour of Lord Krishna, green symbolizes the start of spring or something new; yellow symbolically a significant colour, signifies our favourite herb-turmeric without whose presence, no Hindu festival is considered complete. In the wake of this, the use of different colours during Phagwah festival can be beneficial to everyone. The two festivals have a rooted essence around colours, which are focal to their celebrations. Red is considered lucky and wards off evil-eye, hence it is the most predominant shade in Chinese New Year celebration and Holi is considered incomplete without the splashing of all myriads of these colours ringing in joy, harmony and spring in our lives.

Among other similar traditions of the two festivals, are the preparations of the festivity. Firstly, in both the festivals, thorough cleansing and cleaning of the house is done. It commences almost a week or two prior to the date of festival. According to the Chinese New Year traditions, one needs to clean one's home to get rid of any lingering resident bad luck. In fact, there is a dedicated day before the spring festival, to clean the houses. It is to ensure to sweep the bad luck away and make room for all the good fortune. Cleaning the house may not seem the most exciting ritual yet it sets the tone for New Year to start afresh. Similarly, days prior to Holi, people clean their homes meticulously to ensure good luck and make room for the onset of festivity celebrations. In both the

festivals, gifting money is also a part of the customary celebrations. For Chinese New Year, the big gift is money, which is tucked into red (their symbolically significant colour) envelopes. These red packets are gifted to children and unmarried adults during the holiday. This money is also supposed to transfer good fortune from the elders to the kids. Similarly, for Phagwah celebration, elders in the family gift young ones with money to buy 'Gulaal' and 'pichkaaree' (water gun). It is an integral part of the celebration; the markets are decked up to frenzy weeks before the festival selling sweets, apparels, colours and all kinds of 'pichkaarees' (water guns) to appease and amuse kids and adults. Also, in both the traditions there is a custom to buy new clothes for the festival. It is intricately related to new and fresh beginnings in both these festivals. New clothes are also believed to bring good luck and for one to start afresh.

Another integral aspect of the two festivals is food. No celebration is complete without appetizing special food; meals that are prepared especially during these festivities that are meant to be devoured together. Interestingly central to both the festival feast is a dumpling. No Chinese New Year celebration is complete without the preparation of dumplings, which are stuffed with meats or vegetables. They also have a symbolic significance where they are considered to increase wealth. For sweet dumplings, known as 'Gujiya' (Indian sweet dumpling stuffed with sweetened milk, dried fruits and fried in ghee) are the norm. It is almost impossible to imagine a celebration of Phagwah without imagining 'Gujiya'. Chinese New Year celebrations also include other delicacies which also have symbolic significance. Fish (for prosperity), longevity Noodles (for happiness and success), and Rice cake 'Nian Gao' (for higher income and position). Chinese New Year desserts are also special. They are called 'Fa Gao'. It is a hybrid of sponge cake and muffins (for richness). *Tangyuan* is also a popular dessert for the Chinese New Year.

Similarly, for Phagwah, various delicacies are prepared, which engages all the family and is another excuse to spend more family time together while preparing these feasts. Days before the festival, women usually start preparing with seasoned home-made chips from fresh potatoes, known as 'papad'. They are sun dried and have a painstakingly long process to prepare. Kids and all members of the family sit together and usually prepare these while singing songs of festivity, known as 'Chautal' (a kind of folk songs sung specially around festivities) and bond over food and preparations. Also for Phagwah, people prepare 'Maath' (a crispy deep fried snack), Samosa (a form of savory dumpling, stuffed with spicy potatoes), 'Papdi' (potato crisps/wafers), dal-kachori (dumplings stuffed with savory spicy lentils), 'puri' (deep fried soft whole wheat bread), as savory dishes which are served to the guests that arrive for greetings and exchange. For the sweets, the most popular 'Gujiya' is prepared on the day of 'Holika dahan' (an effigy of Holika is burnt, to mark the triumph of good over evil) and sweets and

snacks are offered in that pious fire. Also 'shakkar paare'(crispy wafers caramelized and sugar coated like candies) and 'meethe sev' (made of gram flour and sugar coated for crispiness) are prepared as part of sweets. Even the infamous 'Bhaang' (traditional mildly intoxicating drink of India, made from young leaves and stems of Indian hemp plant), is prepared on the day of the festival and is served as a 'prasad' (holy offerings) from the deity. The drink is slightly intoxicating in nature and is prepared by drying, grinding and soaking the buds and leaves of the Cannabis sativa plant for days. Similarly, there is special wide for the Chinese New Year that they prepare ; each member of the family raises a toast together to drink and usher into the new year with the spirit of togetherness and merry.

Phagwah is also associated with lots of joyful singing and dancing. The festival radiates of Carnival-like essence as participants are sprayed with variety of coloured dyes. One can hear the strums of special folk songs being sung in groups called 'Chautal' and 'Ulaara', which are accompanied by two instruments, 'dholak' (a small hand drum) and 'Manjeera' (percussive instruments). People living in community all play and dance on the streets, smearing and splashing colours on each other and exchanging hugs and greetings for the festival. This is also known as 'Holi Milan' (the carnival celebration and rejoicing by exchanging greetings and hugs on the festival). The music is fast paced and foot tapping is such that one cannot stop self from participating in the joy filled revelry.

Almost similar to this is the procession and carnival of 'Dragon dance' and 'Lantern festival' which is an intricate part of the Chinese New Year celebrations. Lantern festival is the last event held during the Chinese New Year celebration during which people hang glowing lanterns in temples or at homes and even carry them during a night-time parade. Dragon is considered the Chinese symbol of good fortune, wisdom, power and wealth. Dragon Dance has been considered a highlight of the Chinese New Year celebration for many areas. This procession engages a big, long and colourful dragon being carried through the streets by a volley of dancers to the tune of drums and cymbals. Dragons are an essential symbol of China's rich cultural heritage. It is believed that they bring good luck to people; the 'longer' the dragon, the more fortune it will bring to the community. After the dance, the dragon's head and tail are burnt and its body is kept at the temple where it shall be used next year. The dragon is welcomed everywhere it goes, and the team conducting the dance is received with several banquets enroute, known as 'dragon exchanging wine'. One can witness dragon dances in many Chinese cities and Chinatowns, where they attract a huge crowd of spectators especially gathered for this annual performance.

The two festivals also have a social significance in their own cultures. Like any major festival, Lunar New year is best spent in the company of family and friends. The tradition is so significant that it is heralded as 'the largest human migration on earth'. In 2019 itself, it was projected to have made 3 billion trips exclusively during this holiday season. Family reunion dinners also include ancestral worship rituals that connect their 3800-year old history to the present-day celebration. Just like Phagwah, Chinese New Year also includes welcoming guests with offerings of tea and sweets, which are supposed to sweeten one's arrival. New Year. Sweets and dry fruits are served on a round, octagon like tray. It is also known as 'Tray of Togetherness' in Chinese culture, resembling togetherness and unity of the family. Also, eight is considered a lucky number by the Chinese, which represents family unity and good fortune. Similarly, according to Hindu mythology seven is an auspicious number and has religious and spiritual significance to the Hindus. 'Holika Dahan' is considered as the last day of the year, according to the Hindu calendar. In the pious fire, one makes offering of fresh harvest to the gods and deities. In the same fire, one offers 'Gulariya' (holy offerings made of cow dung), which are seven in number and also encircle the fire seven times offering water, (so that Holika, who had a fire boon, is appeased and may rest in peace), 'boot'( which is the flower of green grams, signifying fresh harvest), and sugarcane and wheat flower (symbolizing farmers fresh annual harvest). Phagwah also is an opportunity for people to participate in social interaction, active inter-mingling and foster harmony which are essential to community living. The spirit of camaraderie that the festival evokes stimulates a heightened sense of community belonging, necessary to a human. It is a common practice for individuals who work in cities and other states to travel back to their homes and villages to be together and part of their families during Phagwah, which in true essence can be only celebrated with togetherness and cherishing the presence of one's family in our respective lives.

The celebration of these two festivals goes far beyond the allegory and has an inseparable significance to our happiness and being. The core values and spirit of these two festivals hold an even higher relevance in times like today where the younger generation tends to eschew their importance and individuals are more isolated than ever. In a world where the issue of 'loneliness' is as grave as the current pandemic, we must understand how these festivals hold the key to many of the modern day ailments of mind and soul. These festivals are a small way to celebrate the glorious heritage, culture and rich traditions of China and India respectively.

### Works Cited

- Kadodwala, Dilip. (2005). *Holi and Other Hindu Festivals*. New Delhi: Evans Brothers.
- Peppas, Lynn. (2009). *Holi*. NJ: Crabtree Publishing Company.
- Pettiford, Rebecca. (2016). *Festival of Holi*. California: Bullfrog Books, 2016.
- Holub, Joan. (2003). *Dragon Dance: A Chinese New Year LTF*. Berkeley: Puffin Press.
- Wallace, Adam. (2019). *How To Catch A Dragon*. New York : Sourcebooks Inc.

### Author:

**Neha Tripathi:** email: n.tripathi121@gmail.com