

# Deep Dive: Holi (Festival of Colors)

## What is Holi?

Holi, also known as the “Festival of Colors,” is a Hindu festival that marks the start of spring and celebrates good over evil. It’s usually celebrated in March and lasts two days. On the first night, *Holika Dahan*, people light a bonfire to symbolize burning away negativity. The next day, *Rangwali Holi*, is a day of joyous celebration; many gather in the streets to throw brightly colored powders and water, sing, dance, and eat.



## Where did Holi come from?

Holi has deep roots in Hindu mythology; it’s often linked to the story of Prahlada, a devotee of the deity Vishnu. Prahlada’s father, the demon king Hiranyakashipu, conspired with the demoness Holika to burn Prahlada. Prahlada survived an attempt on his life by his father, the demon king Hiranyakashipu. Through divine intervention, Prahlad was unharmed, while Holika perished in the flames. This myth is remembered in the ritual bonfire. In this way, Holi celebrates the triumph of good over evil.



## How is it celebrated?

Celebrations occur in people’s backyards, outside temples, and in the streets. People don white clothes and splash powdered dyes (*gulal*) in vivid colors on friends and family, a practice that stems from the playful legends of Krishna and Radh. They also spray water with water guns known as *pichkari*, exchange treats like *gujiya* and *mathri*, and share festive drinks such as *thandai* and *lassi*.



*Gujiya*, a sweet dumpling-like pastry filled with dried fruits and nuts that symbolizes abundance



*Thandai*, a traditional milk drink infused with sugar, spices, nuts and saffron



Households decorate their doorsteps with *rangolis* made from colored powders, rice, or flower petals. Such designs are believed to welcome prosperity and good fortune into the home.



Crispy and flaky, *mathri* is a deep-fried cracker prepared with whole wheat flour.



## Which countries and communities celebrate Holi?

Holi is most celebrated by Indian diaspora communities. However, celebrations take place not only in India, but also in nations like Nepal, Pakistan, Fiji, Mauritius, Trinidad and Tobago, Bangladesh, Australia, the US, and the UK.

## What is the significance of the colored powder, and what do each of the colors represent?

*Gulal* – the vibrant colored powder that people fling in the air – is a central aspect of Holi. Traditionally, these powders were derived from natural ingredients like turmeric, neem, and flower petals. When tossed into the air or applied to someone's face, *gulal* reflects the transformation of the seasons, as spring brings about blooming flowers and warmth.



Every color has a special meaning. While red embodies energy, love, and fertility, yellow (inspired by turmeric) promises longevity and happiness. Green symbolizes nature's renewal and prosperity. Blue is reminiscent of Lord Krishna, a major deity in Hinduism, whose antics with colors are central to many Holi celebrations.

## Is Holi celebrated the same way across India?

While the central theme of colors prevails across the country, Holi traditions vary by region. In Mathura and Vrindavan, the festival maintains strong ties to Lord Krishna, with elaborate processions and reenactments of his playful stories. In Punjab, Sikhs celebrate *Hola Mohalla* (a Sikh festival that usually takes place the day after Holi) with martial arts displays and poetry. In Bengal, Holi is linked to spring festivals honoring the goddess Radha and Krishna.

