

THE HIDDEN GEM OF COMMUNAL SPIRIT : PHOOL WALON KI SAIR

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INTRODUCTION

India, with a population of more than 135.26 crore, is a secular country where people of different cultures co-exist. There is no state sponsored or national religion thus making it a home for everyone with different religious affiliations to come together and live with one another. People are free to practice any or no religion as per their beliefs as the Article 25-28 of the Indian Constitution extends the right to freedom of religion in India. Diverse communities embracing and respecting each other's culture is also something one can find in this country. From Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs to Christians, everyone living together and celebrating each other's festivities shows the communal spirit of India in its purest form. Communal Harmony is a situation where people from different religious backgrounds live together in peace and respecting each other's cultures, free from hatred or any kind of violence. There is affection and love among the citizens. It strongly promotes non-violence and peace towards each other and nation at large. Sadhbhavana Diwas (Communal Harmony Day) celebrated on 20th August every year in India is based on the idea to promote equality, along with acceptance of different religions by all because each citizen of the nation has the right to follow the religion they believe in and intolerance threatens this right. But despite being a secular nation, India still faces problems of communal disharmony leading to communal riots in our country. Despite communal riots, there is still a presence of communal harmony present in the DNA of India. Different communities come together to celebrate festivals in different parts of India to restore and promote the nature of communal harmony. Some of these are Phool Walon ki Sair, Sarva Dharma Sammelan, Ganga-Jamuni Tehzeeb and a few others that keep the communal spirit alive.

PHOOL WALON KI SAIR

Phool Walon ki Sair, translated as 'procession of the florists', is a one-of-a-kind annual celebration conducted and participated by the Delhi florists. It is a weeklong celebration, held during the month of September, usually after the monsoon season of Delhi. The philosophy of 'Unity in Diversity' fits perfectly well with this festival as florists from different religious backgrounds come together to celebrate with great zest and zeal.

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An annual celebration to pray for a better flower season next year, this is a famous festival many Delhi natives might have heard of yet might be unknown to so many. Rightly labeled it is a hidden gem portraying communal harmony right in the heart of the capital of this country.

ORIGIN

The history behind this festival travels back to the Mughal Era times during the year 1812 because of an incident that took place at the Red Fort. Akbar Shah II, the Mughal King wanted to nominate his younger (and favourite) son Mirza

Jahangir in place of his eldest son Siraj Uddin Zafar (Bahadur Shah Zafar II) as his heir but couldn't because Siraj Uddin being the elder son was next in line for the throne. One fine day when Sir Archibald Seton, the British Resident at the Red Fort, went to meet the Mughal King the topic of succession was being discussed. The Resident stated that the East India Company stance was in favour of Bahadur Shah Zafar II to be the successor. After listening to this, Mirza Jahangir, who was in his late teens, insulted the British Resident in open court by calling him 'Loolu', Seton didn't react as he was unaware as to what is the meaning of Loolu. Few days after that, Mirza Jahangir was on the roof of Naubat Khana at the Red Fort and Sir Archibald Seton was returning from the Darbar, when suddenly Mirza Jahangir fired a shot from the roof. Sir Archibald Seton however escaped from that shot but his orderly was killed by this act. The Resident asked the prince to apologize but he refused. For this very reason, The Resident came back to avenge the insult with a whole posse of British troops and Mirza Jahangir was exiled to Allahabad by the orders of the British Resident in the year 1812. Mirza Jahangir's mother Queen Mumtaz Mahal Begum II who was heartbroken and sad with this decision, took a vow that day that whenever her son would be released, from

Allahabad, she would walk from Nizamuddin Auliya Tomb to Qutubuddin Bhaktiyar Kaki and offer a 'chaadar' (sacred cloth) at the Khwaja Bakhtiar Kaki dargah situated in Mehrauli.

Mirza Jahangir was released from Allahabad after a few years and some deliberations was sent back to Delhi. Like a devout mother and person, Queen Mumtaz Mahal Begum II redeemed her vow and went to Mehrauli where grand celebrations were organized. The Queen with the chaadar started her walk barefoot which the people did not have a heart to see and spread rose petals along the way. Along with that, the Imperial Court also shifted to Mehrauli and the Delhi population too followed her. The celebrations continued for straight 7 days turning it into a fair which included all kinds of attractions like jhoolas on the mango trees, cock fighting, bull baiting, kites flying, swimming bouts and wrestling making it a festival in itself on the occasion of the return of the prince. She then offered a chaadar made up of flowers at the Khawaja Bhaktiar Kaki Dargah. Seeing this, the Mughal King, who was of a secular mindset also gave orders for floral offerings in the shape of a floral pankha to be offered at the Yogmaya Temple in Mehrauli because Mehrauli is known for its deity. This was how the very first Phool Walon ki Sair originated and celebrated. Seeing how this event was celebrated with great enthusiasm and the lively spirit of people, it was then decided to declare this event as an annual festival to be celebrated after the monsoon rains, allowing people from each and every community to be a part of it.

HISTORY

Since its origin in the year 1812 with the Mughal Emperor as its patron when it was celebrated for 7 days leading to a shift of the Darbar to Mehrauli, this was celebrated every year with the same enthusiasm. Every year the Mughal Emperor of the time became its patron and people from all religious backgrounds became a part of it. The last 'Phool Walon ki Sair' under the rule of Mughals was celebrated in the year 1857, during the reign of Bahadur Shah Zafar II (Siraj Uddin Zafar, the eldest son of Akbar Shah II). The tradition didn't stop after the Mughals, the festival was still celebrated after the 1857 revolt, by the British Deputy commissioner as its patron, who was the highest government functionary at that time in Delhi, along with the help of some other prominent citizens.

The festival was brought to a stop in the year 1942 by the British during the Quit India Movement phase of the freedom struggle in pursuance of their policy of 'Divide and Rule'. In the year 1961, Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, the then Prime Minister of free India decided to revive the lost legacy of 'Phool Walon ki Sair'. He asked Mr. Noor Uddin Ahmed, the Mayor Of Delhi, Taimur Jahan Begum, scion of the Mughal Dynasty and philanthropist Shri Yogeshwar Dayal, scion of a prominent family of Delhi to revive this beautiful festival giving a chance to people of Delhi to once again relive this beautiful tradition and spread the essence of communal harmony in the society.

The revived festival was celebrated on 6th of September, 1962. The PM Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru became a part of 'Phool Walon ki Sair' and visited Mehrauli on the occasion to celebrate this festival as long as he lived. This was the new beginning of the festival and it has grown ever since that time. Every Prime Minister of India has been taking a keen interest in this festival and coming forward to celebrate it religiously promoting communal harmony in our country.

When Indira Gandhi was the Prime Minister of India, every state was also invited to be a part of this festival and participate in it. Thus, it was no longer a festival confined only to the citizens of Delhi, it progressed to promote national integration by weaving all the States of India into a garland of flowers of Phool Walon Ki Sair. Since its revival in the year 1962, this festival is organized each year by a society called the Anjuman Sair-e-Gul Faroshan, registered under the Societies Registration Act, set up by Yogeshwar Dayal. After he passed away, the responsibility was handed over to his daughter Usha Kumar who took charge as its general secretary and the festival is celebrated under her leadership.

SIGNIFICANCE

Phool Walon ki Sair, is also called 'Sair-e-Gul Faroshan' after the name of the society which organises this festival every year since the year 1962. Many people become a part of this celebration and their enthusiasm keeps the tradition alive making it a festival of merriment and joviality. The importance of Phool Walon ki Sair can be seen in the very essence of communal harmony and national integration it promotes. India is a blend of many religious cultures and is known for its spiritualism and beliefs. Not maintaining harmony among people with different beliefs can lead to the downslide of India which might also take a dangerous turn destroying the social fabric of our country. The need to be tolerant and accept others beliefs thus becomes imperative for our nation. The festival Phool Walon ki Sair not only celebrates the age-old Mughal tradition but also helps the people to understand the importance of coming together as one community, celebrating and maintaining good relations with one another. By organising this festival learning about teamwork and coordination that can be brought among different religions and thus bringing tolerance, peace and trust amongst each other. These rich traditions help keep the identity of our nation intact and promote peaceful living. Thus, it can be easily seen how this festival is such an important celebration which should be promoted more and more, especially in today's time when all we need is to promote peace and being secular. Over the years, this festival other than promoting communal harmony, has also started focusing on national integration by inviting and requesting states all over the country to participate in this festival in order to show the diversity of our country in all its traditions and cultures. One can agree, since its birth this festival is growing each and every year, promoting the beautiful culture of India.

HOW IS IT CELEBRATED?

Over all these years, this festival has changed in ways it is celebrated without losing its original essence and tradition. In today's time it is celebrated in a more extravagant manner and on a larger scale. In the Mughal era, the Mughal king was its patron, but since the time of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, this festival has Prime Minister as its main patron.

The festival, Phool Walon Ki Sair, is a week-long celebration around the time when the weather shifts from summer to winters. It begins with the procession from the famous Nizamuddin Auliya Dargah till the Khawaja Bakhtiyar Kaki Dargah at Mehrauli. Processions are also taken out at India Gate and Chandini Chowk during this week. These processions are led by dancers, shehnai players/musicians along with the florists bearing exceptional and large floral pankhas, chhatra (canopy) and chaadars. When they reach Mehrauli, the chaadar and pankha is offered at the dargah of 13th century Sufi saint, Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki whereas the pankhas and chhatri is offered at the Yogmaya Temple, the shrine of Devi Jog Maya. The celebration of this festival is graced by a variety of cultural programmes including Kathak performances, the most awaited qawwalis and adding another layer of amusement fair with various stalls, kite flying competitions, traditional sports, wrestling bouts and much more. The recent additions to this festival are the cultural troupes from various states showing the diversity of Indian culture making it an attraction for many to attend. The mela is arranged for the local people at the mango orchards in Mehrauli and the main cultural programme is celebrated at the Jahaz Mahal located in a corner of Hauz Shamsi in Mehrauli, which



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was built in the Lodhi dynasty era giving it a more national integration vision along with communal harmony. After which the floral pankhas, chaadar, chhatras are presented at the two shrines. During this 7-day festival, side events also include presenting a pankha to the President, Vice President of India and Lt. Governor of Delhi as per their availability by taking processions by the locals to their residence who also give their blessings for this festival. A day is fixed at the Delhi Secretariat to herald this festival, where a pankha is presented to the Chief Minister and Chief Secretary of Delhi and their blessings are taken.

CONCLUSION

Phool Walon ki Sair or Sair or Anjuman Sair-e-Gul Faroshan is a festival that keeps the spirit of harmony alive among not only Delhiites but all those who travel from other states to be a part of this culture. It shows us a path that despite having different faiths and beliefs we can still come together and be one, showing that there can be beauty in diversity and unity at the same time. This festival teaches us how we all can live together as citizens of the nation avoiding all the things that diminish and disrupt our peace. Spreading love only results in moral evolution of human kind and this festival tries to prove it with great zeal. Each religion teaches us about unity in their own way and all the different religions together bring diversity in our country but this festival helps to bring unity in that diversity by allowing everyone to be with one another and spread happiness by celebrating with one another. Exactly how Mahatma Gandhi once said 'our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of civilization' and this festival helps to bridge that gap and brings us together.

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