Holi, the festival of colors

Grade Level: Middle School

Curriculum Areas: Social Studies, World Cultures

Goals: The goal of this lesson is to expose students to some of the history, mythology and cultural practices of India by learning about one of India’s most widely celebrated festivals, Holi. On a larger level, this lesson allows students to understand some of India’s cultural practices (namely the celebration of festivals and holidays) as very similar to their own, while still appreciating the ways in which they may differ.

Objective:

(1) To introduce students to the festival of Holi, celebrated across India
(2) To root the festival in myth as well as contemporary practice
(3) To analyze the festival as a community event by comparing Holi to holidays in America (such as Halloween)

Lesson Description:

This course is event-based and meant to visually and textually introduce students to the colorful festival of Holi celebrated across various parts of India. Although rooted mainly in Hindu religious mythology, its enthusiastic adoption across various religious sects attests to its popularity as a community event.

Holi is celebrated from between two to five days beginning the full moon day of the month of Phalguna (February/ March) according to the Hindu calendar. The festival is a celebration of spring and heralds the beginning of a new crop season for farmers. India, historically having been an agricultural economy, celebrates many festivals in tandem with crop cycles. Holi has been historically celebrated by farming communities as a ritual that seeks to usher in a successful harvest. It is the community’s show of hope as well as a collective rejoicing in the spring.

Mythology:

Holi is often narrated as having various mythological beginnings. However, it is important for teachers to convey that most of these myths have a moral, meant to impart knowledge on ethics and the right ways of life. Two of the stories are reproduced here as guidelines.

Prahlad:

This story is about a young prince named Prahlad who was fiercely devoted to Vishnu, one of the three main deities of the Hindu pantheon. (The three main Gods of the Hindu pantheon are Brahma the Creator, Vishnu the Preserver and Shiva the Destroyer. Together they symbolize the circle of life. Most practicing Hindus, although recognizing all Gods, identify themselves as either Vaishnavites or Saivities, i.e Vishnu or Shiva worshippers.) His father, Hiranyakashipu, was a demon king and demanded that everyone in his kingdom worship him instead of Vishnu. Prahlad was however, so devoted, that he
stubbornly continued to worship Vishnu. His father then made repeated attempts to kill Prahlad. Finally he had his sister, Holika, who due to a boon, was immune to fire, hold Prahlad on a burning pyre. The story goes that Vishnu then saved Prahlad, who emerged unscathed while Holika was burnt in the fire. The bonfire that is lit on the night before the main day of the festival, signifies this victory of good over evil.

**Radha and Krishna:**

Holi is also said to originate in Krishna’s boyhood. Krishna is an incarnation of Vishnu and is often considered one of the most human of gods. Krishna is known for playing pranks on the young women of his village, the gopis.

The story goes that Krishna is playing with his favorite gopi, Radha and notices that her skin is fair while his is dark. He sulks to his mother and she tells him to throw color on Radha’s face so that the difference can be erased. Hence during the morning of the main festivities, people play with color and water, hoping to erase difference of color, creed and religion, in the hope that this is what will make it a truly equal society.
Description of the festivities:

**Holika bonfire**

This fire is a symbol of rejuvenation and a new start. The whole community helps to build the bonfire, bringing various old things that they no longer need or want. Neighborhood kids also collect wood in the days leading up to the bonfire. Around midnight, everyone gathers around a designated bonfire site to set it ablaze. People sing, chant prayers, cheer and yell. The community also often shares sweets and small treats.

**Rangpanchami**

The final day of Holi is characterized by a loosening of social norms and codes, where the whole community comes together to celebrate the festival of colors. People fill the streets and squirt one another with colored water, water balloons and paint each other’s faces. Everybody looks like one another, symbolizing the erasure of difference. The bright colors also signify the beginning of spring. They are often made from naturally occurring vegetable dyes.

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Readings for students:

- Holi (Rookie Read-about Holidays)

**Other audio-visual material**
Films
(1) Holi song from “Sholay”
(2) The India File – Episode Five: Celebrations

Pictures
(1) Calendar art of gods and goddesses
(2) Greeting cards on Holi

Suggested images
(1) http://www.podmasti.com/uploaded_images/holi-725712.jpg
(2) http://environment.delhigovt.nic.in/image/holi.jp
(3) http://www.indianfestivals.info/img/holiimage1.jpg

Viewing Guide

(1) For Sholay, use the menu to navigate to the song titled “Holi ke din”. The first two minutes of the song should suffice to give an idea of how Holi is celebrated among communities. The song in this instance is set in a village and although dramatized is fairly useful in establishing the sense of gaiety around the festival.

(2) India File (Episode Five) is only fifteen minutes in length and describes how families of two different class backgrounds, but living in the same neighborhood celebrate Holi. The last few minutes of the video are an animated story and are not useful for this exercise.

Additional readings for teachers:

Vasantotsava : the spring festivals of India : texts and traditions
Anderson, Leona M. (Leona May),
New Delhi : D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd., 1993

India, fairs & festivals
Oki, Morihiro,
Tokyo, Japan : Gakken Co. ; New York : Distributors, Kodansha International/USA, 1989.

Festivals of India.

Suggested lesson-plan for five sessions

Session 1:
(1) Discussion on the festivals students celebrate.
Possible Discussion: Questions for students --
- What holidays or festivals do you celebrate?
- How do you celebrate?
- What time of year are these festivals?
- Do you know anything about their origins?
- What beliefs are associated with these holidays/festivals?
- What kinds of things do all of these festivals/holidays have in common

(2) Introduction to Holi
- Pictures from reading material
- Audio-visual clip from the India file

(3) Festival description
- Time of year
- Rituals
- Origins

Session 2:
1. Tell students about the Mythology of Holi
2. The morals and meanings of rituals
3. Activity (refer below)

Session 3:
1. Compare and contrast American festivals with Holi
2. List along with the students the historical as well as functional significance of festivals (harvest, crop cycles, community building)
3. Take reactions from students on what they think about Holi
4. Talk about the ecological significance of renewal and the material used during the festivities

Session 4:
1. Activity

Session 5:
1. Wrap-up and learnings
2. Activity

Possible Activities:
1. Holiday/Festival Comparison Activity using the worksheet provided. Choose two holidays/festivals from the list below and compare with Holi
2. Students form groups and suggest how Holi could be modified to be celebrated in the US. Groups present suggestions.
3. Students draw representations of the spirit of Holi. These could be water color drawings, collages or posters.
(4) Students analyze Indian calendar art to discuss representation of Gods and Goddesses and reconstruct the story of Holi from memory. The lending library at the South Asia Institute has some posters that may be borrowed, you may also find images or posters of the gods and goddess discussed in this lesson plan on the internet to share with your students.

(5) Students discuss the greeting cards and make their own using the imagery from these cards to tell their families about the spirit of Holi. The internet is a great place to find greeting cards for Holi and other religious festivals.

Caveats/ Things to be careful about

(1) Holi can also be a boisterous festival in many parts of India and this should also be communicated to ensure that students understand the dangers of replicating certain practices.

(2) Avoid overt religious specificity.

(3) Holi is often accompanied by the use of abusive language in public space. While this is considered to be in the spirit of a cleanse or purge, teachers can take a call on whether to mention this aspect of the festival.
Holiday/Festival Comparison Worksheet

Student Name(s):

Instructions: Choose two holidays or festivals from the list below (or choose another one that is not listed) and compare with Holi.

Christmas
Halloween
Hanukah
Ramadan
Eid
Easter
Passover
Kwanza
Thanksgiving

| Choice Holiday: | Holi: |