Hinduism, one of the most ancient religions practiced today, is characterized by its polytheistic nature and its ornate and beautiful festivals. One of these festivals is called Holi, more commonly known as the Festival of Color. Although the holiday is most famous for its tradition of fighting with colored powder, Holi is a very important time for Hindus because of its religious origin, its seasonal importance, and, of course, for its emphasis on happiness and merriment, making the holiday “Saturnalia-like” in nature. [[1]](#footnote-1)

Hinduism is also characterized by its wide array of religious tales and stories. One of these stories tells of Holika, for whom Holi is named after. Holika gets into a fire with her nephew, Prahlada, who is a devout worshiper of Lord Vishnu, a prevalent God in Hinduism. Even though Prahlada worships Vishnu, his father is a king named Hiranyakasipu, who is coincidentally the enemy of Lord Vishnu. Hiranyakasipu, who is enraged that his son is against him, has his sister Holika sit in a fire with Prahlada, assuring her that only Prahlada will be harmed. However, because of Lord Vishnu’s grace, Prahlada is saved and the demoness Holika is burned in the fire.[[2]](#footnote-2) This triumph of good over evil is celebrated through Holi. In northern India, participants of the festival build a ritualistic pyre, in which they throw coconuts and other items.[[3]](#footnote-3) This fire symbolizes the triumph of Vishnu over Holika and Hiranyakasipu, and in a larger sense, the triumph of good over evil. This theme of triumph is very central to Holi. For example, one prevalent tradition is to take the ashes of the ritualistic Holi pyre to one’s home, which will help one fight sickness and disease, another symbolic triumph of good over evil.[[4]](#footnote-4) Another important theme in this story is vindication. In this story, both Vishnu and Prahlad are “vindicated,” because their enemies who tried to attack them, Holika and Hiranyaksipu, had been defeated.[[5]](#footnote-5) This vindication is also a value celebrated in the festival. Many see Holi as an opportunity to start over. In other words, participants hope to be forgiven by the gods for anything they might have done wrong in the previous year. [[6]](#footnote-6)This theme of vindication and renewal is also seen in Holi festivals celebrated in Southern India. In Southern India, the festival of Holi is not celebrated as prevalently as in Northern India.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, many of those who do celebrate this holiday in Southern India base their participation on a different tale, the story of Kama, the God of desire. In the story, Kama sends an arrow down to Lord Siva, another very powerful Hindu God. Kama sends this arrow to distract Siva so that he is able to “father a son.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Siva, who finds out about this, is enraged and thus, strikes Kama with a bolt of lightning from his powerful third eye. Kama is destroyed, and Siva, in turn, eventually becomes the God of desire. In other words, Siva becomes Kama himself.[[9]](#footnote-9) Unlike the Holi that tends to be celebrated in Northern India, which focuses on the triumph of good over evil, the Holi of Southern India focuses on desire. Kama, which directly translates to “desire without knowledge,” is of the utmost importance in Hinduism.[[10]](#footnote-10) In fact, when the God of desire is destroyed, the need for desire is so strong that Siva, who originally destroyed Kama, becomes Kama himself. This desire without knowledge is essential in Hinduism because it is one of the “four traditional goals of life.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The other three goals are moksha, (“salvation”), artha, (“prosperity”), and dharma, (“religious duty”).[[12]](#footnote-12)Although kama is ranked the lowest on this list in terms of priority, it is still of great importance because none of the other three goals can possibly be accomplished without it. In other words, these goals are all interdependent on each other so much so that each goal can only be accomplished with the other three. The story of Kama also focuses on renewal. In the story, after the original Kama is killed, Siva himself becomes the new Kama, the new God of desire.[[13]](#footnote-13) This theme of renewal proves to central in the Hindu holiday, as it marks a new beginning of sorts.

While Holi has deep religious roots in Hindu society, it also places a great importance on agriculture and social structure.[[14]](#footnote-14) The festival takes place in the end of February and the beginning of March, depending on the lunar cycle. For example, many people in Northern India light the festival is celebrated days after the full moon, while others may light the pyre as “the fifth day of the waxing moon in the lunar month of February-March,” also called Vasanta.[[15]](#footnote-15) The festival, which is sometimes meant to celebrate the triumph of good over evil, also celebrates the theme of renewal discussed in the previous paragraph. In the case of Holi, the festival celebrates the coming of spring, or the renewal of the agricultural aspect of society.[[16]](#footnote-16) When the Hindu religion was first forming, agriculture played a huge part in the survival and well-being of Indian inhabitants. Although India, like much of the world, has become more and more urban since then, agriculture is still very important, especially for those in agricultural areas. In fact, while agriculture is a relatively down-played aspect of society in the United States, India places a great importance on agriculture. While the United States has a certain “anonymity of food production,” the “intersection of food and social tensions shape social hierarchy and food production” in India.[[17]](#footnote-17) In their society, Indians of higher social standing often trivialize agriculture, and associate those in this field as socially inferior. This classification is reinforced in India’s caste system. Usually, in India, society is divided into four to five castes, or social classes. One of these classes is called “Sudra,” which is either the fourth or fifth and final step of the social ladder, depending on which version of the caste system one is looking at.[[18]](#footnote-18) During Holi, however, all participants, whether they be wealthy or poor, farmers or CEOs, become the Sudra in an act of social inversion. This inversion has multiple explanations. One of these explanations is to mimic the role reversal of Siva in the story of Kama, mentioned in the previous paragraph.[[19]](#footnote-19) However, another, and perhaps more prevalent reason for this inversion is the recognition of the Sudra, despite their standing in the caste system. As much as Indian society connects agricultural work with inferiority, they do realize that this work of the “inferior” because “human survival relies on agricultural bounty.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Therefore, while Holi has a great religious importance, the holiday also serves as a time of, for the most part, fleeting social equality.

This equality is seen especially seen in the festivities of Holi, apart from the ritualistic pyre. In many countries, including the United States, Holi is famous for its fights of color. These fights of color are often referred to as the “play” aspect of the religious festival. This part of Holi is rooted in the worship of Lord Krishna, another prevalent God. More specifically, the fights are meant to mimic Krishna’s playing with *gopis,* as a child. *Gopis,* or wives of cowhearders, would often engage in playful activities with Lord Krishna and his friends when he was a child.[[21]](#footnote-21) In these fights, participants, who generally wear white clothing, throw colored powder and mud at each other. This fight of color is a time of social equality. Participants, from both ends of the Indian caste system, are allowed to participate in this fight.[[22]](#footnote-22) This is to say that those of the Sudra class are allowed to throw colors at those of higher social classes, and vise versa. Once everyone is covered in color, they all look very similar, and are seen as equals However, this equality is short-lived. As soon as participants bathe and are no longer covered with color, they return to their original social castes, as if the fleeting moment of social equality never existed. Even though this equality is temporary, it serves as a way to calm tensions regarding social standing and over-all health and well-being.[[23]](#footnote-23)

While Holi brings a short-lived sense of equality and happiness, insecurities of famine and death also skulk in the background. Holi, which is celebrated at the beginning of spring, is mainly a time in which participants anticipate the next agricultural season. In practice, the happiness and excitement of Holi is meant to bring good luck to crops and harvest. However, there is a considerable danger that an agricultural season may not be as successful as had hoped. Because India, like many other societies, is so dependent on agricultural for society, a relatively unsuccessful agricultural season can spell disaster for everyone, even those of higher social classes.[[24]](#footnote-24) Therefore, there is an almost invisible, but considerable pressure on the sudra to perform and to provide for the rest of the country. These worries go beyond survival, however. These anxieties also pertain to India’s social hierarchy.[[25]](#footnote-25) Therefore, many believe that the frivolity and excitement of the Holi is a way to temporarily break these tensions.

While Holi is often seen by the rest of the world as a time of festivity and frivolity, it actually goes much deeper. The festival has deep religious roots, as they are based on multiple religious tales. The festival also has a great impact on the social structure of India, and has the power that almost nothing else has: it brings people together. When one thinks of religion, one might think that it is something that differentiates one person from another, something that makes people different. What is often overlooked, however, is that religions have the power of bringing people together.

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16. (Jones, 2005, p. 4082) [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. (Sanford, 2011, p. 121) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. **"Shudra." *Encyclopedia Britanica*. Web.**  [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
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24. (Sanford, 2011, p. 121) [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. (Sanford, 2011, p. 121) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)