

The Dynamics of Performance Culture in the Holi Festival: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

The Holi festival, primarily celebrated within Hindu society, manifests as a vibrant realm of performance that dissolves social hierarchies and boundaries through communal participation and collective joy. Grounded in performance theory, this paper interprets Holi as a dynamic cultural event that embodies the ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, Jacques Derrida, Peggy Phelan, and Clifford Geertz. Drawing on Geertz's notion of "blurred genres," the study situates Holi at the intersection of ritual, art, and social performance—where the aesthetic, the sacred, and the everyday intertwine. Contrary to critiques that associate the festival with harassment or environmental disruption, this research argues that Holi's enduring value lies in its capacity to create a liminal space where established norms are momentarily suspended. Through an analysis of mythic narratives and performative practices, Holi emerges as a living, evolving artistic phenomenon that bridges tradition and modernity. As a "Festival of Colors," it becomes a powerful performance site expressing happiness, transgression, and transformation. The article engages with Mary M. Anderson's *The Festivals of Nepal*, Bakhtin's concept of the carnival, Derrida's theory of hauntology, Phelan's ontology of performance, and Geertz's interpretive anthropology to reveal how Holi blurs the boundaries between sacred and profane, individual and collective, and past and present—transforming cultural ritual into a performative dialogue of identity and renewal.

Keywords: performance, liminality, culture, action, dynamic, carnivals

Introduction

The performative aspect of the Holi festival as a vibrant cultural practice that temporarily suspends social hierarchies and reaffirms collective identity is the focus of this study. Modern Holi celebrations frequently involve problematic practices, like verbal excesses, disruptive behavior, or the unsolicited throwing of colors (*lolas*), but the

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enduring enthusiasm with which people continue to participate calls for critical analysis. The festival nevertheless forces people to break free from their daily routines and immerse themselves in communal celebration, even in the face of the stresses of modern work life and some people's growing reluctance to participate in playful acts with color. This phenomenon implies that Holi is more than just a holiday. The festival can be interpreted as existing at the nexus of ritual, art, and social performance, drawing on Clifford Geertz's idea of "blurred genres." The boundaries between the religious and the secular, the beautiful and the commonplace, are blurred during Holi, resulting in a performative environment where a variety of social roles and meanings coexist. According to performance theory, the participants in this liminal moment enact a living form of cultural expression that both reflects and reconstructs social harmony. Playfully throwing colors, singing, dancing, and breaking rules represent a shared desire to reestablish social bonds and dismantle hierarchies, even if only momentarily.

Anchored in the mythic narratives of Holika and Prahlad, as well as the playful legends of Lord Krishna, Holi functions as a "blurred genre" of performance—a ritual that is simultaneously artistic, social, and spiritual. It embodies the aesthetic vitality and dynamic performativity of Hindu culture, reaffirming a sense of belonging and continuity with the past. In this light, Holi is not merely a festival of colors but a performative ritual that transforms society into a stage of shared identity, equality, and renewal.

Materials and Methods

In order to understand Holi as a performance site, this study uses a qualitative research methodology grounded in textual and cultural analysis. The study critically examines theories of performance and cultural expression by drawing on secondary sources like books, research journals, and academic articles. The theoretical underpinnings for investigating how Holi functions as a performative and interpretive cultural text are found in the writings of Jacques Derrida, Peggy Phelan, J. L. Austin, Mary M. Anderson, and Clifford Geertz. Since this study examines how meaning is enacted rather than just represented, performance art rhetoric continues to be crucial. These days, Holi is frequently misinterpreted or superficially seen as a celebration of excess, harassment, or environmental degradation. These false beliefs ignore its more profound cultural and performative significance. Performance studies' critical lens

enables this research to see Holi as a living, dialogic practice—a performance that reaffirms cultural identity, releases collective energy, and renews social bonds—instead of such reductive readings.

This study uses Clifford Geertz's idea of "blurred genres" to understand Holi as a space that blurs the lines between art, play, ritual, and social action. This framework aids in understanding Holi as a meaningful convergence of community, belief, and aesthetics rather than as a chaotic spectacle. This theoretical viewpoint explains why Holi is still a "perfect" festival for Nepali youths in particular: it offers a platform for participation where social freedom, artistic creativity, and group performance coexist. The blending of genres makes Holi a perfect performative platform that speaks directly to the identities and aspirations of a younger, vibrant generation while simultaneously serving as a platform for individuality and a reminder of social harmony.

Result and Discussion

Comparing *Holi* with stressful situations and especially for women, Jitendra Sah writes in his article, "The Dark Shades of *Holi*", in the Kathmandu Post dated on 15 March 2014:

Every year, there is a certain feeling of anxiety that many of us have come to associate with the lead up to the festival of *Holi*, a feeling that is especially amplified if one is a woman...bombarded with color or water filled balloons at the hands of random strangers. (Kathmandu Post, 2014, p. 8)

In the above-mentioned paragraph, Sah posits that *Holi* nowadays is full of stress and people opt for staying off the streets in order to avoid themselves from being bombarded with colors or *lolas*. So, here, Sah unearths the bad cultural tendencies of the people during *Holi* festival. Relating Holi performance with the politics of Nepal, Guffadi writes in his article entitled, "Oli, *Holi* and Goli", in the Kathmandu Post dated 15 March 2014:

According to Hindu legend, Holi is celebrated to mark the victory of good over evil. I guess, the folks back then were willing to actually fight against evil doers, but now... The evil doers run the show in this land of ours and all they do is prevent good, hard-working folks from leading decent, productive lives. (Kathmandu Post, 2014, p. 8)

Here in the above paragraph, Guffadi opines that during the time of *Holi's* inception, folks used to play it as a mark of victory of truth over falsity.

This paper differs from the way the above-mentioned scholar views regarding *Holi* festival. I will draw on the concept of performance studies and will show how the festival *Holi* is a performance culture that bears a special significance in our society. It even creates a special identity for the Hindu people. A strong kind of performing art, *Holi*, the Hindu festival of colors, blends ritual, storytelling, physical expression, and social engagement. *Holi* rites, coming from legendary narratives such as the tale of Prahlad and Holika or the playful actions of Radha and Krishna, are enacted through embodied and dramatic performances instead of being purely symbolic. Rangwali *Holi's* colorful show becomes an enthralling spectacle where the body serves as a canvas for artistic expression, and Holika Dahan represents the victory of good over evil (Schechner, 2013, p. 52). Traditions such as Lathmar *Holi* in Barsana, where men and women perform gender-specific roles with costumes and choreographed gestures, are examples of folk theater and carnival-like reversals (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 10). Music and dance, particularly in locales like Braj, Mathura, and Vrindavanâ are fundamental, changing the merriments into a dynamic climate wealthy with bhajans and people tunes like Hori and Phag. They are regularly gone with by charming Rasleela exhibitions that quicken divine cherish (Tharoor, 2018, p. 189). The change of open spaces into intuitively stages, the brief suspension of social standards, and the combination of entertainers with the gathering of people all emphasize noteworthy concepts in execution hypothesis, particularly Victor Turner's thoughts of liminality and communitas (Turner, 1982, p. 95). *Holi* isn't just a devout celebration; it serves as an exuberant, energetic convention where color, movement, sound, and narrative join together to precise social personality, sentiments, and revival in stunningly creative and showy shapes.

In her book, Anderson describes about *Holi* festival and its inception based on ancient mythological folktales. Anderson presents many folktales behind the evolution of *Holi* festival. She presents *Holi* as full of colour and many people involved in it. Since *Holi* brings people together, it can be seen as a carnival in Michael Bakhtin's term. For Bakhtin in carnival many "people live in it and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 217). In the similar line, in the festival *Holi* Anderson presents many people "may find themselves doused with sacred red power or splashed with scarlet liquid"(Anderson, 2005, p. 250). Anderson shows that in *Holi* the

people celebrate being doused with the vermilion powder as well as red liquid. This is the way that the people celebrate the festival.

McLaren opines, "Body is a terrain of flesh in which meaning is inscribed, constructed and reconstructed" (Laren, 1985, p. 15). *Holi* involves a play of the body in the form of a dance holding hands in hands played among the people. This very dance signifies the importance of the body. Without the play of the bodies the festival doesn't bear any real meaning. So, in the bodies of the participants other meaning is inscribed. Similarly, the participants' play as a performance shows togetherness among the people. This very togetherness marks a kind of interface between the people and the society. Anderson presents the songs of *Holi* as carrying a different flavour. Among various tastes, *Holi* carries romantic flavour as well. Anderson writes: "The traditional songs of *Holi* often prays lovely maidens and glorify romance, perhaps in remembrance of Krishna's amorous escapades" (Anderson, 2005, p. 253). The romantic songs that are sung during this festival are closely connected with the amorous activities of Lord Krishna. Further, *Holi* songs carry the overtones of romantic love directed towards the girls. This shows that *Holi* carries a flavor of performance art which "reflects the ideological sedimentation of social structure inscribed into it" (Anderson, 2005, p. 15). *Holi* shows a specific type of festive performance that it consists of the movement of the bodies in order to perform the festival. The movement of the bodies, however, should necessarily cover specific time and space. Similarly, *Holi* is imbued with a limited number of people in order to perform the dance in the form of movement of the people. Anderson puts this movement of the bodies in this way: "Rowdy youths' troop from home to home of relatives and friends, challenging everyone within range to share their fun. Girls excused from school and women who keep to their homes, indulge in this seasonal amongst themselves" (Anderson, 2005, p. 253). Here, Anderson throws the idea that during *Holi* festival, the movement of the bodies evokes a particular kind of fun. This movement covers a particular time of the celebration, and it also covers a particular space, that is, the courtyard in front of the houses of the people. In a similar line, Peggy Phelan opines that performance entails the idea that a limited number of people within a particular space and time frame celebrate the festival with a sense of fun.

According to performance theory, performance has a distinctly new phenomenon each time it is performed. Performance is changed and becomes a new one performed at different times. So, the thrust of the ontology of performance is that every performance is

a new performance. With this view *Holi* festival has also undergone changes over time. Its ontology is constantly in flux. This changing ontological status is clear when Anderson talks about the changing scenario of the *Holi* festival over time. Anderson writes: "In recent years it has become illegal to throw colour at any citizen who objects or at unsuspecting foreigners and tourists, despite the insistence of some that the dousing of passer-by with red colour during this week is a mark of respect and honour" (Anderson, 2005, p. 252). Here, Anderson sees the changing contour of *Holi* festival. She presents that over time, the way *Holi* is celebrated is changed, and the perception of the people is also transformed regarding the throwing of colour on people. She says that earlier, throwing colour at people was considered to be a mark of respect, but nowadays, throwing colour at people who object is considered illegal and is lawfully convicted as a crime. This shows that *Holi* is changing constantly over time. So, the performance of *Holi* in the past has been transformed now.

It has served as a tool to promote and revitalize cultural identity and representation. As Adrienne L. McLean states in *Dying Swans and Madmen*, "The dancing body offers insight into the intricate interplay between physical experience and cultural representation, as well as the connections between body and identity" (McLean, 1985, p. 15). During the *Holi* dance, performers showcase artistic expressions through deliberate footsteps, movements, and hand gestures, each rich with symbolic meaning. Pallabi Chakraworty expresses her opinion:

"Practice" is an important analytical node in dance scholarship. Practice refers to both social theory and the corporeal actions of the body. Pierre Bourdieu's conceptualization of "habitus," drawn from a phenomenological understanding of practicum has been important in movement scholarship. It enabled bodily meaning to be located outside discourses of representation in the realm of experience and emotion. (Chakraworty, 1998, p. 170)

In the context of *Holi* dance, the cultural essence of the practice is reflected through individuals dressed in traditional attire, performing various dance forms. As Dahal claims, "The anthropology of cultural or ritual performance focuses on the verbal performance and performativity" (Dahal, 2024, p. 471). In this sense, interdisciplinary approaches are found in the concepts of performative (Austine, 1962, p. 67) and verbal art and oratory forms as performance (Bauman, 1977, p. 231). Rather than being merely re-creative or re-iterative, the ritualized performances are creative (Tambiah, 1979, p.

65). However, repeated performances expose the social structures that are "emergent in action" (Hymes, 1975, p. 74). In order for cultural or ritual performance of actions to be ritually effective, they must always create the right conditions or environment for agents to accept them as such.

Every festival happens to have its root of evolution of its current form. So is the case with *Holi*. This festival has many reasons behind its evolution. Different folktales are handed down to people for centuries regarding the evolution of *Holi* festival. One of such folktales is about the story of Holika and Pralad. It is said that Holika was given a blessing that she would remain immune to burning of fire. She tried to put Pralad on a burning fire putting his on her lap because Pralad was a diehard devotee of Lord Bishnu. Holika was burnt instantly even if she was blessed to remain immune to the fire. This marks the victory of truth over falsity. So, commemorating that event, people celebrate *Holi* festival. Thus, it can be said that the root of Holi festival is the folktale of Holika and Pralad. Imbibing this very story, Anderson writes: "Now the antics of *Hoili* festival are thought to celebrate her extermination" (Anderson, 2005, p. 253). This remark of Anderson tells us that Holi festival is celebrated because of the extermination of Holika. So, Holi has a root behind its celebration, in the same way that every ritual has a certain root behind its evolution. Having some reasons behind rituals' performances is the concept of hauntology of Derrida. For Derrida, any event happened in the past is tantamount to a ghost. This very ghostly appearance in the present time is what is called ontology of a performance. For Derrida, "The repetition of the ghost is the repetition of performativity" (Derrida, 1994, p. 57). The ghostly repetition of the folktale of Holika and Pralad is the repetition of *Holi* every year. *Holi* keeps on repeating every year with a new performativity. So, every new performativity supplants the previous ontological status of the performance of *Holi* festival. This time it is performed with newness unlike the previous celebration as if it is repeating again for the first time. This very repetition also marks the performance in the forthcoming times. In this line, it hints that every performance is for future generations.

Anderson when writes that *Holi* is celebrated in commemorating Holika's and mythological burning of 'old year' comes on an equal footing of the concept of hauntology. Anderson says that some believe the traditional bonfires at *Holi* commemorate the fiery death of Holika, while to others it symbolizes the burning of the mythological old year, since Lord Brahma created the world on the day following *Holi*

full moon. Here, she presents that *Holi* is celebrated due to the fact that Holika was burnt and it marks the end of the old year for Newar people as well. This fact suggests Darridian hauntological concept: the past is the source of the present. Similarly, *Holi* as a performance entails the movements of the people as they dance and sing the *Holi* songs with manifold meanings. Anderson tells: " During the last three days of Holi the fervor of 'playing with color' increases when bands of young men wander through the powder-stained streets and winding lanes singing at the tops of their lungs" (Anderson, 2005, p. 253). Here, Anderson shows how *Holi* as a performance, is performed among the people and their bodies are inscribed with meaning. It is so since their active bodies are mingled in the performance, that is, dance. Here, the performer utterly disappears, and there remains only what the performer does or performs. Peggy Phelan is of the opinion that "In performance, the body is metonymic of self, of character, of voice, of ' presence.' But in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else-dance, movement, sound, character, 'art' (Phelan, 2005, p. 150). In this line, if *Holi* is seen, the performers' dancing and singing only remain tangible, and as soon as they perform, their bodies are mingled in dance and songs as art.

Holi festival, if seen from the perspective of Michael Bakhtin's notion of carnival, it looks full of intensity and vigor. Anderson presents *Holi* with a tinge of carnival:

The crowd which gathers on this vast, moonlit field includes many Indians of the Marwari class, merchants who for centuries have made their homes and livelihood... Musicians play, the old color guards stand at attention, while exuberant youths dash around the field in a last burst of playful energy. (Anderson, 2005, p. 254)

The above paragraph shows *Holi* as a festival of carnival. This festival brings people together, and all the people participate in it, suspending all hierarchical privileges. All the exuberant youth play the dances and sing songs blurring all the boundaries creating a liminal space and time. Similarly, the carnival of *Holi* festival is even further celebrated even after the burning of *chir*, which marks the end of the feast. This shows the ecstasy of the festival that continues to sway the people with an intense heat of celebration. Anderson seemingly drawing upon the concept of Bakhtin's notion of carnival, writes:

Now the burning of the *chir* pole indicates to most Nepalese that further tossing of red powder is forbidden, and the festival of Holi is over. On the following day, however, large Indian communities in Kathmandu continue to 'play with color'.... a weird ceremony is conducted on the Tundikhel, which appears to have little relation to *Holi*. (Anderson, 2005, p. 255)

Here, Anderson asserts that even after the celebration of *Holi* is over with the burning of *chir* pole, the intensity of this festival is as such people gather together to put a flavor of carnival but it bears no resemblance with the *Holi* festival.

Thus, *Holi* festival as a performance is celebrated among the people playing with the color. The festival entails movement of the bodies in the form of dance and singing of songs. Similarly, as a performance, *Holi* is a ritual of the Hindu people which springs from certain folktales bordering on the mythical stories of Lord Krishna and the story of Holika and Pralad.

Conclusion

Holi festival, as a performance, is a celebration of the Hindu people. It carries a distinct feature that creates homogeneity among the people from various strata of the Hindu society. As *Holi* is celebrated by playing with the color, it equally makes the life of the people colorful, rendering people a sense of solace and ecstasy, suspending all the hierarchies in the society. As a performance, *Holi* has come through a lot of changes over a long period of time since its inception. Thus, *Holi* is celebrated anew each time it is performed bordering on the ontological concept of performance theory. Similarly, *Holi's* evolution is said to be emanated from various mythological underpinnings such as the story of Krishna's amorous escapades and the story of Holika and Pralad. The source that bears the root behind the inception of a ritual is said to be hauntology of a certain performance culture. Besides, *Holi* is such a performative activity that it brings people together to give the society a distinct identity and flavour. Similarly, by creating a distinct cultural identity, the Hindu people try to give a distinct flavour to the society. *Holi* gives a significant meaning to the Hindu people because it tries to create a society with a homogenizing feature. It creates a kind of carnival where all the people live truly forgetting their everyday humdrum. They consider *Holi* a liminal space where every boundary is blurred and people live in it. *Holi* celebration as a liminal phenomenon

shows the victory of truth over falsity. It also represents a kind of blessing which terminates the most unholy time span of the year according to the Newar culture.

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