

HOLI – HOLY OPPORTUNITY TO RELISH DIVINE LOVE

The festive bonfire; the smearing of dyes; the spraying of colored water; the joyful faces of all – these memories flash through any Indian mind, when reminded of Holi, one of the most important of all Indian festivals.

Indeed, festivals are an integral and endearing part of Indian culture. They break the monotony of life, bring everyone together in joyful reunion and strengthen bonds of affection in the community.

In traditional Vedic culture, festivals served another important purpose, a purpose that has been all but forgotten nowadays. Festivals were primarily meant to bring humanity closer to divinity; they served as occasions for people to put aside their worldly preoccupations and focus on the Lord and His glorious deeds. Without knowing this spiritual purpose, people nowadays get external fun through festivals and miss the internal enrichment that they offer.

The upcoming festival of Holi, celebrated on the last day of the bright fortnight of the month of Phalgun, offers an excellent

opportunity to regain what we have missed for long.

Let's start with the bonfire.

The history of the bonfire dates back to millennia, when the demon king Hiranyakashipu ruled and terrorized the universe, considered God, Vishnu, and His devotees to be his arch enemy. When the demon saw that his own son, Prahlada, had become a devotee of Vishnu, he decided to kill Prahlada. But Lord Vishnu protected Prahlada during all the assassination attempts. In despair, Hiranyakashipu ordered his sister, Holika, who had been blessed with immunity from fire, to take Prahlada into fire and burn him to death. She complied, but the result was the opposite of what the demon had hoped. Prahlada came out of the fire, unscathed, being protected by Lord Vishnu, whereas Holika was reduced to ashes; she had overlooked the fact that her blessing guaranteed protection from fire only when she entered it alone. The burning of Holika is commemorated by the bonfire and by the name 'Holi'.

The significance of this historical narrative is immense. Prahlada signifies our godly, serving, selfless nature; Holika, the ungodly, exploitative, selfish tendency that covers our

original nature. When gold is placed in fire, the impurities melt away and the purified gold emerges, shining brighter. Similarly, the purifying Holi bonfire signifies the burning away of our superficial, lower tendency and the re-emergence of our essential, higher nature. When our pure nature re-emerges, we realize our identity as spiritual beings, as souls, who are sac-cid-ananda, eternal, enlightened and ecstatic. Realizing our identity as the beloved children of the infallible Lord, we become free from fear and full of joy.

This enriching realization does not come just by lighting a fire. Prahlada emerged triumphant from the fire by dint of his unflinching devotion to the Lord. Similarly, we will emerge successful through all the fire-like trials and tribulations of life by developing unflinching devotion. Just as Prahlada developed devotion by learning chanting of the Lord's holy names from his devotee-guru Narada Muni, we too can develop devotion by learning chanting from a contemporary devotee-guru.

The festival of colors, Rangapanchami, generally celebrated the day after Holi, also has deep spiritual significance. Lord Sri Krishna originally celebrated this festival with

His supreme devotees, the gopis, the cowherd damsels of Vrindavana. During a loving exchange, Krishna and the gopis spontaneously smeared each other with dyes and sprayed colored water on each other. This affectionate reciprocation is not at all like ordinary boy-girl affairs. Because Krishna is not an ordinary boy; He is the Supreme Godhead playing the role of a youth to perform *lila* (divine play) with His devotees. And the gopis are not ordinary girls; they are highly evolved yogis who had performed great austerities in their past lives to have the opportunity for an intimate relationship with God.

Due to the superlatively sacred nature of these lilas, these lilas are never to be imitated. Traditionally, devotees used to celebrate Holi by smearing and spraying the deity forms of Radha-Krishna with dyes and colored water. Then, devotees would respectfully accept the remnants of those colors as *prasada* (mercy) and gracefully smear and spray them on each other. Unfortunately, with the passage of time, the God-centered essence of the festival was forgotten. Consequently, a pure, spiritually-uplifting festival has now sadly become an occasion for sensuous, even licentious, revelry.

But the glory of our culture is still there for us to reclaim if we imbibe the profound significance of our cultural festivals.

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