FESTIVALS AS LIVING HERITAGE: DIWALI, HOLI, EID, AND PONGAL AS SHARED SOCIAL EXPERIENCES

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Abstract. Festivals are among the most visible and emotionally powerful expressions of Indian culture. This article examines four widely celebrated festivals, Diwali, Holi, Eid, and Pongal, as examples of living heritage: traditions that survive because communities continue to practice and reshape them. Drawing on sociological and anthropological theory, it explores how festivals create collective emotion, transmit memory through food and music, support social harmony, and adapt to modern life. The article argues that festivals function not merely as religious or seasonal events, but as shared social experiences that renew relationships between people across generations and communities.

Keywords: Indian culture; festivals; intangible heritage; Diwali; Holi; Eid; Pongal

1. Introduction

Imagine a street in India during Diwali. Clay lamps flicker on window ledges, children light sparklers, and the smell of sweets drifts from open kitchens. A few months earlier, the same street may have been splashed in bright powder for Holi, and soon it will be strung with lights again for Christmas or filled with the sound of Eid greetings. Festivals in India are not rare breaks from ordinary life. They are the rhythm of the year itself.

This article looks at festivals as "living heritage": traditions that are not preserved behind glass but are practiced, changed, and passed on by ordinary people. It focuses on four widely celebrated festivals, Diwali, Holi, Eid, and Pongal, and asks what they reveal about community, memory, and belonging in Indian society.

2. Festivals as Living Heritage

Cultural heritage is often imagined as monuments and museum objects. UNESCO, however, also recognizes intangible heritage, meaning the practices, rituals, and knowledge that communities pass from one generation to the next (UNESCO, 2003). Festivals fit this definition perfectly. They live only when people perform them, and they survive because people find them meaningful.

The sociologist Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) argued that shared rituals create what he called collective effervescence, the heightened emotional energy people feel when they gather and act together. That energy renews the bonds of the group. Anthropologist Victor Turner (1969) added the idea of "communitas," a temporary sense of equality and closeness during

ritual, when everyday rank and routine are loosened. Both ideas help explain why Indian festivals feel so powerful: they are not only about belief, but about being together.

3. Four Festivals, Four Stories

Diwali, the festival of lights, is celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and some Buddhists, each with their own stories. For many Hindus it recalls the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya, while others honor Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity. Families clean and decorate their homes, light lamps, share sweets, and open new account books in some business communities. Beneath the many stories lies a common theme: the victory of light over darkness and of knowledge over ignorance.

Holi marks the arrival of spring. People throw colored powder and water at one another, sing, dance, and share festive foods. The tale of Prahlad and Holika is often told as a story of faith triumphing over arrogance. Anthropologist McKim Marriott (1966) described Holi in a North Indian village as a "feast of love" in which the usual rules of caste, age, and gender were playfully turned upside down. For a day, elders can be teased and strangers can become friends.

Eid, in its two main forms Eid al-Fitr and Eid al-Adha, is central to the life of India's large Muslim community. Eid al-Fitr ends the month of fasting in Ramadan and is marked by communal prayer, new clothes, charity to the poor, and shared meals. In cities such as Hyderabad, Lucknow, and Delhi, the festival is also a culinary event, with dishes like sheer khurma and biryani on the table. What makes Eid especially meaningful in India is that neighbors of other faiths are often invited to join the celebration.

Pongal is the harvest festival of Tamil Nadu, celebrated in mid-January. Families boil the season's first rice with milk and jaggery in a new clay pot until it overflows, a sign of abundance, and give thanks to the sun and to the cattle that help in farming. Similar harvest festivals appear under other names across the country, including Makar Sankranti, Lohri, and Bihu. Pongal reminds us that many Indian festivals are rooted in the agricultural calendar and in gratitude toward nature.

4. Food, Music, and Shared Memory

Festivals are remembered through the senses. The taste of a grandmother's sweets, the sound of a particular song, or the smell of fresh flowers can bring back a whole childhood. Food is especially important. Special dishes are prepared only once a year, which turns cooking into a way of passing family history from one generation to the next. Songs, folk dances, and storytelling work in the same way. In this sense, festivals act as a kind of memory that is carried not in books but in bodies, kitchens, and voices.

5. Festivals and Social Harmony

One of the most striking features of Indian festival life is how often it crosses religious boundaries. Non-Muslim friends visit homes on Eid, Hindu families share Diwali sweets with neighbors of every faith, and Christmas markets are enjoyed by people of many backgrounds. Such exchanges build what sociologists call social capital: trust and goodwill between groups.

Festivals also support the local economy. Potters, sweet makers, flower sellers, tailors, and artisans depend heavily on the festival season. In this way celebrations connect culture, livelihood, and community. At the same time, festivals can occasionally become occasions for

tension when political or communal disputes enter public celebrations, which shows how much depends on mutual respect.

6. Tradition in a Changing World

Festivals are not frozen in time. Historians Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) have pointed out that many traditions that seem ancient have been shaped, adapted, or even created more recently. Indian festivals today are changing in visible ways. Many people now send Diwali greetings by smartphone, families scattered across cities and countries gather over video calls, and public celebrations are streamed online. Environmental awareness has led many communities to choose eco-friendly colors for Holi, clay idols for religious immersion, and quieter, cleaner ways to celebrate Diwali.

These changes do not necessarily weaken tradition. They show that heritage stays alive precisely because each generation reshapes it to fit its own world, while keeping its core meaning.

7. Conclusion

Diwali, Holi, Eid, and Pongal differ in origin, season, and story, yet they share a common function: they gather people, renew relationships, and hand memory from the old to the young. Seen as living heritage, they remind us that culture is not only something we inherit but something we do together, again and again. Understanding Indian festivals gives us not just a window into India but a broader lesson about how communities everywhere keep their traditions, and each other, alive.

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