

‘No Holiday’ as a Metaphor of Unrest and Revolt in Mahesh Elkunchwar’s ‘Holi’

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“I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical....It is a medicine necessary for the sound health of government.”

Thomas Jefferson (Jan. 30, 1787)

ABSTRACT

By not declaring holiday on the occasion of *Holi* (day), the college principal unknowingly offers students a chance to revolt against the system and make a kind of statement against the oppressor and his means of oppression in Mahesh Elkunchwar’s *Holi*. His decision plays a sort of trigger to provoke students into indulging unlawful activities resulting in the suicide of a student towards the end. Students’ stance is akin to that of the oppressed who is denied basic human rights and one day s/he revolts to get his or her dues. However, the playwright has not made any attempt to justify the position of students as well as that of the principal. The present paper aims to offer a totally new perspective to understand the play in the light of student revolt and unrest in academic institution due to conflict between the administration and students.

Keywords: Conflict, culture, education, post-modern, religion, revolution

Mahesh Elkunchwar is today considered as the most influential and progressive playwright of post-Independence India. He is best known for his plays, *Holi* (1969), *Garbo* (1970), *Sultan* (1970), *Party* (1975) and *Old Stone Mansion* (1985). He has

handled most of the post-modernist themes such as fragmentation of culture and society, 'the passage of time and mortality, identity and sexuality, religious tension and gender issues, human bond and alienation' (CP: V I) in his plays. He is part of the trinity of which Vijay Tendulkar and Satish Alekar are the other two in the Marathi theatre world.

Holi was first directed by Vijay Mehta in Marathi. In 1985, it was adapted for film by Ketan Mehta. It was Elkunchwar's first major play. The play depicts a conflict between students and the college authorities over a petty issue of holiday. The Principal, Mr. Pande does not declare holiday on Holi, a Hindu festival. Instead, he organises a lecture on Indian culture and screening of educational documentary on that day. It is mandatory for students to attend the programme otherwise a fine of five rupees will be charged. Some students get furious with the fact that there is no holiday and they have to attend the programme. So they decide to overthrow the programme and register their protest. The Principal takes action against these unruly students. These students bully a student called Anand for revealing their names to the Principal. At the end of the play, Anand commits suicide and all the students are taken for interrogation by the police.

Holi can be contextualised in the period which was ripe for student movement and revolt. 1960s and 1970s witnessed more student revolt than any other decade. Student revolt held in Columbia and France in 1968 shocked the whole world. And there were attempts at understanding the praxis of these revolts. It was the period of establishment of organisations such as Student Peace Union (1959) and Students for Democratic Society (1960) in the United States. Cold War militarism, authoritarianism, racism and colonialism were some of the factors for student revolt in the West. In India, it was the period of emergence of many revolutionary organisations such as Dalit Panthers or Republic Yuvak Sangatan (1961) and agitations

against the Government and other administrative agencies. Students and workers were participating violently in protests organised for varied forms of oppression. They were all inspired Marks, Che Guevara, Mao and Martin Luther King. Students became more aware of their rights in a democratic country.

Mahesh Elkunchwar presents the conflict between students and the Principal negatively. He does not show any understanding of the problems of students. He seems to think that students' indiscipline is the major reason for the unrest in the college. Anand Lal, in his Introduction to Collected Plays of Mahesh Elkunchwar Vol. II, states:

The play highlights the frustration of Indian students faced with a bureaucratic and authoritarian administrative system totally impervious to their needs and grievances. At the same time, it is quite clear that student indiscipline is an equally worrisome problem. (2013: xv)

The last sentence reveals that even critics like Anand Lal agrees with the playwright that the students are the real culprit. They are violent, aggressive, erratic and rebellious. The playwright does not want to take any stand in the play. However, his favours tilt towards the administration when he tries to trivialise the students' revolt. It is very obvious when he makes the students to revolt for a petty reason such as not having holiday on Holi. From the beginning till the end, the students are shown fighting and abusing. There seems to be single agenda of showing students responsible for all the unrest in the college. There is a sheer logic that if someone troubles you and you retaliate violently in defence, you only cannot be held responsible for the violence. Here, the students are not understood but they are forced to remain present for the programme that they don't want to attend. Besides, a fine has been fixed for those who are going to remain absent. So students are bound to become restless and indulge in unruly behaviour. It is also not amazing that Vijay Mehta, Usha Ganguli and Ketan Mehta, the people who never supported students' movements

and were always on the side of the establishment, went on to produce the play. Elkunchwar ends the play with the suicide of Anand, who is tortured and bullied by Students as he revealed their names to the Principal. So ultimately the students are held responsible for the tragedy and disturbance in the college. Their rebellion, thus, ends in 'a whimper, yielding nothing substantial'. It is in tune with Elkunchwar's own view of rebellion without any conscious effort:

If there is no conscious effort fortified by a relentless intellectual rigour to understand what we are rebelling against, then not only is such a rebellion shallow and short-lived, but it just ends in a whimper, yielding nothing substantial. (CP: V-I: 328)

So he looked at Students revolt as not so conscious activity but an act triggered by petty interests and due to students' violent and aggressive ways. Students' frustration with the college administration is projected negatively. They are shown as attention seekers, pseudo-revolutionaries, nuisance and irresponsible. But there seems to be no understanding of the fact that the conflict between the college authorities and students escalate when the former tries to be in loco parentis position.

According to Stuart Langton, there are two popular myths about student's revolt; first, there is a 'unified movement of student revolt attributable to a single cause and basically negative and destructive'; and the second myth is about the ideology, assuming that students revolt is mostly dominated by Marxist ideology or it lack any 'ideological basis' (540). Both these myths need to be busted. In this play, though the student revolt is due to a single reason of non-declaration of holiday on Holi but there are other factors too such as the issue of regionalism, the conflict between Marathi students and the North Indian Principal, Mr. Pande. Secondly, the students are not shown influenced by any ideology though they share a common humanitarian ideology (not essentially Marxist ideology) to protest against the college authority.

The play opens with some students gathering in the morning to have their regular tea. They are abusing and calling names to each other. Shrivastav, Lalu, Gopal, Anand are having their regular chat about administration. Gopal informs all that the Principal has not declared holiday on Holi, a Hindu festival. Instead, he has organised a lecture followed by a cultural programme on that day. They are all unhappy and irritated as they think that it is their right to have a holiday on Holi. They are not interested in lectures and cultural programme. Madhav, Timur, Ranjit and Vasanta are the other friends who join them to further this discussion of the obstinate Principal and his erratic decisions. Some boys abuse the Principal for not declaring holiday while some want to follow the line as there is fine for not attending the programme.

One 'pseudo-scholar', Mr. Desai, is going to deliver a lecture on how great the Indian culture is. He would guide them about how they should be principled in life. He is an authority on Hindu religion and Indian culture. But the boys are not interested in such tedious lecture. They fight over this matter among themselves. There is already a conflict between Marathi students and those from UP. As they start abusing each other, Gopal suggests them to decide about the 'holiday business'. Madhav declares that they are all 'going to bunk' (CP: VII: 7) the programme. But Lalu reminds them that if they remain absent they have to pay fine of five rupees and it is difficult for him to pay. So also, after the lecture, an educational film will be shown from seven to ten. Ranjit is unhappy as he thinks that the Principal, Mr. Pande has turned the college into school. In a fit of anger, he declares, 'Today we'll have a blast. Won't let the college function normally'. (ibid) When Shrivastav and Anand talk of being blacklisted or detention, Ranjit shuts their mouth up by claiming such fears as nonsense. He wants to teach Mr. Pande a lesson.

Ranjit: Bro, it's not a question of creating a ruckus. This bloody Pande.....he's got to be taught a lesson. We won three matches in

a row. No f' holiday or nothing! What fun guys have in other colleges! (CP: VII: 8)

When some girls come to meet them, they ask them whether they also want holiday. Girls too want holiday but don't want to revolt like boys. The boys are so angry with the lecture on Indian culture that they start detesting everything that is sacrosanct for these culturists. Ranjit has become so violent that he expresses his desire of removing the cloths of some 'potbellied' ministers or some fat businessman in public and hit their naked assess. Gopal adds that after hitting them, they would set rabid dogs after these people. Thakur thinks that these people have corrupted the whole country and are looting its citizens. Vasanta expresses his anger as he blames these culture-wallahs for looting the whole nation in the name of religion by building temples. When he blames a particular caste, Thakur objects. As the heated debate goes on, Pande, the Principal's nephew, says bad things about Banerji's mother. There is a fight between the two. He hit Pande so hard that his head start bleeding. Pande ran away from the scene. As they are discussing the cause of the fight, there comes news that Banerji has been rusticated with immediate effect. It's not just fight but there is one more reason for such a quick decision of rustication. The Principal and Banerji's father don't get along well. Ranjit gets furious and decides to break the windowpanes in the Principal's office. But he asks his companions to disturb the event organised on Holi instead.

All the boys attend the lecture of Desai. The compeering boy is not prepared and commits mistakes during his speech. All the students make fun of him. When Desai takes control of the microphone and tries to soothe students, they don't listen to him. Ranjit even asks the speaker to change the subject from 'Men Behind Religious Foundation' to 'Women Behind Religious Foundation'. All the boys start laughing at this proposal. The Principal tries to establish order but someone throws an egg at him. The speaker cannot speak as boys continue to shout and

abuse. So he and the Principal leave the stage. Mr. Karkhanis, their teacher and warden, tries to control the boys but in vain. Ranjit raises the issue of Banerji's rustication and the injustice done to him. But Karkhanis tries to calm them and requests them not to abuse the Chief Guest. As the programme is called off, the boys leave the scene. The Principal asks Karkhanis about the identity of the boys as they all belong to hostel. Karkhanis shows his inability to give names as they were so many. As Karkhanis leaves, Anand comes to meet the Principal and he gives the name of all those who were involved in disturbing the programme. He names Ranjit Bhonsle, Lalu Deshmukh, Gopal Bankar, Vasant Patil, Raghunath Mahadik, Jayant Thakur and Madhav Mhatre. The Principal is happy to get the names and calls Anand Katkar 'a petty insect'.

After the incident, all the boys gather outside the hostel. They know that the Principal must be furious and take action against them. Mr. Karkhanis comes to inform them that the Principal has got the names of all those who were involved in disturbing the programme. Lalu Deshmukh, Gopal, Vasant Patil, Raghunath Mahadik, Jayant Thakur and Madhav Mhatre are detained that year and Ranjit Bhonsle has been expelled from the college. Only Anand and Shrivastav are left without punishment as they did not participate in the matter. When someone says that Thakur too was not involved, Thakur shows his intent of not getting any relaxation in punishment. They all decide to accept the punishment. However, all decide to light the fire of Holi in the ground. They start throwing chairs outside for bonfire. Anand requests Shrivastav not to get involved as the latter is saved by him. Then Shrivastav gets the hint that Anand has given names to the Principal. He tries to blackmail Anand but then decides to expose him. He tells Ranjit and his friends that Anand has revealed their names to the Principal. They all start abusing Anand by teasing him and pulling off his clothes. Shrivastav also informs them about the lipstick that he found in Anand's box. When Anand tells them that Wagle, his girlfriend

has given him the lipstick, they start teasing him for his relation with the girl. Shrivastav is about to expose Anand further. But Anand threatens him of killing himself. Ranjit comes to the rescue of Anand and asks all his friends to leave him. They all tease him for his girlish behaviour and offer him a female role in their play. Gopal asks Shrivastav to bring saree for Anand. Vasant wants Anand to be dragged in a saree all over the college. Anand accepts his mistake and tries to apologise. But the boys wraps saree around him and call him a 'nautchgirl from nautanki' (24). Gopal asks Timur to bring razor and shave off Anand's eyebrows and tonsure his head. Anand escapes from their clutches. As Lalu and other boys are planning of leaving the hostel next day, Shrivastav comes running with the news of Anand's suicide. All the boys get frightened and decide to inform the warden. In the last scene, Inspector is seen interrogating Shrivastav about the incident. The harassment of Anand and lighting of fire are symbolic of their revolt.

The treatment they give to Anand as punishment for revealing their names to the Principal or lighting up *Holi* fire by using the chair from the hostel recreation room has been symbolic of the revolt the students wish to bring out against the all the adverse conditions they wish to change and annihilate the evil practices of the system they cannot change (Patil: 18)

Holi is known as the Fire Festival that celebrates the spring harvest. Usually falling in the month of February or March, bonfires are lit during Holi. According to the myth associated with the festival, there was a demon king named Hiranyakashyapa. He had a son called Pralhad. He wanted his son to accept him as God and act according to his wishes. However, Pralhad worshipped Shree Vishnu. Hiranyakashyapa tried hard to persuade Pralhad from worshipping Lord Vishnu but in vain. So he took the help of his sister, Holika. She was entrusted with the task of sitting with Pralhad on top of a bonfire which would kill him but not Holika as she was protected by a boon. As the fire was lit, Pralhad was saved by

Lord Vishnu but Holika lost her life. Lighting of Holi symbolises the burning of evil represented by Holika and Putana. The myth is relevant here as Holi implies a rebellious spirit of Pralhad who revolted against his father and did what he thought as appropriate. Anand's death is like that of Holika who joins hand with the oppressor.

The play has relevance even today as there has been a large scale increase in students protest in various academic institutions since the death of Rohit Vemula on 18 January, 2016. Major student activism was seen in support of Kanhaiya Kumar. The conflicts between the communist student organisations and ABVP are witnessed regularly. However, the reasons for today's student protests are not as trivial as those discussed in '*Holi*'. There should be scope for the rebellion in the academic institute. Richard S. Offenberg rightly points out:

Wild emotionalism and suppression are not the answers to student protest. We must accept one important fact: this generation of students has something very important to say to all of us. If we do not approve of their tactics, their appearance, or their manners we should not be distracted from learning something very important from their protest. Today's youth care about the society in which they live. They are willing to put their convictions on the line. To be sure they have their words, but most important, beyond their words, they are willing to act. Would we prefer a generation that had convictions but no courage? (1974:15)

As responsible citizens, we should not be critical about student protest. Rather, there is a need to understand what students' wishes, convictions and perspectives are.

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