
Portraiture of Indian Festivals and Hindu Muslim Unity in the Poetry of British Women Romantic poets.

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Abstract

India is a country of festivals which show the vivid colours of unity in diversity. People enjoy these occasions with much hilarity and merrymaking and shower this bounty of happiness in the form of amalgamation of the communities residing in the different parts and distant regions. East India Company officials also used to participate in such festivities. Mountstewart Elphinstone, a scholar administrator, remembered Holi, in his memoires, as a license for various activities sometimes which were seldom permitted in the society. Bishop Heber memorizes Holi as the occasion for common drunkenness. Colonel Todd pictures a graphic description of Deepawali and describes it as the 'grand Oriental festival' of Central India. Governor-General and other official staff were given due honour in the invitation cards of Durga Pooja and Navratri in Bengal. English Sahibs equally witnessed their participation in the festival of Moharram.- a ten day mourning for Hussain.

Key words- amalgamation, Durga Pooja, Holi, Common drunkenness, grand Oriental festival.

Introduction

The Religious festivities have always been a kind of renewal in the lives of Indians. People wait for the religious festivals eagerly. Specially children have an uncanny desire and wait for these occasions. People spend lavishly on these occasions and they want to make the occasion a memorable day. Festivals give intensity to community life, inspire hilarity, feasting and social set up on a bigger level. English people in India enjoyed the occasions well. Several instances are reported through the writings of their own about their serious involvement in these festivities. The important religious festivals like Holi, Diwali, Durga Puja, Janmashtami, Muharram and the Id were celebrated in India. Reports abound in number of cordiality that most of the time these festivals were enjoyed by

both the major communities viz. Hindus and Muslims of India. poem 'The Raki' of Elizabeth Landon portrays the famous Hindoo festival Rakshabandhan.

THE RAKI

"There's dust upon the distant wind, and shadow on the skies,
 And anxiously the maiden strains her long-expecting eyes
 And fancies she can catch the light far flashing from the sword,
 And see the silver crescents raised, of him, the Mogul lord.
 "She stands upon a lofty tower, and gazes o'er the plain:
 Alas! that eyes so beautiful, should turn on heaven in vain.
 'Tis but a sudden storm whose weight is darkening on the air,
 The lightning sweeps the hill, but shows no coming warriors there.
 "Yet crimson as the morning ray, she wears the robe of pride
 That binds the gallant Humaioon, a brother, to her side;
 His gift, what time around his arm, the glittering band was rolled,
 With stars of ev'ry precious stone enwrought in shining gold.
 "Bound by the Raki's sacred tie, his ready aid to yield,
 Though beauty waited in the bower, and glory in the field:
 Why comes he not, that chieftain vow'd, to this h
 "Yet crimson as the morning ray, she wears the robe of pride
 That binds the gallant Humaioon, a brother, to her side;
 His gift, what time around his arm, the glittering band was rolled,
 With stars of ev'ry precious stone enwrought in shining gold.
 "Bound by the Raki's sacred tie, his ready aid to yield,
 Though beauty waited in the bower, and glory in the field:
 Why comes he not, that chieftain vow'd, to this her hour of need?
 Has honour no devotedness? Has chivalry no speed?

 "The Rajpoot's daughter gazes round, she sees the plain afar,
 Spread shining to the sun, which lights no trace of coming war.
 The very storm has past away, as neither earth nor heaven
 One token of their sympathy had to her anguish given.
 "And still more hopeless than when last she on their camp looked down,
 The foeman's gathered numbers close round the devoted town:
 And daily in that fatal trench her chosen soldiers fall,

And spread themselves, a rampart vain, around that ruined wall.

“Her eyes upon her city turn—alas! what can they meet,

But famine, and despair, and death, in every lonely street?

Women and children wander pale, or with despairing eye

Look farewell to their native hearths, and lay them down to die.

“She seeks her palace, where her court collects in mournful bands,

Of maidens who but watch and weep, and wring their weary hands.

One word there came from her white lips, one word, she spoke no more;

But that word was for life and death, the young queen named—the Jojr.

the last,

“A wild shriek filled those palace halls—one shriek, it was

All womanish complaint and wail have in its utterance past:

They kneel at Kurnavati's feet, they bathe her hands in tears,

Then hurrying to their task of death, each calm and stern appears.

“There is a mighty cavern close beside the palace gate,

Dark, gloomy temple, meet to make such sacrifice to fate:

There heap they up all precious woods, the sandal and the rose,

While fragrant oils and essences like some sweet river flows.

“And shawls from rich Cashmere, and robes from Dacca's golden loom,

And caskets filled with Orient pearls, or yet more rare perfume:

And lutes and wreaths, all graceful toys, of woman's gentle care,

Are heaped upon that royal pile, the general doom to share.

“But weep for those the human things, so lovely and so young,

The panting hearts which still to life so passionately clung;

Some bound to this dear earth by hope, and some by love's strong thrall,

And yet dishonour's high disdain was paramount with all.

“Her silver robe flowed to her feet, with jewels circled round,

And in her long and raven hair the regal gems were bound;

And diamonds blaze, ruby and pearl were glittering in her zone,

And there, with starry emeralds set, the radiant Kandjara shone.

“The youthful Ranee led the way, while in her glorious eyes

Shone spiritual, the clear deep light, that is in moonlit skies:

Pale and resolved, her noble brow was worthy of a race

Whose proud blood flowed in those blue veins unconscious of disgrace.¹

Holi, a festival of colours, fun and laughter was very famous in India among Hindoos and Moslems right from the days of Emperor Akbar. Sahibs also could not refrain themselves from participating in this merriment occasion. John Malcolm recorded the beauty of this occasion as an occasion of mixing with each other without the fear of high and low, rich and poor and ruler and ruled. Even Mountstewart Elphinstone, a scholar administrator, remembered Holi as a license for various activities sometimes which were seldom permitted in the society. Bishop Heber (1828) remembered Holi as the occasion for common drunkenness. Several instances abound in the records about this festival from the royal places and places of Gwalior, Awadh and Lahore etc. Mountstewart Elphinstone records in his memoir the festival of Holi and the merriment of people at this occasion :

The boys dance round fires, sing licentious and satirical songs and give vent to all sorts of ribaldry against their superiors, by whom it is always taken in good part. The great sport of the occasion, however, consists in sprinkling each other with yellow liquid and throwing a crimson powder over each other's person. The liquid is also squirted through syringes and the powder is sometimes made up in large balls covered with icing-glass, which break as soon as they come in contact with the body. All ranks engage in this sport with enthusiasm and get into the spirit of the contest, till all parties are completely drenched with the red powder that they can scarcely be recognised. A great prime minister will invite a foreign ambassador to play the Holi at his house, and will take his share in the most riotous parts of it with the ardour of a school boy.²

Broughton also joined Holi several times in India. He also detailed his experiences in his memoir.

When we visited Seendhiya to partake of this curious amusement, he received us in a tent, erected for the purpose ... In front were assembled all the dancing girls in camp. We went dressed for the occasion in white lined jackets and pantaloons. The Maharaj himself began the amusements of the day by sprinkling a little red and yellow water upon us from *goolabdans*, which are small silver vessels kept for the purpose of sprinkling rose water at visitors. Everyone then began to throw about the *abeer* and squirt at his neighbours as he pleased. . . . we were alternately powdered and drenched till the floor on which we sat was covered some inches in depth with a kind of pink- and orange-coloured mud. Such a scene I never witnessed in my life.

. . . bedecked with gold and silver lace, their tawdry trappings stained with patches of *abeer*, and dripping, like so many Naiads, with orange-coloured water, now chanting the Holi songs with all the airs of practised libertinism, and now shrinking with affected screams beneath a fresh shower from Maharaj.³



Celebrating Holi (by S.C. Belnos, c. 1840)

All these Englishmen who described Holi as they witnessed in India. These people also followed the same religious traditions as that of the Indians. In their own view, the Holi songs are full of the stories of Krishna and Gopis playing near Mathura and Agra.

Diwali in India held the pride and a religious place right from the times immemorial. In North India, specially, people celebrate it with a lot of fanfare. Colonel Todd gives a graphic description of this festival and describes it as the 'grand Oriental festival' of Central India. He accounts Diwali as one of major religious and social festival of Indians. He details the festivities of this festival as under :

. . . the Feast of Lamps is in honour of Lakshmi, the wife of Vishnu, the goddess of wealth, when every city, village and encampment exhibits a blaze of splendour. The potters' wheels revolve for weeks before solely for the manufacture of lamps (*diwa*) and from the palace to the peasant's hut, everyone supplies himself with them in proportion to his means, and arranges them according to his fancy. Stuffs, pieces of gold,

and sweetmeats are carried in trays and consecrated at the temple of Lakshmi. On this day, it is incumbent on every votary of Lakshmi to try the chance of the dice, and from their success in the Diwali, the prince, the chief, the merchant and the artisan foretell the state of their coffers for the ensuing year.

The Rev. Ward in his *Religion of the Hindoos* (1817), however, admits that he cannot trace its origin.

In the month of Kartik, the Hindoos suspend lamps in the air on bamboos in honour of the gods and in obedience to the *shastras*—as the offering of lamps to particular gods is considered as an act of merit, so this offering to all the gods during the auspicious month of Kartik is supposed to procure many benefits to the giver.⁴

Diwali on the ghats of Kanpur had been a place of interest to several British officers of East India Company. Fanny Parks witnessed Diwali several years in India. She enjoyed it greatly and admired the beauty of this festival as a celebration of not only Indian people but Indian deities also.

On reaching the ghat, I was quite delighted with the beauty of a scene resembling fairyland . . . On every temple, on every ghat, and on the steps down to the river's side, thousands of small lamps were placed from the foundation to the highest pinnacle, tracing the architecture in the lines of light. The evening was very dark, and the whole scene was reflected in the Ganges.

I was greatly pleased: so Eastern, so fairy-like a scene, I had not witnessed, since my arrival in India; nor could I have imagined that the dreary-looking station of Cawnpore contained so much of beauty.⁵

Especially in Bengal, Durga Puja has been an important religious celebration. Several accounts of lavish entertainment and festivities on this occasion abound in the memoirs of the British officials of East India Company. Maria Graham (1811) also enjoyed Kali and Durga Puja and detailed her experiences in these words :

On this occasion her images and those of some other divinities, were carried in procession with great pomp, and bathed in the Hoogly, which being a branch of the Ganges is sacred. The figures were placed under canopies, which were decked with the most gaudy colours, and carried upon men's heads. Several of these moving temples went together,

preceded by musical instruments, banners, and bare-headed brahmins, repeating *muntras* (forms of prayer). The gods were followed by cars, drawn by oxen or horses gaily caparisoned, bearing the sacrificial utensils, accompanied by other Brahmins, and the procession was closed by an innumerable multitude of people of all castes. This feast lasted several days.⁶

In North India, at the same time as Durga Puja in Bengal, Navratri Puja has been very popular. Several English officers witnessed the dancing performances in the elite class and at royal courts. In the courts of Gwalior, Baroda and Udaipur (Oudeypore) there was much pomp and display at the time of Navratri. Several *nautch* parties were organized in these royal courts. The British along with Indians joined this festival and enjoyed greatly. The account of Rousselet gives a detailed information about the dances at Navratri :

The dances of the *Navratri* were held on the upper terrace of the palace, where an immense carpet covered the ground, and torches dipped in resin blazed on all sides, vying with the stars in brilliancy. The huge platform was occupied by a compact circle of women, sparkling with precious stones and spangles, in the centre of which a nautch girl danced with a languishing air to the ancient music of the Indian religion. The scene was really quite romantic. The crowd of women only partially visible by the uncertain light of the torches above us; the star-bespangled vault of heaven; below us the waving tops of the palm-trees and nims diffusing their intoxicating fragrance, the fresh mountain breeze, which came charged with the scents of forests, all combined to give a peculiar charm to these evenings.⁷

In their memoirs, the British officials had recorded that the Durga Puja in Bengal and the *nautch* parties were so popular and famous. People were invited Governor-General and his council members and the lower strata of officials and sepoys, according to their rank, were given due honour in these invitation cards. through invitation cards to witness the festivities.

An interesting announcement about the celebration of Durga Puja carried by the *Calcutta Gazette* of 9 November 1826 runs as follows:

A native festival is to be celebrated at Baboo Rooploll Mullick's in the Chitpore Road on the evening of the 14th, 15th, and 16th instant, in the grandest and most splendid style, an English band will be in attendance, and the Nautches and Entertainments will excel every amusement of the

kind ever witnessed at this Presidency. Tickets are under distribution to the Baboo's friends and all the respectable Ladies and Gentlemen of the presidency, who may feel desirous of honouring the Baboo with their company. Gunter and Hooper are to furnish the Supper, and to supply the best Champaign, Claret, and all kinds of wine and liquors.⁸

Some accounts of these British officers also witnessed the festival of Moharram. Moharram - a ten day mourning for Hussain, the son of Ali by Fatima, daughter of the Prophet was one of the most important religious occasions. The festival of Id was also very popular festival in India. Several British officers joined Muslims to make this festival a memorable one. Such enjoyment of Indian masses shows the real picture of unity in diversity. It also loudly speaks that whosoever come to this land became a part of its own.

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