



HOLI – THE FESTIVAL OF COLOUR

This colourful festival is celebrated on the day of the full moon (Purnima) in the month of Falgun (March) every year, and also represents the arrival of spring. There are several stories related to this day but the most renowned is that of Prahlad and his unbroken devotion for Narayan.

History of Holi

Hiranyakashipu was the king of the Asurs (demons) whose brother had been killed by Vishnu for terrorising Gods and Goddesses. In revenge for his brother's death, Hiranyakashipu wanted to destroy Vishnu and keep other Gods restrained in heaven. He ordered his soldiers to crush all those who worship Vishnu, but the Gods protected the devotees of Vishnu.

Hiranyakashipu thought to himself "I will have to match my powers to Vishnu's to rule over the three worlds".

So he began to perform strict tapasya (penance). While he was so engrossed in his own matters, the Gods raided his city and destroyed his palace. Hiranyakashipu's Queen, who was expecting a child, was sent by the Gods to Sage Narad's hermitage. She lived in the ashram of the great sage and learned about religion and the glory of Vishnu. The child within her, who was Prahlad, also absorbed this knowledge.

Narad taught the Queen that Vishnu is the soul of all created things and is present everywhere. Meanwhile, Hiranyakashipu's severity of penance pleased Brahma who then granted him a boon. Hiranyakashipu asked for immortality, but Brahma could not grant this boon and instead gave the wish that his death could not be caused by man or beast, with a weapon or without a weapon, during day or night, indoors or outdoors, on earth or in the sky. Through this boon he was granted lordship over the materialistic world.

Hiranyakashipu brought his wife back to his city, and Prahlad was born shortly after. Hiranyakashipu, with his new powers renewed his hostilities against Vishnu and his followers. He declared that he was the strongest in the three worlds and that only he should be worshipped.

In the meanwhile, Prahlad was growing up and was Hiranyakashipu's delight. He once asked Prahlad, "Son, tell me what do you think is the best thing in life"? Prahlad replied: "To renounce the world and seek refuge in Vishnu". Hiranyakashipu laughed.



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Then he called his Son's teacher to him, saying, "Guard him closely; I think the followers of Vishnu are secretly influencing him. Don't let him out of your sight!" After many months, his teacher said, "Prahlad, I think you are now ready to meet your father."

His father asked him, "You have been with your Guru a long time! What have you learned? Prahlad said, "I learned that the most worthwhile occupation for anyone is the worship of Lord Vishnu". Upon hearing this, Hiranyakashipu became very angry, "O cursed child! Who taught you such vicious things?" Prahlad remained calm and said, "Vishnu. He reveals himself to all who are devoted to him."

Hiranyakashipu shouted angrily, "This boy must not live! Take him away and kill him! Kill this enemy disguised as my son. Poison him or attack him when he sleeps. Do whatever you can, but kill him!" The soldiers started attacking Prahlad when he was meditating on Lord Vishnu, but their weapons could not touch Prahlad.

Realising the strength of Prahlad's devotion and that he could not stop Prahlad's worshipping, Hiranyakashipu decided to make one final attempt to take his son's life.

He ordered his Evil demon sister (Prahlad's fai) Holika to wear her magical chundari that would protect her from fire when worn over her head. Holika took Prahlad on her lap and sat on the pyre. As the pyre was set alight a gust of wind blew Holika's Chundari off her head and on to Prahlad. Holika was burnt alive and the magical Chundari protected Prahlad.

To mark this day Hindus burn the effigies (putru) of Holika.

Holi also marks the arrival of spring. Hindus celebrate this by offering their newly harvested grain to Bhagwan and by spraying and throwing coloured water on each other symbolizing the beauty and colour associated with spring.

Prahlad was sent to his teacher to try again. This time the teacher tried to get Prahlad interested in means for acquiring wealth and physical pleasures. But Prahlad thought to himself, "How can the pursuit of physical pleasures and wealth bring happiness? It will only lead to envy and anger?" The teacher eventually gave up. Prahlad told his father that Vishnu is the soul of all created beings and is present everywhere.

Hiranyakashipu roared, "Where is Vishnu? If he is everywhere why is he not in this Pillar? If he is not there then I shall cut off your head with my sword. Let Vishnu, your Lord protect you." As Hiranyakashipu struck the Pillar with his sword, Lord Vishnu, in the form of Narasinha (Nara=man, Sinha=lion) emerged from the Pillar.



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He was half man-half lion. It was twilight (neither day nor night) and Narsinha caught Hiranyakashipu, and carried him to the threshold of the building where it was neither indoors nor outdoors and while holding him in his lap, killed him with his claws. Prahlad was installed on the throne and he ruled wisely for many years.

This episode highlights the fact that God would do anything to protect His devotees. Holi reminds us of the troubles of Prahlad and the burning of his aunt Holika in the fire despite her boon. Moreover the religious significance of the festival of Holi is to mark the burning of self pride, selfishness, greed, lust, hatred, all the undesirable evil tendencies, thoughts and behaviours. The victory of good over evil will always prevail.