

## Holi/Eid-I-Gulabi in the Mughal Empire

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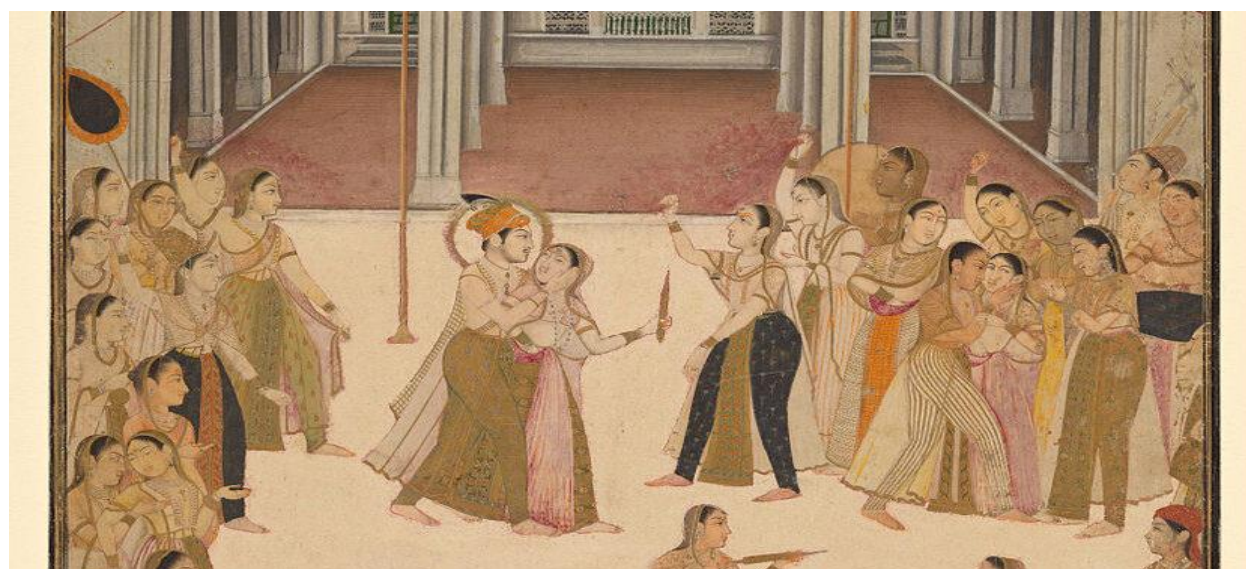
### Abstract

Holi was celebrated like Eid in the Mughal era. It was called Eid- e- Gulabi (Pink Eid) or Aab-e-Pashi (shower of colorful flowers). Everyone joined in the fervor and splendor of celebrations that would take place on a massive scale in the Red Fort. Mughal Emperor Jalaluddin Akbar encouraged the ideals of plurality, inclusiveness and tolerance. During his reign, all festivals were celebrated with equal exuberance and the practice was continued by his successors, excluding the more orthodox Aurangzeb Alamgir. Bahadur Shah Zafar was another Mughal King who loved to celebrate Holi with the Hindu community.

It is said that during Holi celebrations, even the poorest among the community would throw color at the Emperor, and artists would mimic him but nobody would take offence. In fact, the Emperor would enjoy the entertainment with utmost zeal and enthusiasm. Groups of traveling musicians and artists would gather under the Red Fort and display their tricks and talents. The Emperor would reward these artists handsomely as the noble women would watch the events from the balcony.

Not only the Mughal Nawabs, even Muslim poets celebrated Hindu festivals which found eminent place in their respective literary works. Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi (1735-1830), celebration of life is best reflected in his Kulliyat/poems on festivals, especially Hindu festive occasions such as auspicious Diwali and Holi. These poems also show the poet's narrativization of Hindu values and rituals associated with mythological figures on a scale intended to highlight their character's greatness and widespread devotion as a cause for celebration.

**Keywords:** *Eid-e-Gulaabi, Aab -e- Pashi, Inclusiveness, Plurality, Kulliyat.*



## Introduction

In India today, where even the smallest divide of religion, gender and community can spark reactions, the fact that coloring each other does not leave a trace of who you were, is worth remembering. While the festival of colors is associated mainly with Hinduism and the tales of Radha and Krishna, it has also been an integral part of Islam for centuries. Nevertheless, Holi was never an exclusive festival of Hindus. It has a Muslim history as well. From Mughals to Sufi poets, Holi has been part of Muslim culture and literature too. Syncretism in India was actually inspired and introduced by the holiest Sufi saint of Delhi, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya and his disciple, Amir Khusrau. They revered colours, especially “pink” and “yellow” and used them as divine expressions in their beautiful Persian and Hindavi poetry.

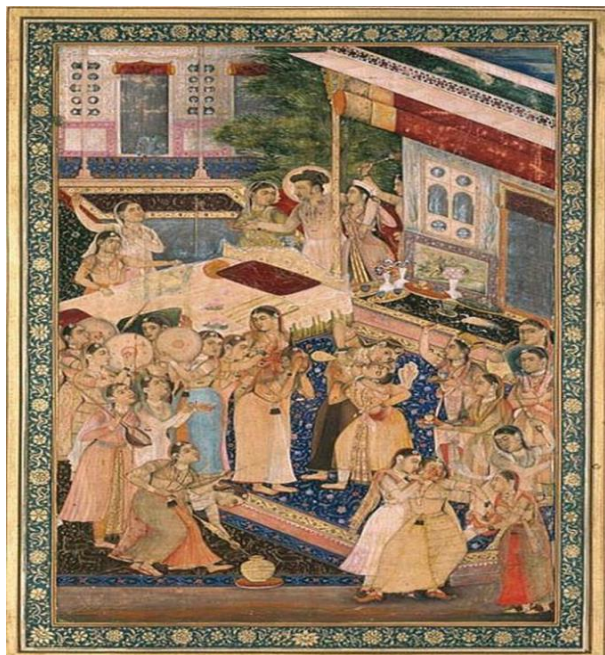
Holi would be celebrated on the same scale as Eid in the Red Fort, during Mughal times. Everyone participated in the Eid-e-Gulabi or Aab-e-Pashi (Shower of Colorful Flowers). The Holi carnival, which took place during the Mughal era, lasted for days and was attended by people of all religious and social backgrounds. This enlightened attitude has been brewing among the Mughals since Babur's reign. Babur is supposed to have celebrated Holi by dousing himself in a pool of alcohol. The poorest of the poor could apply colour to the emperor.

Agra being a quintessential Mughal city, can not overlook the rich tradition of celebrations set by Akbar and Jahangir. Emperor Akbar, one of the subcontinent's greatest kings (ruling from 1556 to 1605), championed religious tolerance. Maintaining a balance between the interests of the Hindu majority and those of the Muslim, Christian, Zoroastrian, Jain, Sikh, and other religions was critical to the empire's peace and

prosperity. The abolition of the poll tax on non-Muslims was one of Akbar's biggest political achievements.

Akbar also won over the rulers of the Hindu Rajput kingdoms by marrying their daughters into his family. Abul Fazal writes in *Ain-e-Akbari* that Akbar used to collect beautiful water guns (*pichkaaris*) of different sizes throughout the year which clearly shows his excitement. This used to be one of the rare occasions when Akbar would come out from his fort in Agra and play Holi with even the common people.

In *Tuzuk-e-Jahangiri*, Jahangir mentions that he played Holi actively and organized *Mehfil-e-Holi*. Paintings of Jahangir playing Holi with Noor Jahan, have been painted by many artists including Govardhan and Rasik. In *Tuzuk-e-Jahangiri*, Jahangir (1569–1627) writes: “Their day is Holi, which in their belief is the last day of the year. This day falls in the month of *Isfandarmudh*, when the sun is in *Pisces*. On the eve of this day, they light fires in all the lanes and streets. When it is daylight, they spray powder on each other's heads and faces for one watch and create an amazing uproar. After that, they wash themselves, put their clothes on, and go to gardens and fields. Since it is an established custom among the Hindus to burn their dead, the lighting of fires on the last night of the year is a metaphor for burning the old year as though it were a corpse.”



This picture above is an oldest painting from 1635 of Jahangir celebrating Holi. Jahangir's court was vastly multicultural and multilingual. During the holi celebration, called Mehfil-E-Holi (mentioned in Tuzuk-E-Jahangiri, the autobiography of Mughal Emperor Jahangir). Jahangir would allow Brahman Sanskrit intellectuals visit the courts in considerable numbers. They would flatter him with Sanskrit poetry, praising him as the God sent emperor who has descended in the form of Lord Krishna.

Pleased after hearing such praise, he would gift the Brahmins gold jewelry along with his promise regarding protection of cows and religious freedom. Then, it would proceed with a large gathering of all Jahangir's Hindu consorts acting as the Gopis along with Hindu Philosophers, advisors, astrologers and so forth, who would take turn in placing red mark on the forehead of Jahangir. After that the game of throwing colors on one another would begin. Both Hindus and Muslims together would partake in celebration in the Mughal court.

During the Shahjahani tenure of Delhi, Holi was known as Eid-e-Gulabi (Pink Eid) or Aab-e-Pashi (shower of colorful flowers) and truly so owing to its carnival spirit and hysterical rejoicing for both the major Indian communities. Shah Jahan would watch the Holi celebrations from the jharokas of his Red Fort in Delhi. The Umaras (nobles), the Rajahs and the Nawabs all exchanged rose-water bottles and sprinkled on each other along with the frenzied drumming of the nagaras (drums). This enlightened spirit percolated in the Mughal period right from the time Akbar. This is how it was celebrated during the reign of Akbar and Shah Jahan as well except for Aurangzeb.

While there are references to Holi in most of the Mughal reign, they are very prominent in the times of Emperor Akbar, Jahangir and Bahadur Shah Zafar, who celebrated the festival in their palaces with much fervor as Eid-e-Gulab-Pashi, where colours were created with tesu and rose flowers.

Mir Taqi Mir, who was in the court of Nawab Asaf-ud-Daulah wrote in praise of Jashne-e-Holi. Wajid Ali Shah, the last Nawab of Awadh, who considered himself to be the embodiment of Krishna, is known to have celebrated the festival with much fervour. One time when Holi and Muharram fell on the same day, he made sure both festivals found attention at different times of the day. While the morning in Lucknow was marked by colours of Holi, the evening was sombre with mourning in place.

Sufism and Holi, too, have also been very closely linked. Baba Bulleshah, equally revered in India and Pakistan, wrote once,

“Hori khelungi, keh bismillah; Nam nabi ki ratn chadi, boond padi Allah; Rang rangeeli ohi khilave, jis seekhi ho fanaa fi Allah.”

(I will play Holi, while saying bismillah; like a precious stone in Prophet's name, every drop falls with the rhythm of Allah, only he who has learnt to lose himself in Allah, may play with these colours.)

Even Muslim Sufi poets had used this festive opportunity to propagate the message of brotherhood. Holi was celebrated at most Sufi monasteries. Nizammuddin Aulia, who is considered to be among the first secular theorists, advocated love for people of all faiths. He also directed his protégée to compose poetry in the language of the commoners and started celebrating Holi at his monastery. This tradition of celebrating Holi became such an integral part of Sufi culture that even today, a ritual "Rang" is observed on the last day of the annual celebrations at every shrine.

Khelungi holi, Khwaja ghar aaye,

(I shall play Holi as Khwaja has come home,)

Dhan dhan bhaag hamare sajni,

(Blessed is my fortune, o friend,)

Khwaja aaye aangan mere.

(As Khwaja has come to my courtyard.)

-Amir Khusrau

The tales of elaborate Holi celebrations abound as much in Lucknow as they do in Delhi. Nawab Saadat Ali Khan and Asifuddaula would spend crores on Holi celebrations. The participating nautch girls, singers and courtiers were famously rewarded with gold coins and velvet cloth.

The references to Holi are innumerable in Urdu poetry. Almost no important Urdu poet, from Khusrau to Sahir Ludhyanvi, left this topic untouched. Not only the Mughal Nawabs, even Muslim poets celebrated Hindu festivals which

found eminent place in their respective literary works.

Urdu poet Nazir Akbarabadi (1735-1830), celebration of life is best reflected in his *Kulliyat*/poems on festivals, especially Hindu festive occasions such as auspicious Diwali and Holi. These poems also show the poet's narrativization of Hindu values and rituals associated with mythological figures on a scale intended to highlight their character's greatness and widespread devotion as a cause for celebration.

Qayam, an 18th century poet, has famously depicted the real naughtiness of Holi. His importance can be understood through Ghalib's acknowledgement of Qayam as his Ustad. In his long poem, *Chandpur ki Holi*, Qayam paints a scene of an inebriated Maulvi who has forgotten his way to the mosque. This is the state of people on Holi.

People from all spheres of life whether pious or habitual drinkers, celebrate together and indulge in mud-slinging. It makes everyone equal and free. Qayam ends his poem with a prayer:

"Ilaihai jab takke, ye shor o shar ho, alam mien, Holi seybaqiasar"

(O God let the festivity of Holi survive till the world does)

Such examples, showcase how India's cultural heritage has been enriched by the harmonious amalgamation and assimilation of various faiths and ethnicities. This is often called the Ganga-Jamuni *tehzeeb* which prevailed all over India right till the 19th century. It still exists in most part of the Indian sub-continent despite many attempts to divide and rule. With Mughal art, music and literature celebrating the many colours of Holi, it is evident that no single religion could stake a claim on any festival of

joy. As many artists point out, the colours are smeared to smudge off any trace of identity and erase all differences among humans, so that all of us can be one.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, it can be concluded that Holi was celebrated with great pomp and splendor in The Mughal Empire. Akbar, and the later Mughals, celebrated a variety of festivals. This was one way of seeking political validation as well as constructing kingship over different ethnicities. We hear of Holi, Diwali, Dussehra, Janmashtami as well as the Persian festival of Nauroz. Various representations in Mughal paintings, as well as in the Rajasthani, Pahari and later provincial Mughal paintings, show celebrations of these festivals.

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