

## Theme 4B Religious practices that shape religious identity: Holi

### Key concepts

- Holi is an annual Hindu spring festival. It is also called the festival of colour. Some believe that the festival gets its name from Holika, who was the sister of Hiranyakasipu, the king of demons.
- On the first day of Holi a bonfire is lit at night to signify the burning of Holika. There is also a practice of throwing cow dung into the fire and shouting obscenities at it as if shouting at Holika herself.
- However, other Hindus celebrate Holi in memory of Krishna. Krishna as a youth used to play all sorts of pranks on the cowgirls, or gopis. One prank was to throw coloured powder all over them and during the second day of Holi people go around until afternoon throwing colours, powder and water at each other, and meet and have fun. Images of Krishna and his consort Radha are carried through the streets.
- The story of Radha and Krishna is a love story which has been interpreted as being symbolic of the loving interplay between God and the human soul.
- Holi is a time when traditional roles and levels of status in Indian society are turned upside down. Social restrictions normally associated with caste, sex, status and age are loosened and this means that Holi bridges social divisions and brings people together. There is also the loosening of social norms concerning behaviour.
- The various legends associated with Holi celebrate the victory of good over evil. Holi also helps people to believe in the virtue of being truthful and honest and to fight against evil. Holi also strengthens social cohesion as it is celebrated by Hindus and non-Hindus.
- In religious terms, Holi reminds people that those who love God will be saved and that those who abuse his devotees will suffer.
- Holi also has great spiritual value if it is observed correctly. It, like all Hindu festivals, can inspire faith in God. It can help a Hindu advance on the spiritual path, away from sensual pleasures, towards communion with the divine.
- The three pillars of the Hindu community are worship in the home and temple, scripture and the guru-disciple tradition and it is through the adherence of devotees to these pillars that the various traditions associated with festivals are maintained.

### Key quotes

*“This kind of love is of the highest form of devotion in Vaishnavism, and is symbolically represented as the bond between the wife and husband or beloved and lover.”* (Subhamoy Das)

*“The deep meaning of Holi is connected to different Indian legends and their symbolic messages. The focus may vary depending on the part of India and the world where it is celebrated.”* (Debra Moffitt)

*“God became Krishna and Râdhâ — Love flows in thousands of coils. Whoso wants, takes it. Love flows in thousands of coils — The tide of love and loving past, And fills the soul with bliss and joy!”* (Vivekananda)

*“Holi is not only about colors and sweets. It reminds of the divine and eternal love of Krishna and Radha. It also reminds one of Narashima, Prahlada and Hiranyakashyapa and thus the fact that ‘Truth and Humanity are invincible forces in the Universe.’”* (Anonymous)

*“Tradition is not the worship of ashes, but the preservation of fire.”* (Gustav Mahler)

### Key words

Holi	Holika	Krishna	Radha	Prahlada
gopis	spiritual	virtue	divine	communion
caste	tradition	social	soul	evil
Hiranyakasipu				

### Issues for analysis and evaluation

#### Key arguments/debates

Some believe that celebrating historical events has no meaning today. Others would argue that the past shapes the present. Some would argue that it depends on what is taken from the past.

#### Key questions

Are festivals important in Hinduism?  
Do festivals show commitment to a religion?  
Is celebrating festivals the best way to show Hindu identity?