

Purple Water

By Milan Sandhu

How would you like to be dumped into a vat of purple water? It happened to me on my first visit to India. I was seven years old and had no warning at all. Boy did I cry! All around me my aunts, uncles, and grandparents were laughing. Tearful laughter soon replaced my cries as I realized this was supposed to be fun. The joke was on me. I must have looked silly sopping in purple water. It was the beginning of spring and the start of Holi, a festival that occurs every year the day after the first full moon in March.

Sunil Uncle tugged me over to the side. He winked as he

quietly pushed a water hose into my palms. "Here, this works wonders."

"Oh, Sunil Uncle, are you sure?" He nodded at me.

I took aim and *fooosh!* My aunt and grandparents were drenched. Their mouths fell open from the shock of it, and I fell over laughing, the hose winding and whirling like a snake gone wild.

There is no time in India as free and as full of cheer as Holi. All over the country, people awaken to drumbeats, food, festivity, and color! Powdered pigment, called *gulal*, is dusted over people, smeared on faces, or stirred in water to dye the country and

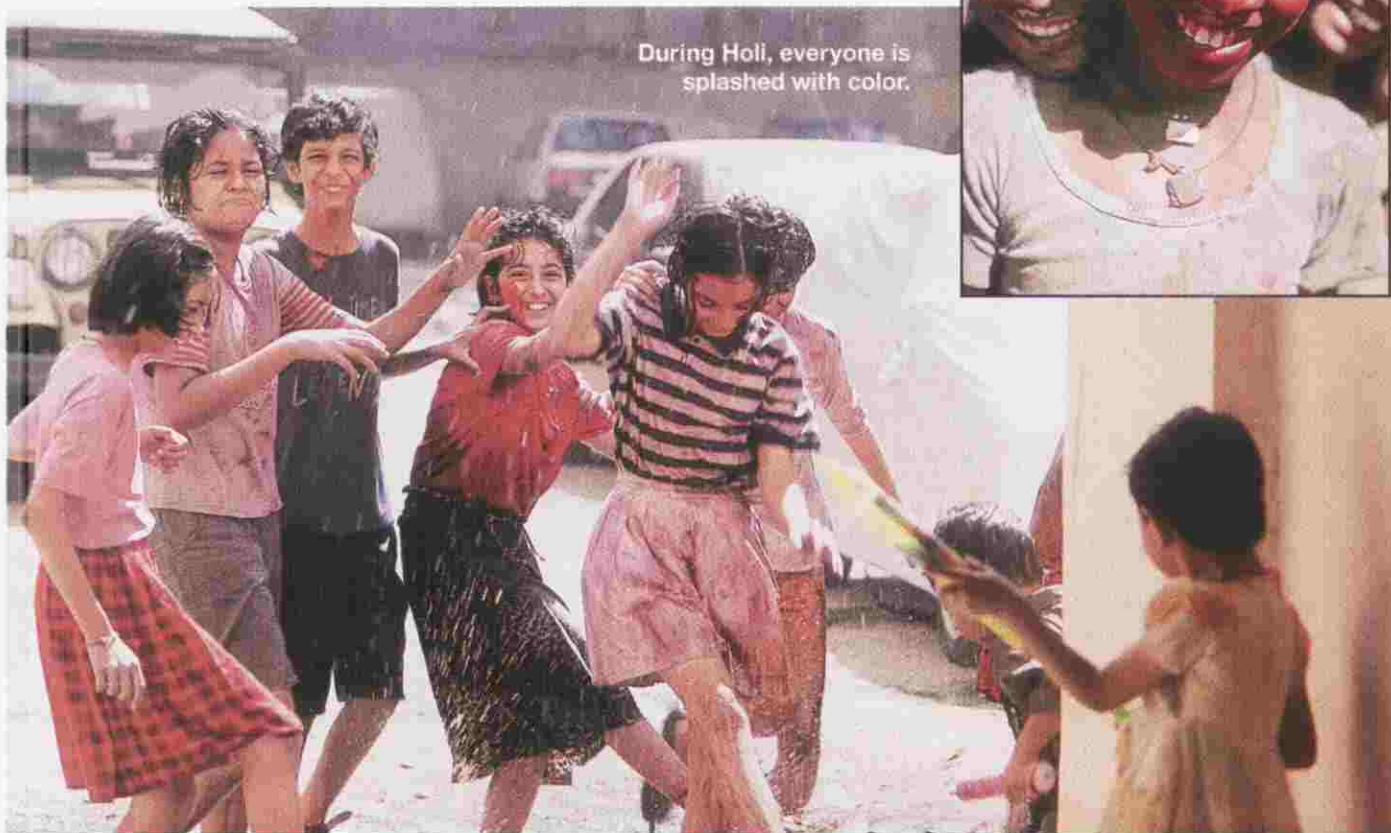
people with vivid hues of red, green, purple, yellow, orange, and blue. It can take days, even weeks, to wash one day's celebration off the roads, houses, and clothes. No one minds, though, as they roam the streets with Martian faces.

Holi celebrates a victory of good over evil, love, and the coming of spring.

Good over Evil

The legend of Holika symbolizes the defeat of evil. Holika was the evil sister of an even more evil king, Hiranyakashipu. Hiranyakashipu believed he was God, and he wanted the world to pray to him. Prahlad,

Purple water plays a big part in the Indian festival of Holi, celebrated this year on March 6.



During Holi, everyone is splashed with color.

Hiranyakashipu's young son, refused. Prahlad was gentle, kind, and highly devoted to the god Vishnu, something Hiranyakashipu and Holika could not tolerate.

Holika and her brother devised an evil scheme. Hiranyakashipu asked Holika to hold Prahlad in her lap for a grand ceremony. He lit ritual flames around the two, hoping to burn Prahlad. Since he believed his sister was immune to fire, he had no fear for her. But good won and evil lost. Prahlad lived on to win the love of his father's kingdom.

On Holi, people in many parts of India light a bonfire at night to recreate the legend of Holika. They throw popcorn and sesame candy into the flames to keep the fire blazing high.

Love and the Coming of Spring

Holi is also a tribute to everlasting love—as in the mythological tales of the Hindu god Krishna and his companion, Radha. Krishna, tired of his own blue skin, decided it would be fun if Radha were a different color, too. Encouraged by others, he took colored powders and smeared them over Radha. Today, people remember the fun, and anyone is fair game when it comes to gulal.

Finally, Holi affirms the spring season. Winter's chill has gone, and flowers are budding. Everyone is filled with joy. Street parties take place over much of India. All through the day, rainbow-colored people drop into neighbors' houses to share food and drink—and of



Holi welcomes springtime and is called the festival of colors. Colored powders (gulal) are popular during the festival. Here, powders are for sale in Indore, India. In the past, gulal was made from ground flower petals and water.

course, to be dumped into vats of colored water! The only rule on Holi is to have fun!

Sunil Uncle made sure I learned that lesson, but he was amazingly dry after the hose sprayed everyone else. I grabbed a fistful of orange dust and darted toward him. He held out his arms, ready for a hug, but I had other plans. I rubbed the orange right onto his face. We fell, and before I knew it, we were rolling in the grass and mud, both dirty and smudged with orange.

Tricks and Treats!

My aunt called out to us, and I thought, "Oh no, this is it."

Instead of scolding us, she handed us tiny balloons and told us to sneak up on the neighbor's house. We crept onto their front lawn and bombarded the doors with water balloons. Then the

neighbors waved out their windows, holding snacks and sweet treats.

"Hold fire!" yelled Sunil Uncle.

Wow! This was like Halloween, only better. We could play tricks and still get treats. There were even drummers wearing massive drums, called *dhol*s, around their necks. They kept pounding their drums with long sticks, and the whole neighborhood was dancing to the rhythm, wet and wild!

I must have been a sight at the end of the day, but who wasn't?

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Milan Sandhu was born in the United States in 1967 to Indian immigrant parents. This article is about the author's first visit to Delhi and her first Holi celebration. What started as a disaster ended as a lifelong quest to embrace her culture.

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