

Is Qazi Hussain Ahmed right?

Festivals

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By Mateen Kaul

LAHORE: Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs celebrate Basant all over the subcontinent. Its origins, as Jamaat-e-Islami chief Qazi Hussain Ahmed has pointed out, are as Basant Panchami, dedicated to the worship of the goddess Saraswati. But Basant was also adopted by Sufi saints and promoted by them.

Devi Saraswati is the goddess of learning, and Basant Panchami, observed on the fifth day of the fortnight following the new moon occurring during spring, is considered an auspicious day for children to enrol in school. Hindus celebrate the day by wearing yellow and singing verses in praise of the goddess.

Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore started the tradition of Basant Panchami celebrations in West Bengal, and the day is popular there until now.

According to legend, the Muslims of India began celebrating Basant as early as the 12th century thanks to the Chishti Sufis. The story goes that famous poet Amir Khusrau used the celebration of Basant to cheer up his mentor Nizamuddin Aulia, the great Chishti saint of Delhi. Nizamuddin Aulia, depressed by the passing of his nephew Taqiuddin Nooh, had withdrawn from the world for a couple of months. His close friend and disciple, Khusrau, was looking for ways to brighten his pir.

One day Khusrau came upon a group of women in yellow, singing, dancing and carrying colourful flowers. It was Basant Panchami and they were on their way to take their offerings to their god. Khusrau dressed himself up like those women, took some mustard flowers and, singing the same songs, started walking towards the graveyard where his pir would be sitting alone. Nizamuddin Aulia noticed some women coming towards him.

On close inspection, he realised what was going on and smiled - for the first time in two months. Khusrau and other Sufis and their disciples started singing Persian couplets in praise of spring, and symbolically the mustard flowers were offered to the grave of Nooh. The celebration of Basant became an annual affair

in Nizamuddin Aulia's monastery, and subsequently in other centres of the Chishti order all over India.

Lahore became the centre of Basant festivities in the Punjab during the Mughal era. According to Lahore, a book by Syed Muhammad Latif, the Basant fair in Lahore was a grand affair when Maharaja Ranjit Singh ruled the city.

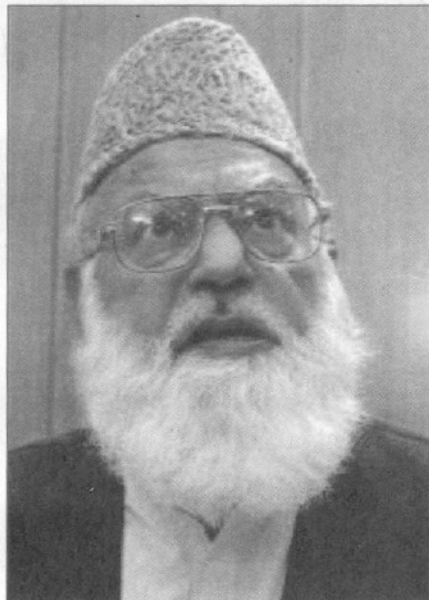
"The fair was held with great magnificence in the time of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, when visitors were enjoined to wear yellow cloths, the Maharaja and his courtiers being themselves attired in dresses of the same colour. The fields on either side of the road from the city to Shalimar were cultivated with mustard, the yellow flowers of which waved beautifully for miles. When added to this were the yellow costumes of the troops and the rich dresses of the Sirdars, it will be understood that the whole scene from Lahore to the Royal gardens was extremely picturesque," he writes.

According to some, Basant in Lahore was a mela in memoriam of Hakikat Rai, a Hindu sentenced to death for blasphemy. The judge who sentenced the 17-year-old said he would be pardoned if he embraced Islam, but Hakikat Rai refused and was executed.

Though the Hindus of Lahore did celebrate Basant at the tomb of Hakikat Rai, writes Mr Latif, Muslims celebrated it in the precincts of the mausoleum of Madho Lal Husain, near Shalimar Gardens, where they gathered to pay benedictions to the shrine of the saint.

The origins of kite flying at Basant are unclear, but the earliest references to kite flying in India are in miniature paintings of the Moghul era dating to around 1500. The first mention in Indian literature is the use of the word patang in a poem about a young man who uses kites to drop messages to a lover being held in seclusion from him.

Kite flying is most fervent in Lahore and unique to the Punjab. Kite flying is popular in Gujrat, but reaches a peak at the Makar Sankranti, or Uttarayan festival in January. It is popular elsewhere in India in August, during the festivals of Raksha-Bandhan and Teej. ■



It started out as Basant Panchami, a festival dedicated to the worship of the Hindu goddess Saraswati. It was then adopted by famous poet Amir Khusrau to cheer up his Sufi mentor Nizamuddin Aulia