



Dare Do!

If you ever wanted proof of valour of the Nihangs, you've turned to the right page. The Hola Mohalla festival in Anandpur Sahib is all guts and glory.

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I have travelled a fair bit—alone, with family and friends—to hill destinations, deserts and beaches, where many of you probably have also been. Trekking through beautiful valleys, riding camel back on sand dunes or swimming in the ocean, but never have I ever thought about setting off on what might be termed as a pilgrimage to some.

The night before my journey to the annual Hola Mohalla festival at Anandpur Sahib, a pilgrimage site for Sikhs and a stage for the martial arts of the Nihangs (an armed Sikh order), I sat down with a Sikh friend to learn a little about the people I would meet. I started my journey that very night, scratching the surface of this religion and by the time I was packed and ready the next morning, I felt that I was already on the road.

Driving away from the concrete jungle of Delhi, as I entered the state of Haryana, the tall buildings and jam-packed streets slowly faded away and all I could see were vast fields all along the highway. Whenever you are travelling to Punjab, there is one thing that will tell you that you are nearing the state—the distinctive

headgear. I began to slowly see many colourful, smiling people walking the streets, riding tractors or bikes. Roadside *dhabas*, drawing you in with the promise of the 'best' butter chicken and kinu (similar to an orange, but larger) juice stalls, flew past as I approached the city of bliss and bravery.

The City of Bliss

I had fallen asleep during the last leg of the journey and when I opened my eyes, we had entered the gates of Anandpur Sahib. As had a sea of pilgrims—some came on foot, some drove in trolleys attached to tractors and some in trucks and expensive SUVs. It was later that I learnt that many of these people make these vehicles their makeshift homes during the festival.

I though was more fortunate. My home for the next three days was the camp, Anand by the Sutlej, by the banks of the river, which is established every year a few days before the festival. In order to provide suitable accommodation to the many visitors who come from other cities and countries, this campsite was started by Sodhi Vikram Singh, a descendant

Anandpur Sahib is home to the legendary Nihang warriors and numerous Sikh pilgrims during the annual Hola Mohalla festival





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of the fourth Sikh guru, Guru Ramdas. Back in town I beheld *langars* (community kitchens) all along the roadside, offering free meals to the pilgrims and travellers. It was an unusual and beautiful sight—vibrant colours spread across the city with multi-coloured *pagris* (turbans), *sakwars*, and *churas* (bangles). While the sight was pleasant—it was the initial sound on the street (one that I would hear through the festival) that gave me goosebumps. A follower on the street shouted the first part of the legendary Khalsa slogan, “*Jo Bole So Nihaal*,” which was answered in unison by everybody on the street with “*Sat Sri Akal*” (Whoever utters these words will be happy. God is eternal).

The colour code for the festival was blue—as that was the attire for the Nihangs who would be presenting a fine show of valour and craftsmanship over the next day. Sporting a long beard, bare-legged, carrying a spear in hand and

a sword in a scabbard tied to their waist: this was the dramatic introduction to the legendary warriors from the Akal Sena (The Eternal Army)—the Nihangs, brought into existence by the 10th Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh.

The Bravehearts

I learnt from my host that the word ‘Nihang,’ when broken into two, Ni + Ahang, means ‘without ego.’ Even for a few days it was exciting to be a part of this fascinating culture, which still follows age-old traditions. While wandering around town I stumbled upon a *dera* (campsite) of the legendary Nihang warriors. As I entered the camp, I was greeted with friendly smiles. I sat down with them, learning about their culture and history, and one of the elders said, “*Guruji* blessed us with *Akal Shakti* (timeless power) and we use *jaikaras* (battlecries) to draw that strength from the *Akal Purakh* (the timeless

being). Nowadays, our tradition is slowly fading as most of the Nihangs have started getting married and having children. We were supposed to be the icons of martyrdom in the early ages. But as time passed, we only have these festivals to display our courage and skill.” They invited me to eat at the *langar* with them. *Ghee* soaked *rotis* with *dal* and *aloo matar ki subzi* was a simple yet fulfilling meal.

Polo

There was constant surprise in Anandpur Sahib over the three days I was there. The people, the colour, the energy, the skill...and also the fact that there was a game of polo that had been organised. I sat by the sidelines watching a game between Anandpur Sahib Polo Club and Delhi Polo Club, wondering how hard could the sport be, till the players reached the side I was sitting at and I could feel the earth trembling

underneath. While the match was dramatic, the real drama of the Hola Mohalla festival lay elsewhere.

The Festival

The crowd swept me with it as I tried to join the procession towards the Charan Ganga Stadium. The crowd had tripled in number over two nights and it was impossible for vehicles to ply. I almost missed the procession as I had to walk all the way from the campsite to the city. When I reached, the Nihangs were all set to leave. One of them told me that they would be joining the other *dals* on their way to the stadium. And off I went with the procession, soaking in the atmosphere, as the followers at regular intervals shouted out their war cry, performing *gatka* (a martial art form), fire breathing and displaying their swordsmanship along the way. The procession grew in size at


The Nihangs are known for their bravery and fierce combat skills. Their attire is known as Shiv Swarupam



every other gurudwara as people dressed in blue, yellow, saffron and many other colours flooded the streets. When I finally arrived at the stadium, the view was fantastic—a sea of humanity seemed to have converged at the site—sitting around the field, on the hillside, waiting outside stadium fences. I managed to get on the field, up close to the action and I sat watching a display of *gatka*, sword and combat skills. Once in a while, colours flew, as per the tradition of Holi. The energy and the power in the crowd was unmatched and unlike anything I had seen.

And then came the horsemen. The crowd on the field scattered like flies as the horses came galloping down. I stood transfixed—unable

to move, frozen in fear and awe as the horses galloped in my direction. Just in time, a Nihang standing nearby pulled me away from the path and guided me to safety. Now at a safe distance I watched the horsemanship of the Nihangs, which ranged from tent pegging, riding two, three and even four horses at the same time and standing atop two horses while they galloped through the stadium.

While the festival had been electrifying and somewhat surreal, the energy raw, the display of valour breathtaking, and the people warm and utterly brave, I would return the next day back to the metropolis and to my couch with the memories and the experience that was worth the little fright. 

Display of swordsmanship, horsemanship and combat skills by the Nihangs are the main attractions of the Hola Mohalla festival



NAVIGATOR

GETTING THERE

By Air Chandigarh is the nearest airport (80 km from Anandpur Sahib).

By Rail Anandpur Sahib is connected to New Delhi by rail. The most convenient train is the Uhl Janshatabdi that departs from Delhi at 2.35 pm (six-hour journey).

By Road You can take a State Transport/ Punjab Roadways bus from New Delhi to Chandigarh and rent a car for the onward journey to Anandpur Sahib (two hours).

WHERE TO STAY

Anand by the Sutlej, which offers accommodation in luxury tents by the banks of the Sutlej river. For reservations call: (0) 98103 22284

DON'T MISS

The martial arts display at the Charan Ganga stadium during the festival.

MUST-SEE

The state-of-the-art museum, Virasat-e-Khalsa, located in Anandpur Sahib, which is dedicated to Sikh history.

There is an unmatched energy in the martial arts display and horsemanship of the Nihangs