

How do festivals, like Diwali, shape Hindu faith?

Lauren: Hey and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm your host Lauren Layfield. I'm a TV and Radio presenter, and this is the series where we explore the key beliefs and practices for your GCSE on Hinduism.

This episode is all about why festivals matter in Hinduism. But I can't do it alone so I'm really happy to be joined once again by Vallisa Chauhan who is guiding us through this series.

Vallisa: Thanks Lauren and hi everyone. I'm a radio presenter and I'm also a practising Hindu. Festivals have always been a part of my upbringing. They are moments my whole family look forward to throughout the year. And more recently, I've been DJing at some Hindu festivals which has been really fun! So, I'm excited to bring some of the beliefs to life for you.

Lauren: Can't wait for it. Well before we dive into the details, grab a pen, some paper, or your notes app, because throughout the episode, we'll highlight key ideas you might want to jot down.

Vallisa: And keep on listening until the end, because there will be a quick quiz too!

Lauren: And remember you can listen to all episodes in this series over on the BBC Sounds app. Just search 'Bitesize GCSE Hinduism'. Right, shall we get into it?

Vallisa: Let's do it!

Lauren: Vallisa, I would love to hear about how you celebrate your faith. Can you tell me about some of the festivals and holy days?

Vallisa: I'd love to. Hindu festivals are a significant part of our spiritual and cultural life. There are lots of religious celebrations, and they're all important. But I'll highlight three in particular; Diwali, Holi, and Navaratri.

Lauren: Ok let's start with Diwali.

Vallisa: Yes, Diwali usually takes place in October or November. Diwali is often called the festival of lights. The name comes from 'Deepavali' meaning 'a row of light', represented by the rows of small clay lamps, called diyas. They are lit during the festival.

Lauren: And what's the reason behind the lights during Diwali?

Vallisa: Well, the stories vary across different parts of India, but many share a common theme of good over evil. One well-known origin story, often celebrated in Northern India, comes from the Ramayana, an ancient Indian epic poem. It tells the journey of Prince Rama and his wife Sita.

After being sent into exile, Sita is kidnapped by the demon king Ravana. Rama goes on a journey to rescue her, and with the help of others, he eventually defeats Ravana. When Rama and Sita return, people light rows of lamps to guide them home.

Lauren: I love that story. And what's the significance of Diwali for Hindus?

Vallisa: Well, this story, like all the stories Hindus may remember during Diwali, represents the triumph of light over darkness - good overcoming evil. During the festival, when we light lamps (or diyas) we are reminded of Rama and Sita's safe return.

Lauren: Could you tell me more ways that Hindus celebrate Diwali?

Vallisa: Yes of course. Diwali is usually celebrated with activities across five days. Let me run you through each day. Day one - Many Hindus begin by cleaning their homes and preparing for the festival. As a symbol of good fortune, some Hindus may buy gold items, like jewellery, or new household goods, like kitchen utensils.

Day two - People may decorate their homes with diyas. They might also use colourful powder or sand to make designs on the floor. These are called 'rangoli' and I love how, as the years have passed, traditions have adapted to modern life. Now you can even buy pre-made rangoli patterns, making it easier to decorate our homes and still share the same joy through colour and light.

Day three - For many, the main day of the festival. Families gather for Lakshmi puja, a prayer to the deity Lakshmi. Deities are divine entities Hindus may worship. They may pray to Lakshmi in hopes of prosperity as Lakshmi represents wealth and good fortune. On this day, we might have a big meal together and sometimes there are fireworks.

Day four - In some Hindu cultures this is the first day of the New Year. That includes Gujaratis, like my family! We'll spend time with family and friends, sharing gifts and well wishes. My mum has always said that we should wear new clothes on this day and I won't lie, I'm totally here for that! I'm also really lucky to still have so many elders in my family, so we spend the day visiting them, surrounded by laughter, warmth, and, of course, lots of delicious food.

Day five - This can be a day dedicated to family bonds. In particular, some Hindu brothers might visit their married sisters. This day is all about love and food. My brother always teases me about not being able to cook, so I like to turn that into a challenge by putting together a full feast just to prove him wrong.

Lauren: And so, you should! That sounds like a really special time, Vallisa, so thank you so much for sharing that with us. And there's more information on Diwali on the Bitesize website. All you need to do is search Bitesize GCSE Hinduism.

Lauren: So, as we move through the year, what other festivals are important for Hindus?

Vallisa: Let's fast forward to spring and talk about Holi, the festival of colours!

Lauren: Which I have actually been to in India, and it was absolutely amazing. Can you tell everybody a bit more about it?

Vallisa: Yes, of course I can! During Holi, many Hindus celebrate by gathering with friends and family and throwing coloured powder at each other. It's a really joyful festival that marks the arrival of spring and also celebrates themes like good overcoming evil. And yes, it's definitely a good idea to wear old clothes!

Lauren: Oh gosh yeah, I was covered in powder basically. It's really messy.

Vallisa: It is really messy, but the coloured powder is called 'gulal' and the different colours are often associated with special meanings. For example, the red symbolises love, blue represents Krishna - the Hindu deity, and green means new beginnings.

Lauren: And is there a particular story, like with Diwali, behind Holi traditions?

Vallisa: Yes, there is! As with many Hindu festivals, there are different origin stories, all with the common theme of good triumphing over evil. One is the story of Hiranyakashipu, a powerful demon king, and his son Prahlad.

Prahlad remained devoted to the deity Vishnu, despite his father's attempts to stop him. Hiranyakashipu's sister, Holika, tried to harm Prahlad by sitting with him in a fire, but she was burned while Prahlad survived. This story is remembered during Holi as a symbol of light overcoming darkness.

(Sounds of Holi celebrations)

Lauren: Vallisa, are there any other traditions during Holi festival?

Vallisa: Yes, there is. The Holi festival typically lasts for two days. There are often bonfires on the first night of Holi, which we call the 'Holika Dahan'. This involves burning an effigy - that's a sculpture that will be burnt of Holika. This is to symbolise the story of her defeat when she was burnt in a fire.

Families gather to tell stories and offer prayers. And then the colour throwing starts, known as 'Rangwali Holi' and it begins on the second day. The Holi festivities can last longer than two days though, and in some parts of India, like the Braj region in Northern India, festivities can last up to 16 days!

Lauren: Wow that's a really long time, and what do you love about Holi Vallisa?

Vallisa: Well, what stands out to me most is the atmosphere. No matter how cold it is outside, people continue celebrating, dancing, and playing right until the very end of the event. There's something really special about this festival and how it brings people together. It's not just meaningful for Hindus, but it's also wonderful to see people from all backgrounds joining in and enjoying the celebration, just like you did when you went to India!

Lauren: It was honestly one of the favourite days of my entire life. I absolutely loved it.

Lauren: So Vallisa, we've heard about Diwali and Holi. What was the third festival you wanted to tell us about?

Vallisa: Yes, Navaratri! It's a nine-day festival that usually takes place in the autumn. It's dedicated to Durga, a deity often understood as a powerful protector and a symbol of divine feminine energy. Although followers of different Hindu branches, like Shaivism and Vaishnavism, celebrate Navaratri, this festival is particularly important for followers of the branch of Hinduism called Shaktism.

Lauren: Ok so what's Shaktism?

Vallisa: Well, those who follow Shaktism focus their worship on the deity Shakti who many Hindus believe has different forms, one of which is Durga.

Lauren: You said the Navaratri celebration lasts nine days. Is that significant?

Vallisa: Yes, the deity Durga has nine different forms or manifestations. So, in some parts of the world, one of the nine forms of Durga is worshipped on each night of the

festival. In others, it's common to focus on three forms, spending three days worshipping each form.

Lauren: Can you tell me more about the different forms of Durga?

Vallisa: Well, each form represents a different quality, such as strength, compassion, or wisdom. In Hindu stories, Durga takes on these forms to defeat evil forces and restore balance, showing the victory of good over evil. Many Hindus today worship Durga as the supreme divine mother who destroys negativity on Earth just as the other deities can help Hindus overcome their life's problems.

Lauren: Vallisa, it sounds like all of these festivals are really important for bringing the community together and for reinforcing religious identities.

Vallisa: That's right. In the Mahabharata, which is an important ancient Indian text, we're reminded that festivals are beacons of culture and tradition. Festivals like Diwali, Holi, and Navaratri bring together not just families, but the wider community. Hindus have been taking part in these celebrations for centuries. For me, they're more than just a celebration.

These occasions give us a chance to reconnect and express our faith as a family. While Hindu communities are diverse, these occasions often bring people together and create a strong sense of connection, identity, and harmony. It's always a really special time.

Lauren: And if you'd like more details on any of the festivals we've discussed, make sure you head to the Bitesize website and search for Bitesize GCSE Hinduism.

Vallisa: Right Lauren, I think it's time to put your knowledge to the test. Are you ready for a quick quiz?

Lauren: I am, let's do it. Grab a pen and paper or just your notes app and note your answers down!

Vallisa: First up. Do you remember how many days Diwali lasts for?

Lauren: Yes. Diwali, or the 'festival of lights', lasts for five days.

Vallisa: That's correct! Each of the five days has particular traditions and rituals. Next question. Which festival takes to the streets as people throw coloured powder?

Lauren: That is Holi and it's the festival of colours!

Vallisa: That's the one - well done! And finally, what is the name of the deity worshiped during Navaratri?

Lauren: I think that's Durga and she has nine forms.

Vallisa: Perfect answer!

Lauren: Thanks very much for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Vallisa: Next episode, we'll be looking at the role of sacred texts in Hinduism.

Lauren: And remember, there are more podcast series on other faiths that you might be studying at GCSE. Just search for Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies on BBC Sounds. And we will see you next time!

Vallisa: Bye!