

Holi: Hurling Colors At Peers Siddhi B Ranjitkar

Nepalis in general celebrate the spring festival called 'Fagu' or 'holi' for a week starting on the eighth day of the bright fortnight and ending on the full moon day of the month called 'Falgun' (February/March) following the Nepal calendar. The celebration of 'holi' reaches the peak on the last day of the festival. Unlike other regularly celebrated festivals, revelers neither make offerings of animal sacrifice to any deity nor take a fast for earning merits on this occasion, as this festival is only for enjoyment. They celebrate the festival hurling colors at each other, singing amorous songs and expressing the advent of the spring season. Some people link this festival with various myths.

During this festival Nepalis play with colors among themselves and with others means strangers, too. This is a first spring festival that does not involve the animal sacrifices and the people en mass going to any shrines of any deities and making offerings as usually done in Nepal but inspires people with amorous activities. However, the first day of this festival involves in making some kinds of offerings to demigod called Lord Krishna believed to be the human incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the symbol of romantic activities, and the couple called Kama and Rati: the god of love, and the goddess of desire respectively. Some women go to the old palace square and make offering to Lord Krishna and the couple Kama and Rati around a shrub set up at the center of the square symbolizing the tree on which Lord Krishna hanged the apparels of women-nude swimmers believing these deities bless them with the happy family life.

Nepalis celebrate it with great enthusiasm, as it comes after almost three-month long winter when Nepalis almost every day and night remain wrapped in long warm shawls. They throw away the shawls and come out to play with colors during this festival celebrated for a week. The Nevah community and the Terai people have special Holi songs that add colors to this festival. They call these songs 'Fagu' songs. In the Tarai areas, people sing Holi songs and eat sweet balls mixed with 'bhanga' (intoxicating herb) that make them tipsy.

Holi is the romantic festival, as Nepalis play with red color that stands for romance but it has distorted in time. Throwing red color at the women certainly means a romantic advance. In the past, only red vermillion was used to throw at women or at peers. Then came the balloons filled with red vermillion powder that any body could throw at women. Young people hurled such balloons at the beautiful women curiously looking through windows at the men playing with colors. However, currently, youngsters use any kind of colored water to splash at women or at the peers, as vermillion has become expensive.

If you happen to be in Nepal particularly in Kathmandu on the full moon day in February-March, you probably notice teenagers screaming at each other in excitement after hurling colored-water-filled balloons at each other. They might be on terraces, porches or on streets with a plastic bagful of balloons filled with fresh water or colored water and waiting for their chance to hurl those balloons at others. They often attempt to surprise the peers or neighbors by unannounced and well-targeted throws of balloons. If the balloons hit the targets then the attackers would go wild in screaming at the victims in excitement, if the attackers missed the targets the other side would go wild in excitement. Teenagers in groups armed with the colored-water-filled balloons walk from one place to another, looking for peers to hit. However, they might attack anybody if they found her/him fit to do so. So, if you are not willing to be one of their targets better stay home for a day on the 'holi' day.

The Home Ministry issues a customary notice of warning to the 'holi' revelers of possible legal actions against those hurling colored-water-filled balloons at strangers or at others

against their will. However, neither the police nor the players do care much about such a warning.

Officially the 'holi' festival starts off after ceremoniously setting up the three-tiered umbrella-like flagpole called "chir" at Basantapur in Kathmandu on the eighth day of the bright fortnight in other words one week before the full moon day. In the function Living Goddess Kumari presides over, the state priests officiate the setting up of the "chir" following the Vedic rituals at the auspicious time set by astrologers at the middle of the Basantapur Square for officially announcing the opening of the 'holi' festival. Encroaching on the age-old tradition of setting up amorous symbols called "chir", Prithvi Narayan Shah introduced this new tradition after the occupation of the Neval kingdoms more than 250 years ago.

The state priests also set up a shrub with multi-colored strips of linen hung on it at the palace courtyard called Layaku near Hanuman gate to the ancient palace in Kathmandu. This is also called a "chir". The state priests follow the Vedic rituals for setting up a shrub as a replica of the holy tree called 'kadam' on which Lord Krishna hung the apparels left by women for swimming nude in the Jamuna River. Such a shrub is brought from the forest called Shleshmantak at Pashupati Gaushala in Kathmandu.

In Bhaktapur, the tradition of setting up the male reproductive organ made out of wood inserting into the symbolic female organ in a piece of red cloth continues even today to mark the celebration of the 'holi' festival. Both of these human reproductive organs together called "chir" remain suspended from a ceiling of the temple to Lord Bhimsen at the Dattatriya Square in Bhaktapur starting on the eighth day of the bright fortnight until the end of the full moon day of the month called 'Falgun'. The male and female reproductive organs believed to be of Lord Bhimsen and his spouse Draupadi. The wooden male organ is of about three feet long and of about six inches in diameter and a female organ is made out of a piece of red cloth with a hole at the middle. They clean those items in the water of the stream flowing by the temple to Brahmayani and then set those items up at the temple to Lord Bhimsen in Bhaktapur. The female organ made out of cloth hangs from a ceiling vertically and the wooden male organ hangs horizontal just passing the hole in the red cloth remain for the public display for a week.

Priests set up "chir" at the public square in Lalitpur. They set up a pillar believed to be the male organ and the ground on which the pillar stands is believed to be the female organ in Lalitpur

In Tarai: the flatland in southern Nepal, as the symbol of opening of the 'holi' festival, the people set up a "chir" on every village courtyard, and then make bonfire every night during the period of this festival. Every night they sing amorous songs beating drums. They eat sweet balls mixed with 'bhanga' that causes them tipsy. Madheshi people end the 'holi' festival celebrating it with more vigor than the people in the Kathmandu Valley one day after the full moon day.

The tradition has it that on the night of the full moon day, the personnel of the concerned 'guthi' lower the "chir" standing at Basantapur in Kathmandu, and uproot the shrub at the old royal palace officially ending the celebration of the 'holi' festival in Kathmandu. They take both the "chir" and the shrub to the Bagmati River in Kathmandu and burn those things down there.

In Bhaktapur, the celebration of the 'holi' festival ends after the attendants to the Goddess Taleju bring out the gold-plated idols of Malla kings including of the kings such as

Bhupatindra Malla and Jagajyoti Malla to the public display hurling red powder in air and smearing red powder on the faces of people around them.

The Nevah community celebrated the 'holi' festival amorously in the past. They sang different love songs. They made vermilion-filled wax balls with love letters in them and hurled those balls at the women they loved causing the whole bodies of women covered with vermilion: bright red powder that represents love between a man and a woman. Women return smiles signaling the acceptance of the love and affection they have shown.

Some of the meanings of the songs, the Nevah community sang are as follow, 'my dear young lady, I want to smear you with vermilion on the occasion of 'holi' festival, don't get angry, as it is a festival, so just get some vermilion.' Vermilion is an amorous representation; so, men want to smear women with vermilion during the spring season. Another popular 'holi' song is 'I saw a woman looking out of the window from where a chain of mustard plants is hanging; and I need the woman and cannot survive without her.'

Nepalis have been celebrating the 'Fagu' or 'holi' festival entirely for fun on the advent of the spring season. Later on, some religious-minded individuals must have related this festival to one myth or another suited to their religion, culture and tradition. In the course of time, both Hindu and Buddhist Nepalis began relating this festival to a Hindu and a Buddhist myth to explain its origin.

A legend has it that noticing some women swimming in nude, Lord Krishna picks up their apparels left on the bank of the river and hangs them on the branches of the 'kadam' tree and begins playing his favorite flute in order to set the tradition of not bathing in nude. On hearing the soothing tune of a flute, the nude women swimmers look around and notice Krishna sitting on one of the branches of the tree and playing his flute. To their horror they also notice that their apparels are also hanging on the branches of the tree.

Nude women swimmers beg Krishna to return their apparels and save them from disgrace. However, Krishna pretends that he has not heard their plea. Finally, Krishna agrees on returning their apparels on condition that they will never swim or bathe in nude.

Women in turn want to make fun of Krishna. So, they make a plan on smearing Krishna with various colors and making fun of him. They ask Krishna to put on his best apparel and come over to a courtyard to meet them. All the women get together at a courtyard with a bagful of powder of different colors. Unsuspected Krishna comes in his best clothing to the courtyard where all those women gather. As soon as Krishna come over to them, the women encircle him and every woman starts off smearing his face with the colors they have brought in revenge to what Krishna has done to them when they have swam in the Jamuna River. Some people believe that the tradition of playing with colors has started since then.

Another myth about the beginning of the 'holi' festival is about Holika attempting to burn her nephew to establish her brother as a god. Atheist King Hiranya Kasyapu does not recognize anybody as a god rather he declares himself a god and orders all teachers in his kingdom to teach all children that he is the god no-one else. The king has a son called Prahalda. However, his own son Prahalda does not agree with his teacher on accepting his father Hiranya Kasyapu as a god; for him the only god is Lord Vishnu. He meditates on Lord Vishnu whenever he has some free time defying the order of his father Hiranya Kasyapu.

Hiranya Kasyapu tries every possible trick on his defiant son Prahalda to distract him from Lord Vishnu. However, he could not succeed in doing so. Then, he sees no alternative to destroying his disobedient son to establish himself as a god in his kingdom. So, he orders

his courtiers to dispose of his insolent son Prahalda. They make many attempts on the life of Prahalda; however, Lord Vishnu saves Prahalda from death each time they try to kill him.

Ultimately, Hiranya Kasyapu approaches his sister Holika and asks her for a favor of destroying his rebellious son Prahalda burning him on her lap while she would emerge unharmed. Holika has received a boon of any fire not burning her. So, Hiranya Kasyapu is sure that her sister will not refuse his request for destroying his son in other word her nephew taking him with her into bonfire.

Holika wants to do something good for his brother taking the life of her nephew but burns herself into ashes. She takes Prahalda on her lap and jumps from the palace terrace into the bonfire made at the royal courtyard. Prahalda is not terrified but chants the name of Lord Vishnu while airborne with his aunt. Holika with Prahalda on her lap lands on the bonfire; Prahalda emerges untouched by the fire while Holika burns to ashes.

Smearing the face of Prahalda with red powder: symbol of victory, devotees of Lord Vishnu welcome him back to the world of devotees again. So, some of us believe that Nepalis have set the tradition of celebrating the festival of 'holi' to mark the victory of virtue over the vice Holika represented, and derived the word 'holi' from Holika. Nepalis make bonfire at each village in terai for commemorating the anniversary of this event every year.

The Nevah Buddhists also not far behind relating this festival with a myth. They relate this festival to a merchant leaving his family behind gone to Lhasa seeking fortune there. After amassing a huge wealth, the merchant called Singha-sartha-bahu wants to return back home in Nepal. However, he finds out that his colleagues are in love with the local women, and are under their control. He could not help his colleagues in turning their back on the women because they have been under the magic spell of the women.

He then prays to Lord Karunamaya: one of the incarnations of Lord Avalokitesvara for help. One night, the lord appears in his dream and explains to him how his friends and he could escape from these women.

Following the instructions of Lord Karunamaya, his friends and the merchant sneak out of Lhasa at mid night and travel back home without turning back throughout the journey. In Nepal their friends and relatives welcome them jubilantly hurling red powder in air to express their joy and victory on their return. Nepalis have been repeating this celebration of return of Singha-sartha-bahu and his friends every year setting the tradition of playing with colors in joy. This celebration has been the 'Fagu' festival.

Later on, merchant Singha-sartha-bahu becomes a 'Cakan dyo'. Local people deify him as a 'dya' means a deity and worship him, and even hold a festival in his honor on the occasion of the 'Fagu' festival once a year. So, local people at Thamel in Kathmandu take out 'Cakan dya' on the full moon day every year.

The 'Fagu' or 'holi' festival is a non-religious and non-sectarian festival. Almost all Nepalis celebrate it for a bit of fun and frolic after a long spell of dreary winter season. Although it is linked to various myths, this festival is mainly for welcoming the spring season in high spirits.

When the tradition of this 'holi' festival was set in Nepal is a matter of research but the Licchavi rulers must have made it an enjoyable festival, as Licchavis were known for pioneering the cultural development in Nepal. Their administration had lasted from 300 to 879 A.D.

The social importance of this festival has reached the peak during the reign of the Malla Kings starting in 1200 A.D. and ending in 1769 A.D, as they gave a royal importance to it. So, at that time the high-ranking state officials needed to wear an especially prepared white linen dress and go to the royal courtyard for playing colors with the then Malla royalties. The royalties took part in playing 'Fagu' with the high-ranking officials at the palace courtyard and then have a nice-festive dinner in the evening. They made it mandatory to the high-ranking officials to dress in clean white and go to the palace for receiving vermilion from the king and the queen, and other royalties as their blessings. Common people also went to their seniors and elders to receive vermilion from them as blessings on the 'Fagu' festival day. This tradition has faded away.

During the last millennium, the 'Fagu' or 'holi' festival has undergone a sea change from a respectable color game to a current day nuisance of hurling colors at pedestrians and strangers indiscriminately without any warning. It is a fun for somebody but misery for others.

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Chir at Basantapur



Chir at Bhaktapur



Holika carrying Nephew Prahalda to Bonfire

Source: Facebook Newa Mhasika



A couple playing with colors

