

# Holi

Holi, popularly known as the festival of colors, is a Hindu spring festival celebrated in India and Nepal, and by Hindus around the world. The main day of Holi is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Phalgun, which typically falls somewhere in February or March in the Gregorian calendar.<sup>i</sup> The festival is a celebration of spring and is known as a time when traditional social boundaries and hierarchies are upended.<sup>ii</sup> The festival comes to a close with a focus on harmony, new beginnings, and the renewal of social bonds. Holi is particularly important to worshippers of the god Krishna, as Holi is closely associated with him and the landscapes where he is said to have lived.

In 2019, Holi will be celebrated on March 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>. In some places, the festival may last one day, while in others it may be a two-day event. The first day of Holi is often observed with bonfires, while the second day involves the famous flinging of colors.

Holi is shortly followed by, or sometimes coincides with, the Sikh festival of Holla Mohalla, a festival of music, military processions, and devotional songs. Though these festivals occur close together, they are different celebrations. This year, Holla Mohalla will take place on March 21<sup>st</sup>, although observances may vary.

## **The Origins of Holi**

There are a number of different legends associated with the celebration of Holi. Many connect the festival to the story of Holika, a demoness. Her brother was a king and had a son, Prahlad, who was deeply devoted to the Hindu god Vishnu. This angered Prahlad's father and he tried to have the boy killed. When his first attempts failed, he asked his sister Holika to kill Prahlad. Holika had been given the gift of immunity to fire by the gods, so she sat in a pyre with Prahlad in her lap. While in the pyre, Prahlad is said to have prayed to Vishnu. Despite her gift, Holika burned to death and Prahlad lived because of the intervention of Vishnu on behalf of a true devotee. Holi therefore is a festival that celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

Holi is also closely associated with the divine play, or *lila*, of the god Krishna and his cowherd sweetheart, Radha. Although the playful exploits of young Krishna are not related to the story of Prahlad and Holika, Krishna is an *avatara*, or incarnation of Vishnu. Vishnu is believed to have ten incarnations, including that of Krishna, who is worshipped as a child, a trouble-making youth, the divine lover to Radha, and the chariot-eer-advisor to Arjuna in the epic Mahabharata. Stories of his youth in the area of Braj tend to focus on Krishna's adventures with Radha and their young friends. Because of his lively and playful nature, Krishna is closely associated with spring and passion. So in "playing Holi," devotees reenact the festivities of Krishna, Radha, and their friends.

Holi falls around the arrival of spring and the harvest of winter crops, so Holi is also closely associated with agricultural bounty and welcoming the new season.<sup>iii</sup>

## **The Festival of Colors**

Holi is best known for one particular element of its celebration: throwing colors! People "play Holi" by throwing or smearing people with colored powder or dousing each other in colored water.

Versions of Holi's color throwing festivities are celebrated around the world. For example, one of the largest Holi gatherings in North America takes place in Spanish Fork, Utah, where the festival is hosted by a local International Society of Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) temple and attracts up to 70,000 attendees.<sup>iv</sup>

## Observance of Holi

Though throwing colors may be the most famous aspect of Holi, observances of the festival range widely from place to place. It is generally thought of as a time when social hierarchies (i.e., caste, gender, age, and class hierarchies, among others) are momentarily dissolved or reversed. Activities that would otherwise be unlikely to occur or are against social norms may be embraced. For example, in Barsana, India, Holi is marked by women playfully chasing and hitting men with sticks, while the men defend themselves with shields. Because the festivities of Holi can often be rowdy, people may also choose to celebrate in smaller settings, such as in their own private gardens, rather than in public places.

Other Holi activities may include bonfires that evoke the story of Holika and Prahlad. In many areas of India, these bonfires take place on the first day of Holi and involve burning an effigy of Holika.

For all of the enjoyable chaos of Holi, the end of the festival focuses on the renewal of order and social ties.<sup>v</sup> Celebrants bathe, put on new clean clothes, and visit friends, family, and teachers, sharing sweets and other goodies. Because Holi is considered a time of renewal and new beginnings, it is also a time to forgive one another and forget past disagreements.<sup>vi</sup>

The way Holi is celebrated and understood varies regionally, both within South Asia and across the world. Hindus living in other regions have developed their own specific traditions. Similarly, how significant the holiday is to people will depend on their personal, familial, and regional beliefs and practices. As a result, Hindu colleagues may celebrate Holi in different ways or not at all.

## How Will Holi Affect the Global Workplace?

Observances of Holi often include visits to family and friends, following the initial celebrations, when everyone has cleaned. It will therefore be important for some individuals to take time off or work remotely around Holi in order to prepare for travels and to spend time with loved ones. As with all holidays, it is important to remember that there are many different ways to celebrate Holi and that it is up to each individual as to what that observance looks like.

For companies with colleagues in India or Nepal, consider when planning meetings, conferences, and events that offices may be closed on Holi in observance of the holiday

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<sup>i</sup> "Holi," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed February 27, 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Holi>.

<sup>ii</sup> Carol Kuruvilla, "How to Appreciate – Not Appropriate – Holi Celebrations," *HuffPost*, March 2, 2018, accessed February 27, 2019, [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/when-it-comes-to-holi-dont-just-do-it-for-the-gram\\_us\\_5a97211de4b09c872bb0ece6](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/when-it-comes-to-holi-dont-just-do-it-for-the-gram_us_5a97211de4b09c872bb0ece6).

<sup>iii</sup> A. Whitney Sanford, "Don't Take It Badly, It's Holi: Ritual Levity, Society, and Agriculture," in *Sacred Play: Ritual Levity and Humor in South Asian Religions*, ed. Selva J. Raj and Corinne G. Dempsey (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 38.

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<sup>iv</sup> Larry Bleiberg, “10 great places to celebrate the Hindu festival of Holi,” USA Today, March 10, 2017, accessed March 1, 2019, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/travel/destinations/10greatplaces/2017/03/10/holi/98946526/>.

<sup>v</sup> “Holi,” Encyclopedia Britannica.

<sup>vi</sup> Sanford, “Don’t Take It Badly, It’s Holi,” 37.