

[Holi Festival welcomes spring]

don't print March 1987
THE COWICHAN NEWS LEADER, MARCH 26, 1987 Page 19.

Holi Festival welcomes spring

Holi Festival in India can only be termed an extraordinary experience. I had heard of it, read of it and for two weeks I was excited of it. They told me it was in celebration of the coming of spring and that people throw colored water at each other. While in India last year, two weeks before the festival in March, I noticed plastic bags of colored powder, small balloons and plastic squirt bottles take a prominent place in the markets, but still I was caught unaware.

While standing on a very crowded sidewalk in Old Delhi, trying to figure a way to cross an impossibly crowded street, I felt something splash on my bare ankles. Being in Old Delhi, nothing surprised me, so I ignored it till it happened again. Then my companion laughed and said Holi Season is starting. We looked up and saw small children throwing small water-filled balloons at passers-by.

Even though it happened again a few days later in another bazaar, I was still unprepared for the actual day. Early on the morning of March 15, the young men of the house where I was staying called me from my room, asking, "Aren't you coming to watch the Holi festivities?" Nothing I had been told prepared me for what I saw in the street. All the children of the neighborhood were up and out early, having a wonderful time splashing each other with colored water. Of course, I grabbed my camera and headed for the gate, but my friends called me back to warn me to wear my clothes.

What fun they had splashing the 'foreigner from Canada' while I attempted to get some pictures of them.

Later, after breakfast, I went with my host family door-to-door on our street, carrying a plate containing several colored powders. Everyone greeted us with 'Happy Holi!' there were plenty of hugs and kisses as we placed a smear of color on each of their faces. Then we returned home to sweat our tears. This was considered to be the sensible adult way of celebrating, although there was one home on our block where the adults were having as much fun as the children. They used buckets and hoses and everyone was soaked. The women's sari appeared to be the same ones from

last year. The hose and buckets passed around among and strikes between their frolicking. This obviously was the house to come to if you enjoyed Holi festivities.

Few adults venture out on the streets this day because water balloons or a child with a squirt bottle could appear from anywhere. It's all in good fun and over before the sun sets.

Holi is a Hindu festival and celebrated as such in most of India, but to the Sikhs it is treated as a time for worship.

In the Punjab the air is becoming noticeably warmer and Holi marks the beginning of spring. However, as far back as the year 1699, the spiritual leader of the Sikhs, Guru Gobind Singh, discouraged his Sikhs from spending their energies on what he considered to be the purposeless and often degrading excesses of Holi.

He summoned his followers in Amritsar to attend a new festival he called Holi Mahalla. The most satisfactory translation of the festival's name is probably "maneuver". The festival being predominantly military, he was providing an alternative to the Krishna festival and regularizing the training of his army. The highlight of the festival was a mock battle. However, there were also archery and wrestling contests as well as music and poetry composition.

In Canada this day is observed by a regular worship in Sikh temples followed by Langar, the serving of a free meal to all who attend, but here, too, it marks the beginning of spring.



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2020_06_07_01_038

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