



Photo Essay

Myth, Ritual, and Symbolism in Sangla Holi: A Socio-Cultural and Performative Analysis

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There are places that hold memory in their stones, their rivers, their very air. Sangla is one such place. I first came here in March 2020, when the River Basra was still half frozen and the apple orchards stood bare, their branches reaching like supplication toward the peaks. I did not know then that I would return in 2023, and again in 2025, each time drawn back not merely by scholarly obligation but by something older and less nameable. The pull of a festival that refuses to be merely watched. Sangla Holi does not perform itself for you. It performs itself through you, through the drumbeat that enters the chest before the ears register it, through the smoke of the pyre that settles into your hair, clothes and stays there long after you have left the valley.

Situated at approximately 2,700 meters above sea level in the Baspa Valley of Kinnaur, Himachal Pradesh, Sangla is “known for its picturesque landscapes, apple orchards, and traditional Kinnauri villages” (Rongmei). Each spring, as the last of winter’s frost thaws into the Baspa River below, the village erupts into three days of sacred performance. This is Sangla Holi, a principal component of the four-day Faguli Festival observed in the Sangla Valley (Curly Tales Desk). Unlike the vibrant and colourful Holi celebrations in other parts of India, Sangla Holi is a carefully choreographed theatrical epic. A play in which kings cross swords, ascetics debate philosophy, and gods walk among mortals. It is simultaneously an act of worship, a re-enactment of cosmic battles, and a political theatre of alliances and reconciliation.

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To understand Sangla Holi is to understand the pulse of Kinnaur itself. Situated nearly 200 kilometres from Shimla, close to the Indo-Tibetan border, Kinnaur was part of the Mahasu district until 1960, when it was recognised as a separate administrative unit (Kanwar and Negi d558). Once a crucial subdivision of the erstwhile Bushahr state, its ruling lineage traces back to Pradyuman, grandson of Lord Krishna, believed to have founded the dynasty after vanquishing Banasur (Negi Loktus 13). Yet the region's identity is not solely shaped by political genealogy. The people of Kinnaur, the Kanaures, inhabit a unique cultural space shaped by the convergence of three religious traditions: Bon animism, Buddhism from Tibet, and Hinduism from the plains. As P.S. Negi Loktus observes, a Kanaure is traditionally "*born as Bon, lives a life of Hindu/Buddhist, receives a Buddhist/Bon funeral*" (24–25). Sangla Holi is a beautiful example of this layered inheritance, what Richard Schechner would recognise as "restored behavior," a living performance in which traditions are not merely preserved but continuously reinterpreted, adapted to their historical moment while retaining their symbolic potency (36).

One afternoon, I found myself sitting with a group of women at the edge of the festivities, laughing, passing food among themselves, watching the procession with the easy familiarity of people who have seen this all their lives and love it no less for that. I asked, almost casually, about the name Sangla. One of the older women turned to me, still smiling from something someone had just said, and answered as though the story were as natural as the river below us. The very name, she said, is rooted in the legend of Bairing Nages, the Naag Devta of the village. According to chiranings (divine utterances) spoken by the Grogch (oracle) in trance, in the place of the present village, Sangla used to be a huge lake. The deity Bairing Nages assumed the form of a rat and dug a channel at a place called Jaryo, releasing trapped waters and restoring the river's natural flow. In the local dialect, Sang means 'dawn' and La means 'drainage of water': Sangla is "the clearance of water at dawn" (Negi Loktus 147). For the Kanaures, history is

not merely inscribed in ancient texts, it is alive in the *chiranings* (divine utterances) delivered annually by the *grokches* (oracles) of the Shu, and in the *shu-geethangs* (divine songs) sung during native festivals (Negi Loktus 25). Sangla Holi is precisely such a site where myth is not merely narrated but enacted.

I have returned to Sangla three times, March 2020, March 2023, and March 2025, each visit layering new understanding over the last. What follows draws on those three periods of ethnographic fieldwork. The photographs are principally Kanwar Pal Singh's, taken across all three visits, with select images of my own from 2023 and 2025.

Four Days of Sacred Performance

The Phaguli festival is celebrated during the month of Phalgun (March) in the Vikrami Samvat calendar, on a designated day throughout Kinnaur (Negi Loktus 92). Sh I.L. Negi, former Adhyaksh of the Shri Bairing Naag Mandir Committee, traces the festival's origins to 1933, when it was initiated by the Gram Devta, the presiding village deity, Shri Bairing Nages ("Sangla Holi"). From its inception, the festival carried a deliberate pedagogical purpose: to transmit the values of Sanatan Dharma through embodied performance rather than textual instruction—a distinction that anticipates Schechner's argument that performance is never simply repetition, but always a re-doing that opens space for new meaning (36).

Day One: Invocation and Procession to Shri Bairing Nages

The festival begins at the heart of the Deshang (village), at a site known as Chhudo, where villagers assemble for a grand procession leading to the temple of Shu, Shri Bairing Nages. As Negi Loktus notes, every Deshang, or group of Deshangs, has a deity addressed as Shu, regarded as the supreme authority in the local cultural order (55). The festival commences with offerings of prayer to the deity, invoking blessings for prosperity, happiness, and communal well-being. Here, in Turner's terms, the community stands at the

threshold of ritual time, a liminal opening in which ordinary social structures are temporarily suspended in favour of collective devotion (Turner 94–95).

The temple soon reverberates with the sound of Baski, an ensemble of sacred instruments played by designated individuals of a particular caste (Fig. 2). According to Negi Loktus, these instruments number as many as eighteen, each producing a distinct tone, including the bam (nagara), dols (drums), kunnal, ron-singla, cymbals, shehnayi (a pair made of silver), and putting-putting (a small drum), collectively generating eighteen musical tones (Negi Loktus 58–59). The festival unfolds as a spectacle of sound, movement, and devotion, punctuated by the vivid presence of characters from the Ramayana like, Sadhus, kings, queens, Ram, Laxman, Hanuman, and other divine figures, who lead the procession (Fig. 3). Chants of "Holi Hai! Holi Hai!" echo through the valley, blending with folk songs and traditional melodies. Along the route, households open their doors to offer food, and locally brewed Phasur (a homemade apple or wild apricot alcohol) is served as a symbol of abundance and communal gratitude ("Sangla Holi," Chalo Kinnaur).



Fig. 1. Holi procession at Bairing Nages Temple during Sangla Holi, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 2. Baski, an ensemble of sacred instruments played by designated individuals, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 3. Characters from the Ramayana leading the Holi procession, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.

Day Two: Journey to Azad Kashmir, a Sacred Passage

On the second day, the celebration transcends the familiar boundaries of the village as the procession moves towards a place known locally as Azad Kashmir. The day is marked by ritual feasting, with traditional dishes such as Poley, Hodh, Cheelta, Puri, and local vegetables reinforcing the spirit of

hospitality and communal sharing ("Sangla Holi," Tribal Girl). The sacred instruments accompany the procession as villagers dance and sing in celebration.

After gathering in Azad Kashmir, the procession continues toward a site called Boning Saring. To reach it, the procession crosses the Baspa River by walking across a wooden log bridge placed by the locals. This journey serves as a powerful metaphor for both physical and spiritual passage (Fig. 5). The log bridge, spanning the roaring waters below, symbolises the transition between the mundane and the sacred, instantiating precisely the ritual liminality described by Turner — the “threshold” state in which initiates are betwixt and between social categories, temporarily unmoored from ordinary life and open to transformation (94–95). Upon reaching Boning Saring, a sacred resting point, the community pauses for refreshments and ritual observances before retracing its steps to the village. As evening descends, the rhythmic nati dance binds the villagers in a shared expression of devotion and communal joy.



Fig. 4. Holi procession heading towards Azad Kashmir, Day 2, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2023.



Fig. 5. Holi procession crossing the Baspa River via wooden log bridge, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 6. Procession at Boning Saring, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.

Day Three: Holika Dahan

The final day marks the climax of Sangla Holi (Fig. 7). As the principal day of the festival, it is centred on the ritual burning of Holika, Holika Dahan, which draws the entire village together ("Sangla Holi"). The procession, having received blessings at the temple in the morning, moves through various village routes carrying the effigy of Holika (Fig. 8). At each halt, households

offer refreshments, rituals are performed, and women sing folk songs, enriching the festival's spiritual and communal fabric. In the evening, the procession returns to the temple, where the Kayang dance is performed. In Kinnaur, the Kayang (nati) dance is traditionally performed anticlockwise, with men leading and women following (Negi Loktus 152). As the effigy of Holika is set alight by Hanuman under the rising moon (Fig. 9), the air fills with chants and invocations. It's a ritual reminder of the eternal struggle between order and disorder ("Way Back Home").

The role of Hanuman is central to this ritual enactment. In Kinnaur's understanding, he is a Jeevi Devta, a living deity, still present in the Kaliyug, still watching. Balvinder Lelan Negi puts it plainly in the documentary *Holi with Gods*, wherever the name of Ram is chanted, Hanuman must be there, as coordinator, as keeper of discipline, as the one who holds wrongdoers to account (Burhan Habshee). The blazing pyre consumes the effigy of Holika, signalling the culmination of disorder and the restoration of cosmic balance. Like each year, chaos yields to order, conflict to unity, darkness to light.



Fig. 7. Two Kings performing Swang at the grand procession, Day 3, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 8. Villagers carrying the effigy of Holika through Sangla village, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.



Fig. 9. The effigy of Holika set alight by Hanumang in the temple premises, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2020.

Swang: Theatrical Performance as Ritual Text

Throughout the three days of Sangla Holi, at every designated resting point where the procession halts, an important theatrical performance known as Swang is performed.

According to Balvinder Lelan Negi, the primary purpose of bringing Holi to the people of Sangla was to instil awareness of Sanatan Dharma and its cultural heritage ("Sangla Holi || Most Vibrant Holi of Kinnaur").

What strikes me most is that conflict is always the beginning, never the end. Two Sadhus, one Vaishnava, one Shaiva, face each other in theatrical dispute, their disagreement carrying the weight of centuries of doctrinal difference (Fig. 10). The crowd watches, and knows how it ends. By the performance's conclusion, the Sadhus reconcile. The argument was never really about division. It was about showing that division can be survived, absorbed, and ultimately transcended.

Another striking performance features two kings, each carrying a sword in one hand and a rumaal (handkerchief) in the other (Fig. 7). Engaging in a fierce mock battle to expand their empire, they symbolise political and territorial conflict. Their moment of reconciliation, marked by the waving of the rumaal, represents the diplomatic unity that underpinned empire-building in Bharatvarsha. The rumaal, transformed from a simple cloth into an emblem of diplomacy and resolution.

The Devi figures stayed with me longest. Men dressed as goddesses, holding a mirror in one hand and a sickle in the other (Fig. 11). I learnt through locals that the mirror reflects beauty and grace, qualities associated with Indian femininity, while the sickle symbolises labour, resilience, and the nurturing force of creation. This dual representation embodies the phrase "Nari Devi ka roop hai" (Woman is the manifestation of the Goddess), reinforcing the notion of divine femininity as simultaneously powerful and nurturing. Characters from the Ramayana, including Lord Ram, Lakshman, and other divine figures, do not arrive as illustrations of a text. Rather, they walk among the living, and the living make way for them.



Fig. 10. Fig. 10. Sadhus engaged in Swang, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 2023.



Fig. 11. Devi figures portrayed by men, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Jasmine Kaur Chandla, 2025.

Day Four: Phaguli Festival and Faag Mela

On the fourth and final day, following three days of colour-drenched theatrical ritual, the Phaguli Festival culminates in the grand Faag Mela. This marks the transition from winter's harshness to the arrival of Basant (spring), signifying the end of the black times. Unlike the preceding days, the fourth day does

not involve playing with colours. Instead, the people of Sangla don their finest traditional attire, celebrating through dress rather than colours. Women wear the Doru, Soli, Pattu, and adorn their Thepang (Kinnauri topi) with fresh Narkasen flowers, the symbolic yellow of Phagun rendered in botanical form ("Faag Mela") (Fig. 12). The fair begins with the blessings of Shu Desang, setting a sacred tone for the day's proceedings.

One of the most significant aspects of the Faag Mela is the ceremonial procession of deities from their shrines, carried in public on Rathang (Sheerung), sacred palanquins (Fig. 13). The main deity, Bairing Nages, is accompanied by Majang Nages (the next in seniority) and the deity Bir, said to be *gupt* (invisible) in earlier times.

Once brought into the temple precincts (Santhang), the deity is positioned within public view, allowing for direct engagement. While the Shu-Mathes (priests) primarily communicate with the deity, other Kardars (functionaries of Shu) assist, and even members of the public may participate. When communication reaches a deadlock, the Grogch (oracle) enters a trance state to deliver Chiranings/Bhakhyans (divine revelations) on behalf of the deity. I.L. Negi describes the Phag Mela as Bairing Nages' own festival, the occasion on which he makes his grand annual appearance to celebrate Holi.

I realised, standing there, that each festival in Kinnaur carries its own distinctive tune, and the melodies of Shu-Geethangs (divine songs) at the Faag Mela are unlike anything I had heard on the other days (Fig. 14). The local belief holds that it is through Nages that the village sustains its Dhan (wealth), Dharam (righteousness), Nyay (justice), and Prakriti (natural balance).

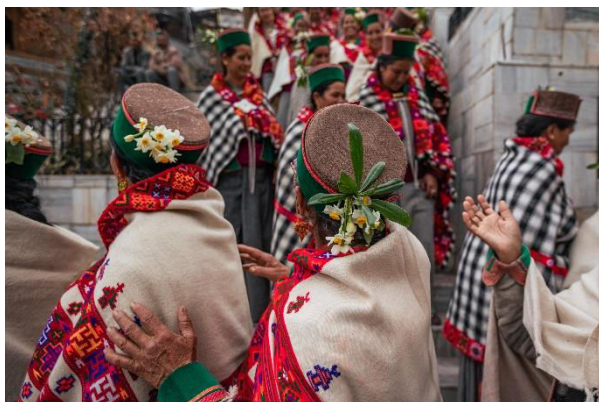


Fig. 12. Kinnauri women in traditional dress in Phagun, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 8 March 2023.



Fig. 13. Deities in public view near Santhang. Photo by Jasmine Kaur Chandla, 8 March 2023.



Fig. 14. Deities on their Rathang, communicating through distinct ritual movements, Sangla Valley, Himachal Pradesh. Photo by Kanwar Pal Singh, 8 March 2023.

Conclusion: A Living Archive of Cultural Identity

By 2025, something had shifted in a way I could not quite name but could feel. The temple precinct that I had moved through freely during my first visit, following the procession, stopping, doubling back, was now so densely crowded that movement within it was barely possible. Around me, phones were raised above heads, recording. Tour operators had begun packaging Sangla Holi as a curated destination experience, marketing it as women-friendly, safe for solo travellers, a cultural encounter guaranteed to be authentic. People arrived with that particular alertness of those who have come to witness something rare before it disappears, not understanding, perhaps, that the act of arriving in such numbers is itself part of what changes it.

I stood at the edge of the temple precinct in 2025 and watched Hanuman approach the effigy, the same way I had watched in 2020 and 2023. The drums were the same. The

chanting was the same. The fire, when it came, was the same fire. And yet, there is a question I have carried home from Sangla across three visits, and I have not answered it, and I am not sure if it can be answered. When a ritual becomes a spectacle, does it remain a ritual? Or does it become something else, still beautiful, still moving, but subtly hollowed, the sacred centre slowly replaced by its own image?

I do not know. What I know is that somewhere in the crowd that night, the Grogch was preparing to speak the words of the deity. That the rumaal was being folded, ready to wave. That the women I had sat with along the temple wall would return next year, and the year after, not because anyone had packaged it for them but because Sangla Holi is theirs, woven into the fabric of who they are in a way no tourist itinerary can reach.

Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps it isn't. The Baspa River does not wait for the question to be resolved. It runs, as it always has, cold and indifferent and continuous, carrying everything downstream.

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