Holi, Caribbean Style
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Guyanese Hindus powder the streets of New York in brilliant colors for "Phagwha"

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Tens of thousands of jubilant Indo-Caribbeans celebrated Phagwah, the joyous Hindu festival of spring that symbolizes the triumph of good over evil, during the weekend of March 25-26 in New York and New Jersey. Excitement and enthusiasm were widespread as the celebration took on a carnival atmosphere. Phagwah is not yet an official local holiday, so the Guyanese celebrate it on the weekend after the proper date, which tends to fall during the week.

Celebrants wearing traditional garb and bathed in multi-color powders sprayed by one and all upon each other danced in the streets in four cities. In Jersey City, New Jersey, police said 12,000 celebrated Saturday morning. In Richmond Hill an estimated 30,000 paraded Sunday afternoon. In the Bronx over 15,000 showed up Sunday at noon; and in Hollis, one thousand participated. Each of the parades culminated at a public park with cultural variety shows featuring local talent, speeches from politicians and greetings from community leaders--and the playing of Phagwah.

The sunny, warm weekend exuded an ideal atmosphere for the celebration and led to soaring spirits among celebrants as they danced and clapped to chowtaal music. Several floats and an array of colored powders brightened up the parade routes. Talcum powder rose above and beyond the huge crowds. Groups of all ages participated in the revelry. Young and old alike shouted at the top of their voices as the potpourri reached its climax.

The Phagwah festival is associated with a story of a Hindu prince defeating the forces of evil. According to Hindu beliefs, Prince Prahalad, who stood for righteousness, opposed his evil father, King Hirnakashyap, who in his desire for personal power tried to kill his own son. But Prahalad survived these attempts at his life, including the immolation attempt by his aunt, the wicked Holika. Thus, Phagwah came into being to celebrate the triumph of righteousness over evil. Following this theme, the organizers of the parade appealed to community leaders to bury their differences, to forgive one other for past mistakes and work together for the betterment of the community and for Guyana. One organizer said: "In light of the tense atmosphere in Guyana we should work together for the peace and prosperity of our homeland--and the politicians should struggle for what is in the best interest of the nation, not themselves."

As the parade in Richmond Hill made its way down Liberty Avenue, announcers on flat-bed trucks blared out Phagwah greetings in Hindi and English over a loud speaker and invited onlookers to join in. The response among the multi-ethnic community, which includes large numbers of Hispanics and Sikhs, was heart warming. The parade route of fifteen blocks

was an undulating sea of humanity. Many non-Hindus who joined in the celebration clapped and danced; including Christians and Muslim, while others looked on. Thousands of people lined the streets and stood on verandas and rooftops to cheer on the participants.

The New York City police in full force closed traffic along the parade route and blocked intersections. Muslim Haji Zakir, who a week ago held a multi-religious Eid Ul Adha celebration in Richmond Hill, appealed for religious and racial unity among Guyanese. He said, "In Guyana, we were always one people, and we should continue to live in harmony and respect and partake in each other's traditions and festivals just as we used to celebrate Phagwah back home." Reactions to the parades were positive, and there was widespread support for them, although many Guyanese expressed the feeling that there should be only one parade in Queens. "Two parades show there is disunity among us," said one celebrant. Indeed, there had been disunity and infighting among the various temple societies in organizing the event.

Parade organizers hope to get the same kind of recognition for Phagwah that Christian, Jewish and Muslim holidays receive in New York, where parking is suspended and students are excused from public school for the day. Ramesh Kalicharran, one of the founders of the Phagwah parade concept, said he is pleased that it has now become institutionalized. He called on Guyanese to put aside their differences and unitedly lobby city politicians for official recognition of the festival.