Holi: The Feast of Love

India’s Spring Festival in a U.P. Village, 1951-79

McKim Marriott University of Chicago

rev. 2/18/07
"Kishan Garhi" village is in Aligarh District about 100 miles southeast of India's capital at New Delhi. (The "East Pakistan" of this 1951 map became Bangladesh in 1972.)
The village's 1950 census showed members of 20 different Hindu and 4 Muslim castes, mostly known by the names of their occupational specialties. All were ranked according to their givings and receivings of food and services, transactions evident at some 30 local feasts during the 1951–52 year.
Participant observer Marriott receiving a protective charm from his Sanadhya Brahman priest at the August Saluno festival. He lived in the village for 14 months in 1951–52, for 6 months after the "Green Revolution" in 1968-69, and revisited briefly in 1979 and 2004. Photos here are of activities from or similar to those of 1951–52, except where noted.
"The Feast of Love," the text partly illustrated here, appeared originally in 1966 in Milton Singer (ed.), *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, pp. 200–12 and 229–31. It has often been reprinted elsewhere, as it was recently in Diane P Mines and Sarah Lamb (eds), *Everyday Life in South Asia*, pp. 249–60 (Indiana University press, 2002)
Members of a joint household of *Kachvāhā Ṭhākur* or *Kāchi*-caste farmers pose for a family portrait, illustrating what villagers consider proper behavior. Males born in the village stand forward, considering me a "village brother" or "father's brother." My "village sisters" do not cover their faces. But the men's wives (who have all come from other villages) count me (the photographer) a potential mate, so they stand back and respectfully cover their heads and faces. The eldest female, my "village mother," stands in the background, covering her head, but showing me a smiling face.
Ramji Lal, a 14-year old boy of *Baghele Ṭhākur* or *Gadaria* Goatherd caste (crowned, center) being wedded in 1951 to an 11-year old bride (covered at left) in her natal home, 30 miles away. Ramji Lal and his family’s Brahman priest (right) from a village next to Kishan Garhi, add incense to the wedding fire. The couple remains silent throughout the ceremony. Present behind them are the boy’s male kin and family Barber.
A 16-year old Brahman bride clings to her brothers as my Jeep is loaded to carry her and her groom to Kishan Garhi, many miles away. She wails and screams, “I am dead! My mother and father are dead I" The faces of her kin mirror her anguish. After I had driven a mile or two, her new husband, who was seated beside me, took charge. "Shut up!" he said. "You are bawling like a Camār Leatherworker." Thereafter she made no sound. [Photo is from 1969, following legislation that raised the minimal age for girls to be married.]
The wife of a Muslim *Telī Oilpresser* grinds grain daily to make the unleavened bread that is the family's main food. I am younger than her husband, but with exaggerated respect she covers her head and complains in loud whispers to a child behind her about my queries. When I object to her deferential silence and address her as "elder brother's wife" (construing ours as a joking relationship), she drops the cloth from her head and says, "If you are my husband's younger brother, get out of here and stop bothering me!"
A woman of Nāū Barber caste here works at another wifely duty—coating her front platform with fresh cowdung plaster to make it clean for the festival. Her husband with his barbering kit watches her work. Shortly after this 1951 photo, she and neighboring wives waved fistfuls of plaster toward me, urging me to return on the full-moon day "to play Holi" with them. I agreed, but wondered just what such "play" might mean.
HOLI

Mahadev Bawa, a Jāṭ Ṭhākur laborer, jokester, and junkie, plays a flute during the Vasant "Spring" fortnight that precedes Holi. Welcoming the hot weather that will soon follow, many villagers dye some of their clothing yellow, the color of this season when the mustard oilseed crop bursts into flower.
Preparing for the communal bonfire, singing women of many castes come in procession to contribute cowdung cakes and wind protective threads around the site.
Other combustibles for the bonfire are gathered by Muslim and Hindu boys. They have stolen someone's unused door, also thatch from my house's roof. I object, but they say that by village custom, nothing once placed there as fuel can be removed.
On the full-moon day all households extinguish their regular cooking fires. Children decorate hearths for new domestic fires to be kindled from the communal bonfire.
Essential fuel for all new Holi fires is dried cowdung. A housewife of Jāṭ caste displays necklaces and wafers of dung that she has reshaped from material with which she had modeled "Grandfather Cowdung Wealth" (Lord Kṛṣṇa) for worship just after Divali as described in Marriott [ed.] *Village India* p. 200.
FIRE
The evil Holikā’s cremation fire is to be ignited at the rising of the full moon of March with which northern India begins the month Phālgun. Lighting the Holi fire in here is the inauspicious duty of an appointed Brahman, the "Master of the Village Site," but in 1951 Mahadeva Bawa actually beat him to that task. (Both later suffered disasters.)
Males of all castes come to the Holi fire, providing that their respective households have suffered no deaths during the preceding year. They roast stalks of green barley, then circle the fire in two directions, saluting each other with "Rām Rām, Šāh!" or "Jai ..Śrī Kṛṣṇa!" and exchanging roasted grains. Here men of the Turai "Water Carrier" and Brahman castes greet each other, exchange grains, and embrace.
Another pair, one a Barber, the other a Camār Leatherworker laborer, trade salutations, barley grains, and embraces. (Only personal acquaintance enables an observer to recognize the caste identities of the men who mingle on such an occasion.)
Here 3 meet at one time—a Muslim *Faqir* Beggar and a Brahman man standing to exchange, while a young *Camār* laborer touches the elder Brahman's feet.
Married women do not attend the fire, but here an elder Brahman widow—many male's "mother" or "grandmother" by village kinship terminology—is deferentially saluted at the fire by a young man of Khāṭik Cutter caste.
Men carry coals from the Holi fire to rekindle cooking fires in every house. The water first heated on this new fire is preserved in many houses as a powerful curative.
Men also carry roasted barley from the communal fire to wives, children, and men who have remained at home. House doors are left open until late to receive such visitors.
DUST

Before dawn house doors are chained shut again. Gangs of boys take over the village lanes, demanding that everyone come out and play Holi with them.
Hunted down in a field, I find myself looking up at mud-covered young Kumhar Potters, Oil Pressers, and Camārs.
This young Cutter widow has just been doused with a pail of cowdung water by a lover whom she had recently jilted in favor of a wealthier Brahman.
Karhera Cotton-carder, Beggar, and Camār youths break pots on my door.
They batter my house with mud bricks and me with handfuls of dust.
As dwellers in Lord Kṛṣṇa's fabled land of Braj, villagers are pretty sure that He started the Holi tradition of men and women dousing each other with colored water. At noon everyone bathes and puts on fresh clothing for the afternoon's doings.
COLOR
COLOR

A Brahman wife is so pleased with my Kāyastha Scribe assistant that she grabs him to decorate his fresh white shirt with blue dye.
Men play with colors among themselves "to show their love." A Jāt Ṭhākur exlandlord-farmer of Kishan Garhi greets his friend, a Bārahensi Baniya Merchant living in a neighboring village, by smearing his face with red powder.
Having recently been pressed to pay a painfully large bribe to the police for his landlord friend, the Merchant replies by massaging the landlord's head with a bucket of diesel oil.
Holi-playing so well fits the ambivalent feelings between the families making marriages for their children that it often breaks out at weddings, whatever the season (here January). These men of the groom's party (who will soon carry away a local girl) have just been doused with liquid colors by their hostesses, the bride’s women.
As Jeep-driver for the groom at this wedding, I too, get doused and lovingly beaten on the back with a rolling pin and turmeric-stained hand-prints by the bride's mother.
STICKS
STICKS

Village wives whose passions are not satisfied by throwing colored water use sticks. On Holi afternoon, they may beat any local man they can catch, making themselves difficult subjects for my camera. Men try to avoid the wives' blows by dodging behind sticks whose ends they plant on the ground, or by running—the tactic I usually chose.
By 1969, such spontaneous, irregular attacks on married men by stick-wielding wives were partly replaced by a formal game in which a team of 10 wives defend with sticks a large cake of locally made brown sugar. A team of 10 husbands try to seize the sugar cake and escape with it from the circle of wives without getting beaten themselves. A spectator sport for the audience perched on the walls of this compound, such a game has continued, I was told in 2004.
DANCE

Kishan Garhi is the home of a family of itinerant Jogī-caste clowns and reciters of Śaiva legends. On Holi afternoon 1952, Jogī men dressed as women dance and sing in a village lane. They inspire other villagers, many stoned on bhang, to do likewise.
Mahadev Bawa dances wearing donkey bells.
A Jogī boy, an elder Brahman, and others join in.
Holī-playing spills over into the following days. In the courtyard of a Jat ex-landlord's house, a Muslim Mīrāsī dancer performs with lewd gestures for an audience of women and children. [1969]
An American visitor to the village, a graduate student from Berkeley, catches the dancing bug. [1969]