

Holi: from Hindu festival to hipster following

CASE STUDY | 19 Nov 2015

In 2014, Utah saw 70,000 people come together to revel in the two-day Hindu festival of colours known as Holi. With a crowd that was more Mormon than Hindu, the occasion highlighted how the religious event has been embraced by people of all backgrounds. How has Holi gone hipster?

AUTHORS

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LOCATIONS:
INDIA

SECTORS:
TRAVEL AND LEISURE



HIGHLIGHTS

- 01** The Hindu festival of Holi traditionally marks the beginning of spring and the victory of good over evil
- 02** It's been called 'the festival of colours' for celebrations which include community free-for-alls using powdered paint and water
- 03** The event has captured the Western imagination, with annual festivals in cities around the world

DATA

- Rather than being confined to the start of spring, global celebrations are spreading to the summer
- Holi has gained popularity in the West for its inclusive message, with religion taking a back seat
- Opportunistic Indians outside of the subcontinent have taken to hosting annual Holi parties that have become must-attend events

SCOPE

In 2014, 70,000 people descended on Spanish Fork, Utah to take part in the two-day Hindu festival of colours known as Holi. Yet the fact that the majority of participants were Mormons rather than Hindus demonstrated how the occasion has evolved beyond its religious roots. [1] How has Holi gone hipster, and global?

Holi is a Hindu festival that marks the end of winter, the beginning of spring, and signifies the victory of good over evil. It has become known as the festival of colours for the way in which it is celebrated, beginning with a bonfire and a gathering of people in a community the night before. The next morning, entire cities come together to throw coloured powder and water at each other in a free-for-all. Groups walk through the city singing and beating drums, and food and drinks flow freely. It's a day to forget past wrongs and forgive friends.

"It has also become a chance (or more accurately, an excuse!) for Indians to shed their tightly-held inhibitions," reads the blog of London-based Indian restaurant Dishoom. "The usual social strictures are delightfully subverted, leaving us free to indulge in feverish colour-play and light-hearted merrymaking. The fact that bhang (cannabis) is traditionally consumed at Holi, in thandai, lassi or pakoras, only casts a happy glow over the playful nature of proceedings." [2]

Holi has captured the Western imagination and is now regularly celebrated across the world in varying styles. In March 2014, as festivities dimmed down in India, the celebrations continued on through April and May in countries like the UK and Canada. But the way the West has adopted Holi has little to do with the religious background, instead embracing the colour, the fun, and the festivity. How exactly has an old Hindu occasion gained such widespread popularity?



Holi gives Hindus a break from their inhibitions

Harsha K R, Creative Commons (2014)

CONTEXT

“The colours of Holi are brightest when we all come together to observe this magnificent festival and tradition,” said New Jersey senator Robert Menendez in 2012, inviting everyone to come out and participate in the 20th Annual Phagwa (Holi) Parade in Jersey City. “The multi-day festival of Holi is meant to bring people together and I believe that it’s important, especially in a diverse state like New Jersey, for all of us to make time to learn and celebrate the cultures of our friends and neighbours.” [3] Menendez wasn’t the only one taking Holi global, with Daily Express journalist Kelby McNally declaring it “London’s most colourful and exhilarating festival” in 2013. [4]

“In Utah, if you go anywhere and mention the festival of colours to anybody, they’ll know exactly what you’re talking about and their face will light up,” says Caru Das, priest at the Radha Krishna Temple in Spanish Fork and organiser of the town’s annual event. He said it was meant to serve young people who wanted to have fun but without the alcohol or drug use associated with rock concerts or large festivals. Yet one Hindu attendee admitted that most people there had no idea what the festival truly meant or stood for. [5]

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Priya M, 34-year-old Londoner

In London, it’s much the same. “Every year, an increasing number of my English friends want to know what the fuss is all about and come join me in the Holi celebrations,” says 34-year-old Priya M, who works in publishing. “Most of them have

no idea what it means though. They're just there for a day of throwing things at each other and dancing to Bollywood songs. It's one of the best parties there is." [6]

The Holi One festival that now takes place in several countries around the world – including the UK, Costa Rica, Brazil and South Africa – is inspired by Hindu tradition, but is not religious in nature. "Thousands of people, dressed in white, come together to share in music, dance, performance art and visual stimulation," reads its site. [7] In fact, in 2015, the London festival was not celebrated in the usual month of March, but rather in August, when the weather was more suitable for being splashed with water and colour.

"It's all down to Holi paint parties, which are taking London by storm," writes journalist Ellie Broughton of the festival's popularity. "The traditional Hindu festival of spring, during which people pelt each other with powdered paint, has adapted for Western audiences who are seeking Facebook photos rather than spiritual meaning." [8]



Holi's spiritual message has been stripped away in Western celebrations

Thomas Hawk, Creative Commons (2012)

INSIGHTS AND OPPORTUNITIES

In India, a number of new trends come up each year around Holi. One year, bazaars were full of Chinese-made water pistols, while another year organic gulal (powdered colour) had caught on. The festival, however, is still very much in its globally nascent stage, with people in the Western world largely unaware of its significance, or indeed, its existence.

This has created a big market for opportunistic Indians, many of whom own restaurants and event companies, hosting annual Holi parties that have become must-attend events for people of all ages and ethnicities. "Enjoy the sight of elderly grandparents, tiny children and everyone in between – all doing the same thing, all covered in glorious technicolour," reads Dishoom's blog. "People who had never met before were rubbing powder paint in one another's faces, dancing and improvising a conga. And in a way, I think this is exactly what we need more of in London." [2]

Holi is increasingly a celebration of global togetherness, with religion an afterthought. “We shouldn’t be too precious about preserving any clear blue water between ‘religious’ and ‘cultural’ festivals,” says Nick Spencer, director of research for religion think tank Theos. “After all, the great Christian festivals of the Middle Ages were as much social and cultural celebrations as they were theological ones.” [8]

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Christmas is celebrated all over the world by Christians, Hindus, and Muslims alike. It’s easy to see how Holi could become a lot like the winter holiday. It has universal appeal to both children and adults, and its religious affiliations are secondary to the cultural inclusion that it offers.

This can translate to real retail opportunities. While Indian businesses have traditionally focused on Holi gear (water pistols, balloons, powder etc.), in recent years there’s been a shift towards jewellery, clothing, make-up, and food and drink. [9] Skincare products and hair oils are heavily promoted during Holi, claiming to protect sensitive skin and brittle hair from heavy colour. And, like in India, Bollywood dance numbers are a frequent backdrop to Holi celebrations in every part of the world.

Like any major festival, Holi brings with it opportunities in live events, food, music, and quick retail. What makes Holi special and different, however, is that it’s combing the best of what the East and the West have to offer on a large scale.

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