

ॐ CHAPTER FOUR

Festivals and Holidays

Hindus observe a number of religious festivals and holidays throughout the year. As with Buddhism, a religion that sprang from Hinduism, these festivals do not always fall on a specific day of a certain month. This is because Hindus follow a lunar calendar which is based on the moon and not the sun.

In India, the year is divided into twelve lunar months. The new year falls in the month of Vaishakha, which corresponds to parts of April and May in the western calendar. The other eleven months are Jaistha, Asadha, Sravana, Bhadra, Aswin, Kartik, Agrahayana, Paus, Magh, Phalgun, and Chaitra. Exactly when these months occur is explained as each festival is discussed.

Dasera

One of the most popular Hindu festivals is *Dasera*. (Also spelled Dassehra, Dussehra, and Dasara.) It is celebrated all over India, as well as in other parts of the world. It takes place during the month of *Aswin*. *Aswin* corresponds to September-October in our calendar.

Dasera is held in honor of the Mother Goddess. If you remember from Chapter Three, the Mother Goddess takes different forms. Sometimes she is Shakti, who is kind and loving. At other times, she is Durga, a warrior goddess who rides a lion and is angry and frightening.

Dasera is known by different names in different parts of India. In the north, it is called *Dasera*. In western India, it is known as *Navratri*. In the east, it is called *Durgapuja*. As you can tell by the latter name, Hindus in the eastern part of India observe the festival in honor of the Durga form of the Mother Goddess.

Regardless of the name, *Dasera* lasts

for nine nights. It is a happy festival for which people decorate their homes and shrines with flowers. They also give each other gifts. *Dasera* is a time to patch up old quarrels and renew friendships. It is also considered a lucky time for people to buy a house or start a new business.

In some parts of India, the story of Rama is included in the celebration of *Dasera*. You have already read about Rama rescuing his wife Sita by killing the ten-headed demon, Ravana. Before embarking on his mission, Rama prayed to Durga for help. Hindus celebrate the occasion by making giant puppets of Rama, Ravana, and other characters involved in the story. On the last night of the festival, the puppet of Ravana is burned on a huge bonfire. His burning signifies the triumph of good over evil.

Hindus believe that by taking part in *Dasera*, the energy and power of the Mother Goddess is transferred to them. They believe this helps them overcome the evil that they face in their daily lives.

Section Review:

1. During which Hindu month is *Dasera* observed?
2. Which god or goddess is honored during the festival of *Dasera*?
3. In what ways is *Dasera* a happy festival?

Diwali

Diwali is the most important Hindu festival. It is held during the Hindu month of *Kartik*. This means it falls in October-November by the western calendar.

Diwali means a "group or row of lights." During the five-day festival, people

Words to remember:

Dasera
Aswin

decorate their homes, mandirs, and buildings with rows of candles and lamps. They also hang garlands of flowers and paper chains. Some Hindus throw away their old lamps and buy new ones for the occasion. The idea behind the row of lights is the belief that darkness (evil) can be driven away by light. Many people also leave doors and windows open for Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune. More than anything else, Diwali is observed to honor Lakshmi, and Hindus believe that by leaving their doors and windows open, she will enter and bless their houses.

Several different stories are remembered during Diwali. One is the same story honored during the festival Dasera—the story in which Rama, one of the forms of the god Vishnu, kills the demon Ravana and rescues his wife Sita. Another story deals with Vishnu himself and how he defeated a wicked giant named *Naraka* (sometimes Narakasura).

Since Diwali comes at the end of the financial year in India, business people and shop owners make sure their account books are balanced and their bills are paid. If everything is in order, they believe that Lakshmi will help their businesses grow and prosper.

Diwali is also a family festival. Like Dasera, it is a happy time. People give each other presents, and families invite friends to dine with them. The sending of cards is also becoming popular. In addition, there is music, dancing, bonfires, and fireworks.

Section Review:

1. Why do people decorate their houses and other buildings with rows of lights during Diwali?
2. Which goddess is honored during this festival?
3. What do business people and shop owners strive to do during Diwali?
4. In what ways is Diwali a family festival?

Holi

Holi is a spring festival that lasts for five days. It takes place sometime in February and March, which is the month



of *Phalgun* in the Hindu calendar. Holi is also known as the Festival of Color, as it welcomes the changing colors of the season.

People have a good time during Holi. One reason is that they are allowed to throw colored powders and water over everyone in the streets. This custom goes back to stories about Krishna playing practical jokes on people when he was young. Up through the ages, even the upper classes have enjoyed such pranks. One old painting in particular shows a prince and his court throwing red powder at each other.

The name *Holi* comes from a princess named *Holika*. A story relates that many years ago Holika tried to kill her brother, *Prahlad*. She did so at the insistence of her father, *King Hiranyakashipu*. *Hiranyakashipu* wanted to be worshiped as a god, but one person stood in his way. That person was his son, *Prahlad*. *Prahlad* absolutely refused

Holi is sometimes called the *Festival of Color*. Celebrated in spring, it coincides with the wheat harvest. Part of the fun of Holi is the participants' throwing of red powder and colored waters on one another.

Words to remember:

Diwali
Kartik
Naraka



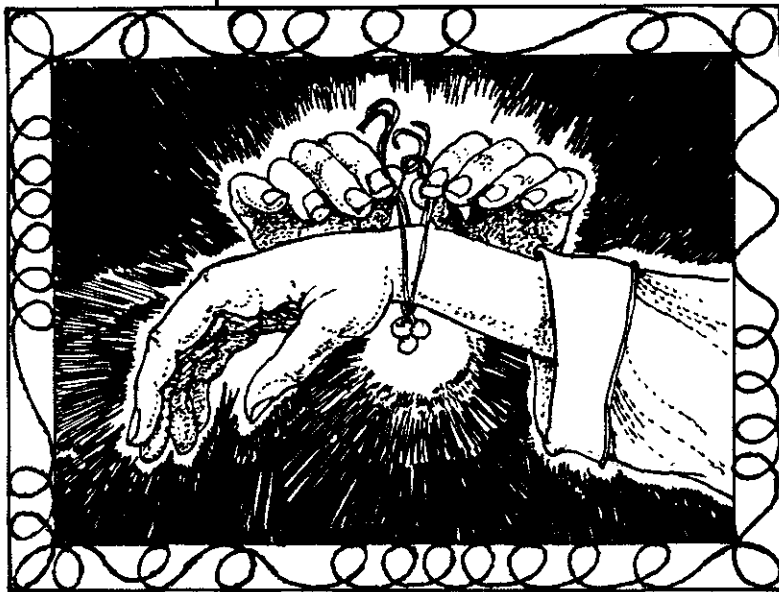
to recognize his father as a god. Instead, he worshiped Vishnu.

Furious, Hiranyakashipu ordered Holika to sit inside a bonfire and hold Prahlad on her lap. The king believed that Holika was indestructible and would not be harmed by the fire. But the king's scheme backfired. Instead of Prahlad being burned to death, it was Holika who perished. Legend says that he remained unharmed because he chanted prayers to Vishnu. The importance of the story is that it reminds Hindus to trust God (Brahman).

Words to remember:

Holi
Phalgun
Holika
Prahlad

King
Hiranyakashipu



During Raksha Bandhan, people tie silk thread with a bauble on the wrists of friends and relatives to protect them from danger and harm during the coming year.

Because Holi also celebrates the death of Holika, the highlight of the festivities is the bonfire, which is always lit at dusk. Walking around the bonfire is considered sacred. When the bonfire goes out, the ashes of the fire are smeared on people's foreheads. This is done to bring them good luck.

Section Review:

1. What is the origin of the name "Holi"?
2. Why is Holi also known as the Festival of Color?
3. What do people douse each other with during Holi?
4. What is the origin of the bonfire at Holi?

Other Festivals

Dasera, Diwali, and Holi are three festivals celebrated throughout the year. Still others are discussed below.

Raksha Bandhan

Raksha Bandhan is a festival that traces its origins back to *Indra*, the early Aryan Lord of the Sky. (Look back in Chapter One in the section entitled "Enter the Aryans.") A story relates that Indra was once attacked by an evil demon but that he was saved by his wife having tied a magic string around his wrist. *Raksha* means "protection," while *Bandhan* means "to tie." During Raksha Bandhan, people tie silk thread with a bauble on the wrists of friends and relatives. This act is to protect them from danger and harm.

Raksha Bandhan is held during the Hindu month of *Sravan*. This corresponds to July-August on the western calendar. Some families celebrate the festival as *Sisters' Day*. On this day, a girl ties a colored silk or cotton bracelet around her brother's wrist. This is to protect him and wish him well. At the same time, he gives her a present and vows to protect her. There is also a *Brothers' Day* observed after Diwali in the month of Kartik. At this time, girls rub a special powder on their brothers' foreheads to wish them good luck in the coming year.

Janmashtami

Janmashtami, or *Krishnajanmashtami*, is a festival that remembers the birthday of the god Krishna. It is celebrated in the month of *Sravan*. You may remember from Chapter Three that Krishna is one of the forms of the god Vishnu. You may also remember that his story is told in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is part of the long scripture called the *Mahabharata*.

For eight days and nights before



Krishna's birthday, the Bhagavad Gita is read non-stop. Since it takes only three hours to read the entire story, people take turns reading until midnight of the day the birthday is celebrated. The reading is timed to end exactly at that time.

Many Hindus spend all night in the mandir (temple) on this special day. They fast until midnight, but after that hour they eat special desserts prepared for the occasion. They also sing and dance, and the arti ceremony is performed. By placing their hands over the flames of the arti lamp and then rubbing their hands on their heads, Hindus believe they receive power from Krishna as well as his blessings.

The Chariot Festival

The Chariot Festival, or *Ratha Jatra*, is observed mostly in eastern India. It is a festival dedicated to *Jagannath*, the Lord of the Universe. It falls in the month of *Asadha*, which occurs sometime either in June or July by our calendar.

Hindus celebrate *Ratha Jatra* by pulling a monstrous chariot or cart containing a huge statue of *Jagannath* through the streets. The chariot might be as much as 50 feet high and contain 16 or 18 enormous

wheels. With cymbals and conch shells providing music, the chariot is pulled along by thousands of people. *Jagannath* is worshiped as one form of Vishnu, and it is not unusual for fanatic followers of the god to throw themselves beneath one of the massive wheels. Our English word *juggernaut* is derived from the name *Jagannath*.

There are still other Hindu festivals. *Ramnavani* honors the birthday of Rama, another form of Vishnu. *Mahasivratri* is dedicated to the god Siva, while *Pongal* is a popular harvest festival in some parts of India. You can read more about these festivals in books that deal with Hinduism and India.

Section Review:

1. What is the significance of the silk bracelet Hindus tie around the wrists of friends and relatives during *Raksha Bandhan*?
2. Which scripture or story is read non-stop for eight days and nights before the celebration of Krishna's birthday?
3. What do people pull through the streets during the festival honoring *Jagannath*, the Lord of the Universe?

Words to remember:

Raksha Bandhan
Shravan
Sisters' Day
Brothers' Day
Janmashtami
Rathajatra
Jagannath
Asadha
juggernaut

For Further Thought:

1. Which Hindu festival did you find the most interesting? Explain.
2. Pretend you are a tourist and that you have witnessed the Hindu festival of Holi. Write a letter to a friend back home describing the events.
3. Research and write a report on one of these Hindu festivals that was mentioned at the end of the chapter: *Ramnavani*, *Mahasivratri*, or *Pongal*.
4. You read that during the Chariot Festival, some devotees of Vishnu throw themselves beneath the enormous wheels of the chariot that is pulled through the streets. Can you think of a reason why they would do this?
5. If you were a small child, which Hindu festival would you look forward to the most? Why?
6. Think of ways in which Hindu festivals resemble those celebrated by other religions.
7. What does celebrating a *Sisters' Day* and a *Brothers' Day* seem to indicate about Hindu family life?