

# Varied hues

Holi is observed in many parts of the country. But unlike popular perception, all the celebrations are not alike. By Anil Mulchandani



**ONE OF INDIA'S** most celebrated festivals, Holi marks the end of winter and the beginning of summer. In religious terms, it is dedicated to the salvation of Vishnu devotee Prahlada and the death of Holika, the evil she-demon who tried to kill him. According to this belief, the demon Hiranyakashipu had been granted a boon that made it difficult to be killed. His own son, Prahlada, was a devotee of Lord Vishnu. When all his attempts to kill his son failed, he ordered him to sit on a pyre in the lap of Holika, Hiranyakashipu's demoness sister. Holika burnt to death, while Prahlada survived unharmed.

Typically Holi is celebrated by the lighting of bonfires in which Holika is burnt to symbolise the victory of good over evil. In the morning, Dhuleti is celebrated involving sprinkling coloured powder called *gula* on each other and dousing anyone in range with coloured water. Holi is celebrated specially exuberantly in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and other states of central India.

There are other celebrations associated with Holi from temple rituals to folk fairs. An unusual Holi celebration used to be held at Ahore in south-western Rajasthan. Called *Bhata Gair*, this ceremony was a ritual game of two teams which would compete to cross a fence between them. Supporters of each team would throw stones on the rival team trying to invade into their area. This was stopped after serious injuries and calamities.

A number of tribal fairs occur in Chhota Udepur and other districts of eastern Gujarat and the Jhabua, West Nimar and other districts in western Madhya Pradesh during Holi, especially on market days in these regions. One of the most easily accessible is the Kvant or Kawant Fair held near Chhota Udepur. From Chhota Udepur, driving towards Kvant, it is possible to see large groups of women in colourful clothes and wearing attractive jewellery walking to attend the fair. Most of the men are also colourfully attired for the occasion. Jeeps, buses and trucks are jam-packed with

people in their festive best heading towards the site of the fair.

Sometimes it is possible to see groups of men playing the flute and women playing cymbals (*manjeera*) as they walk towards the fair site. At the fair site, the atmosphere is festive. Men with painted bodies, peacock feathers adorning their turbans, and sometimes masks to match, dance, play musical instruments and form human pyramids. The dances are vibrant and enlivened by music, with gourds hung on the belts of the dancers rattling to enhance the rhythm of the dance. They may have bells or stone-filled gourds around their waist, which rattle with their hip-jerking dance movements as they stamp their feet in the long procession.

During Holi, Dakor turns into a key pilgrim town of Gujarat for Krishna devotees thanks to the story of Bodana. According to legend, Bodana, a diehard Krishna devotee, regularly went on full moon days from Dakor to Dwarka. As Bodana grew older and could not make the pilgrimage, Krishna is said to have agreed to stay in Dakor. Thus, the Ranchhodrai Temple here is considered the abode of the original Krishna idol that once rested in Dwarka. The Fagun Purnima Fair here during Holi attracts several hundred thousand pilgrims. Many walk from cities like Ahmedabad to Dakor as part of the pilgrimage.

Braj, in the southwestern corner of the Gangetic valley centred around Mathura-Vrindavan, is revered by Hindus as the place where Lord Krishna spent his idyllic childhood. The Braj Pradesh includes Vrindavan, Govardhan, and some places on river Yamuna. Braj Bhoomi is part of the pilgrimage called Chaurasi Kos Parikrama. As Holi is closely associated with Lord Krishna, Mathura, Vrindavan, Nandagaon and Barsana become religious tourism destinations during the Fagun Poornima season. Holi is celebrated for 16 days with special puja and Krishna worship in the region. Nearby places like Agra, Hathras and Aligarh are also sites for Holi celebrations. The Holi songs of Braj mandal are sung in pure Braj *bhasha*.

At Barsana, the Lath Mar holi is unique. Women beat up men with sticks while spectators sing and chant. Males sing provocative lyrics about women, who attack the singers with lathis. The men protect themselves with shields. The watching crowd can get quite hysterical with excitement at the contest.

Kanpur has huge Holi celebrations spread over seven days. Towards the end of the week-long celebrations, the Ganga Mela is held around Anuradha Nakshtra. Organised at the Sarsaiyya ghat, Ganga Mela was started by freedom fighters after the Mutiny, under the leadership of Nana Saheb. It aims at unity between different religious communities. Holi is also one of the most



## GO NATURAL THIS HOLI

There is a new trend associated with the most vibrant festival – Holi is now turning organic since artificial colours contain harmful chemicals. Organic colours are mainly obtained from plant sources, soils and minerals and a combination of these. Roots, tree barks, leaves, seeds, vegetable extracts, coloured earth and salts are used to prepare the colours.

“Since the Holi colour market is unorganised, a lot of cheaply available industrial dyes are used to produce colours making them harmful for humans. These colours usually use silica, mica and other chemicals as a base. Furthermore, the pollution caused by these colours is potent in terms of quantity and level of toxicity to a lot of surface and ground water sources. These colours are also much harder to wash off so we use more water to scrub them off,” says Tina Datta, Co-Founder and Managing Director, NaturalMantra.com, an online store for natural, organic and eco-friendly products..

This Holi, have fun and make your own colours. Read on to find out how. “The safest way to prepare colors at home using known ingredients is by mixing Turmeric (Haldi), Kumkum and Beetroot extract which is totally safe for skin and has zero side effects and clothes can be washed easily. Fast and strong

colors can be prepared by using arecanut soaked in water, barks of peepal tree but cause permanent stains on clothes,” says Dr. Harish, Director, Getta Pvt. Ltd., a leading marketing and advertising firm.

Other experts recommend two tips when dealing with Holi colours: use only powder colours that will reduce the amount of water you need to remove colours and smear oil or heavy moisturisers on the body and use hair oil to ensure that colours come off easily.

Here is how you go about preparing different organic colours:

**Yellow:** Use a mix of turmeric and chickpea flour mix. “The proportion of turmeric to besan ideally should be 1:2, one spoon of haldi for two spoons of besan,” says Datta. You could boil the haldi in a small quantity of water if you want a richer colour. For a sunny yellow, soak a few marigold flower petals into a litre of water, strain and use.

**Green:** “You could use fresh vegetables like spinach, coriander, mint or tomato leaves soaked into a paste and kept for easy mixing with water. Avoid henna and amla leaves as they stain clothes and skin to some degree,” says Sindu Aven, Academic Design and Content, Zee Learn Limited. You can also dry and powder the leaves of



the Gulmohur tree.

**Blue:** Mix dry jacaranda flowers, powder them, mix with water, strain and use.

**Red:** Use homemade sindoor as a red gulal. “Mix the lime powder used on betel nut leaves with a bit of turmeric and a tiny amount of water or dry hibiscus flowers for a few days before using that powder as a deep red gulal,” says Datta. Red hibiscus flowers can be dried and powdered and mixed with water. Boiling the peels of red pomegranate is another option. Or else use two teaspoonfuls of red sandalwood in a litre of water, strain and use.

**Pink:** Boil beetroot and keep the concentrated colour aside. Mix proportionately to achieve varied hues of magenta and pink.

**Brown:** It can be made by boiling leaves or coffee beans. “The concentration has to be diluted adequately to avoid stains,” says Aven.

– Bindu Gopal Rao

important festivals in Gorakhpur and other towns of eastern Uttar Pradesh. As part of Holi Milan, people visit each other's houses, sing Holi songs and apply coloured powder on each other.

Holi is celebrated at Dol Poornima, Dol Utsav or Dol Jatra in West Bengal and Odisha. Dedicated to Lord Krishna, during this festival a richly ornamented Lord Krishna bedecked with coloured powder, flowers, bright clothing and other decorations, often together with Radha, is taken in a swinging palanquin for a procession to the accompaniment of music, blaring of conch shells, trumpets, colour sprinkling and shouts of ‘Jai’. Followers of medieval Vaishnavite spiritual leader, Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, celebrate the Dol Poornima during his birth anniversary. At the Jagannath Temple at Puri and in other centres of Odisha, the idols of Jagannath are taken around the streets. In Puri, the deity coming out from the main temple is much awaited by devotees. At the *mandap*, the deities are placed on a swing.

Along the Konkan coast, from south western Maharashtra to northern Kerala through Goa and Karnataka, there are various kind of Holi celebrations. One of the biggest is Dhakto Shigmo or Shig Mahotsav in Goa. Dhakto Shigmo begins five days before Holi and the celebrations include colourful street floats depicting myths and folk heroes, folk theatre, music and dance, sword

## DOCSPEAK

Two leading medical practitioners on skin allergies and how to prevent them

### EFFECTS OF HOLI COLOURS ON SKIN

The festival of colours is back, immersing people with much needed joy and enthusiasm. Most Holi colours sold in the market are oxidised metals or industrial dyes mixed with engine oil.

Green comes from copper sulphate, purple is chromium iodide, silver is aluminum bromide, black is lead oxide and shiny colours are the result of powdered glass being added to the colours. All these are toxic and can result in anything from skin allergies, eye irritation, blindness and much more. When washed, they enter rivers, lakes and other water bodies and the soil and increase pollution. So, everyone should play safe Holi safe as these colors can lead various medical complications. Here is a partial list of chemical colours, compositions and health effects:

**Lead Oxide (Black):** Renal failure, learning disability

**Copper Sulphate (Green):** Eye allergy, temporary blindness

**Chromium Iodide (Purple):** Bronchial asthma, allergies

**Aluminium Bromide (Silver):** Carcinogenic in nature

**Mercury Sulphite (Red):** Skin cancer



**Dr. Ajaya Kashyap,**  
Chief Surgeon,  
Cosmetic & Plastic,  
Fortis Hospital

I suggest you go for natural and eco-friendly colours. They are made from natural substances, which are safe and soothing both for you and your environment. They are costlier, but are worth their price.

Skin allergies come in various forms. Eczema is one of the most common skin complications occurring due to the effect of artificial colours. In this allergic condition, skin becomes scaly and appears to be inflamed. Besides, blisters appear that that cause severe itching. Atopic Dermatitis is another plausible allergy occurring due to the chemical reaction of colours. The allergy causes severe itching, pain and blistering.

Rhinitis, an allergic reaction, is an inflammation of the nasal membrane, wherein one experiences nasal congestion, discharge, itching and sneezing. Artificial colours can also cause severe damage to the airways, which can lead to asthma. In this allergic condition, one experiences breathing difficulty and shortness of breath. Another possible allergic condition occurring due to inhalation of chemically treated colours is pneumonitis, wherein one experiences fever, chest tightness, fatigue and breathing difficulty.

### HOW TO PREVENT SKIN ALLERGIES

Here are a few tips on how to prevent skin allergies during Holi

- Avoid all facial treatments during this period. If you are prone to allergies and rashes, visit your dermatologist to check whether you need precautionary medication.
- Harsh chemicals in the colours can cause itching and rashes, which lead to eczema upon scratching. Contact Dermatitis, abrasion, irritation, itching, dryness, Pruritus and burning sensation are the other problems. The best way to protect your skin is to apply a thick layer of oil or petroleum jelly or face cream on the exposed parts of the body an hour before you step out.
- Put a lot of oil on your hair to protect them from harmful colours so that residue from the dyes does not get stuck to your hair and scalp.
- Wear clothes with long sleeves and full length bottoms to protect your skin.
- Do not sit in the sunlight after playing Holi. This makes it difficult to remove the residual colour later on.



**Dr Abha Kashyap,**  
Aesthetic Image  
Consultant, MedSpa

- Don't remove colors by scratching with nails. Use a granular scrub on the body and face to get rid of the colours.
- Wash the colour from your hair two-three times and remove it completely. Apply a lot of moisturizer on the body and face after taking shower.
- It is always healthy to play with natural colors made of turmeric and flowers. Here is how you can obtain some of the colours:
  - ▶ You can make *gulal* at home by mixing red sandalwood powder with a bit of *maida* or *atta*.
  - ▶ You can also boil the red sandalwood powder with water to make red coloured water.
  - ▶ Mix *haldi* and *besan* (gram flour) to get a bright yellow powder.
  - ▶ Mix the paste of green leafy vegetables in water to make green coloured water.
  - ▶ Plain henna powder mixed in water will give you a vibrant orange colour.
  - ▶ You can mix *henna* powder containing *amla* in water for a bright brown colour.

displays and colourful powder sprays.

On the first day, the patron dieties are bathed and dressed, and feasts are held. On Holi day the celebrations at towns like Panaji, Madgaon, Vasco, Mapusa and Ponda can be specially vibrant with processions accompanied by drums and cymbals. At Panaji, the evening parade is vibrant with spectacular effects, flamboyantly dressed people, acrobatics, decorated umbrellas and illuminated floats exhibiting dieties and popular figures.

Traditional culture like Kunbi tribal dances and the various performing art forms from different talukas in Goa are part of the Panaji parade. Supported by the state government, the parade often features entertainment from other states. The various influences on Goan culture - Konkani, Portuguese, Maharashtrian, and tribal - together with newly developed cosmopolitanism - are on display at the Shigmo celebrations in the bigger towns.

In rural areas, there are different festivities in various villages, with certain villages actually earmarked for particular events. Village residents gather for chorus songs. Processions of performers go from door to door with percussion instruments, and in return for donations put up a performance wishing the house owner well.

Some of the temple celebrations are specially famous and draw visitors even from neighbouring states.

Holi or Phakuwa is a big festival in Assam. Dol Jatra and spraying of colours are both part of the festivities that go on for three days. The Doul Govinda Temple in Guwahati is famous for its Holi programmes. In lower Assam, the burning of clay huts recreates the Holika legend. Barpeta is well-known for the Doul Mela celebrations.

In southern India, Kama Dahan is part of Holi celebrations. The legend here goes something this. When Kama, the God of Love, fired an arrow at Shiva to awaken him from a penance, Lord Shiva opened his third eye and set Kama on flames. When Kama's wife Rati asked for forgiveness, Shiva assured her that Rati and Kama would be reborn on Holi. ■