



An Indian widow dances during celebrations for Holi or "festival of colors" in Vrindavan.



A Hindu priest throws colored powder on to devotees inside Banke Bihari temple during Holi festival celebrations in Vrindavan.

India's shunned widows spray color to celebrate Holi



Indian widows celebrate Holi or the "festival of colors" in Vrindavan.



Indian students celebrate the Holi festival with colored powder at Guru Nanak Dev University in Amritsar.

Widows in India's northern town of Vrindavan smashed social taboos by spraying each other with brilliant powdered colors to celebrate Holi, a Hindu festival that ushers in spring. Tradition bars Indian widows from celebrations as their presence is considered ominous. Although fast dying out, the custom still persists in some places. Such women are ostracized and, irrespective of age, obliged to wear drab clothes, often white to signify mourning, and avoid jewelry or adornment. But a hermitage in India's most populous state of Uttar Pradesh is working to change public attitudes toward widows during Holi, which falls on Monday this year. Widows smeared each other with color, danced and sang during Thursday's celebration at the hermitage run by a non-profit group, Sulabh International.

"I have not played Holi like this in the last 30 years," said one participant, Gaurbani Sheel. "This has changed my mood, despite being a widow." Holi, one of the most popular festivals in the Hindu calendar, can last nearly 10 days in some parts of the state, although it is more often limited to a day elsewhere. Besides throwing color, people eat quantities of a traditional sweet dumpling called 'gujiya'. In the nearby ancient holy city of Varanasi, devotees and "sadhus", or holy men, daubed each other with ashes from funeral pyres at the Manikarnika Ghat, where Hindus cremate their dead on the Ganges river. Devotees sounded pellet drums and danced amid the pyres during

the customary sprinkling with ashes, days before the main festival that is meant to appease a principal Hindu deity, Lord Shiva, widely seen as the god of creation and destruction. "It is the ancient traditional belief of Varanasi that Lord Shiva comes to the crematorium to celebrate Holi with his devotees and ghosts," said worshipper Gulshan Kapoor. — Reuters



A Hindu priest, left, leaves after pouring colored water onto devotees inside Banke Bihari temple during Holi festival celebrations in Vrindavan.



Indian students take a selfie as they celebrate the Holi festival. — AP/AFP photos