

Holla Mahalla at Anandpur

Humans celebrate the end of winter and the arrival of spring in their own unique way, in different parts of the world. The celebration is not necessarily linked to any particular religion, since it can be traced back to the pagan times. In India this festival goes by the name of Holi. It is a period of joy and rejoicing at the arrival of spring, with people sprinkling colored water at each other on this occasion to mark the advent of the balmy days! In time, India lost its way under the pressure of the Muslim conquest and the festival came to be associated with people who call themselves Hindus; they constitute a majority (85%) in India. In time, the innocent act of sprinkling colored water on passersby was replaced by throwing filth and rubbish at others, leading to confrontations (rather than joyful interactions) between people in the street.

Guru Gobind Singh (the tenth Sikh Guru) decided to replace this practice with a big annual religious gathering at Anandpur, in the state of Panjab. It is not clear when Holla was initiated but most likely it was introduced after the birth of the Khalsa in 1699. On this occasion, Sikhs participated in sports, musical and poem reciting contests, display of skills of martial arts, playful sprinkling of rose water and saffron powder, etc. The Guru renamed the celebration of the festival 'HOLLA.' So Sikhs celebrate Holla and Hindus celebrate Holi! The celebrations last several days. On the last day Guru Gobind Singh used to divide his Sikhs into two groups, each wearing a different color uniform. One of these groups was put in charge of an enclosure representing a fort, with that group acting as the garrison responsible for holding the fort against invaders. The other group with the Guru as its leader would constitute an invading army bent on conquering the fort. Killing or wounding was forbidden on both sides. Mock battles were staged. The generals on both sides displayed their martial skills and strategy in attacks and counter attacks. At last the citadel was conquered and the victory was celebrated in a unique way. A heap of Karah Parshad was piled upon wide white sheets in a clean open place. The Sikhs were to rush to the heap and eat as much of it as each person could get hold of. This activity provided a great deal of joyful mirth, fun, camaraderie, and companionship. The celebration was called the Holla Mahalla. It may be considered an opportunity for the Sikhs to sharpen their military skills for the coming wars that were forced upon them by the neighboring Chieftains and the Mughal Army. Guru Gobind Singh was evicted from Anandpur in 1704 under harrowing circumstances. This is not the place for me to go into details about the heroism displayed by the Sikh soldiers in their skirmishes with the enemy on the historic battlefields of Chamkaur, Muktsar, etc.

History indicates that Sikhs continued to celebrate Holi even in Maharaja Ranjit Singh's time. The Maharaja himself went out among the throngs and made merry often in a manner quite unbecoming of a monarch. History indicates that he participated with equal enthusiasm in other Hindu and Muslim festivals too. This was a part of his strategy to convince people that he did not intend to set up a Sikh Kingdom but a Punjabi State in which the Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs would be equal before the law and enjoy the same privileges and duties; Sikhs constituted a bare 7 % of the total population in the kingdom.

In a generally peaceful world of today and a revolution in the weapons and tactics of war, Holla Mahalla has lost its original military significance; it is not considered a major Sikh festival now. However, it is still celebrated at Anandpur with martial competitions and a mock battle in which Nihangs participate enthusiastically, displaying their unique sword wielding skills known as 'Gatka.'

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