

THE FESTIVAL OF HOLI

Hindus celebrate a tremendous number of religious festivals; they are frequent and usually joyous. Hindus are known to have the longest calendar of holidays (Walker 351). Great festivals can be seen as times of general worship and are recognized by the provincial government as public holidays (O'Malley 121). Festivals are celebrated for important days, famous incidents in mythology, moon phases, purification, remission of sins, or worship of a certain god or goddess (Walker 352). Festivals may be celebrated by fasting, vigils, bathing, fairs, chanting, lighting of lamps, games, drinking, and gift offering (Walker 352).

One of the most popular of Hindu celebration is the festival of Holi (O'Malley 123). It is a harvest rite to welcome the return of spring (Prior 41). Holi begins about ten days before the full moon in the month of Phalguna (February-March), but it is usually only observed on the last three days (Kapoor 696). It was once a fertility festival, but now it is seen as a time of hilarity and horseplay (O'Malley 123). It is celebrated after the harvest so that everyone is able to freely enjoy themselves (Prior 41). The festival begins with a bonfire celebrating the cremation of the Holika (Marriott 201). Holika was the sister of the evil King Hiranyakasipu, and together they plotted to kill his son Prahlada, a devotee of Visnu. King Hiranyakasipu had tried many times to kill his son; he threw him into a pit of poisonous snakes, and had elephants trample him while he was sleeping, but Vishnu always saved him (Gateshill and Kadodwala 19). Holika was supposedly fireproof so she brought Prahlada into a fire with her. However Visnu came to the rescue, saved Prahlada, and Holika was burned to death. (Sivananda 19). Another legend is that Holika was a child-eating cannibal who was destroyed by Krsna (Sivanada 19). Whichever myth is believed, ultimately they are both stories of good conquering evil. The burning of the Holika image is symbolically a burning all evils. Devotees start collecting wood early so the bonfire is

always huge and in some villages it is a rule that everyone must contribute something to the fire (Marriott 201). The fire is usually lit by a Brahmin and holy water is poured onto the wood (Gateshill and Kadodwala 18). Worshippers dance and mothers carry their babies around the bonfire in a clockwise direction to ask Agni, the god of fire, to bless them (Mayled 15). New corn is cooked in the fire and eaten to celebrate the harvest (Mayled 15). Coconuts, popcorn, dates, and lentil are also roasted in the fire and eaten (Mayled 15). People sometimes will take embers from the fire home to rekindle their own fire.

During the next day, normally forbidden behaviour is allowed (Pastva 79) and barriers of caste and rank are forgotten (Bahree 30). Women beat men with stout canes “just as the milkmaids loved Lord Krsna” (Marriott 205), and washmen, tailors and Brahman priests sing together (Marriott 211). In the past throwing mud, refuse, and even excreta at others was not uncommon (Walker 354), but today coloured powders (*gulal*) and liquids are playfully thrown at others (Prior 21). People run through the streets and water is thrown either directly from a pot or squirted from plastic containers or balloons sold especially for the festival (Vickery 221). Powders of different hues are also thrown on each other. This is why the festival is referred to as the festival of colors. Parties of boys and men dance in the street impersonating Krsna and people can be heard singing lewd songs and shouting obscenities; this is supposed to drive away devils or evil spirits. The street celebrations and practical joking may remind a Westerner of Mardi Gras (Pastva 79).

Some powder is also smeared on the faces of the deities, especially Krsna and Radha. Youthful Krsna is remembered during this time since he is known for playing tricks. Many worshippers say it is Krsna who taught them how to celebrate the festival of Holi (Marriott 207). The colored water and powders are associated with Krsna and the story about him, Radha and

the other *gopis* (milkmaids) walking by the river on a nice spring day. Krsna threw colored powder on Radha and she threw some back on him; pretty soon the milkmaids and the cowherd were all dancing together to Krsnas flute, while they threw red powder all over one another (Mayled 15). To some this may seem like a weird reason to celebrate, but it has a deeper meaning; it shows that Krsna, who is God, wants a special, close relationship with those who worship him (Gateshill and Kadodwala 17).

At noon time, there is a state of truce and every one goes home to bathe and put on fresh clothes (Marriott 203). In the evening, people visit with each other and exchange sweets (Bahree 30). Friends embrace each other three times to wish one another good luck. Devotees are found indulging in all sorts of vices in the name of the Holi festival. Some drink intoxicating liquor, like the festival drink, a sweet and mild, thick, green liquid made up of almonds, sugar, curds of milk, anise, and half a cup of *bhnag* (juice from the hemp leaf) (Marriott 205), and others bet money and gamble (Sivananda 19). Holi is more popularly celebrated in Northern India. In the South India, Holi celebrations include *dolayatra* (swing ritual), where images of a deity are placed on decorated swings and swung back and forth by devotees.

Holi is known as the festival of love, as well as the festival of colors. It is a time where two stories are remembered: one about Prahlada and the other about Krsna. Both stories promote the worship of Visnu; Prahlada is a devotee of Visnu and Krsna is one of Visnu's *avatars*. Prahlada's tale shows good winning over evil and Krsna's story is the basis for the fun and frolic observed during Holi. It is a great festival where every one of all ages and castes participates and "for a moment may experience the role of his opposite" (Marriott 212).

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<http://www.colorsofindia.com/holi/aboholi.htm>

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