

Some Aspects of *Phagwa* as a Community Festival in Fiji

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Abstract

The Phagwa festival, mainly referred to as Holi, was introduced to Fiji through the Indenture system in the 19th century. It is celebrated after the lunar month of Phalgun, the last month of the Hindu calendar. The celebration holds great cultural and historical significance; it implies the victory of good over evil. The celebration includes singing of Faag by various 'village groups' (mandalis), making and distribution of a variety of sweets, lighting of bonfires and smearing of powdered and water colours in fun and harmony. In a multi-lingual country like Fiji, Holi is no longer considered as the festival of Hindus but is widely recognized by people of different religious backgrounds demonstrating the multiplicity of Fiji's unique heritage. This paper provides a broad overview of the evolution of the festival in Fiji from the 19th century to now.

Keywords: *Phagwa, Holi, Diaspora, Multi-Lingual, Community Festival, Chutkulas, Chutaals.*

Introduction

Holi is an ancient Hindu festival. Originating in India, it spread to different parts of the world through the diaspora from the Indian sub-continent. Holi is also variously known as the 'festival of spring', 'festival of love' and the 'festival of colours', each harbouring a different reason for the celebration. It is also commonly known as 'Phagwa'. People may have given the festival different names and ways of celebrating it but the notion behind all is the same - it marks the end of the winter season in India and welcoming of the spring season; this is mentioned even in 17th century literature (Ebeling: 2010). Holi is celebrated at the end of winter, on the last full moon day of the Hindu luni-solar calendar month marking the spring. The date falls typically in March in month of 'Phalgun' which is the 12th month of the Hindu calendar.

In the Braj region of India, Holi is a commemoration of the divine love of Radha for Krishna and celebrated as a festival of love. Holi is also associated with the 'Kama Deva and Rati' legend, where Lord Shiva is roused from deep meditation by *Kama Deva*. Thus rudely awakened Lord Shiva burns Kama to ashes but is restored due to pleas from Kama's wife Rati. This return of the god of love (Kama) is celebrated on the 40th day after Vasant Panchami¹ festival as Holi.

The festival is mentioned in the Puranas² and Dasakumara Charita,³ as well as by the poet Kalidasa in his 14th century Sanskrit drama 'Ratnavali'⁴.

But at the root of the festival is the celebration of triumph of good over evil in the honour of Hindu god Vishnu and his devotee Prahlada.

According to Bhagavata Purana, King Hiranyakashipu had earned a boon that gave him five special powers: he could be killed by neither a human being nor an animal, neither indoors nor outdoors, neither at day nor at night, neither by 'astra' (projectile weapons) nor by any 'shastra' (handheld weapons), and neither on land nor in water or air. He thought he had become invincible, grew arrogant and gave himself the status of God. He demanded that everyone to worship only him. Hiranyakashipu's own son Prahlada, however, disagreed. He was an ardent devotee of Lord Vishnu, and encouraged others to do the same. This infuriated Hiranyakashipu. He subjected Prahlada to continuous harsh

¹ Vasant Panchami is a festival that marks the preparation for the arrival of spring

² The *Puranas* are ancient Hindu religious texts, written between 3rd to 10th century CE.

³ *Dasakumara Charita* is a romantic prose in Sanskrit language

⁴ *Ratnavali* (Precious Garland) is a Sanskrit drama about a beautiful princess named Ratnavali, and a great king named Udayana. One of the first textual references to the celebration of Holi, the festival of Colours has been found in this text

punishments. Prahlada remained to his resolve to do what he thought was right. Finally, Hiranyakashipu took help from his sister Holika who was blessed by Lord Brahma with a cloak to protect her from fire and that with the cloak she will never be harmed by fire in her life. Holika challenged Prahlada into sitting on a pyre with her at dusk, she wearing the blessed cloak. As the fire roared, a gust of wind blew the cloak over Prahlada, saving him but burning Holika alive. Lord Vishnu, in his avatas as Lord Narsasimha - half human and half lion - appeared. Neither a human nor an animal, he appeared at dusk (neither day nor night), took Hiranyakashyapu to the doorstep (neither indoors nor outdoors), placed him on his lap (which was neither on land, nor on/in water nor in air), and then eviscerated and killed the king with his lion claws (neither astra nor shastra), thereby re-establishing dharma (the path of righteousness). This victory of good over evil is celebrated annually by lighting a 'Holika' bonfire, a day prior to play with colours and other festivities. The name of the festival 'Holi', has roots in this.

Holi is regarded as an important spring festival for Hindus with a national holiday in India, Nepal and Guyana, with holidays for Hindus in some other Girit diaspora countries. In Fiji, Holi is not a national holiday, but is celebrated by Hindus throughout the country.

The Fiji Girit Diaspora

The Indo-Fijians are descendants of indentured labourers brought from India to work on plantations in Fiji. The recruitment began in 1879 and ended in 1916. Their origins are mainly Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and South India. Altogether 60,945 individuals were recruited to work in Fiji. The Indentured labourers signed an agreement (a contract) to provide their services for 5 years, or for 10 years for a free return passage.

The people of North Indian origin spoke a Hindi dialect (Bhojpuri). It is identified as the language (Awadhi) in which Poet Tulsi Das narrated his 'Ram Charitra Manas', the story of Ramayan of Sage Valmiki. This language was familiar to most North Indians (Lal, 2000). In Fiji 'Ramayan mandalis' (religious groups) were established in almost all areas where a few Indian families resided. While the population of Indo-Fijians has continued to increase, their composition of Fiji's population has declined from 51% in the 1970's to around 35% now. Some Hindu festivals are given national recognition and prominence in Fiji, with *Diwali* being a public holiday. Hindu schools are granted a holiday for the Ram Naumi and Holi festivals.

Holi Celebrations

In Fiji, devotees create an effigy of Holika on the first day of the forty-day period which is commonly known as *Holika sthapana* (establishing the bonfire) using twigs and dry leaves. Inside the effigy, they place a special plant known as 'redh plant' which symbolizes Prince Prahlada; the plant is removed right before the lighting of the fire. Traditionally, the actual Holi festival begins with singing of *chautals* by village mandalis, after Holika sthapana moving from house to house in the locality. On the thirty-ninth day, the bonfire is lit after sunset and people do *parikrama* (ritual of moving clockwise round an object of devotion as an indication of reverence). Singing chautals is seen as a symbol of purification. The following morning, which is the final day, people perform prayers and apply the bonfire ash to each other and distribute it to every household as they continue singing of chautals from house to house, playing with colours and enjoying sweets and meals to mark the special day. The importance of lighting the bonfire signifies the ending of evil and impurities of our heart and the upcoming realization of our spiritual glory.

The singing of chautals is one of the main features of the festival. Playing of drums (*dholak*), in particular, is paramount. As a ritual, the drums are tuned (the nine strings around the drum are tightened) at the start of the celebration. At the end of each session of chautaal all strings except one is de-tuned, which denotes a promise among the group members that the Phagwa will continue the next day. This pattern is followed till the last day of celebrations. The remaining string is de-tuned a week after the celebrations end on a Tuesday evening, which is commonly termed by the Indo-Fijians as *Budhwa Mangal*. The de-tuning ritual is marked by singing of chautals for the final time and enjoying grog (a mildly intoxicating drink). Budhwa Mangal is not given as much significance in Fiji as it is prioritized in India. It is celebrated on a big scale in India as it commemorates the day when Lord Hanumana burnt Lanka; on this day, many temples are thronged with people worshipping Lord Hanuman, seeking his blessings for prosperity.

The chautals could be explained as four different styles of beating of drums and singing. The chautaal is sung by a group of 10-12 people with 5-6 people forming a competitive sub-group for continuous, repetitive singing of the same verse before moving on to the next verse of the song. The beating of the drums and singing of verses reach an up-tempo with each of the four rhythmic patterns (chautaal) of beating drums and singing. Dhol beating (Drum beating) is usually accompanied rhythmically by melodious music from harmoniums, tambourines, *dhantal* (long steel rod based percussion instrument), *kartaal* (brass cymbals) and *jhika* (sistrum).

The verses sung enable the listener to visualise events and actions quite

vividly. These create an atmosphere of immense excitement and hilarity. Lyrics of the chautaal verses range from political coups to religious myths, biography of renowned leaders and history of the country; some who are not grounded in spirituality include sexually oriented verses. The chautaal includes subgenres of *chutkulas*, *kabira*, *jogira*, *ulara* and *jhumar* and the most significant farewell song, 'Sada anand', which signifies the divine love of Radha for Krishna and the iconic Holi celebrations between the two. The farewell song also implies the group of singers blessing the hosts for the hospitality; the blessing includes singing that translates to having their lives filled with colours.

Brenneis (1985) describes the singing of chautaal in Bhatgaon⁵:

Cautal, the second popular song form important in Bhatgaon, refers both to a style of singing and to a particular song genre performed during the Holi festival. In North Indian ... [it] brings forth and depends upon masti, a sense of total and divinely induced intoxication often aided by hearty draughts of hashish, milk and honey. In Fiji, on the other hand, both Holi and the cautal-singing associated with it seem bowdlerized and far too polite... Holi in Fiji clearly lacks the insult, ribaldry and release that it affords in India. Bhatgaon villagers, however, find it an occasion of high spirits, to be anticipated with mischievous glee and discussed afterwards with pleasure. For Bhatgaon Holi is the definitive occasion for tamasha- "fun"-in the village year.

Holi is a period when relationships are renewed; it becomes a day to forget and forgive. A glimpse of this relaxed atmosphere is best captured by this line of a chautaal sung during this period: *Phagun bhar baba devar lage....*⁶

This is also depicted in the same manner in India, the source of these celebrations. There is an atmosphere of societal relaxation of relationships and freedom from societal etiquettes⁷ especially of females. This is fictionalised in the 'memoirs' of a plantation 'overseer' in Fiji:

⁵ Brenneis described Bhatgaon as a village of 650 Fiji Indians, the descendents of indentured labor migrant. It is a rural village of Hindi-speaking Fiji Indians located on the northern side of Vanua Levu, the second largest island in the Republic of Fiji.

⁶ During the Holi period (Phagun) the father-in-law (baba) is same as (lage) devar (husband's younger brother). Implying that all proper etiquette between a daughter in law and the father in law are relaxed during this period of celebrations

⁷ This relaxation may be the reason for vulgar behaviour of males against females in India.

On the day of the Holi or Phagua, bands of women roamed the country side until noon, showering men with a red fluid meant to represent blood.....being the only period of licence during the long year, the women make most of it. By mid-day, unpopular overseer looked like what happened on St Batholomew's day; the popular were drenched in cheap perfume. From the glimmer of dawn, Lautoka and the estates were overrun by gaggles of excited women and girls out for a good time. With male control absent, things happened which staggered the godly. The afternoon and evening were different. Lautoka with its hair down, thronged the Indian fair...if they were sufficiently uninhabited by race-consciousness, and could laugh at themselves as well as others, people found that they were having an astonishingly good time (Gill 1970:121).

The above fictionalisation may reflect activities in certain parts of India, but are not seen in modern day Fiji. Mayer (1973) described Holi celebrations in Fiji during the 1950's as follows:

The Holi festival was traditionally a period of licence, where the poor were free to insult the rich, the women to forsake their modesty, and all classes of society to mingle and to throw red dye on each other, the sign of Holi. Freedom for normal restraint was carefully regulated in Fiji – it did not extend to women, nor to those men who did not wish to join in; but the aspect of equality was there, as expressed by one man when he said, 'the importance of the red dye is that everyone looks the same when it is poured on them, it makes everyone equal and happy (Mayer 1973: 87).

Mayer's description of Holi more or less fits the current celebrations of Holi but the passion and zeal with which it was celebrated has reportedly been diminishing in Fiji over time.

The Metamorphosis of Holi Celebrations

The reasons for the gradual diminution of the passion and zeal may be attributed to the transformation of the social system resulting from the transition of settlements from 'coolie lines'⁸ during indenture period to individual farm

⁸ These were rudimentary buildings constructed by plantation owners or employers where indentured labourers were housed.

holdings and homes in rural Fiji, to an increasingly urbanised population. The creation of physical distances also created social distances, and thus transformed relationships from informal ones of close knit living conditions to more formal in separated individual lives.

As in India where various parts of the country or different communities celebrate Holi in different ways, there are variations in Fiji as well. Women in Fiji are often in the backgrounds, more involved with cooking and distribution of sweets and snacks. The movement from coolie lines to individual holdings, strengthened the agrarian occupation and rural rooting of Indo-Fijians. Holi, therefore, has also been more associated with the rural areas and settlements. The mandali groups would move from house to house singing, playing colours and enjoying sweets and snacks. Children will be more concerned with playing colours and enjoying sweets prepared for the day.

In some parts of India, Holi celebrations are associated with singing and dancing and the drinking of 'bhanga'⁹ and men climb on top of each other to form a human pyramid up to the height from which a pot of buttermilk is hung. The one who breaks the pot is named the Holi King of the year. This is known as *Matki Phod* (breaking the pot). This practice of drinking 'Bhang' and 'Matki Phod' has been replaced in Fiji by drinking of yaqona (kava)¹⁰, though kava consumption is not restricted to Holi. In Fiji, consumption of liquor has also been observed during this occasion.

The practice of drinking yaqona was limited in the first and second generations of Indo-Fijians in Fiji. In the third and fourth generations the practice has become prevalent with its associated social problems. The forty-day Holi celebration now turn out to be a yaqona drinking spree for a lot of participants. Initially, yaqona was used traditionally by the indigenous of Fiji for traditional ceremonies; it has now become a highly commercialised crop and consumed widely by both the indigenous and Indo-Fijians.

All Hindu communities in Fiji celebrate Holi, mainly following the tradition of Vishnu Purana epic of the victory of good over evil and related to the Holika Dahan.

⁹ *Bhang* is an edible preparation of cannabis originating from the Indian Subcontinent. It has been used in food and drink as early as 1000 BC in ancient India. Bhang is traditionally distributed during the spring festival of Holi (Wikipedia).

¹⁰ *Kava* is Piper methysticum Kava is consumed for its sedating effects throughout the Pacific Ocean cultures of Polynesia, including Hawaii, Vanuatu, Melanesia, and some parts of Micronesia such as Palau. To a lesser extent, it is consumed in nations where it is exported as a herbal medicine.

A Typical Holi Celebration

Pratap Chand (2013) attempts to capture Holi celebrations at his village during the 1950s and 1960s, as a village boy in Fiji:

Holi fell during the rainy season. The singing of phagua was rotated among the homes....But I did not miss the burning of Holika on the hills. It was fun to light the fire amidst loud singing and chanting. We put a special plant found along the river called, redh, a symbolic representation of Prahlad. The fire was lit and the plant removed. This meant that Prahlad was saved from the fire.... The most important day was the actual day of the festival. I mixed rangh (coloured paint) brought from the shop in small granules and filled in small bottles.... The village mandali [sang] at all the homes... The members were treated with sweets mainly goolgoola and lakdimitha. At some homes adults engaged in rum drinking.... Adults could not throw rangh on everybody. One did not throw rangh on their village sisters, aunts and the like. But one could throw rangh on individuals with whom they had some joking relationships (Chand, 2013).

This description of Holi generally remains the format of celebrations in Fiji, though there have emerged slight variations across different localities. Of interest is how the celebrations differ between urban and rural areas. Initially, in Fiji, the celebrations were generally rural based; the reason was that urban Fiji had paucity of Indo-Fijian residents. The celebrations described above is typical of rural Hindu settled areas. Indo-Fijian urban numbers increased gradually, and more rapidly after the 1980's. now urban settlements are a population mixture. This changes the nature of the celebrations to be more centrally based around Hindu temples or Hindu community centers. With the urban drift of Indo-Fijians, centralized celebrations have become common features of urban Holi celebrations. The overall organization of festivities is done during evenings when people are home from work. The singing of the chautaals occurs during the evenings, and is held in public spaces like temples.

Though *Holi* is a Hindu festival, there is a marked secular content to it in Fiji that helps explain its appeal to people with different religious beliefs. The latter partake in the celebrations not in the ritualistic traditions but as a mark of entertainment and delicacies usually offered by friends and neighbours. The gist of the celebrations is joviality, fun, dancing and singing and playing with colours.

In the celebration of Holi, the gender norms in India are highly tilted in favour of males, with males at the forefront of the celebrations. While there is

no definitive view on whether this has been challenged in recent decades, what is known is that in certain places, certain practices are being challenged:

In Vrindavan in the state of Uttar Pradesh, widows have in recent years come out against tradition to partake in the festivities of colour. In Hindu tradition, widows are regularly expected and coerced to live a life of deprivation, giving up all worldly pleasures, including the use of colour even in their clothing. By participating in the celebrations, they have begun to defy those expectations and traditions (Bhandari, 2016).

Overall, in Fiji the drunkenness, sleaziness and the vulgarity associated with the festival in Bollywood movies, is not observed. While, males remain at the forefront, leading the rituals, females remain in the background, with the preparations of sweetmeats and prayers.

Hindu widows in Fiji do not have ritualised restrictions in celebrating Holi. Widows normally dress in light colours, but play Holi using 'facial powder' instead of using bright colours, and the play is within established relationships and friends.

The scale of the celebrations in Fiji, however, have come down. Interestingly, this is more so for rural areas, as rural populations have rapidly fallen, leading to the diminution of village mandalis. With urban drift, migration and somewhat cursory interest shown by now a more educated younger members of the society, the celebrations are also quite muted in urban Fiji. The large peri-urban belt – where a vast majority of Indo-Fijians now reside – is now the place where Holi celebrations remain marked and prominent.

Recently, efforts have been made to celebrate Holi in open public spaces in the urban centres. A new event - 'Holi in the Park' - is organized by the ruling political leaders, backed by business houses. This aims to bring people from different cultural backgrounds together and cement the brand of multiculturalism which the ruling party in Fiji has been promoting over the past decade.

There has also been a revival in chautaal competitions or 'faag sammel-am' at district and national levels. This is where singing groups compete for prizes. The major problem with this now, however is the lack of chautaal singers in the country. With the state-sponsored move to reduce the significance of Hindi – the language in which chautaals are often written – chances are that over the next decade there is likely to be a significant decline in chautaal singers in the country. Thus, whether the recent revival would be sustained, is doubtful.

Conclusion

Holi festival in Fiji is a community festival, celebrated in open spaces. It is a period of fun and joviality. Unlike other festivals, religious observances are not paramount; this festival coincides with harvests and onset of spring with its promising diversity of colours. It becomes a joyous occasion for celebrations amid plenty. It is observed over a period of forty days.

The mode of celebrations has not changed much from its inception in India. The celebrations have been localised and taken a local flavour especially in singing of chautaals and chutkulas. In Fiji it is turning out to be an occasion where inclusivity and diversity of different ethnic groups in the celebrations of Holi is a distinct possibility.

The intensity of celebrations, and the passion for it over the years has changed. From being a major festival with major celebrations in the 1950's to 1970's, its intensity declined after the 1987 coups, despite the fact that the coups should have given the greatest relevance for the theme of victory of good over evil. Rural depopulation of Indo-Fijians, and migration abroad are major reasons for the decline in the festivity intensities. Now the peri-urban areas of Fiji have become major locations for much of the celebration. Over the past decade or so, there has been a major revival in the celebration of this festival. But with the state's attempt to de-emphasise Hindi, the language in which Holi related literature is found, the current revival would most likely be short-lived.

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