

Flowers of Memory, Seeds of Unity: Reinterpreting Phool Walon Ki Sair

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ROR ID: <https://ror.org/04mmwq306>

Abstract

The Indian subcontinent, the homeland of Hinduism, the third most practiced religion in the world today, and home to the vast majority of its believers, also has a large Muslim population. It is also a fact that there have been intense interactions between Muslims and Hindus since the first Muslim presence in the Indian subcontinent, and that these interactions have resulted in the members of the two religions adopting certain elements of each other's beliefs, culture and lifestyle. Sometimes these interactions have been positive and moderate, while at other times they have led to mutual tension and conflicts. It has been observed that various methods have been tried by the rulers in almost every era to eliminate this social tension and polarization. They have attempted to bring the adherents of these two faiths, which appear to be at different religious and cultural extremes, closer together. Phool Walon ki Sair, the Florists' Procession Festival, is a perfect example of this. First celebrated during the reign of the ruler Akbar Shah II (1760-1837), it was later reintroduced by Jawaharlal Nehru to promote unity and solidarity between the Muslim and Hindu communities. This festival has a cultural rather than religious value and has been celebrated and internalized by both Hindus and Muslims. This festival, a rare example of state officials' efforts to unite a community of diverse cultures and beliefs and eliminate division and hatred, is noteworthy in many respects. It has become important and necessary to examine this festival, which began to be celebrated during a period when the British imperialist rule was dominant in the region, and which served the purpose of rejoicing and celebrating together rather than uniting the Hindu and Muslim faiths, from the perspective of the History of Religions. In this study, how Hindus and Muslims have celebrated this festival from past to present will be discussed with a historical, comparative and descriptive method and some current analyses will be attempted. We believe that this study will be a noteworthy work that will contribute to the studies conducted in Türkiye and internationally on the ongoing tense Hindu-Muslim relations in the Indian subcontinent.

Keywords

History of Religions, Muslim, Hindu, Festival, Phool Walon ki Sair.

Citation

Yıldız Aydın, Arzu. "Flowers of Memory, Seeds of Unity: Reinterpreting Phool Walon ki Sair". *Trabzon Theology Journal* 12/Special Issue (November 2025), 57-75.

<https://doi.org/10.33718/tid.1774302>

Date of Submission : 30.08.2025

Date of Acceptance : 14.10.2025

Date of Publication : 30.11.2025

Peer-Review : Two External - Double anonymized

Ethical Statement : All rules specified in the Higher Education Institutions Scientific Research and Publication Ethics Directive have been complied with in this study.

This study does not require ethical committee approval, and the data used were obtained through literature review/published sources.

It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited in the bibliography.

Use of AI : No artificial intelligence-based tools or applications were used in the preparation of this study. All content of the study was produced by the author(s) in accordance with scientific research methods and academic ethical principles

Plagiarism Checks : Yes – intihal.net

Conflicts of Interest : The author(s) has no conflict of interest to declare.

Grant Support : The author(s) acknowledge that they received no external funding in support of this research.

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Hafızanın Çiçekleri, Birliğin Tohumları: Ful Valon ki Sair'i Yeniden Yorumlamak

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ROR ID: <https://ror.org/04mmwq306>

Öz

Hint alt kıtası, küresel ölçekte en fazla müntesibi bulunan üçüncü din yani Hinduizm'in anavatanı olmasının yanında yoğun bir Müslüman kitleye de ev sahipliği yapmaktadır. Hint alt kıtasında Müslüman varlığının ilk görüldüğü zamanlardan itibaren Müslümanlar ve Hindular arasında yoğun etkileşimlerin olduğu, bu etkileşimlerin iki dinin mensuplarının birbirlerinin inanç, kültür ve hayat tarzı bakımından bazı öğeleri benimsemesi ile sonuçlandığı da bir hakikattir. Bu etkileşimler bazen olumlu ve ılımlı bir zeminde varlık gösterirken bazen karşılıklı gerilim ve çatışmalara sebebiyet vermiştir. Meydana gelen bu toplumsal gerginliği ve kutuplaşmaları ortadan kaldırmak için hemen her devirde yöneticilerce çeşitli yolların denendiği görülmüştür. Dinî ve kültürel anlamda birbirine uzak uçlarda görünen bu iki inancın mensuplarını birbirine yaklaştıracak yollar denenmiştir. “Ful Valon ki Sair” yani “Çiçekçilerin Alayı” Festivali bunun güzel bir örneğini teşkil etmektedir. İlk olarak hükümdar II. Ekber Şah (1760-1837) döneminde kutlanmaya başlanan bu festival sonraki süreçte Jawaharlal Nehru tarafından yeniden icra ettirilmiş, Müslüman ve Hindu halk arasındaki birlik ve beraberliğin tesisinin sağlanması amaçlanmıştır. Bu festival dinî olmaktan ziyade kültürel bir değer taşımaktadır ve hem Hindularca hem de Müslümanlarca kutlanarak içselleştirilmiştir. Devlet yöneticilerinin farklı kültür ve inanca sahip bir toplumu birleştirerek ayrılık ve nefreti ortadan kaldırmaya yönelik çabalarına dair nadide bir örnek olan bu festival birçok açıdan dikkate şayandır. İngiliz emperyalist yönetiminin bölgede baskın olduğu bir dönemde kutlanmaya başlanan, Hindu ve Müslüman inancını birleştirmekten ziyade birlikte sevinme ve kutlama yapmak amacına hizmet eden bu festivali Dinler Tarihi perspektifinden ele almak önemli ve gerekli bir hal almıştır. Bu çalışmada söz konusu festivalin Hindu ve Müslüman topluluklar tarafından tarihsel süreç içerisinde nasıl icra edildiği, tarihî, mukayeseli ve betimleyici yöntemler çerçevesinde ele alınacak; ayrıca konuya ilişkin bazı çağdaş analizlere de yer verilecektir. Araştırmanın günümüzde Hint alt kıtasında süregelen gergin Hindu-Müslüman ilişkilerine dair Türkiye’de ve uluslararası platformlarda yapılan çalışmalara katkı sağlayacak özgün bir eser olacağı kanaatindeyiz.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Dinler Tarihi, Müslüman, Hindu, Festival, Ful Valon ki Sair.

Atıf Bilgisi

Yıldız Aydın, Arzu. “Hafızanın Çiçekleri, Birliğin Tohumları: Ful Valon ki Sair'i Yeniden Yorumlamak”. *Trabzon İlahiyat Dergisi* 12/Özel Sayı (Kasım 2025), 57-75.

<https://doi.org/10.33718/tid.1774302>

Geliş Tarihi : 30.08.2025

Kabul Tarihi : 14.10.2025

Yayın Tarihi : 30.11.2025

Değerlendirme : İki Dış Hakem / Çift Taraflı Körleme

Etik Beyan : Bu çalışmada, Yükseköğretim Kurumları Bilimsel Araştırma ve Yayın Etiği Yönergesinde belirtilen tüm kurallara uyulmuştur.

Bu çalışma, etik kurul izni gerektirmeyen nitelikte olup kullanılan veriler literatür taraması/yayınlanmış kaynaklar üzerinden elde edilmiştir.

Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur.

Yapay Zeka Kullanımı: Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde yapay zeka tabanlı herhangi bir araç veya uygulama kullanılmamıştır. Çalışmanın tüm içeriği, yazar(lar) tarafından bilimsel araştırma yöntemleri ve akademik etik ilkelere uygun şekilde üretilmiştir.

Benzerlik Taraması : Yapıldı - intihal.net

Çıkar Çatışması : Çıkar çatışması beyan edilmemiştir.

Finansman : Bu araştırmayı desteklemek için dış fon kullanılmamıştır.

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Introduction

India, a land deeply rooted in culture and civilization, has served as a hub for human settlement since prehistoric times, accommodating numerous states and communities within its expansive and fertile territories. While indigenous traditions have significantly shaped its cultural richness, successive waves of migration and invasions have also played a formative role in shaping its pluralistic identity. The history of these migrations and raids can be traced back to the 2000s BC.¹ This means that modern India is the product of a heritage and multiculturalism spanning over four millennia. From the 10th century onward the arrival of Muslim Turks in the Indian subcontinent, their settlement, and the states they established, have become an unwavering part of today's Indian culture and civilization.² The cultural, religious, and social pluralism that has accumulated over centuries across the Indian subcontinent is now being examined and appreciated with growing scholarly interest on a global scale.

Following the establishment of Muslim rule in the region, particularly from the 9th and 10th centuries onwards, Muslims' influence and strength in the region increased, while Hindus, in response, adopted a more withdrawn and uncommunicative attitude.³ There are several possible explanations for this situation. One of these is that a foreign nation coming from outside establishes its rule over the local population and while doing so, sometimes causes destruction. Another issue is that Hindus, especially the upper castes, viewed this new community as inferior and disparaging. Some attitudes and actions of the administrators have also fueled tensions from time to time. However, it should be noted that Muslim Turks generally demonstrated a tolerant administration.⁴ They pursued a policy of demonstrating a balanced administration by accepting the two religious groups as they are.

Over time, the influence of bilateral interactions has led to the mutual adoption of certain elements within the sultanate's palace traditions, administration, and religious practices, as well as among the people. These can be considered evidence of the harmony and positive mutual interaction among the people.⁵ Such interactions can occur spontaneously or, as in the case of the Phool Walon ki Sair festival, with the encouragement of rulers. This festival is noteworthy both for its celebration, its historical journey, and its political and social significance.

Although there are studies on Hindu-Muslim relations in our country, it has been observed that no study has been conducted specifically on such a festival. International stu-

- 1 Gregory L. Possehl, *The Indus Civilization: A Contemporary Perspective* (New Delhi: AltaMira Press, 2002), 1-2, 153-154.
- 2 See Burjor Avari, *Islamic Civilization in South Asia: A History of Muslim Power and Presence in the Indian Subcontinent* (New York: Routledge, 2013).
- 3 Satish Chandra, *History of Medieval India: 800-1700* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2007), 57-58; Kivameddin Burslan (trans) Ebû Reyhân Muhammed b Ahmed el-Bîrûnî, *Tahkîku mâ li'l-hind. Bîrûnî'nin Gözüyle Hindistan* (Ankara: Türk Tarih Kurumu, 2015), 2.
- 4 Chandra, *History of Medieval India*, 323-327; Richard Maxwell Eaton, *Temple Desecration and Muslim States in Medieval India* (Gurgaon: Hope India, 2004), 50-52.
- 5 On the influence of Islam on Indian culture see Hammet Arslan, "İslam'ın Hint Kültürüne Etkisi: Ahmed Yesevi, Kabir ve Guru Nanak Örneği", *I. Uluslararası Hoca Ahmed Yesevi Sempozyumu Bildirileri*, ed. Ahmet Kartal (Ankara: Merkez Repro Basım Yayın Ltd. Şti., 2017).

dies, however, have generally approached the festival from a political perspective or simply provided brief information about it. Mirza Farhatullah Beg's *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower Sellers*⁶ is a valuable study that examines the festival from both historical and political perspectives, as well as its ritual celebration. Sraman Sircar's article, "The Politics of Celebration: Interrogating the Secular Heritage of the Phool Waalon Ki Sair Festival in Delhi",⁷ addresses the festival's historical, social, and political significance. Another work worth mentioning is Margrit Pernau's chapter "Celebrating Monsoon Feelings: The Flower-Sellers' Festival of Delhi" in *Monsoon Feelings: A History of Emotions in the Rain*.⁸ Given the current problems between Muslims and Hindus, it was deemed appropriate to briefly examine the festival and its history. Due to the limitations of this topic, we will only briefly touch upon Mughal history and subsequent periods in relation to this festival. The study will approach Hindu-Muslim relations from a different angle, through the role and impact of a religious ritual in bringing people closer, and will attempt to analyze the purposes for which this ritual was encouraged in different administrations at different periods.

The study will primarily employ a historical-comparative approach, combining textual sources with socio-cultural analysis to trace both continuity and change. This perspective not only contributes to the field of the history of religions by highlighting the role of ritual in intercommunal relations, but also enriches the broader social sciences through its focus on pluralism, cultural negotiation, and collective identity formation. By situating the Phool Walon ki Sair festival within both local and global scholarly debates, the research seeks to provide an original contribution to studies on interreligious encounters in Türkiye as well as internationally.

1. In Search of Harmony: Unity in Diversity

Indian civilization, just like many others, has been built upon diverse groups that came together and form a unity. But what makes India unique is many of these diversities are still recognisable. The idea of "unity in diversity" has been the cornerstone of the national identity of this multifaceted and changing, yet also static civilization. A total of 22 different languages are recognized by the Indian Constitution as official languages⁹ representing less than half of the languages spoken in India. We see the same diversity across cultural, ethnic, religious, and geographical areas. A region with such vast diversity has generally lived in peace and harmony throughout its millennia-long history. Members of nearly every religion, including Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, Parsi, Jains, and Christians, practice their faith and hold festivals and rituals in these lands. It is also known that members of these religions celebrate each other's festivals, holidays, and special occasions together.

Looking at pre-colonial India, the Mughal empire generally pursued a policy of religious

6 Farhatullah Beg, *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower-Sellers*, trans. Mohammed Zakir (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012).

7 Sraman Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration: Interrogating The Secular Heritage of The Phool Waalon Ki Sair Festival in Delhi", *Contemporary South Asia* 33/1 (January 2025), 36-51.

8 Margrit Pernau, "Celebrating Monsoon Feelings: The Flower-Sellers' Festival of Delhi", *Monsoon Feelings: A History of Emotions in the Rain*, ed. Imke Rajamani vd. (New Delhi: Niyogi Books, 2018), 379-407.

9 Constitution of India (Constitution of India), *Eighth Schedule* 344(1), 351 (1950).

tolerance towards non-Muslims which served as unifying force.¹⁰ It's safe to say that this attitude played a significant role in the longevity of their administration in the subcontinent, as it helped them prevent any feelings of injustice, inequality, or conflict that might arise within society.

Unity and harmony have at times become a difficult struggle in the Indian subcontinent, especially since the British presence began to become evident. The principle of divide and rule, one of the fundamental principles of imperialism, has played a significant role in this.¹¹ As we mentioned above, it is not possible to say that everything was only positive and harmonious during the rule of the Muslim Turks in the Indian subcontinent. Mutual conflicts, cruel attitudes and sanctions of some rulers, negative and marginalizing treatment of Hindus towards this community that came later, and even mutual conflicts and frictions were also observed.¹² However, Muslims and Hindus have generally coexisted peacefully. The appointment of Muslims to prominent positions and positions in Hindu governments and Hindus in Muslim governments can be considered an indication of this. Once this unity and solidarity, order and balance, were disrupted, their restoration became extremely difficult. Indeed, current nationalist approaches only deepen the gap between the two groups.

The Indian constitution was drafted in a secular manner and promotes equality, as in many countries in the modern world order, and it appears that an attempt was made to draw a framework that treated all faiths equally. Articles 14 and 15 ensures the right to equality and the prohibition of discrimination. Freedom to choose or not to follow any religion is ensured by articles 25-28.¹³ The Indian Constitution guarantees freedom of belief, allowing people to choose whether to have or not to believe. The state aims to ensure that people can exercise their freedom of belief as they wish within a secular framework. However, the extent to which this approach is reflected in both state policies and interpersonal relationships in daily life is a separate matter.

In contemporary times, the rise of Hindu nationalism — marked by assertions of cultural superiority and a push for homogeneity — has contributed to the creation of a deeply problematic social climate. As a result, members of the Muslim community in India often find themselves at odds with these dominant narratives. The tensions between Hindu nationalist groups and Indian Muslims have surfaced in numerous troubling forms, reflecting the growing polarization within society.¹⁴

It's perfectly understandable that leaders have, at various times, strived to strengthen existing ties or build bridges between cultures by uniting the people. Indeed, former Indian Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru, who revived the two-hundred-year-old Phool Walon ki Sair festival, took ownership of this festival and aimed to foster cohesion and unity among

10 Rajeev Kinra, "Revisiting the History and Historiography of Mughal Pluralism", *ReOrient* 5 (April 2020), 143-144.

11 Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire* (London: Penguin Books Ltd, 2017), 40.

12 See Cemil Kutlutürk, *Hint Düşüncesinde İslam Algısı* (İstanbul: Dergah Yayınları, 2019); Ebu Abdullah Muhammed İbn Battuta Tancî, *İbn Battuta Seyahatnamesi*, trans. A. Sait Aykut (İstanbul: Yapı Kredi Yayınları, 2004), II/665-675, 687-697.

13 Constitution of India (Constitution of India), *Fundamental Rights* 12-35 (ts.), Article 14, 15, 25-28.

14 Mehmet Masatoğlu, "Building Bridges in a Divided Society: Addressing Hindutva and Muslim Conflicts in India", *Marifetname* 11/1 (June 2024), 68.

the people.¹⁵ We see that Indra Gandhi also adopted this attitude; in fact, he supported this festival and encouraged its celebration not only in Delhi and its surrounding areas but throughout India.¹⁶ Today, this festival is celebrated as an event that unites different groups without changing them, rather than commemorating the memory of a prince, which is its origin story, and we believe that it will continue to serve this purpose in the future.

The significance of Phool Walon ki Sair lies in its promotion of social harmony and unity. Failure to maintain harmony and unity among people with diverse religious cultures, moral values, and beliefs will harm not only minority groups but also the order and stability of society as a whole, leading to the destruction of the social structure. Therefore, mutual tolerance and acceptance of other faiths are essential, and this attitude should be encouraged. This is why the Phool Walon ki Sair festival serves as a catalyst, albeit on a micro scale, for people to learn to unite, understand each other, and build positive relationships. Thus, it goes beyond simply celebrating a centuries-old Mughal tradition.¹⁷

While it can be said that by organizing this festival, the aim is to establish mutual communication and coordination between different religions and thus to create tolerance and trust and to encourage a peaceful life, there are also thinkers who state that the intention of the administrations is much more pragmatic.¹⁸ It must be admitted that, in managing and directing society, bringing different groups together on a common ground and creating a shared cultural heritage seems quite ingenious.

During the current celebration of Phool Walon Ki Sair festival, both the Delhi State Government and the Festival Committee have opted for equidistance by treating the two religious groups on equal footing, which should be considered as a secular stance from a political perspective.¹⁹ Although this festival has religious elements in its essence, the Government and the festival committee prefer a secular approach for harmony, unity and a peaceful social order. In order to better understand this festival, which is one of the countless inter-religious common elements of India, and its unifying effect, analyzing the origin and historical adventure of the festival will enable the reader to understand the subject more clearly in the mind of the reader.

2. The Origins of the Phool Walon Ki Sair Festival: Political and Social Background

Phool Walon Ki Sair, also known as Sair-e-Gul Faroshan, is a unique festival that emerged in Delhi during the late Mughal era in the early 19th century and has been adopted by various political powers for various purposes over time. The festival's origins should be considered not merely as an expression of a cultural or religious ritual, but also as a product of the political power struggles and social transformations.

15 "History", *Phool Waalon Ki Sair* (Accessed July 24, 2025).

16 "Once a symbol of secularism, Phoolwalon ki Sair festival is now a mere shadow of its past glory" (Accessed July 10, 2025).

17 Shiza Parveen, "The Hidden Gem of Communal Spirit: Phool Walon Ki Sair", *Samvedna* III/1 (2021), 14; Hammet Arslan, "Holi: Hindu Bahar Bayramı", *Dokuz Eylül Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 39 (June 2014), 183.

18 Parveen, "The Hidden Gem of Communal Spirit: Phool Walon Ki Sair", 14.

19 Anna Bigelow, "Lived Secularism: Studies in India and Turkey", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 87/3 (2019), 725-764; Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 47.

The festival's origins lie in a tense moment of dynastic succession, a conflict that emerged between the two sons of Emperor Akbar Shah II (reigned from 1806–1837) and British imperial rule. His elder son, Sirajuddin Zafar (1775–1862) (later known as Bahadur Shah Zafar), lacked support in the imperial court due to his mother's humbler social origins. At the same time, the younger, Mirza Jahangir (1791?–1821), enjoyed greater influence through his mother, Mumtaz Mahal Begum, who had close ties with the king and formed alliances with the king's mother and sister.²⁰ From the looks of it, the king's favor seems to favor his second son, Mirza Jahangir, as heir apparent. However, there was also the issue of British colonial rule. The British held the real power in the region and wanted Sirajuddin Zafar appointed as heir apparent.

Phool Walon Ki Sair was initially celebrated in memory of Prince Jahangir, son of Akbar Shah II. Due to the public's great interest and affection, it became a traditional festival, repeated by the rulers. While there are a few minor differences among the accounts, the general narrative is as follows: Akbar Shah's younger son, Jahangir's erratic behavior and frequent breaches of etiquette strained his relationship with the British Resident, Archibald Seton. In 1809, Jahangir publicly insulted Seton and, later, fired a shot from the Red Fort at his returning entourage. Seton survived the attack, but his aide was wounded and died. Seton demanded an apology from Jahangir, but he refused. Sir Seton then gathered a large regiment and returned to retaliate. Jahangir was exiled to Allahabad, about 700 kilometers from Delhi.²¹ His mother, Queen Mumtaz Mahal Begum, deeply regretted distressed by her son's situation made a vow of offering a lavish canopy of flowers at the shrine of the thirteenth-century Sufi saint Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki in Mehrauli, about eighteen kilometers south of the walled city, if her son was allowed to return to Delhi during her lifetime.²² The background of the incident was greatly influenced by the fact that the Sultan intended to choose his second son, Jahangir, who was only seventeen years old at the time, as the heir rather than his eldest son, but the British government was not in favor of this and wanted to see his eldest son as the heir. Accordingly, Jahangir's hostile attitude toward Sir Seton seems quite understandable. It should be emphasized here that British political cunning is also a significant factor that should not be overlooked.

After some delays and uncertainties, the prince returned to Delhi three years later. When Mirza Jahangir was eventually released and came back to Delhi in 1812, Akbar Shah II fulfilled the queen's vow by organizing a grand ceremonial procession. This procession began at the Red Fort and proceeded to the shrine of Qutbuddin Bakhtiar Kaki (1173–1235), a revered 13th-century Şūfī saint, as well as to the Yogmaya Devi Temple in Mehrauli. Queen Mumtaz Mahal had vowed to offer a floral canopy (pankha) and a sheet (chadar) if her son were allowed to return. As a result, these beautifully crafted floral offerings were carried in a magnificent procession from the Red Fort, located within the walled city of Delhi, to the village of Mehrauli. This marked the beginning of the Phool Walon Ki Sair (Procession of the

20 Pernau, "Celebrating Monsoon Feelings: The Flower-Sellers' Festival of Delhi", 383–384.

21 Beg, *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower-Sellers*, 4–5; Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 38; "The Forgotten Legacy of the Phoolwalon Ki Sair", *The Hindu* (Accessed July 14, 2025).

22 Faizuddin Munshi, "The Last Assembly", trans. Rana Safvi, *City of My Heart: Accounts of Love, Loss and Betrayal in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (Gurugram: Hachette India, 2018), 99–101; Pernau, "Celebrating Monsoon Feelings: The Flower-Sellers' Festival of Delhi", 384–385.

Florists), which eventually became institutionalized as an annual celebration.²³

Phool Walon Ki Sair festival was institutionalized directly by the personal will and support of Akbar Shah II. The Mehrauli region held great strategic religious and symbolic importance thanks to its sacred sites. Members of the Mughal dynasty were devout adherents of the Chishtiyya order, and the tomb of Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, one of its most revered saints, was located here. This transformed the tomb into a center of not only religious but also social and political importance. Furthermore, with Akbar Shah II's encouragement, the historic Yogmaya Devi Temple in Mehrauli was incorporated into the festival. The temple was renovated by Lala Sedo Mal, a wealthy upper-caste Hindu merchant, with the inception of the festival in 1812.²⁴ Thus, by ensuring that both Muslim and Hindu sacred sites are included in the same ceremony and procession, the multi-religious structure of the festival is established and the cultural and religious diversity of Delhi is represented in this respect.

While some versions state that Queen Begum herself dedicated the offering of offerings to the temple along with the dervish lodge, most versions state that King Akbar Shah II himself recommended this. This can be considered an indication that the meaning and expectations Akbar Shah attributed to this event were more political.²⁵

The institutionalization of the festival can be interpreted as a strategic political maneuver by the declining Mughal Empire. After the British captured Delhi in 1803, the Mughal emperor was stripped of real political authority and reduced to a symbolic figurehead. Akbar Shah II, aware that direct confrontation with the British was futile, turned to cultural expression as a means to assert imperial relevance. He used the festival as a symbolic stage to project the continued legitimacy of the Mughal dynasty despite its diminishing power.²⁶ Meanwhile, the British, by presenting themselves as the protectors of the Mughals, were tactically exploiting the symbolic authority of the emperor to reinforce their own dominance in India without overtly challenging indigenous structures. Maintaining a weakened Mughal ruler as a nominal sovereign allowed them to exercise control with minimal resistance. In this light, the festival may also be understood as one of the Mughal regime's final attempts to assert its presence and preserve its legacy in the face of irreversible decline.

It can be said that the festival, which brought Muslims and Hindus together through both the temple and the shrine, served the purpose of strengthening the people's loyalty to the Mughals, consolidating their authority over the city of Delhi and gaining the support of the people, continued to be celebrated in the same way after Mirza Jahangir, the man who originally the festival had created for, passed away in 1821.²⁷ This, in turn, can be considered a validating factor in this claim. The fact that the purpose of the festival was to ensure unity, solidarity and authority rather than to celebrate Mirza Jahangir's return from exile is

23 Syed Wazir Hasan Dehlvi, "The Last Glimpse of Delhi", trans. Rana Safvi, *City of My Heart: Accounts of Love, Loss and Betrayal in Nineteenth-Century Delhi* (Gurugram: Hachette India, 2018), 37-40; Munshi, "The Last Assembly", 98-101; Pernau, "Celebrating Monsoon Feelings: The Flower-Sellers' Festival of Delhi", 384-385; Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 38-39.

24 Beg, *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower-Sellers*, 38-39.

25 "Phool Walon Ki Sair", *India Heritage* (Accessed July 20, 2025).

26 Beg, *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower-Sellers*, 38.

27 Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 39.

evident from the fact that it continued to be celebrated after Mirza's death.

Sultan Akbar II is reported to have moved from Delhi to Mehruali later in his reign. Similarly, his son, Bahadur Zafar Shah (1775-1862), lived in Mehruali and governed the state from there.²⁸ For the Mughal Empire, this could be seen as an attempt to break free from the influence of British colonial rule, at least to some extent, as the Phool Walon festival provided an opportunity to establish a stronger bond and authority with its subjects in Mehruali.

After Akbar II's death in 1837, his eldest son, Sirajuddin Zafar, known as Bahadur Shah Zafar, succeeded him. After Akbar Shah's death, his eldest son, Sirajuddin Zafar, known as Bahadur Shah Zafar, succeeded him, but by his time, the British had almost completely taken over the control of the government. He had almost no authority to do anything without the Resident's permission. Perhaps for this very reason, the festival held even greater significance for Shah Zafar. The celebration of this festival, which the state saw as a symbol of its power and presence, became more grandiose and extravagant every year. He was aware that this festival would preserve and strengthen the bond between his Muslim and Hindu subjects, thus enabling him to retain control of the capital, Delhi. As Shah Zafar lost state authority, he increased the pomp and splendor of this festival.²⁹ The significance of this festival is evident in the sultan's efforts to portray himself in the public eye as a ruler who had retained his former majesty and power, perhaps in a way to regain power and as a strategic challenge to British political supremacy.

In 1857, a rebellion against British colonial rule took place but failed. Following the rebellion, British colonial rule took over, and Phool Walon was not celebrated until the early 1870s. Evidence of the festival's revival is found in colonial administrator Oswald Wood's cadastral survey report for Delhi and its surrounding area.³⁰ The British colonial government sought to solidify its authority and legitimacy in the region by portraying itself as the successor of the Mughals. To this end, they financed religious sites valued by the people. This enabled them to demonstrate to the public that they were both a tolerant and harmonious government, as was the case with the Mughals, and also a liberal and generous one. Similarly, the Phool Walon festival, celebrated with great pomp during the final years of the Mughals, was revived as a particularly effective tool for the British to achieve this goal.³¹ The colonial government's aim with this festival could be seen as a political maneuver to consolidate its authority and rule, rather than to engage with the people or respect their beliefs. Another goal the British aimed to achieve with this festival was to provide small profits to local rulers related to the festival, thus reinforcing their loyalty to the government and providing financial gain.³² In other words, the festival not only legitimized the British rule, but also reinforced their authority and earned income.

28 R. V. Smith, *Delhi: Unknown Tales of A City* (New Delhi: Roli Books Private Limited, 2015), 14-15.

29 Narayani Gupta, *Delhi Between Two Empires, 1803-1931: Society, Government and Urban Growth* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981), 4-17; Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 40; William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of a Dynasty, Delhi, 1857* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 483-484.

30 Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 41.

31 Anne-Julie Etter, "Antiquarian Knowledge and Preservation of Indian Monuments at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century", *Knowledge Production, Pedagogy, and Institutions in Colonial India*, ed. Daud Ali - Indra Sengupta (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 81-87.

32 Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 42-43.

By the 1940s, as British colonial authority in the region began to erode, the celebration of *Phool Walon Ki Sair* was officially prohibited by the colonial administration. The suspension of the festival coincided with the rise of nationalist movements across India, as both Hindus and Muslims increasingly united in their struggle for independence.³³ As a celebration rooted in interfaith participation and communal harmony, the festival was perceived as potentially subversive in an era of growing anti-colonial sentiment.

The festival, which symbolically brought together Hindus and Muslims, was suspended for a time. However, despite various challenges, it was never forgotten. A significant moment came in 1948 when Mahatma Gandhi—one of the most important figures of independent India—visited the shrine of Bakhtiar Kaki in Mehrauli. Here, he emphasized the importance of communal harmony and national unity, assuring the Muslim community that the Indian government would not discriminate against them.³⁴ This event also serves as a powerful example of how the temple and shrine began to be viewed by the new Indian state as vital spaces for promoting the message of social cohesion and unity among its citizens.

In the postcolonial period, *Phool Walon Ki Sair* underwent yet another significant historical transformation. Within the framework of Gandhian ideals—which advocated secular equality and equal treatment of all religious communities—the festival was no longer perceived as a tool of resistance against colonial British power, as it had been during the late Mughal era, nor as a means for securing legitimacy or economic gain under colonial rule. Instead, it came to embody a nationalist purpose, one that emphasized the equality and unity of Hindus and Muslims alike.³⁵ As India moved toward a modern world order, the evolving perceptions and motivations surrounding the festival reflect the broader historical transformations of religious institutions and rituals. The shifting meaning of *Phool Walon Ki Sair* in response to contemporary political and social needs thus offers a compelling example of how religious traditions adapt over time.

After India gained independence, the Delhi State Government played a significant role in the process of reviving and institutionalizing the *Phool Walon Ki Sair* (*Sair-i-Gul Faroshan*) festival. The government began contributing Rs 300 annually to the *Sair-i-Gulfaroshan Fair Committee*, which was set up to organise the festival.³⁶ This step reveals the meaning and importance that India's new post-independence administrative structure has placed on the festival in order to support cultural unity and social harmony in the capital.

In 1961, Jawahar Lal Nehru, determined to revive the lost tradition of “*Phool Walon ki Sair*,” commissioned the Mayor of Delhi, Mr. Noor Uddin Ahmed, Taimur Jahan Begum, a descendant of the Mughal Dynasty, and Shri Yogeshwar Dayal, a philanthropist from a prominent Delhi family, to revive the festival. Under Yogeshwar Dayal's leadership, the committee members came together to form an association called *Anjuman Sair-e-Gulfaroshan*

33 Catherine Blanshard Asher, *Delhi's Qutb Complex: The Minar, Mosque and Mehrauli* (Mumbai: Marg Foundation, 2017), 119; Stephen Legg, *Spaces of Colonialism: Delhi's Urban Governmentalities* (New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2007), 142–148.

34 Sircar, “The Politics of Celebration”, 43.

35 Sircar, “The Politics of Celebration”, 43.

36 Sircar, “The Politics of Celebration”, 44.

to organize the festival annually.³⁷ Since then, the Anjuman has continued to organize the festival with financial and logistical support from the Delhi government.

A year after the committee's formation, India's first Prime Minister, Jawahar lal Nehru, sent a letter to the Anjuman, officially supporting the festival, stating that it represented Delhi's "secular" heritage, and becoming its patron.³⁸ This support, coming from the highest echelons of government, cemented Phool Walon Ki Sair's official significance and place in modern India.

Archival records indicate that Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of independent India, regularly visited Mehrauli throughout his life to attend and support the Phool Walon Ki Sair festival. His involvement marked a symbolic renewal of the celebration in the postcolonial context. Since then, the festival has not only been revived but has steadily grown in scale and significance. Successive Prime Ministers of India have shown consistent interest in the festival, often leading its celebrations in a ceremonial capacity.³⁹ Through their participation, they have reaffirmed the state's commitment to fostering communal harmony and promoting India's secular and pluralistic values through cultural expression.

This festival, which began in 1812 under the patronage of the Mughal Emperor, is now held annually at Mehrauli by the Anjuman Sair-e-Gul Faroshan, and people from different religions participate. While Jawahar Lal's initial attendance was a few thousand, it is said that the number of participants has since reached a million.⁴⁰ This can actually be considered as an indicator of the festival's popularity today.

Beyond its growing popularity, the festival's significance also lies in the continuity of its organizational structure, which remained largely unchanged despite shifts in the political order. Indeed, despite the shift in political structure, the main actors organizing the festival remained the same. It is noteworthy that the first committee formed consisted of the attendants (Khadim) of the Bakhtiyar Kaki Shrine and the foundation members of the Yogmaya Temple. This demonstrates that religious authorities maintained their influence over the festival even in the new era, where a secular and modern understanding of the nation-state was adopted.⁴¹ The festival thus preserves its religious character and continues to reflect its spiritual essence.

It is known that when Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) was the Prime Minister of India, he encouraged the festival to be celebrated not only in Delhi and its surrounding areas but also with the participation of every state. Thus, we can say that the festival was aimed to be highlighted as a unifying event by encompassing all the states of India, rather than being local, in order to promote national integration. Today, the festival is organized by the Anjuman Sair-e-Gul Faroshan, an association registered under the Societies Registration Act. The responsibility of this association, founded by Yogeshwar Dayal, was passed on to his daughter Usha Kumar after his death. The festival is currently led by Usha

37 Parveen, "The Hidden Gem of Communal Spirit: Phool Walon Ki Sair", 13; Usha Dayal Kumar, *Phool Waalon Ki Sair* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 2014), 14.

38 Kumar, *Phool Waalon Ki Sair*, 6.

39 Kumar, *Phool Waalon Ki Sair*, 5-7.

40 "History".

41 Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 44.

Kumar, who serves as the association's general secretary.⁴²

The fact that Phool Walon Ki Sair was used for different purposes by the rulers in different periods does not eliminate its purpose of strengthening the Hindu-Muslim unity and harmony and strengthening the feelings of brotherhood between the people of these two religions. The transformation of this event from a ceremony specific to the imperial era, to a political element of colonial rule, and then to a symbol of secular nationalism, demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability with which cultural traditions can be linked to power structures and administrative strategies.

The historical, sociological, and political significance of this festival is undoubtedly noteworthy; however, equal attention must be given to the ways in which the festival has been celebrated over time, as well as the transformations and shifts it has undergone throughout its historical trajectory.

3. The Celebration and Contemporary Status of the Phool Walon Ki Sair Festival

The Phool Walon Ki Sair (Procession of the Florists) is a centuries-old festival that reflects Delhi's deep-rooted syncretic cultural and religious traditions. As we stated before it was first celebrated in 1812 during the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar Shah II, the festival has historically symbolized the spirit of communal harmony by incorporating both Hindu and Muslim rituals. However, due to political circumstances, the festival was discontinued between 1921 and 1961, only to be revived in 1961 under the patronage of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, who saw it as a powerful symbol of India's composite culture.⁴³

The festival is celebrated in September or October, coinciding with the end of the monsoon season, and typically lasts seven days. Its central purpose is to offer prayers for a fruitful flower harvest in the coming year, and it also serves as a joyous way of welcoming the change in season.⁴⁴ Through this festival, people joyfully relieve the stress of the past season and the monsoon, while expressing their hopes for the coming year.

At the heart of the celebration lies a grand procession, which starts from the Dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi and proceeds to the shrine of Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki in Mehrauli. Along the way, it passes through iconic parts of Delhi such as India Gate and Chandni Chowk, accompanied by musicians, dancers, and florists carrying elaborate floral fans (pankha), canopies (chhatra), and tents. These are presented as offerings at both the Sufi shrine of Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki and the Yogmaya Temple, dedicated to the Hindu goddess Jog Maya. In this way, by visiting religious sites revered by both religions, a celebration unique to India is carried out. The celebration includes performances such as Kathak dance, qawwalis, traditional sports, kite flying competitions, and wrestling matches, which are all open to the public and contribute to the fair-like atmosphere of the event.⁴⁵ Cultural troupes from different states of India are also invited to showcase regional art forms, re-

42 Parveen, "The Hidden Gem of Communal Spirit: Phool Walon Ki Sair", 14.

43 Pernau, "Celebrating Monsoon Feelings: The Flower-Sellers' Festival of Delhi", 399.

44 Smith, *Delhi*, 218.

45 Beg, *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower-Sellers*, 7-15; Dehlvi, "The Last Glimpse of Delhi", 40-46.

inforcing the festival's role in fostering national integration and social unity.⁴⁶ With the participation of different states in the festival, the event goes beyond being local and takes on an all-India dimension.

Historically, the Mughal emperors used this festival not only as a religious and cultural event but also as a political tool. For example, during the rule of Bahadur Shah Zafar, coins were scattered among the crowds during the procession, serving as a spectacle of imperial generosity. The royal family would also visit sites such as Humayun's Tomb and Alai Darwaza, thereby reinforcing their symbolic control over the historic landscape of Delhi.⁴⁷ One of the most iconic elements was the fireworks display on boats in the Hauz-e-Shamsi reservoir, where Mughal officials and the city's residents would engage in mock naval battles, concluding with the emperor declaring the public as the symbolic winners.⁴⁸ It is evident that the festival aimed both to embed the authority and generosity of the ruler and the state in the public consciousness, and to ensure that the people celebrated it with greater enthusiasm and interest.

In modern times, the festival continues to be celebrated annually in Mehrauli, with support from both government authorities and local organizations like the Anjuman Sair-e-Gul Faroshan. Floral fans are also presented by high-ranking officials such as the President, Vice President, and Chief Minister of Delhi, emphasizing the event's official recognition.⁴⁹ Although there are differences between the way the festival was celebrated in the past and how it is observed today, it can be said that the authorities still value the festival and, by participating in it, they also help ensure its continuity.

The performances held at the festival reflect both religious plurality and social commentary. For example, qawwali performances such as Piya Haji Ali and Khwaja Mere Khwaja evoke connections to various Sufi traditions across India, suggesting a broader, inclusive Muslim identity. Similarly, Hindu mythological plays, like the reenactment of the goddess Kali subduing Shiva, and the inversion of social hierarchy in the tale of Sudama and Krishna, offer moments of symbolic empowerment for the ordinary people.⁵⁰ In this respect, we can say that bridges are being built between different groups, both between religions and within a religion, and the aim is to instill the idea of unity and solidarity in people's minds.

Over the years, Phool Walon Ki Sair has evolved into more than a traditional flower festival—it has become a platform to celebrate India's rich diversity and bridge religious and social divides. With its colorful rituals, inclusive performances, and deep historical roots, the festival continues to affirm the pluralistic ethos of the Indian nation.

46 Munshi, "The Last Assembly", 99-104; Parveen, "The Hidden Gem of Communal Spirit: Phool Walon Ki Sair", 15.

47 Beg, *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower-Sellers*, 14.

48 Beg, *Bahadur Shah and the Festival of Flower-Sellers*, 36-41; Munshi, "The Last Assembly", 100-104.

49 Parveen, "The Hidden Gem of Communal Spirit: Phool Walon Ki Sair", 15-16; Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 37.

50 Sircar, "The Politics of Celebration", 45-46.

Conclusion

While Phool Walon Ki Sair originally emerged as a result of a religious vow, it has evolved over time, shaped by India's social and political dynamics, and has taken on a secular festival identity. The religious rituals underlying the festival have, over time, fostered a shared sense of belonging within the collective memory of diverse communities, transforming the festival from a mere religious event into a practice of social peace and coexistence.

It is clear that the Mughal ruler Akbar Shah II played a significant role in institutionalizing the festival and making it a popular event. Recognizing the multi-religious and multi-cultural nature of the period, the Sultan brought Begum Sultan's one-time offering to the masses and transformed it into an official annual celebration. This tradition, which he initiated, was continued after his death by his son, Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal ruler. This demonstrates the festival's embrace of the Mughal dynasty and its use as a political tool.

The British colonial administration, which initially used the festival to bolster its legitimacy, later viewed such events that brought the people together as a potential threat during the independence movement, in line with its "divide and rule" policy, which aimed to divide the Indian people along religious and ethnic lines. Consequently, the celebration of this festival, which fostered a sense of unity and solidarity among the people, was banned, and the festival was interrupted between 1942 and 1961. This interruption not only signified the cessation of cultural activity but should also be interpreted as an indicator of the colonial administration's policies targeting the people's collective memory and collective solidarity.

Phool Walon Ki Sair was revived in 1961 after India's independence under the leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru, and since then it has become a significant cultural element representing the secular and pluralistic nature of modern India. Nehru and his successors championed the festival's peaceful and unifying character, ensuring it was seen as a symbol of social harmony and religious pluralism in India. In this respect, the festival is not only a historical tradition but also played a strategic role in the process of building the secular and inclusive identity of the Indian state after independence.

Considering the festival's current structure, the simultaneous visits to sacred sites belonging to both Hindu and Muslim faiths allow members of different faiths to come together while preserving their religious identities. This, in turn, fosters a culture of mutual tolerance, understanding, and coexistence. The rituals of offering pankha, chadar, and chatra at sites such as the Yogmaya Temple and the Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki Dargah demonstrate that both faiths are represented in this festival, thus demonstrating that this event is not merely a religious festival but also a shared cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the festival's historical transformation reveals that it is not limited to a mere religious or cultural event; it also reveals that rulers, at different times, instrumentalized this event for political purposes. During the Mughal era, this festival was used to gain public affection, consolidate political legitimacy, and demonstrate the empire's power. For the British, the festival became an extension of colonial policies, and after independen-

ce, it became a symbol promoting the values of national unity and secularism. Today, the embrace of the festival by state institutions and local governments not only maintains its presence in the public sphere but also enables it to serve as a symbolic tool of solidarity in the context of social inequalities.

In this context, Phool Walon Ki Sair should be considered not only as a legacy of the past, but also as a powerful demonstration of the coexistence of India's multi-religious and social diversity today. Especially in today's India, at a time when some circles are attempting to marginalize Muslim heritage and cultural presence, inclusive and reconciliatory festivals like Phool Walon offer hopeful examples, like an oasis in the desert. These secular celebrations, built around religious symbols, demonstrate the possibility of finding common ground, coexisting with differences, and maintaining social peace.

In conclusion, with its nearly two-century history, Phool Walon Ki Sair stands before us as a vibrant representation of interfaith harmony, social integration, and secular values in India. This festival is not only a reminder of the past but also a symbol of the ideal of peaceful coexistence for the future. In today's world, where social polarization and identity-based divisions are increasing, remembering and supporting events like Phool Walon is not only a cultural duty but also an ethical and political responsibility.

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