

Hindu Festivals



Introduction

There are many Hindus in Britain and as Catholics we may have Hindu friends, work with Hindus, or just notice the celebration of Hindu festivals. This leaflet is written to help Catholics understand what happens in two major Hindu festivals: Diwali and Holi. Vatican II acknowledged that in Hinduism, women and men “probe the mystery of God and express it with a rich fund of myths and a penetrating philosophy,” (Nostra Aetate, 2). We will see some of these rich myths celebrated in the two festivals.

Festivals, as with our own Christmas and Easter, are times when people come together to celebrate important religious events or stories which help shape and direct their life. In different parts of India (where the majority of Hindus live) festivals are often celebrated with local customs and traditions playing a large role. The same is true of Britain, so it is impossible to give a comprehensive introduction to festivals. In Britain, the local Hindu temple often acts as a focus for the community's

celebrations, with priests (Brahmins) leading the worship (puja) and recounting stories of the gods from the various scriptures. Meals together and meeting friends will also take place at many temples, although the home is also the centre of worship and communal celebrations.

Diwali

Diwali is probably the most important festival celebrated by British Hindus and takes place around October/November. “Diwali” means a “row of lights” and it is best characterised as a festival of light; light overcoming darkness, good overcoming evil. There are two popular gods commonly associated with Diwali: Rama and Lakshmi. Incidentally, in Hinduism, gods are often viewed as different aspects of one divine power rather like a single ray of light (God), when shone through a prism, gives us many different colours (gods).

During the five days of Diwali the exciting and moving story of Prince Rama and his wife Sita is recounted. It is a story where

Sita is captured by the demon king Ravana and Rama pursues Ravana encountering many dangers and difficulties. Finally, Ravana is defeated and Sita and Rama return to their new kingdom where they are joyfully welcomed by their subjects with lights lit in the windows. The story expresses the struggle with evil that all must undergo before they can truly follow God and also the struggle and commitment required to make a long and happy marriage. Sita is the ideal woman and wife, gentle, faithful and with great strength of character, Rama is the ideal man and husband, with great loyalty to duty and truth. The reason that small oil lamps or fairy lights are used by Hindus to adorn their homes or workplace is to recall the welcoming of and rejoicing in the return of Rama and Sita; the welcoming of God into their lives.

Lights are also lit to invite the goddess Lakshmi into Hindu homes and lives. Lakshmi is the goddess of fortune and prosperity, so Diwali is also the start of the financial new year where all debts must be repaid, symbolising the inner desire to start anew, to wipe the slate clean and commit oneself to following the light. The day after Diwali, Bestuvarash, is the first day of the Hindu New Year.

During Diwali, Hindus often visit friends and relatives, taking presents and special sweets (often made of milk, coconut, almonds and other natural foods). Lights adorn homes and firework parties (rather like Guy Fawkes) are common. These originate in the burning of an effigy of evil (Ravana) to symbolise the triumph of good over evil. Hindus greet each other "Happy Diwali" during this period and non-Hindus can also greet their Hindu friends similarly.



Holi

Holi takes place during February and March, and among other things is a Spring festival - close to the time of 'Harvest Festival' celebrated in Britain. Holi is a playful and boisterous affair in Indian villages and is a little toned down in Britain. It is a day when all differences should be forgotten (rich or poor, young and old, etc.) and social barriers are removed by the the squirting of coloured waters and powders so that no one can remain pompous or untouched by festival fun. The origins of this are thought to go back to the courting days between the gods Krishna and Radha. While Krishna played his charming music on his magic flute, the gopis (milkmaids) danced and enjoyed the oncoming of spring. Krishna, playfully and naughtily threw coloured water at one of the gopis, his future wife Radha. Everyone joined in eventually and all were lost in enjoyment; the enjoyment of new life and God.

The most important stories connected with Holi concern Prahlad, whose proud and haughty father Hiranyakashyapu banned the worship of God. Prahlad refused to obey and Hiranyakashyapu tried to kill him several times, but each time God protected Prahlad. Hiranyakashyapu finally ordered his daughter Holika to carry Prahlad into a bonfire, as Holika could not be burnt by

fire. However, Holika was burnt (as her special powers only protected her when alone in the fire) and Prahlad was saved by his devotion to God. (Sometimes, the story is told that Holika carried her brother through the fire to save him at the cost of her own life). Hence, Holi is often celebrated with a Holi bonfire recalling this event, stressing yet again the victory of good over evil and the importance of devotion and duty to God. The word Holi is from the name Holika. Sometimes, offerings to God are thrown into the fire including coconuts, which are later removed and the tasty flesh shared with family and friends.

There are many other Hindu festivals, Especially important for many British Hindus are the festivals of Navarati/Durga Puja and Dussehra (September/October), and Shivaratri (January/February). Navarati,

meaning the 'festival of nine nights' is devoted to the many forms of the great mother goddess, Devi. The final day is Dussehra, celebrating the victory of Rama over the ten-headed demon Ravana. Shivaratri is in honour of the Lord Shiva, lord of the dance, master of yoga. For some Hindus, fasting is central, spending the whole night in prayer; for others, dancing and singing in praise of Shiva is the order of the day. In India temple bells are rung throughout the night.

There is a leaflet on Hinduism in this series, and if you would like to know the dates of this year's Hindu festivals your local Community Relations Council should be able to help you, or the National Council of Hindu Temples (UK), The Secretary, Shree Sanantan Mandir, Weymouth Street, Leicester LE4 6FP.

Note: All diacritical marks have been omitted from the text.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Do Christians have similar festivals to Diwali and Holi where the triumph of good over evil is celebrated? Compare similarities and differences
2. How much effort do you make to find out about the festivals of non-Christians who live near you? How could you go about such a task?

This is part of the series of leaflets prepared for the Catholic community by the Committee for Other Faiths. Understanding and friendly relations with those who believe in God and live their lives with religious principles and purpose contribute to the harmony of society and the happiness of all. The series offers useful information to those who want to overcome the obstacle of ignorance and promote through dialogue, prayer and action the Catholic Church's teaching of respect and love for all peoples.

The Committee is grateful to its member Gavin D'Costa for this contribution.

**+ Charles Henderson
Chairman**

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