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Spring in March

“Beware the Ides of March,” warns the soothsayer who accosts a triumphant Julius Caesar, in the famous Shakespearian tragedy. This prediction signals the impending tragedy of Julius Caesar who neglects this caution only to meet his doom. History records that on 15th March 44 B.C.E., Caesar met his gory end. Thus the month of March assumes significance. Not only is March remembered for this historical event, even the ancient Romans dedicated the month to Mars, their God of War, which invariably denoted turbulent times.

Even in present times March is a month to dread. Any school-going child will tell you that March brings the shivers. Why? It invariably brings along with it the annual exams. In the true sense of the term, it is the litmus test of one's career. Millions of students all over the country burn the midnight oil to cross the tough hurdle of the SSC/HSC and other school exams. For students, March is not a month of joy but of hardship and toil. Hence it is dreaded by one and all.

Now let's look at the brighter side. March is also the season of spring. Mother nature is all smiles at this time, as March heralds the blossoming of flowers. Be it the Moghul Gardens of Rashtrapati Bhavan or our very own Jijamata Udyan, the flower shows offer a riot of colours with a wide range of flora shining brightly under the clear skies. Across the length and breadth of the country, winter seems to be yielding to the warm sun as the March 21 Equinox brings longer sunshine periods. The floral abundance is carried to home and hearth as prices of vegetables, milk and other essentials touch record lows. This warmth is infectious.

The spirit of spring is also reflected in the merriment of festivals like Holi and Rang Panchami. While the former signals the victory of good over evil, the latter represents mass participation and merriment through exchange of colour. In Northern India, this festival is celebrated with verve and excitement. Men, women and children happily indulge in applying colour on each other with utter disregard for caste, creed or status. The 'Nihang' Sikhs (those especially blessed by Guru Gobind Singh) celebrate the day after Holi as 'Holla Mohalla' with a display of martial arts. Thus they also add a rare touch to the festivities.

The late Wajid Ali Shah, the former ruler of Oudh (Lucknow) in the 19th century gave royal patronage to this colourful festival. He would celebrate the festival by dancing in the streets of the city along with commoners. The contributions of this partially deaf king to the development of Kathak and songs specially composed for the event (48,000 couplets) would be presented to the common public to commemorate this festival. Despite his dethronement by the British he carried these traditions to Bengal where he was incarcerated during his later years. The chains only added to the spring in his steps!

But for some sections in our society, it is not all dance and song. For Christians, the world over, this is also the season of 'Lent', a 46-day period of fast, abstinence that begins with Ash Wednesday and culminates on Easter Sunday. The entire month is a period of penitence and prayer for the Christian community in preparation for the most important festival of the Church calendar - Easter.

Undoubtedly, as suggested by the title, March appears to be a period of dynamic activity. Be it the exam season for the kids, the festivities of Holi/Rangpanchami/Holla Mohalla, the Mukharas of Kathak or the period of contrition for the Christian community, the monthly calendar is overflowing with activity. Be ready then to slip on your ghunghroos (dancer's anklets) and join the dancing fraternity in humming the tune of Brijbhoomi' chorus...

'Hori khelo mose Nanda lala...'

- Prof. VIJAY PAGE