

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Why we celebrate Holi, or: The invincible boy

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EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 28 March this year (2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Holi. It is a boisterous occasion. Bonfires are lit and on this day the rules of respect are dropped and people are allowed to let rip. Ashutosh Vardhana tells the story that gave rise to the festival.



Ashutosh Vardhana:

Why we celebrate Holi, or: The invincible boy

Holi (28 March 2002)

The story of Holi starts with an evil king, Hiranya-Kashipu. He was very powerful, ruled the whole world, but very badly. He rewarded criminals and persecuted good people. Most people on earth were terribly unhappy. The king hated God (Vishnu) with all his heart and did everything to spite him.

However, he had a son, Prahlada, who was a great devotee of Lord Vishnu. The king tried in vain to stop his son from praying and meditating. Since all his threats and punishments were of no avail, he decided to kill the boy. But the boy was so single-minded in his devotion to Lord Vishnu, that none of the normal ways of killing people worked on him. Weapons and poisonous snakes could not kill him. Elephants refused to step on him. He was to be burnt at the stake, but the fire did not harm him.

Meanwhile more and more people, seeing how Lord Vishnu protected his devotee, turned to Lord Vishnu - so the king's attempts to kill his son had the very opposite effect - almost as if a religious leader bans a book or a film because of blasphemy but thereby makes it really popular. It is better to behave like God, who regards blasphemy as a trifle, ignores it and treats it with the contempt it deserves. Then the blasphemers and mockers get bored with it and invent better pastimes.

The king exposed Prahlada to icy winds on top of a mountain and gave him poisoned food. A fiery woman with magic powers tried to pierce his heart (i.e. tried to seduce him) but could not harm him. The king dropped him from Blackpool Tower, tried to drown him, put him into bad company, but all this could neither kill the boy nor destroy his devotion to Lord Vishnu. He had already survived ten attempts to kill or to corrupt him.

Prahlada had an aunt called Holika (stress: Holiká). The festival of Holi is named after her. She had obtained a boon that she could not be harmed by fire. At the instigation of the king, she sat down on top of a huge pile of wood (railway sleepers pinched from Railtrack), with Prahlada on her lap, holding him tight so that he could not run away, and had the bonfire lit. She trusted in her boon (God's promise), but Prahlada trusted in God just like that, promise or no promise. Because Holika was using her boon for evil purposes, it did not work; but Prahlada's unconditional trust in God worked, even without a boon. Holika was burnt to ashes, but Prahlada remained unharmed.

Eventually the king got his come-uppance. Prahlada had told him that everything is Vishnu and Vishnu is everywhere, in every human being, every animal, insect, microbe, in every tree, every rock, even in every sinner.

In the king's hall, there was a huge pillar. The king shouted: 'If your Vishnu is in this pillar, why doesn't he come out and show himself?', and he kicked the pillar, spat at it and struck it with his sword. The pillar burst open and Lord Vishnu came out, his lower body shaped like a man (nara), and his upper body shaped like a lion (simha). This form of Vishnu is called Nara-Simha, the man-lion. Nara-Simha grabbed the king, tore him to pieces, and installed pious Prahlada on his throne.



Lord Vishnu as Nara-Simha and his wife Goddess Lakshmi on royal throne



Nara-Simha tearing King Hiranya-Kashipu to shreds

In his next life king Hiranya-Kashipu was reborn as the monster Ravana, the great enemy of Lord Rama.

To commemorate these events, we light bonfires, and on this day the rules of respect are dropped and people are allowed to let

rip - much like Christians in Catholic countries or cities (e.g. Germany [Cologne, Munich], Trinidad, Brazil) at carnival time, on the four days before the beginning of Lent. We throw coloured powders and squirt coloured water at each other, revel in the mess (as we all like to do from time to time, being little pigs at heart). We worship God who is present everywhere and who is represented by the fire, its purity and its warmth. There are many explanations for these customs and many variants of the story, and presumably all are true to some extent. The bonfire may be a reminder of the bonfire on which Prahlada was meant to be burnt, and the powders and mess we throw at each other may be a reminder of the ashes of that bonfire. Apart from that it is a good opportunity to have fun, and we all need much more of that than we normally get.



The joy of Holi

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM THIS STORY?

1. If you try to ban something (good or bad), stamp it out, like going to mandir, church or mosque, drugs, books and films, even blasphemy and mocking a religion, you advertise it, make it desirable and popular and people do it out of spite if not out of conviction. Since God smiles about blasphemy and does not strike the blasphemer dead instantly, why should we! When we are so touchy, are we really defending God's honour, or merely our personal vanity? Does our vanity deserve special protection? Can God's honour be affected by blasphemy? Can God not defend his own honour - when the time is ripe? In this story he did. Mercifully the scriptures of Jews, Christians and Muslims agree with us on this point:

- 'To me belongs vengeance and recompence; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand.' (Bible: Deuteronomy 32:35)
 - 'Whether We (Allah) let you (the Holy Prophet) witness the punishment with which We threaten them, or cause you to die before it is fulfilled, your mission is only to give warning: it is for Us to do the reckoning.' (Surah 13:40)
 - 'The apostle says: "Lord, these men are unbelievers." Bear with them and wish them peace. They shall before long know their error.' (Surah 43:88-89)
2. We will feel better in adversity if we trust in God's help and let him guide our behaviour and do not behave like cowards or criminals, especially if we live under evil regimes (Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia). Our main principle should always be not to harm any other people, especially not in the name of God (who knows better than we what each of us deserves). Instead we should help our neighbours and persecuted strangers as best we can, especially members of other communities.
3. We have to use our common sense. We are not Houdinis (escape artists). We may be destined to die or to suffer whatever we do and however righteous we are, and we are sure to perish if we behave like fools, take unnecessary risks, do not protect our houses against burglars or step out in front of a moving lorry. God will surely fail us if we are trying to put him to the test. Prahlada was an exceptional case. He was completely intoxicated with God, he was not, like most of us, half-hearted about God and thought: 'If you exist, you must now display your power.'

NOTE FOR READERS UNFAMILIAR WITH HINDUISM:

Contrary to common perception we Hindus believe in one God, who is neither man nor woman, who is absolute, unchangeable and universal, who is 'existence - consciousness - bliss' (sat, chit, ananda), and about whom we can say nothing else that is really valid. Unlike God-the-Absolute, the many gods that our stories talk about and that our pictures depict are changeable. Their purpose is to aid the different inclinations of each devotee and help him/her to move from the visible towards the invisible, concentrate his affection on god and to lead a life that brings him closer to the experience of god. Since God, in whatever religion, is everywhere, the Jewish, Christian and Muslim God, being one with our absolute God, resides also in our images. All of us therefore have good reason to be friends, worship God wherever we find him, and to support each other in our different ways of worshipping God, be it in mosque or mandir, for God is one by whatever name we call him and whether we 'depict' him or not.

Note: You can read a full version of this story on the web:
<http://www.tudo.co.uk/hindustories/index.html>

https://www.tudo.co.uk/hindustories/03_holi/holi.html