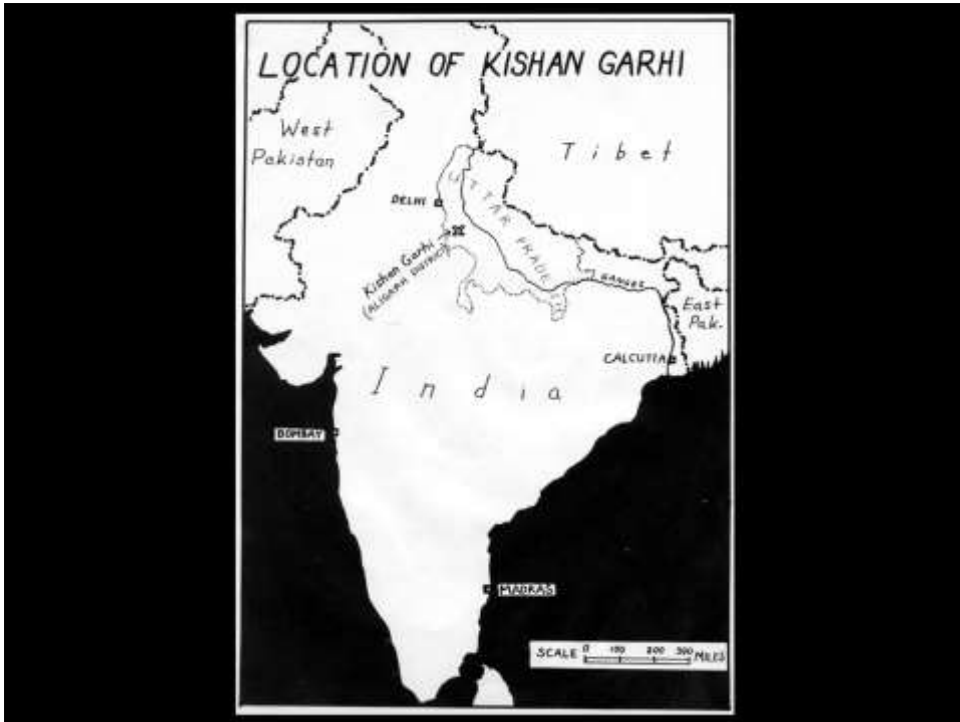


Holi: The Feast of Love

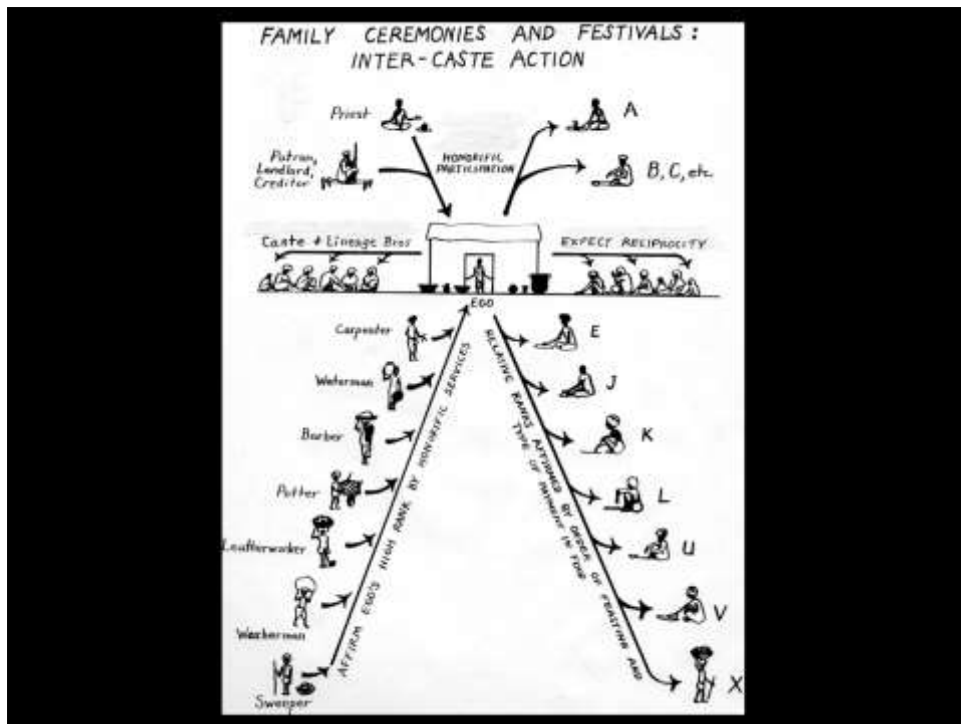
India's Spring Festival in a U.P. Village, 1951-79

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rev. 2/18/07



"Kishan Garhi" village is in Aligarh District about 100 miles southeast of India's capital at New Delhi. (The "East Pakistan" of this 1951 map became Bangladesh in 1972.)



The village's 1950 census showed members of 20 different Hindu and 4 Muslim castes, mostly known by the names of their occupational specialties. All were ranked according to their givings and receivings of food and services, transactions evident at some 30 local feasts during the 1951–52 year.



Participant Observer
1951-2
1968-9
1979

Participant observer Marriott receiving a protective charm from his *Sanadhya* Brahman priest at the August *Saluno* festival. He lived in the village for 14 months in 1951–52, for 6 months after the "Green Revolution" in 1968-69, and revisited briefly in 1979 and 2004. Photos here are of activities from or similar to those of 1951–52, except where noted.

VIII. THE FEAST OF LOVE

by McKim Marviss

I shall try here to interpret Krishna and his cult as I met them in a rural village of northern India while I was conducting my first field venture as a social anthropologist. The village was Kidhan Garhi,¹ located across the Jumna from Matharā and Vrindaban, a day's walk from the youthful Krishna's fabled land of Vraja.

As it happened, I had entered Kidhan Garhi for the first time in early March, not long before what most villagers said was going to be their greatest religious celebration of the year, the festival of Holi. Preparations were already under way. I learned that the festival was to begin with a bonfire celebrating the cremation of the demesest Holikk. Holikk, supposedly fireproofed by devotion to her demon father, King Harmitka, had been burned alive in the fiery destruction plotted by her to punish her lecher Prahlāda for his stubborn devotion to the true god, Rāma.² I observed two priests and a large crowd of women reconstructing Holikk's pyre with ritual and song; the Brahman master of the village site with a domestic chaplain consecrated the ground of the demesest's reserved plot; the women added wafers and trinkets of dried cow-dung fuel,³ stood tall straws in a circle around the pile, and finally circumambulated the whole, winding about its protective strands of homespun cotton. Gangs of young boys were collecting other combustibles—if possible in the form of donations, otherwise by stealth—quoting what they said were village rules, that everyone must contribute something and that anything once placed on the Holi pyre could not afterward be removed. I barely forestalled the contribution of one of my new cows; other householders in my lane complained of having lost brooms, parts of doors and eaves, bundles of straw thatch, and an undetermined number of fuel cakes from their drying places in the sun.

The adobe houses of the village were being repaired or white-washed for the great day. As I was mapping the streets and houses for a preliminary survey, ladies of the village everywhere passed invitations upon me to attend the festival. The form of these invitations was

usually the oscillation of a fistful of wet cow-dung plaster in my direction, and the words, "Sabho will play Holi with us?" I asked how it was to be played, but could get no coherent answer. "You must be here to me and to play!" the men insisted.

I felt somewhat apprehensive as the day approached. An educated landlord told me that Holi is the festival most favored by the castes of the fourth estate, the Śūdras. Eavesdrops at the district town advised me to stay indoors, and certainly to keep out of all villages on the festival day. But my village friends said, "Don't worry. Probably no one will hurt you. In any case, no one is to get angry, no matter what happens. All quarrels come to an end. It is a Rām—a divine sport of Lord Krishna!" I had read the sacred *Bhāgavata Purāna's* story about Prahlāda and had heard many of its legends of Krishna's miraculous and amorous boyhood.⁴ These books seemed harmless enough. Then, too, Radcliffe-Brown had written in an authoritative anthropological text that one must observe the action of rituals in order to understand the meaning of any myth.⁵ I had been instructed by my reading of B. Malinowski, as well as by all my anthropological preceptors and elders that one best observes another culture by participating in it as directly as possible.⁶ My duty clearly was to join in the festival as far as I might be permitted.

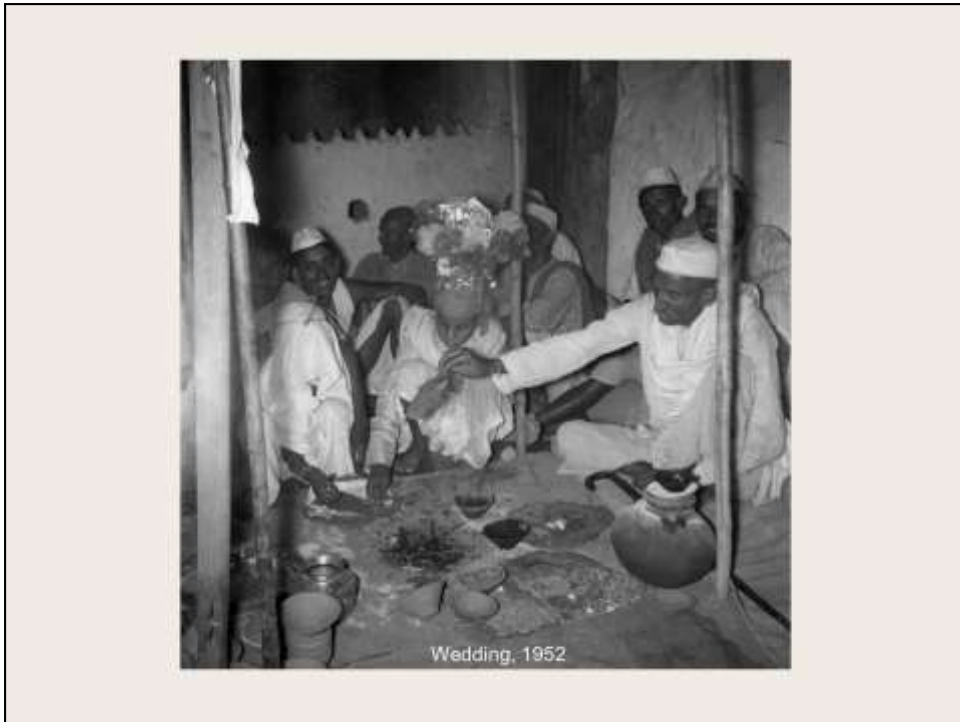
The celebration began auspiciously, I thought, in the middle of the night as the full moon rose. The great pile of blessed and pillaged fuel at once took flame, ignited by the village fool, for the master of the village site had failed to rouse with sufficient speed from his slumbers. "Victory to Mother Holikk!" the shout went up, wishing her the achievement of final spiritual liberation rather than any earthly conquest, it seemed. A hundred men of all twenty-four castes in the village, both Muslim and Hindu, now crowded about the fire, naming ears of the new, still green barley crop in her embers. They marched around the fire in opposite directions and exchanged shouted gains with each other as they passed, exhorting or greeting one another with "Rim Rim!"—bliss in many cases to distinctions of caste. Household fires throughout the village had been extinguished, and as the assembled men returned to their homes, they carried coals from the collective fire to rekindle their domestic hearths. Many household courtyards stood open with decorated firsipins awaiting the new year's blaze. Joyful

"The Feast of Love," the text partly illustrated here, appeared originally in 1966 in Milton Singer (ed.), *Krishna: Myths, Rites, and Attitudes*, pp. 200–12 and 229–31. It has often been reprinted elsewhere, as it was recently in Diane P Mines and Sarah Lamb (eds), *Everyday Life in South Asia*, pp. 249–60 (Indiana University press, 2002)

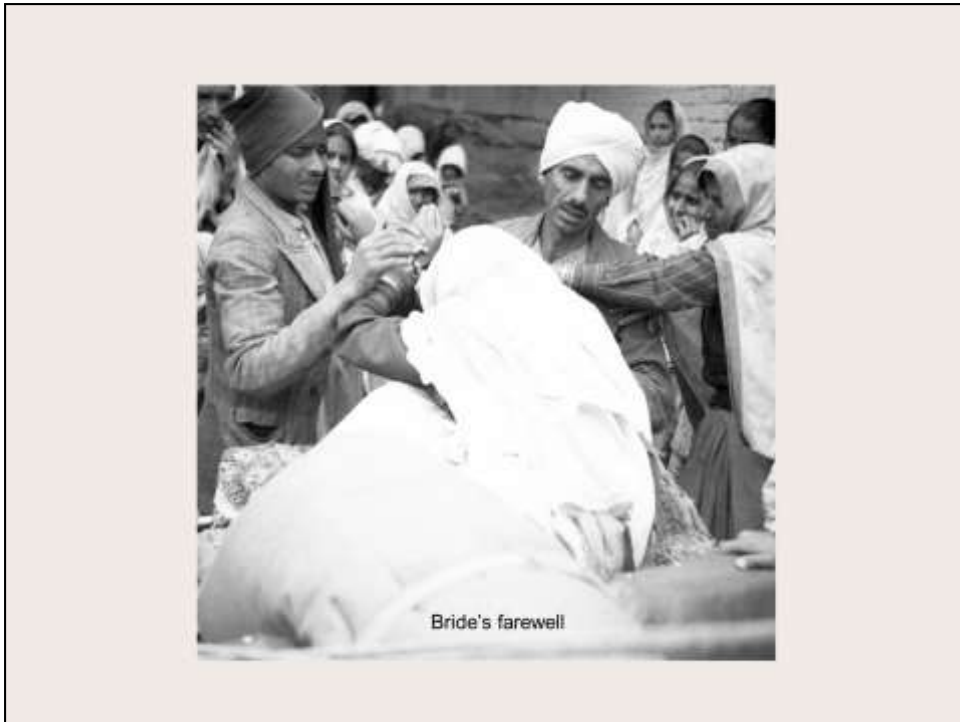
DHARMA



Members of a joint household of *Kachvāhā Ṭhākur* or *Kāchi*-caste farmers pose for a family portrait, illustrating what villagers consider proper behavior. Males born in the village stand forward, considering me a "village brother" or "father's brother." My "village sisters" do not cover their faces. But the men's wives (who have all come from other villages) count me (the photographer) a potential mate, so they stand back and respectfully cover their heads and faces. The eldest female, my "village mother," stands in the background, covering her head, but showing me a smiling face.



Ramji Lal, a 14-year old boy of *Baghele Thākur* or *Gadaria* Goatherd caste (crowned, center) being wedded in 1951 to an 11-year old bride (covered at left) in her natal home, 30 miles away. Ramji Lal and his family's Brahman priest (right) from a village next to Kishan Garhi, add incense to the wedding fire. The couple remains silent throughout the ceremony. Present behind them are the boy's male kin and family Barber.



A 16-year old Brahman bride clings to her brothers as my Jeep is loaded to carry her and her groom to Kishan Garhi, many miles away. She wails and screams, "I am dead! My mother and father are dead I" The faces of her kin mirror her anguish. After I had driven a mile or two, her new husband, who was seated beside me, took charge. "Shut up!" he said. "You are bawling like a *Camār* Leatherworker." Thereafter she made no sound. [Photo is from 1969, following legislation that raised the minimal age for girls to be married.]



The wife of a Muslim *Teli Oilpresser* grinds grain daily to make the unleavened bread that is the family's main food. I am younger than her husband, but with exaggerated respect she covers her head and complains in loud whispers to a child behind her about my queries. When I object to her deferential silence and address her as "elder brother's wife" (construing ours as a joking relationship), she drops the cloth from her head and says, "If you are my husband's younger brother, get out of here and stop bothering me!"



A woman of *Nāū* Barber caste here works at another wifely duty—coating her front platform with fresh cowdung plaster to make it clean for the festival. Her husband with his barbering kit watches her work. Shortly after this 1951 photo, she and neighboring wives waved fistfuls of plaster toward me, urging me to return on the full-moon day "to play Holi" with them. I agreed, but wondered just what such "play" might mean.



HOLI

Mahadev Bawa, a *Jāt Thākur* laborer, jokester, and junkie, plays a flute during the *Vasant* "Spring" fortnight that precedes Holi. Welcoming the hot weather that will soon follow, many villagers dye some of their clothing yellow, the color of this season when the mustard oilseed crop bursts into flower.



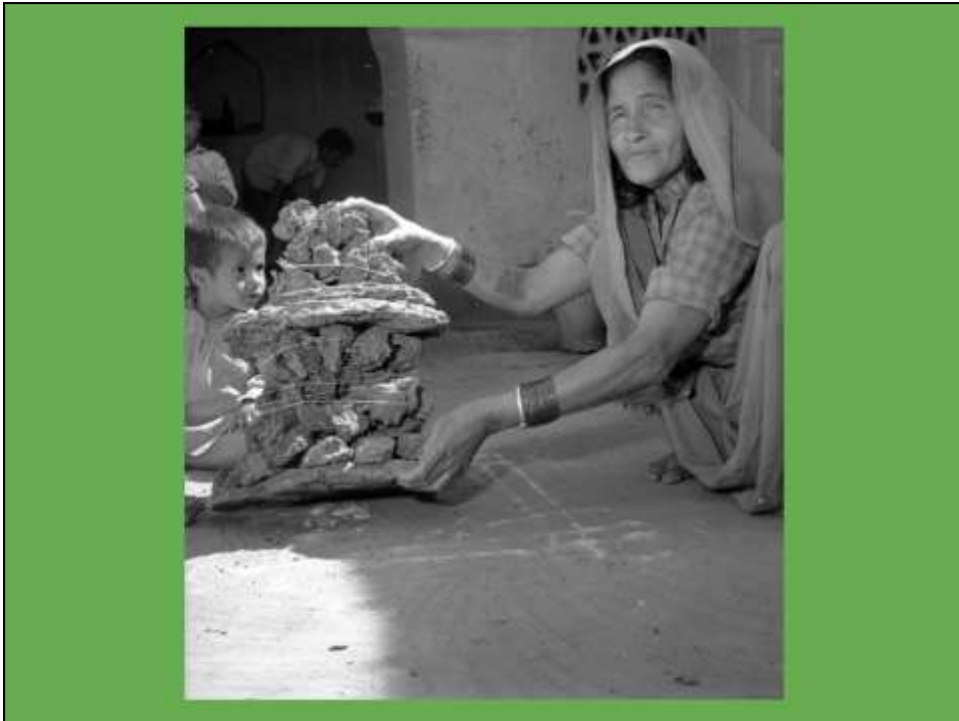
Preparing for the communal bonfire, singing women of many castes come in procession to contribute cowdung cakes and wind protective threads around the site.



Other combustibles for the bonfire are gathered by Muslim and Hindu boys They have stolen someone's unused door, also thatch from my house's roof. I object, but they say that by village custom, nothing once placed there as fuel can be removed.



On the full-moon day all households extinguish their regular cooking fires. Children decorate hearths for new domestic fires to be kindled from the communal bonfire.



Essential fuel for all new Holi fires is dried cowdung, A housewife of *Jāt* caste displays necklaces and wafers of dung that she has reshaped from material with which she had modeled "Grandfather Cowdung Wealth" (Lord *Kṛṣṇa*) for worship just after Divali as described in Marriott [ed.] *Village India* p. 200.

FIRE



FIRE

The evil *Holikā's* cremation fire is to be ignited at the rising of the full moon of March with which northern India begins the month Phālgun. Lighting the Holi fire in here is the inauspicious duty of an appointed Brahman, the "Master of the Village Site," but in 1951 Mahadeva Bawa actually beat him to that task. (Both later suffered disasters.)



Males of all castes come to the Holi fire, providing that their respective households have suffered no deaths during the preceding year. They roast stalks of green barley, then circle the fire in two directions, saluting each other with "*Rām Rām, Śāh!*" or "*Jai ..Śrī Kṛṣṇa!*" and exchanging roasted grains. Here men of the *Turai* "Water Carrier" and Brahman castes greet each other, exchange grains, and embrace.



Another pair, one a Barber, the other a *Camār* Leatherworker laborer, trade salutations, barley grains, and embraces. (Only personal acquaintance enables an observer to recognize the caste identities of the men who mingle on such an occasion.)



Here 3 meet at one time—a Muslim *Faqir* Beggar and a Brahman man standing to exchange, while a young *Camār* laborer touches the elder Brahman's feet.



Married women do not attend the fire, but here an elder Brahman widow—many male's "mother" or "grandmother" by village kinship terminology—is deferentially saluted at the fire by a young man of *Khāṭik* Cutter caste.



Men carry coals from the Holi fire to rekindle cooking fires in every house. The water first heated on this new fire is preserved in many houses as a powerful curative.



Men also carry roasted barley from the communal fire to wives, children, and men who have remained at home. House doors are left open until late to receive such visitors.

DUST

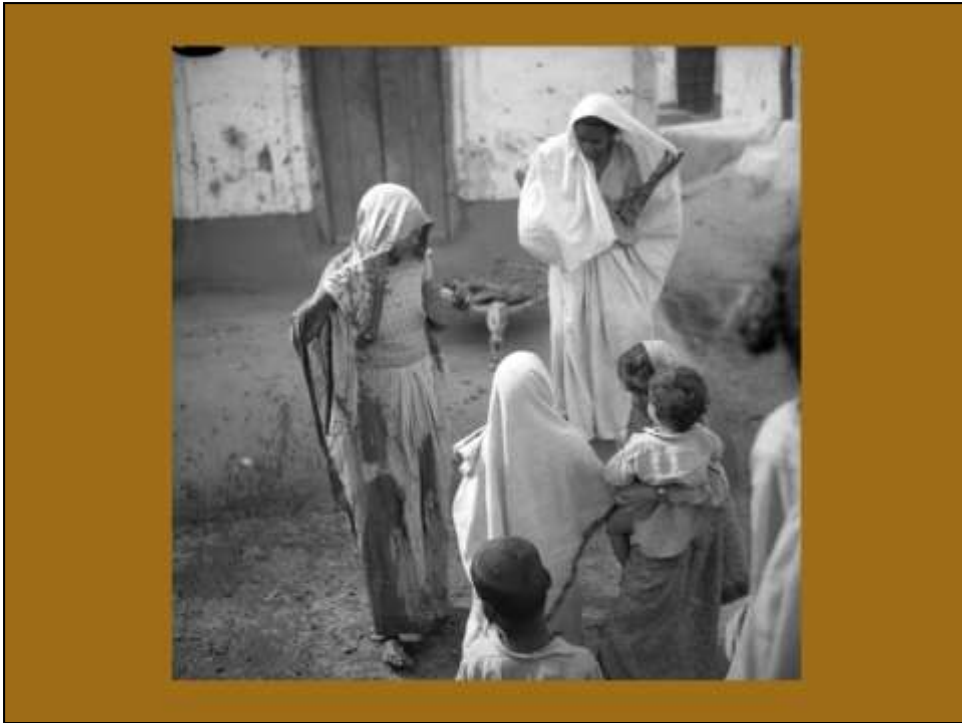


DUST

Before dawn house doors are chained shut again. Gangs of boys take over the village lanes, demanding that everyone come out and play Holi with them.



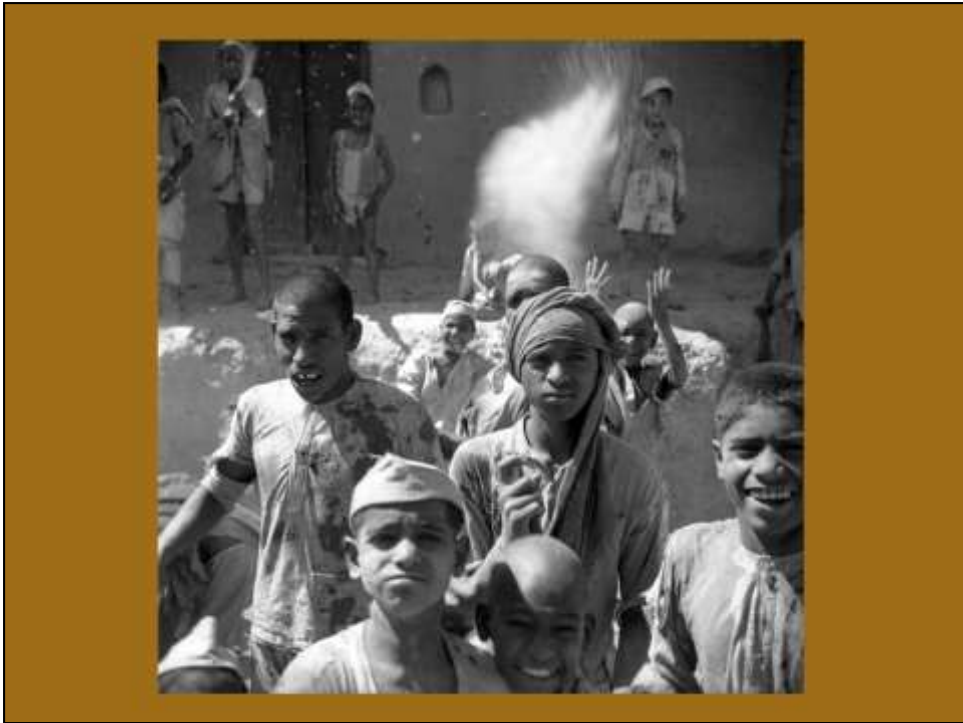
Hunted down in a field, I find myself looking up at mud-covered young *Kumhar* Potters, Oil Pressers, and Camārs.



This young Cutter widow has just been doused with a pail of cowdung water by a lover whom she had recently jilted in favor of a wealthier Brahman.



Karhera Cotton-carder, Beggar, and Camār youths break pots on my door.



They batter my house with mud bricks and me with handfuls of dust.



As dwellers in Lord *Kṛṣṇa*'s fabled land of *Braj*, villagers are pretty sure that He started the Holi tradition of men and women dousing each other with colored water. At noon everyone bathes and puts on fresh clothing for the afternoon's doings.

COLOR



COLOR

A Brahman wife is so pleased with my *Kāyastha* Scribe assistant that she grabs him to decorate his fresh white shirt with blue dye.



Men play with colors among themselves "to show their love." A *Jāt Thākur* exlandlord-farmer of Kishan Garhi greets his friend, a *Bārahseṇi Baniya* Merchant living in a neighboring village, by smearing his face with red powder.



Having recently been pressed to pay a painfully large bribe to the police for his landlord friend, the Merchant replies by massaging the landlord's head with a bucket of diesel oil.



Holi-playing so well fits the ambivalent feelings between the families making marriages for their children that it often breaks out at weddings, whatever the season (here January). These men of the groom's party (who will soon carry away a local girl) have just been doused with liquid colors by their hostesses, the bride's women.



As Jeep-driver for the groom at this wedding, I too, get doused and lovingly beaten on the back with a rolling pin and turmeric-stained hand-prints by the bride's mother.

STICKS



STICKS

Village wives whose passions are not satisfied by throwing colored water use sticks. On Holi afternoon, they may beat any local man they can catch, making themselves difficult subjects for my camera. Men try to avoid the wives' blows by dodging behind sticks whose ends they plant on the ground, or by running—the tactic I usually chose.



By 1969, such spontaneous, irregular attacks on married men by stick-wielding wives were partly replaced by a formal game in which a team of 10 wives defend with sticks a large cake of locally made brown sugar. A team of 10 husbands try to seize the sugar cake and escape with it from the circle of wives without getting beaten themselves. A spectator sport for the audience perched on the walls of this compound, such a game has continued, I was told in 2004.

DANCE



DANCE

Kishan Garhi is the home of a family of itinerant *Jogī*-caste clowns and reciters of Śaiva legends. On Holi afternoon 1952, Jogī men dressed as women dance and sing in a village lane. They inspire other villagers, many stoned on *bhang*, to do likewise.



Mahadev Bawa dances wearing donkey bells.



A Jogī boy, an elder Brahman, and others join in.



Holī-playing spills over into the following days. In the courtyard of a *Jat* ex-landlord's house, a Muslim *Mīrāsī* dancer performs with lewd gestures for an audience of women and children. [1969]



An American visitor to the village, a graduate student from Berkeley, catches the dancing bug. [1969]