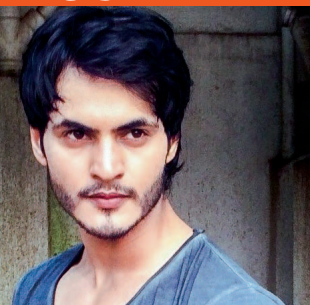


The Asian Age

MUST READ



SCREENARIO ...36

TAKING THE LEAD

It's not just the hero or heroine who is important



HEADLINERS ...43

THE TOP SECRET GIANTS

An NY firm is pumping in billions into India



GALAXY ...45

A FIGHTING SPIRIT

Suman Sharma loves her fighter planes



SPORTFOLIO ...48

GOOD TO BE PLAYFUL

Abhishek Bachchan opens up about his sporty side



COLOURS OF HAPPINESS
Holi is a festival of foolery and frolic, love and laughter, and spreading happiness of the cavorting kind.
PHOTO: ABHIJEET MUKHERJEE

HOLI HIGH

THERE'S A SPECIAL HIGH TO HOLI — A SPIRITED GAIETY, A PLAYFUL BOISTEROUSNESS... AND A LICENSE TO GET TIPSY AND TOSS PROPRIETY TO THE WINDS

Ashwin Sanghi



The *Rajvallabha*, a 17th century text, equates *bhang* with *amrit*

One is 114 times more likely to die from overdosing on alcohol than from cannabis, reports a study from the *Scientific Reports* journal. If true, it would seem that Lord Shiva wasn't way off the mark with his habit. According to legend, the shade of a tall marijuana plant brought Shiva relief from the blazing sun. Curious, Shiva chewed some of its leaves and felt so invigorated that he adopted its use.

Hence, the widespread use of *bhang* in Shiva worship in India. Of course, *bhang* does not always refer to the plant itself but rather to a mild liquid refreshment (or *thandai*) made by boiling a mixture of milk, sugar, cannabis, poppy seeds, pepper, ginger, cloves, cardamom, almonds, nutmeg and rosebuds. The two other cannabis preparations in India are *ganja* (made from flowers and upper leaves of the plant) and *charas* (made from flowers

that are in full bloom) both of which are far more potent than *bhang*. The earliest reference to *bhang* is contained in the fourth book of the Vedas, the *Atharvaveda*, which refers to *bhang* as one of the "five kingdoms of herbs which release us from anxiety". By the tenth century, *bhang* is called the "food of the gods". Five hundred years later its virtues are listed as astringency, heat, inspiration and the capacity to remove wind and phlegm. By the sixteenth century, a Sanskrit play *Dhurtasamagama*, depicts two vagabonds quarrelling before a corrupt judge. Before passing a verdict the judge demands payment for his decree and is readily offered *bhang*! The *Rajvallabha*, a seventeenth century text goes on to equate *bhang* with *amrit* by saying that it was manufactured like nectar from the ocean by churning it with Mount Mandara.

HOLI HIGH



PHOTO CREDIT: NISHANT VERMA

Continued from page 33

Bhang soon became a symbol of festivity and hospitality and no social celebration — marriage, coronation, harvest — was complete without it. It even became indispensable in war. Indian folk songs from the twelfth century talk about *bhang* and *ganja* as the “drink of warriors”. Soldiers

would usually take a swig to eliminate any fear or panic. *Bhang* also became inextricably linked with religion when sadhus and fakirs began to use it to improve their meditation and concentration.

‘Shivaya Vishnu roopaya, Shiva roopaya Vishnuve; Shivasya hridayam Vishnu, Vishnoscha hridayam Shivaha.’ In effect, the ultimate truth is that Shiva is merely a form of Vishnu and Vishnu is merely a form of Shiva. Shiva resides in the heart of Vishnu and Vishnu resides in that of Shiva. Nothing explains this unity better than the use of Shiva’s *bhang* in Holi, a festival dedicated to Vishnu (or Krishna).

Churchill, once when asked about his position on whisky is said to have replied, “If you mean whisky, the devil’s brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason... then, my friend, I am opposed to it with every fibre of my being. However, if by whisky you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the elixir of life, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together... then my friend, I am absolutely, unequivocally in favour of it!”

Churchill could almost have been describing *bhang*!

The writer is the bestseller author of *The Rozabal Line*, *Chanakya’s Chant*

PHOTO CREDIT: NISHANT VERMA



Jaishree Misra



The best Holi celebration has to be a *‘lathmaar’*, a great gender reversal ritual played out a few days before the actual festival in a place near Mathura called Barsana, the only town that has a temple dedicated to Radha. Legend has it that Krishna harassed the local girls to such an extent that, incensed, they ganged up on him and chased him out of their town using sticks. Rather reassuringly in these times of widespread violence against women, the ritual has carried on into modern times with no one shying away from this spectacular display of role reversal.

Men from the nearby village of Nandgaon visit the women of Barsana who await their arrival by readying themselves with large bamboo sticks. The more sensible

The women go hell-for-leather, showering the men with not just blows but also the choicest of abuses

of the male visitors come armed with *‘thali’* shields so they have a modicum of protection when the women go hell-for-leather, showering their male visitors with not just blows but also the choicest of abuses, partially fuelled by the intake of *bhang*. All this is, apparently, carried out in a generally amicable fashion but, of course, there might be the odd woman who relishes the chance to get a bit of her own back at her husband. I am assured that, by and large, the ritual is apparently carried out in a spirit of egalitarian fun and good temper with even the town’s mothers-in-law encouraging their bahu to ‘go girl’, feeding them with *ghee*-enriched

goodies in order to give them strength... My own mother-in-law, a feisty octogenarian from UP, laments that this festival never made it as far as her home town of Bulandshahr and, on hearing a definite note of regret in her voice, I can’t help thinking that my father-in-law possibly made a rather lucky escape.

The writer is the author of eight novels, including *A Love Story for My Sister*

Anand Neelkantan



SAME STORIES, TOLD DIFFERENTLY

In the city of Kochi where I grew up, Holi was confined to a few streets where its minuscule Gujarati population lived. It was just another name among scores of festivals that I had to mug up for my social studies examination in school. It was only when I lived in Delhi that this festival of raw sensuality and colourful splurge transformed itself into a joyous celebration for me. Every festival has a story to tell and I started enquiring about the origin of this unique festival. And a fascinating world opened up. I saw the familiar myths of my childhood being shaded with a different brush, coloured by an unfamiliar paint.

Holika dahan forms an important part of Holi celebrations. Hiranyakashyapu, the Asura who considers himself as God, is enraged by his son Prahalada’s refusal to acknowledge his divinity. He orders his sister Holika who had a fire-proof cloak to enter a raging fire with little Prahalada in her hands. The myth until here is same in most parts of the country. What happens next shows the power of perspective. In the northern versions, Vishnu comes as a breeze to knock off the cloak from Holika’s shoulders. The shawl covers little Prahalada, protecting him from the fire, while the Asuri is charred to death. Lord Vishnu protects his disciple and tricks the evil Holika. The southern version of the same myth shows the poor woman in a more sympathetic light. Holika is a caring aunt, who covers her little nephew with the fire-proof cloak and sacrifices herself. Thus a story of trickery becomes a

story of sacrifice.

Another story is about how Holi became a festival of colours. Krishna agonises over his dark skin and wonders whether a fair-skinned Radha will accept him. Yashodha asks Krishna to colour Radha and other *gopikas* in whichever colour he wants, thus starting a colourful tradition.

This story is amusing as well as a bit disturbing. Krishna itself means black. Rama is described as having a luminous dark skin and Kali is as black as she can get. Sita and Draupadi are black and so is Hanuman. For many centuries, India celebrated the beauty of black skin in her poetry, temple arts, sculptures and songs. Our heroes and heroines are black skinned, so are our gods and goddesses. The story of Krishna getting a ‘fair and lovely’ complex owes more to the two centuries of British rule and subsequent association of white skin to superiority than to any of our Puranas. It also shows how we carry the baggage of colonialism even while celebrating the most egalitarian of all Indian festivals.

The writer is the author of *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* and *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan*



Braj Holi

BRAJ REGION includes Mathura, Vrindavan, Barsana and Nandgaon. Holi celebrations here last for almost a month. Lath Mar Holi of Barsana depicts the ‘battle of the sexes’. As the story goes, *gopis* of Barsana, where Radha grew up, bash up the men (*gopas*) of Nandgaon, the town where Lord Krishna spent his childhood, with *lathis*. The males captured are then forced to wear female attire and dance.



PHOTO CREDIT: ABHIJEET MUKHERJEE

WEST BENGAL: Holi is known as Dol Purnima in West Bengal and Odisha. It is celebrated with dry colours called *abeer*. In Santiniketan, which was founded by poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, it is celebrated as Basantotsav. Students dress up in yellow-coloured clothes and wear garlands of *palash* flowers. The celebrations include song, dance and musical performances.

Dol Purnima