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Holi - Festival of Colors

By Vickie Chao

Every March, people in India celebrate Holi for at least two days. Holi is also called the Festival of Colors. It is a religious holiday for the faith of Hindu.

On the days of Holi, people in India party together. They build bonfires on the roads. They throw colored powders at each other. They spray colored water at each other. It is a lot of fun!

Why do people in India celebrate Holi? Nobody knows for sure, as there are different stories about the holiday's origin. Of the various versions, the fight between Vishnu and Hiranyakashipu may be the most famous.

Vishnu is a good god. Hiranyakashipu is a demon king. The two never liked each other. Then things got even worse after Vishnu killed Hiranyakashipu's younger brother in a battle. Hiranyakashipu was very upset. He vowed to avenge the death of his younger brother. To reach this goal, he meditated in a mountain for several years so he could gain magical powers. At last, his hard work paid off. The god of creation, Brahma, appeared before him. He said, "Hiranyakashipu, I am touched by your passion. Now, tell me what you are praying for."

Hiranyakashipu replied, "Great Lord, my prayer is about the way I shall die. I wish not to be killed by any creature made by you. I wish not to be killed either indoor or outdoor. I wish not to be killed either during the day or at night. I wish not to be killed by any weapon. I wish not to be killed either on earth or in heavens. Please grant me those wishes." Brahma agreed. He granted Hiranyakashipu those wishes.

With Brahma's blessing, Hiranyakashipu believed he was invincible. He became very sure of himself. He wanted everybody in his kingdom to worship him. He wanted everybody in his kingdom to treat him like a god. Afraid of his power, everybody in his kingdom



obeyed him. The only person who did not do so was his own son, Prahalad. Prahalad was a young boy. As a devoted follower of Vishnu, he knew it was wrong of his father to call himself a god. So he refused to worship him like one. Hiranyakashipu was very angry. He first tried to change his son's mind. But that did not work. He then tried to kill his son by burning him alive! To do that, he needed help. He went to see his evil sister, Holika, who had a magical power of not getting burned. He asked Holika to hold Prahalad on her lap and sit on a bonfire. She agreed.

Now, with Holika on his side, Hiranyakashipu prepared a bonfire. He had Holika hold Prahalad on her lap and sit on it. As the fire was blazing, Vishnu appeared. He took away Holika's magical power and rescued Prahalad. Holika died in the fire.

Interestingly, this ending is only one version of the story.

In another version of the story, Holika was a good woman. When she and her nephew sat on the fire, she gave him her magical power. Thus, she died, but Prahalad did not.

Because the two endings were very different, having bonfires on Holi carries two different meanings, too. For the first version, bonfires mark the end of evil and darkness. For the second version, bonfires signify people's respect for Holika.

Building bonfires is only one tradition on Holi. Throwing colored powders and spraying colored water is another. The origin of this custom was said to be from a god named Krishna. Krishna was very naughty. He liked to play pranks. One of his all-time favorites was to throw colored powders and spray colored water on passersby.

Though Holi may mean different things to different people in India, it sure is a fun holiday for everybody. Over this brief period, people in India forget about their problems. They forget about their backgrounds. They forget about their social classes. All they want is to have a good time. They use this holiday to celebrate the harvest of winter crops. They use this holiday to celebrate the arrival of spring. And, most definitely, they use this holiday to throw colored powders and spray colored water at their friends, relatives, or even total strangers!

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Questions

- _____ 1. In what month do Indians celebrate Holi?
- A. March
 - B. May
 - C. April
 - D. July
- _____ 2. Holi is also called the Festival of Lights.
- A. True
 - B. False
- _____ 3. According to the legend, why did Hiranyakashipu want to kill Prahalad?
- A. Because Prahalad burned down his house
 - B. Because Prahalad refused to worship him like a god
 - C. Because Prahalad killed his brother
 - D. Because Prahalad was naughty
- _____ 4. Which of the following about Holi is NOT true?
- A. People throw colored powders at each other.
 - B. People build bonfires on the roads.
 - C. People light up lamps and place them everywhere.
 - D. People spray colored water at each other.
- _____ 5. Who granted Hiranyakashipu magical powers?
- A. Vishnu
 - B. Prahalad
 - C. Brahma
 - D. Holika

- _____ 6. Which of the following about Hiranyakashipu's prayer is true?
- A. Hiranyakashipu prayed not to be killed by any weapon.
 - B. Hiranyakashipu prayed to be strong.
 - C. Hiranyakashipu prayed to be handsome.
 - D. Hiranyakashipu prayed to be rich.
- _____ 7. Who was said to start the custom of throwing colored powders at total strangers?
- A. Krishna
 - B. Vishnu
 - C. Brahma
 - D. Holika
- _____ 8. Who rescued Prahalad from the fire?
- A. Vishnu
 - B. Hiranyakashipu
 - C. Brahma
 - D. Krishna

After Vishnu rescued Prahalad from the fire, he had a battle with Hiranyakashipu. He won and killed Hiranyakashipu. Given that Hiranyakashipu had the blessings from Brahma, how do you suppose Vishnu killed Hiranyakashipu? Use your imagination and write a story about it.
