

Faiths and festivals Book 2:

A month-by-month guide to multicultural celebrations around the year

by Karen Hart

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March: Holi – festival of colours



The Hindu festival of Holi is a truly beautiful time of celebration. Chiefly observed in India and countries with large Hindu populations, Holi is primarily a **celebration of springtime**, the season's beautiful colours, and a farewell to winter months, but originally marked the agricultural season of the Rabi (agricultural) crops. Although Holi has religious roots with connections to Hindu mythology, for most Hindus today, Holi is the least religious of Hindu celebrations – a time for lots of fun, and also a time when the usual boundaries between young and old and rich and poor are lowered (although not completely ignored) in favour of a time of mutual celebration.

In most regions Holi celebrations last about two days, being celebrated on the last full moon day of the lunar month;

Phalg una (February/March), with Rangapanchami (fifth day of the full moon) marking the official end of Holi.

There are certain well-established customs attached to Holi. The main custom is the smearing of coloured powders on the faces of friends and family and the throwing of coloured and scented water – hence the name **Festival of Colours**. Another popular custom on the first day of Holi is to participate in the building of a large public bonfire. It is customary for men to prepare for this by hunting for and collecting wood. The bonfire is lit as the moon rises, close to midnight.

Traditionally, natural colours made from plants were used to make the coloured dyes used during the Holi celebrations,

July: Ratha Yatra Festival



Ratha Yatra – meaning ‘chariot journey’ is an annual Hindu festival held during India’s rainy season – the months of June and July. It is held on the second day of Shukla pakshya (waxing cycle of the moon) of Ashadh Maas (third month in the lunar calendar).

The festival is a very special event in the Eastern part of India, particularly in Puri, in the state of Orissa, and is held in honour of Lord Jagannath (Lord of the Universe). Jagannath is a form of Krishna

In Puri there is a large Jagannath Temple, which houses wooden images of Lord Jagannath, his brother Balaram or Balabhadra, and sister Subhadra. The temple was built nearly eight centuries ago and is one of the four major traditional centres of pilgrimage in India. Although Hindus make pilgrimages to Jagannath temple all year round, it is considered to be very special if the pilgrimage is made during Ratha Yatra.

The festival attracts thousands of pilgrims from all parts of India, with the highlight of the day being the **chariot procession**, when three ornately decorated chariots, made to look like temples are pulled through the streets of Puri by thousands of devotees. Images of the three deities – Jagannath, Balaram and Subhadra each sit in their own chariot.

The journey commemorates the annual journey of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and their sister Subhadra to the Gundicha temple (an important sanctuary of Lord Jagannath). On their return from the Gundicha Temple the three deities stop for a while near the Mausī Maa Temple (aunt’s house) and receive an offering of Poda Pitha (special type of pancake) believed to be the Lord’s favourite. After a stay of seven days, the deities return to their home.

The huge procession accompanying the chariots sings devotional songs, accompanied by instruments such as

September: Harvest Festival and Sukkot



Harvest Festival

Harvest Festivals – giving thanks for a bountiful harvest, are celebrated in various ways across the world, America’s Thanksgiving national holiday being one example.

In Britain, people have given thanks for a good harvest since pagan times. Many old Harvest customs – singing hymns, decorating churches with crops and loaves of bread are still observed today.

In Britain, harvest celebrations are traditionally held on the Sunday nearest to the Harvest Moon – the full moon occurring closest to the Autumn Equinox, during September or early October.

During pagan times, agricultural communities would hold a huge harvest feast to mark the occasion. This harvest supper was presided over by the Lord of the Harvest, who would have been a well-regarded member of the community and who would take responsibility for carving the main dish of the day – roast goose. Although today this tradition is not usually observed, Goose Fairs are still held at harvest time in some rural communities, with fairground rides, cattle shows and food stalls.

Another well-known harvest custom is the making of corn dollies, which were used to decorate houses during the festival. Corn dollies (straw work decorations) were traditionally made from the last sheaf of corn cut, and were made in honour of the corn spirit, which in pagan times was

Setting examples of religious and cultural celebrations



The following examples show the approach that two successful pre-schools have taken in introducing the subject of faiths, cultures and festivals to their pre-school children.

Handsworth Pre-School, North East London

Handsworth Pre-School, London, is an OFSTED registered and PSLA accredited pre-school group which has been running for over twenty five years and caters for children

from two to five years. Here (during a session celebrating the Holi festival) pre-school leader Kitty West, shares her ideas on teaching the subject of faiths and cultures in a pre-school environment.

“The subject of faiths and festivals is not directly taught, but introduced through play and activities.

For example, the Japanese Doll Festival was talked about during circle time and simple origami activities were organised to celebrate the occasion.