

Holi

Holi is a festival of Spring which lasts for anything from one to five days. It is especially popular in Northern India. **In 2007 Holi falls on 3rd March.** Holi is very much a community festival, as most of the celebrations take place out of doors in large groups. "Holi" literally means "burning".

Holi-Day 1

What happens: The day of the full moon (*Holi Purnima*) is the first day of Holi. A platter ('thali') is arranged with coloured powders, and coloured water is placed in a small brass pot ('lota'). The eldest male member of the family begins the festivities by sprinkling colors on each member of the family, and the youngsters follow.

Holi-Day 2

What happens: On the second day of the festival called 'Puno', images of Holika are burnt in keeping with the legend of Prahlad and his devotion to lord Vishnu. In rural India, the evening is celebrated by lighting huge bonfires as part of the community celebration. The evil spirit, symbolized by all those dead leaves, twigs, dirt and filth that collects during the winter months, is thrown up in the fire. People gather near the fire and celebrate with folk songs and dances. Mothers often carry their babies five times in a clockwise direction around the fire, so that their children are blessed by *Agni*, the god of fire.

People sometimes take embers from the fire to their homes to rekindle their own domestic fires. In some communities, a pot of new barley seeds is placed for roasting under the pyre before the bonfire is lit up. These seeds are eaten after the fire dies down. The ashes from the Holi fire are also believed to provide protection against diseases.

The story: A demon king named Hiranyakashipu wanted to avenge the death of his younger brother, who had been killed by Lord Vishnu. To take on Vishnu, the tyrant king wanted to become the king of the heaven, earth and the underworld. He performed severe penance and prayer for many years to gain enough power. Finally he was granted a boon, that he could not be killed by day or by night, by man or by beast, or inside or outside the house. Hiranyakashipu thought he had become invincible.

Arrogantly, he ordered everyone in his kingdom to worship him, instead of God. The demon king, however, had a very young son, named Prahalad who was an ardent follower of Vishnu. Despite his father's order, Prahalad continued to pray to Vishnu. The demon king decided to kill his son: he threw him in a pit of snakes, he tried to get elephants to trample him, but each time Prahalad survived. The king asked his sister Holika to help him kill Prahalad. His sister was also a demon, and she was immune to fire. They planned that they would build a bonfire and Holika would carry Prahalad into the fire and hold him there until he burned to death. A pyre was lit and Holika sat on it, clutching Prahalad, but in the end Prahalad was saved through the power of Vishnu and emerged unscathed by the fire, while Holika was burned to ashes. The story symbolizes the destruction of evil by good and is the reason Holi is celebrated with bonfires.

Then Vishnu appeared in the form of Narasimha (half lion and half man) to finally destroy the evil Hiranyakashyap. Remember that Hiranyakashyap was blessed with a boon according to which he could neither be killed by man nor beast, neither during day

nor at night, and he could not be killed indoors nor outside: Vishnu in his half-human, half-animal guise of Narasimha attacked and destroyed Hiranyakashyap at twilight in the porch. So the prophecy was true – but not in the way that the demon thought!



Holi-Day 3

What happens: The most boisterous and the final day of the festival is called 'Parva', when children, young people, men and women visit each other's homes and coloured powders called 'aabir' and 'gula' are thrown into the air and smeared on each other's faces and bodies. 'Pichkaris' (huge water syringes) and water

balloons are filled with colours and spurted onto people - while young people pay their respects to elders by sprinkling some colors on their feet, some powder is also smeared on the faces of the deities, especially Krishna and Radha. Of course, everyone wears their oldest clothes, because people end up smothered in paint! The evenings are not 'as' exciting. A good part of what's left of the day is spent trying to wash the mess off! For days afterwards it's normal to see people with patches of pink skin, green hair, purple hands and silver nails etc. Even the neighbourhood cows and buffaloes get their share of colourful patches. This is effectively a day of misrule when all caste and gender differences are put aside – anyone can splatter anyone!

The coloured powder, or, gula was earlier made out of dried seeds of tropical flowers like the Palash, and dried silt from the riverbed. This has now given way to synthetic dyes, often mixed with fine Mica dust for a glittering effect.

The story: Holi is also closely associated with the life and times of Krishna who is famous for his sense of mischief and light-hearted revelry. Krishna spent his childhood in an idyllic village called Gokul in Uttar Pradesh. He grew up amidst green pastures in the company of cowherds and village children and had everyone spellbound by the way he played the flute. He was notorious for stealing butter, milk and other goodies from the village folk and for doing many other mischievous things. He got away with it all though, for he was so charming that no one could really be cross with him.

He was also the Casanova of Indian mythology! He was the sweetheart of all women and it is said that he had the ability to 'please' all of them at the same time! An amazing number of paintings, sculptures and other art forms, especially of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries celebrate Krishna and the **gopis** (milkmaids') passion for each other and he is shown especially with Radha who was his favourite gopi. Krishna used to play pranks on the girls by throwing water and paints over them – it became a favourite game with them, and one which everyone now joins in with great enthusiasm!