

Talk for Inter-religious Holi 24 March 2024, Wentworthville, Sydney

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I'll start by thanking the organisations that are sponsoring this occasion, Hindus for Human Rights, The Humanism Project, NRI Affairs, and WAACI (which I was delighted to discover stands for We Australians are Creative, Incorporated). Thank you for inviting me to speak at this inter-faith Holi celebration today. We live in times that are increasingly marked by division, separation and distrust between people and between communities. It's really good to be at an occasion whose organisers are setting themselves clearly against these tendencies. As you know, I'm down to give a short speech on the socio-cultural significance of Holi. I'll aim to keep things short and not too academic.

I do take rituals seriously, however, because my academic field is anthropology, and anthropologists love rituals and festivals. Communal festivals such as Holi are, or at any can be important occasions in human social life, well worth supporting the careers of any number of anthropologists.

As most of you probably already know, Holi is a very widespread and popular Hindu festival, particularly in the northern part of the subcontinent. It is associated with springtime – it is celebrated at the full moon of the month of Phalgun (tomorrow evening). It traditionally fell at a relatively quiet period in agricultural communities, after the seed had been planted but well before the harvest began. A good time for a festival.

Holi in village communities usually falls into two main parts – the first in which large bonfires are lit, and a second in which people, especially young people, “play with colours” – in other words spray coloured water or coloured powder on each other – and generally have fun. Holi is a celebration of some very positive things – spring, youth, the growth of the crops, the unity of the community. It is traditionally also a time when people who have quarrelled or offended each other forgive, forget and make up. It's also a time where in the puritanical society of south Asian villages there was a certain degree of freedom for romantic behaviour between men and women, and for socialising across the usual boundaries.

So Holi is a popular festival, and it's an occasion which creates a great deal of enjoyment for many people. Like quite a few folk and popular festivals around the world, it's an occasion for ritual reversal, a time where everything gets turned upside down for a brief period. But Indian society is based on hierarchy and boundaries, within the family, between castes, and between religious communities. Hierarchy and power don't just disappear when Holi begins. How far things get turned upside-down varies between communities. Holi in different places can vary quite a lot. In practice, though, in village communities, people were and are usually pretty careful who they play Holi with, particularly when it's across caste and communal boundaries. Also the games can get out of control, and become occasions for more problematic behaviour. Holi can be a risky time for women, particularly if they are from socially vulnerable and disadvantaged parts of the community.

The mythological stories behind Holi are also more complicated than they look at first sight. If we go back to those bonfires on the first night of Holi, the most common Holi story relates the fires to the burning of a female demon called Holika. Holika is the sister of a demon-king who refuses to recognise the authority of Vishnu. The king's son, Prahlad, is a devotee of Vishnu, and Holika is attempting to kill Prahlad in a plot which misfires and leads to her own death and that of her brother. So you can read this as the destruction of evil, and it's often told that way. But if the ritual is about destroying evil and misfortune on behalf of the community, that leads questions like: what is the community? Who is part of it? Who is excluded? Who or what is seen as the source of evil or misfortune?

Vishnu is the ultimate representation of hierarchy, and Holika is both female and, arguably, linked to low-caste goddess-cults. So a whole line of feminist and anti-caste critique has developed, in which the burning of Holika has been seen as asserting both male dominance of women, and upper-caste dominance of Dalits and other lower castes.

The other major myth of Holi is to do with the burning of Kāma, the god of erotic love, sometimes along with his consort Rāṭī. Here it is usually Śiva who burns them with the yogic fire of his third eye, as a result of them having disturbed his meditation. But whether it's Holikā or Kāma who is burned, or whether it's some other story altogether, it's possible that these stories are adding a hierarchical layer to something which was originally rather different. If Kāma is burned, in some versions of Holi he may also be brought back to life and worshipped the following day. The ashes from the ritual fire may be used ritually to bring

about fertility and prosperity for the community. It seems likely that Holi goes back to a level of folk agricultural ritual well before the growth of the major Indian religious traditions, and that the stories of Holikā and Kāma got added on later.

Pupul Jayakar interprets Holi this way in her book on Indian folk religious traditions, *The Earth Mother*, which some of you may know. While her interpretation tends to the creative and romantic, I think that it also has some historical truth. Also, and perhaps more importantly, this multiplicity of meanings offers us today the possibility to take the hierarchy and separation side of Holi less seriously, and to see Holi as having genuine possibilities for asserting equality and commonality between members of the wider society. Holi may not always have been, or be today, as inclusive and egalitarian as we might wish, but Hinduism has no single source of authority, and nobody owns Holi, not even Narendra Modi. So I think that we have every right to create our own version of Holi that points towards a connection between communities and a positive future for all.

I think it's also really important that we do this kind of work. Festivals have the potential to be powerful communal rituals. They can state but they can also reshape the boundary between insiders and outsiders. In the past, throughout much of South Asia, Hindus, Muslims, Jains, Christians, Sikhs frequently attended each other's religious holy places, took part in each others celebrations and festivals. Many major shrines, particularly in Nepal, Sri Lanka and South India have or used to have multiple religious identities. In many parts of South Asia people still share across communal boundaries in each others' festivals and rituals. That has become more difficult in recent times for political reasons, particularly along the Hindu-Muslim boundary. But you can still find a sense, as we did when studying shrines in Bangladesh, that differences in religious practice are not that vital. They are just different ways of accessing a divine power that is ultimately available to all. All these are signs of a past which was different from our present, and suggest resources that can be brought back to life to create a different future.

Here our position in the South Asian diaspora can also be an asset. South Asian ritual occasions around the world can easily become opportunities for people from different communities to share and get to know each other without the boundaries and the differences being as politically loaded as they might be in contemporary South Asia. And since we are still in the middle of Ramadan, as well as Holi, it's worth noting that the evening *iftar* scene

in Lakemba – which had 1.4 million visitors last year - has probably done at least as much over the last few years to strengthen relations between Muslims and Non-Muslims in Sydney as any pronouncements of community leaders. Eating together, playing together, doing things together, over time becomes the basis of what we are, and what we can become. And so, very much, it can be with Holi. So I hope that helps a little to suggest what we are doing, why it is important, and how good it is that we are all here together.

A few references:

Pupul Jayakar, *The Earth Mother*, Penguin, New Delhi, 1989, p.85-87. Available at

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