



Common Origins and Deviations of Sikh Religious Festivals from Mainstream Hinduism

Dr Amrita Mehta

Associate Professor
Bhagini Nivedita College
University of Delhi
New Delhi, India

Abstract

Sikhism, a unique amalgamation of Hinduism and Islam, follows most of the religious festivals of Hinduism, yet differentiates itself from the motivation to celebrate common origin festivals such as Holi, Diwali, Makkar Sankranti and Baisakhi. Sikhism also lays greater emphasis on the celebration of the birth anniversaries of the Gurus and the martyrdom of the fifth, ninth and sons of the tenth guru along with their staunch disciples. In an attempt to distinguish itself from the majority traditions, Sikh festivals are sourced in the incidents from the lives of the Gurus even though they fall on the same days as Hindu festivals. The threat of being encompassed by the majority traditions is now being fobbed off by increasingly fundamentalist stances and injunctions to not follow Hindu traditions of Raksha Bandhan, fasting during Navratras or Karva Chauth. However, most Sikhs continue to celebrate any/all festivals that appeal to them in whatever manner that offers them solace and delight, ignoring the diktats of Granthis (head priests) and continue to forge a mixed identity that had originally marked the birth of the Sikh religion in the Indian subcontinent.

Key words: Sikhism, Hinduism, festivals, origins, mixed identity

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I. Introduction

Sikhism, born out of a unique fusion of Hinduism and Islam, is actually thought to have greater affinity with the basic principles of Islam yet it identifies itself more as an offshoot of the Hindu faith. It sought to differentiate itself from the existing religions by stressing on an egalitarian, casteless and gender neutral inclusive approach.

Festivals in Sikhism

The festivals celebrated within Sikhism predominantly centre around the lives of the Gurus. The biggest and most widely celebrated events are the birth anniversaries or Gurupurabs of the first Guru, Guru Nanak and the tenth guru, Guru Gobind Singh; followed by the birthdays of the other eight gurus. Apart from these, the Sikhs celebrate Lohri, Maghi, Hola Mohalla, Baisakhi and Bandhi Chor Diwas. Although the nomenclature may indicate these to be unique festivals, in essence they coincide with and are celebrated on the same days as the Hindu festivals of Makkar Sankranti, Holi, Bihu or Pongal and Diwali. The timing of the festival indicates its original roots while the motivation to celebrate them has been given a different turn to distinguish them from the festivals of the majority community.

The overriding fear and anxiety of any minority community is that of being subsumed and absorbed into the mainstream or dominant culture. Sikhism too displays this anxiety in as much as the motivation for celebrating festivals is concerned. After the annexation of the Sikh kingdom in Punjab in 1849 by the British, and the conversion of the last ruler Dalip Singh to Christianity in 1853; the increased influence of the Brahma Samaj in the 1860s and the formation of the Anjuman-i-Islamia (an association created to improve religious, educational, and social conditions in the Muslim community) in Lahore in 1869, the need was acute to propagate the Sikh faith. To combat the threat of being subsumed into other religions and to carve a distinct identity, the Singh Sabha Movement was initiated in the 1870s. The aim was to stem the decline of Sikh practices and institutions, and to

revive and restore the faith to its original glory by promoting the Punjabi language and culture and underlining its differences from other religions. In this way, festivals too can be redefined and remodelled.

Maghi or Makkar Sankranti celebrated throughout India by different names and in varied ways, is marked in Sikhism to commemorate the martyrdom of the forty bravehearts who fought the Mughal forces and were killed at Muktsar. Lohri, traditionally celebrated in northern India by both Hindus and Sikhs, marks the passing of the winter solstice and the beginning of the end of winter. It is simultaneously a thanksgiving for the winter crop and memorialisation of the legend of Dulha Bhatti, a brave hero of Punjabi folklore who saved girls from being sold into the slave market. Baisakhi is the harvest festival that is celebrated throughout the country under various names such as Onam, Pongal, Bihu. It marks a double celebration for Sikhs as it is the Sikh New Year and marks the establishment of the Khalsa Panth by Guru Gobind Singh at Anandpur Sahib in 1699.

Holi, the Hindu festival of colours was reincarnated as Hola Mohalla by Guru Gobind Singh. Born in Patna, Guru Gobind Singh spent his childhood and teenage years observing the celebration of Holi with great energy and abandon by the youth. An astute observer of human psychology, he felt that the raw power and robust appeal of the festival could be channeled into a festival of freedom, a day to mark defiance and to harness it to patriotism. He decided that the Sikhs would celebrate 'Hola' - the masculine form of Holi and 'Mohalla' was taken from the Arabic root 'hal' (meaning descending) and conjoined with the Punjabi meaning of an army-like procession. So instead of the traditional Holi where people played with coloured powders and water, Guru Gobind Singh transformed it into an occasion for Sikhs to show off their martial skills in mock battles. The first Hola Mohalla was celebrated in 1701, two years after the establishment of the Khalsa Panth. Hukumnamas were issued to not bring sweets or gifts of colours, but to bring weapons, shields and war articles as a gift for the Guru. To date, this grand three day festival is a magnificent thrilling display of Sikh martial arts-the Gatka, tent-pegging, bareback horse riding, riders straddling two horses, sword fighting, fencing- not only by men, but also women and children.

Hola Mohalla is the annual martial meet, a kind of Sikh Olympics, first initiated by Guru Gobind Singh by organizing mock battles and poetry contests at Lohgarh Fort. While introducing a war-like atmosphere, it retains the abandon and joy of Holi. The traditional splash of colours is transformed into a shower of dry colours and flower petals on the contestants. Warriors, devotees, tourists mingle in brightly coloured clothes and smear each other with colours. It reiterates the fecundity and fertility of springtime festivals and combines it with pride and fearlessness. Modern day thrills have also been introduced now. The youth display dare devilry on motorcycles and cars, and fire eaters spout fire. Mass blood donation camps are organized and saplings are distributed for home plantation. All in all, the festival revitalizes and broadens the scope of the original Holi festival by encompassing martial awareness, religious discourses, community service and environmental consciousness that encourages involvement and participation at numerous levels and generates a targeted enthusiasm subsuming revelry alone. The tradition continues and is now observed on a massive scale at major Gurudwaras such as Anandpur Sahib, Keshgarh Sahib, Huzoor Sahib and in smaller ways at local gurudwaras.

Diwali, redesignated as Bandhi Chor Diwas, is celebrated to mark the release of 52 imprisoned kings by Guru Hargobind from the Gwalior Fort in 1619. The Guru was offered release by Emperor Jahangir and he requested that the 52 imprisoned be released with him. He was taunted that those that could hold onto his robe ends would be allowed to leave with him. The quick thinking Guru Hargobind ordered a robe with 52 ends to be stitched and he walked out majestically with all the kings in tow. It replaces the return of the mythological God Rama from exile with the dramatic release of a human Guru from imprisonment. Therefore the reason festivals are celebrated have been linked to the Gurus even though the festival days and the manner of celebrating with sweets and delicacies with loved ones are similar.

Rituals and Celebrations

Many Sikh celebration rituals are exactly as those of the Hindu community yet some have been eschewed to carve a distinct identity and underline difference. In wedding ceremonies the sehra, chooda, mehndi, haldi, ghodi-barat rituals are common but the jaimala, havan, sindoor, bindi, kanyadaan have been done away with. The wedding is solemnized by four rounds around the Guru Granth Sahib by the bride and groom instead of the holy fire. The Guru stands at the centre of sacred marriage union. The splash of colourful clothing, resplendent jewelry and small mischievous rituals remains the same.

Many rituals like the Mundan of babies, Shradh for the dead, were initially followed but discontinued after the Singh Sabha movement. Other festivals that involve fasting like Navratras and Karva Chauth are not observed officially although they may be marked individually in some households. However there is hardly any Sikh household that worships idols though pictures and painting of the Gurus commonly adorn the walls. Raksha Bandhan is commonly observed although of late, the Sikh priests advise Sikhs to shun it.

Festivals that predate Sikhism are celebrated for newer reasons and alongside there are other Sikh festivals like the Gurus' birthdays, death day, martyrdom day, coronation day, foundation of Khalsa faith, saints birthdays like Baba Farid, Kabir, Namdev and the beginning of the calendar month, Sangrand. The common thread

in these celebrations is the musical recitation of the Gurbani and the organizing of community kitchen-the langar. Anyone can recite the holy verses, preside over ceremonies or sing the Gurbani. Each festival takes the devotee back to the roots of the religion by reiterating the words of the Gurus, the musical immersion of their recitation as kirtan and the humbling of pride by cooking, serving and partaking of the langar with fellow humans irrespective of their faith, caste, or economic status. No fasts, rituals baths, idol worship, priestly chanting, havans or poojas are prescribed.

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