

Holi

Holi, popularly known as the festival of colors, is a Hindu festival celebrated in India, Nepal, and Hindu communities around the world. The holiday falls around the arrival of spring and the harvest of winter crops and is also closely associated with agricultural bounty and welcoming the new season. The main day of Holi is celebrated on the full moon day of the month of Phalguna, which typically falls in February or March in the Gregorian calendar. The festival is a celebration of spring and is known as a time when traditional social boundaries are upended. The festival ends 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 religious sites from his stories. As the holiday involves activities such as throwing colors and spraying water, the holiday tends to be celebrated with more fun and joviality, rather than meditation and rituals, although some communities may include this as part of their celebrations.

In 2024, Holi will be celebrated on **March 25th**. Please note that the date of Holi may shift depending on location. The holiday may be celebrated as a one-day or two-day event. Where it is celebrated over two days, the first day usually consists of building bonfires, while the second day focuses on color fights.

A Note on Deities in Hinduism

Hindus, outside of the West, typically do not use the term “God”. While in the West, many Hindus may use the term to describe their perception of the divine, especially to others from a different religious background. Hindus have a diverse range of beliefs about the divine. Many believe that Deities, or Ishta Devatahs, are manifestations of a Supreme Being, whom they may call Brahman (not to be confused with Brahmin, known as the priest/teacher class in Hindu teachings). Hindus may also use the term Bhagawan, Andavan, or the Divine, depending on their cultural or theological background. Some Hindu sects such as ISKCON believe the Supreme Being is a specific form such as Krishna, a widely known incarnation of Lord Vishnu, one of the most revered Deities in Hinduism.

The Origins of Holi

There are several different legends associated with the celebration of Holi. Many connect the festival to the story of Holika. Her brother, the wicked King Hiranyakshipu, was annoyed that his son, Prahlad, was deeply devoted to the Hindu Deity Vishnu. Angered by the boy’s devotion, Hiranyakshipu tried to have Prahlad killed. When his first attempts failed, he asked his sister Holika to kill Prahlad. Holika had immunity to fire, so she sat in a pyre with Prahlad in her lap. but ultimately Holika burned to death and Prahlad lived. There are multiple versions of this legend. In some, Holika was tricked to lose her ability. In others, she sacrificed herself due to her guilt and piety. In yet others, Prahlad prays to Vishnu, who saves him. All the legends refer to Prahlad’s deliverance as a triumph of good over evil.

Holi is also closely associated with the divine play, or lila, of Krishna, and his cowherd sweetheart, Radha.

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.

The Festival of Colors

Holi is best known for one particular element of its celebration: throwing colors! People “play Holi” by throwing or smearing others 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.

Observance of Holi

Though throwing colors may be the most famous aspect of Holi, observances of the festival range widely from place to place. As noted above, it is generally thought of as a time when social boundaries 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.

After the commotion and frenzy of Holi, celebrants bathe, put on new clothes, and visit friends and family to exchange gifts as a way to renew the natural order, welcome new beginnings, and forgive and forget past disputes and disagreements.

The way Holi is celebrated and understood varies regionally, both within South Asia and across the world. Hindus living in each region have developed specific traditions. 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. It will therefore be important for some individuals to take time off or work remotely around Holi to prepare for travel and to spend time with loved ones. As with all holidays, it is important to remember that there are many 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, keep in mind when planning meetings, conferences, and events that offices may be closed on Holi in observance of the holiday.

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