



## Newsletter Archives

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Diwali  
the Festival that Binds India Together

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Diwali, also referred to as Deepavali or Dipavali, is probably the biggest festival ever in Hinduism and is even celebrated by other religions such as Jainism and Sikhism. An official holiday in India, the Diwali symbolizes the victory of good over evil.

According to the Hindu almanac, Diwali is a five-day festival, which commences on the new moon day, which ends in the month of Ashwin, or the beginning of the Kartika month. This means that it begins on the 13th day of the dark half of Ashwin and ends on the 2nd day of the bright half of Kartika. The main day of Diwali differs as per the region the person comes from.

### Symbolism of Diwali



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**OIL LAMP OR DIYA**

During Diwali, cotton wicks are placed in diyas (or little lamps), filled with oil and lighted. This signifies the individual seeker trying to triumph over the evil forces residing within himself, by lighting the lamp of true knowledge inside his spiritual being.

In India and also among many parts of Nepal, Diwali is celebrated as the homecoming of Lord Rama after his 14-year Vanvaas (exile in the forest) and triumph over Ravana, the demon King of Lanka. According to legend, the residents of Ayodhya (Rama's birthplace) welcomed Rama home by lighting rows (avail) of lamps (dipa). Hence the name, "Dipavali". Over a period of time, the word, "Dipavali", changed to become "Diwali". But the name remains unchanged in South and East India and Nepal.

In Jainism, Diwali is celebrated as the day when Mahavira attained nirvana or salvation. This was originally on 15th October, 527 BC.

Diwali has remained a very important festival in Sikhism too. The entire town of Amritsar had been illuminated to commemorate the return of Guru Har Gobind Ji, the sixth Guru of Sikhism. The Guru had been imprisoned with 52 Hindu kings at the Gwalior Fort by Jahangir. After attaining freedom, Guru Gobind visited Darbar Sahib or the Golden Temple, in the city of Amritsar. The overwhelmed residents joyfully welcomed him by lighting diyas and candles to greet the Guru visiting their city. This is why the Sikhs also refer to Diwali as Bandi Chhorh Divas, or "the day of the release of the detainees".

Diwali, being the Festival of Lights, Hindus all over India celebrate it by lighting colourful diyas of all shapes, sizes and colors and also hang kandils (colourful paper lanterns) and torans (decorative items hung outside the main door), so as to welcome Goddess Lakshmi, the Hindu Goddess of Peace, Prosperity and Plentitude.

## **Spiritual significance of Diwali**

Not for nothing is Diwali referred to as the "Festival of Lights". In the spiritual sense, this festival urges the seeker to become aware of and develop the inner light. The whole idea behind lighting the diyas is to find that inner effulgence which lies inside every living being.

India is a very spiritual land. Almost every aspect of everyday life is given a spiritual or religious perspective here. According to Hindu philosophy, there is something that goes much beyond the gross or physical body and that is the spiritual body or the Atman. Diwali, here, celebrates the illumination of that inner light, which ousts all obstacles, dispels all ignorance and outshines all darkness within the individual's soul. It makes the seeker realize that one's real nature is not one's impermanent body, but is that iridescent, transcendent, infinite power of The One residing within the temple of one's body. Diwali actually celebrates the existence of that Ananda (joyful), Ananta (infinite) entity within oneself.

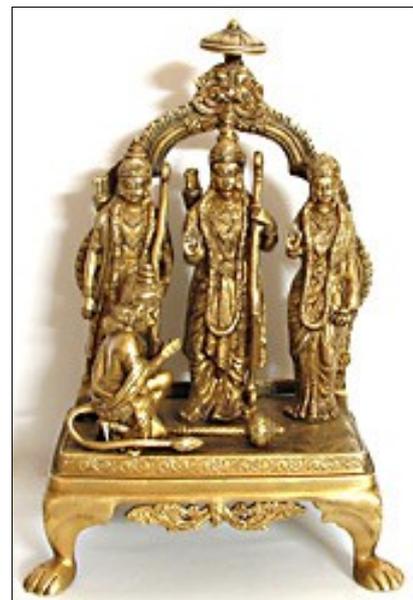
People celebrate Diwali through lighting diyas, fireworks, flowers, sharing sweets and offering Puja (prayers). While the rituals differ from region to region, the main aim of the festival is the same – to rejoice the luminous Atman or the Brahman within.

## **Legends associated with Diwali**

There are many legends and stories associated with the festival of Diwali. They are as diverse as the land itself. Here are some of the stories related to the Festival of Lights.

### **Rama's return to Ayodhya**

In North India, people celebrate Diwali as the day Rama, along with his wife, Sita, and brother, Lakshmana, returned to Ayodhya, after his 14-year old Vanvaas and having defeated the terrible ten-headed demon, Ravana. The residents of Ayodhya, it is believed, lit ghee lamps to light their path as they walked along. Rama had to travel back to North India, all the way from Lanka. On the way, he crossed South India. Since he reached the South earlier, the festival is celebrated one day earlier in South India. Diwali, here, comes about 20 days after Dusshera.

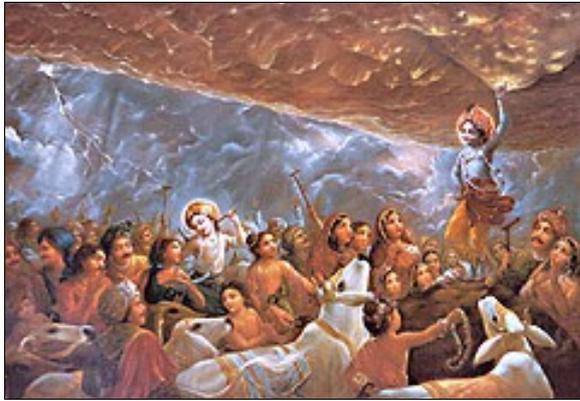


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**RAMA, LAKSHMANA, SITA AND  
HANUMAN**

## Narakasura's killing

The day before Diwali is called the Narak Chaturdashi. This is the day Narakasura was killed by Satyabhama, Krishna's consort. Narakasura was an evil demon who created pandemonium in all the three worlds. This incident took place in the Dwapara Yuga. The Maha Bhagavatam has a different version. According to it, the demon was actually slain by Krishna himself, who provokes Satyabhama to kill him.



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### KRISHNA LIFTS MOUNT GOVARDHAN

immensely angered Indra, who caused heavy rains, thunder, lightning and flooding to ruin the village. Krishna lifted Mt. Govardhan with the little finger of his left hand and held it up for all the people and cattle to huddle under it. Indra ultimately accepted defeat and understood the true power of Krishna.

The day after Diwali is the day Krishna defeated Indra, the God of the Devas. This day is celebrated as the Govardhan Puja.

According to the tale, Krishna saw his foster father, Nanda, prepare for an annual offering to Indra. Krishna questions his father about it and rebelled against what they called their "dharma" (act of righteousness). Krishna also averred that they being farmers, should concentrate on farming and their cattle and nothing more.

Convinced by Krishna's words, the villagers did not go ahead with the Puja. This

## Krishna leaving his human body

It is believed that Diwali also commemorates the day when Krishna left his human body, that is, the day the Krishna Avatar ended. In the Ramayana, there is a story wherein Angad, the son of Bali (who Rama had slain), had wished to avenge his father's death by slaying his killer. When he related that desire to Rama, the Lord smiled and promised him that his desire for revenge would be fulfilled in his next life. Angad had been unaware then, that Rama was the killer of his father. In his next life, Angad was born as the hunter, who became the cause of Lord Sri Krishna's "death".

Krishna was one day relaxing under a tree with his feet crossed. A hunter, from afar, saw his feet moving and thought that it was a deer. He immediately took aim and released an arrow at him. When he realized it was Lord Krishna, the hunter was dismayed and broke down, repenting his act. Krishna merely smiled and forgave him, saying that it was all predestined by Vidhi (fate).

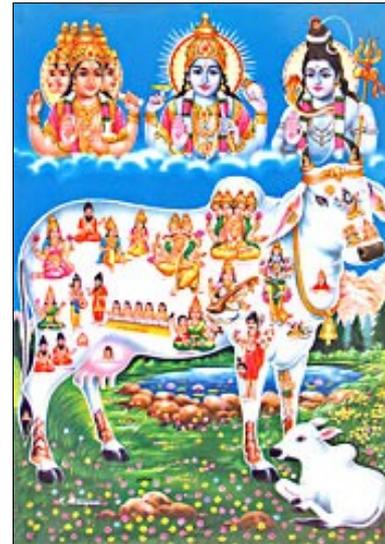
In actuality, Krishna's tenure in earth was over. He had fulfilled his avatar's mission of giving the world the Bhagavad Gita. He hence he shed his human form and ascended heavenward.

## The five days of Diwali

Diwali, being the most major Hindu festival, is celebrated over a period of five days. Incidentally, this system is followed among Hindus all over the world! All of the days, with the exception of Diwali, are named as per their designation in the Hindu almanac. Here are the details about each of the five days of the Diwali festival:

## 1. Vasu Baras:

"Vasu" means cow and "Baras" implies the 12th day. On this day of Vasu Baras, both the cow and calf are worshipped. The "Go Mata" (literally, the "Cow Mother") is a sacred animal in Hindu tradition. It has been likened to the Kamadhenu (the divine Cow who grants all wishes). Cow worship is considered very auspicious in this country.



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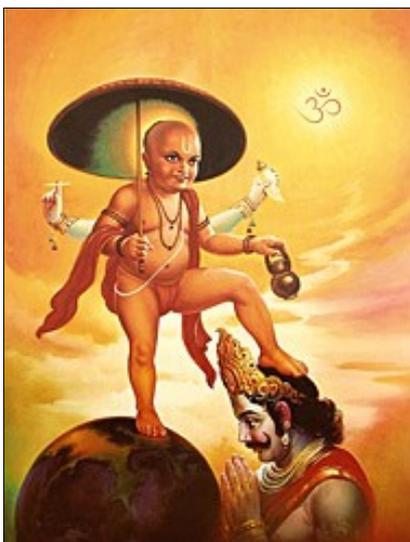
**KAMADHENU**

## 2. Dhanteras or Dhanatrayodashi:

"Dhan" means wealth and "Trayodashi" is the 13th day. As the name implies, this day falls on the 13th day of the latter half of the lunar month. This day is considered auspicious for shopping for new utensils, silver and gold. Incidentally, this is also the day when Lord Dhanvantari emerged from the churning of the mighty Ocean (Samudra Manthan). Hence, this day is also regarded as the Dhanvantari Jayanti.

## 3. Naraka Chaturdashi or Choti Diwali:

Chaturdashi is the 14th day. This is the day the demon Narakasura was killed by Lord Krishna. This day signifies the ultimate victory of good over evil. In Gujarat, this day is the Kali Chaudas and in Rajasthan, it is the Roop Chaudas (Chaudas also means 4+10, which is 14).



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**KING BALI HUMBLING BY THE  
VAMANA AVATAR**

This day is also referred to as Choti Diwali and is celebrated with as much fervour as the actual Diwali itself. According to legend, King Bali - the demon king, not to be confused with the monkey king Bali - had become such a popular and mighty king that he became a threat to the Devas. Lord Vishnu took the Vamana avatar and asked the king to give him only that much land that he could cover with three steps. King Bali was surprised by this very simple request and immediately agreed to give him that land. Suddenly, Vamana took the Vishwarupa (gigantic form). He covered the entire heavens with his first step, spanned the whole of the earth with the second one and asked the king where he could keep the third step. Bali realized who this Brahmin actually was and immediately bowed before the Lord, offering his own shiras (head). Putting his foot on Bali's head, Vamana pushed him down underground. But before that, Vamana promised Bali that he could return to the earth once every year and be among his

favourite people yet again.

This day also marks the start of Diwali for the South Indian community. They wake up as early as two or three in the morning on this day, apply fragrant oil on their hair and body and have an elaborate Ganga Snanam (it is believed that taking a bath before dawn gives the effect of taking a dip in the Holy Ganges). They then draw rangolis or kolams (geometric designs) just outside their homes, wear new clothes, light earthen lamps all around the house and then perform a special puja and offer naivedyam (offering food to the deity).

After the Puja is done, the children go outside and burst firecrackers, symbolizing the fall of the mighty demon, Naraka. Then there are the elaborate breakfast and lunch sessions that everyone merrily participates in.

#### **4. Lakshmi Puja:**

The actual day of the Diwali is also 30 Ashwin or 15 Krishna Paksha Ashwin, which is the last day of the year according to the Hindu calendar. The most important ritual on this Diwali day is that of the Lakshmi Puja, which is especially elaborately done in North India. Hindus worship Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Ganesh, the God of all Auspicious beginnings. The whole house and even the threshold is lit with earthen lamps, in order to welcome wellbeing and prosperity into the house.



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**LAKSHMI**

#### **5. Govardhan Puja:**

This day, also called Annakut, marks the day when Krishna defeated Indra . Through this story, Krishna teaches us about the importance of Karma Yoga or that "Work is Worship" and that it comes above all else.

In order to show Annakut, a mountain of food is decorated, which symbolizes Krishna lifting the Govardhan mountain. In Maharashtra, this is also celebrated as Bali-Pratipada (commemorating King Bali) or Padva.

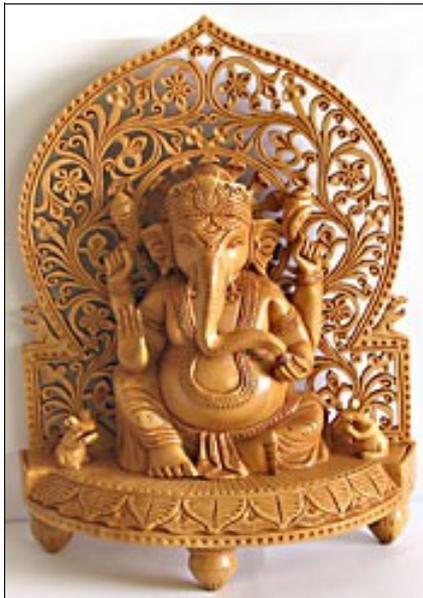
#### **6. Bhaiduj:**

Bhaiduj, also called Bhaubeej or Bhayyaduj, is the day when brothers and sisters meet and express their love and affection for each other. In Gujarat, this day is called Bhai Bij and in Bengal, it is Bhai Phota. During Bhaiduj, married brothers and sisters meet and spend the day with each other, reliving the olden. This particular festival is very ancient and is dated even before "Raksha Bandhan", a similar brother-sister festival, was recorded.

## Puja Vidhi during Diwali

There are elaborate pujas or rituals to be performed during Diwali time. Puja Vidhis give step-by-step instructions on how to perform these complicated and elaborate pujas. Many people also prefer to call over their family priests to conduct these pujas.

### Ganesha Puja



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**GANESHA**

Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed Lord, is believed to be the remover of all obstacles. That is why Ganesha is the first deity to be propitiated before commencing the Diwali Puja. On the eve of Diwali, Lord Ganesha's idol is placed just next to that of Goddess Lakshmi, on the right hand side of the same platform. Offerings are then made to both the idols. These include haldi (turmeric), kumkum (vermilion), perfume, chandan (sandal paste), gulal (coloured powder) and garlands of cotton beads.

The flowers offered to Ganesha include marigold and Bel leaves or the wood apple tree. Dhoop or incense sticks are also lighted and placed in front of the idols, along with coconuts, fruits, sweets and tambul. After having done all these, the deities are offered Aarti, with the appropriate aarti songs sung for each deity.

The common belief is that if Ganesha is pleased with the devotee, he would protect him always and grant the seeker health, wealth, peace and prosperity.

### Lakshmi Puja

The Lakshmi Puja is performed on the third day of Diwali, that is, on Diwali day itself. This puja is performed to commemorate the utter splendour of Goddess Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity. Performing Lakshmi Puja on Diwali Day, it is believed, is the best and easiest way to appease her. This day falls on amavasya and is devoted completely to the deity. The Lakshmi puja is also referred to as "Chopada-Puja" – the sun enters its second course and passes by Libra on this day. Libra represents balance and this has been considered by the business community as the sign to balance their accounts.

The Lakshmi Puja day is also associated with gambling, especially in North India. People all over this region get together for parties and gamble nightlong. It is believed that Parvati played the game of dice along with her consort, Shiva, and said that those who played dice on this day would be blessed by Lakshmi, with prosperity and plenty for the entire year ahead.

## Puja vidhi for the Lakshmi Puja

First, you have to prepare a platform, cover it with a new cloth, place a handful of grains in the centre and place the Kalash (pitcher) right in the middle of this. The kalash can be made of silver, gold or copper. The kalash needs to be filled with water. You then place betel nuts, flowers, some rice grains and a coin in it. The kalash should be covered with a small plate filled with rice.

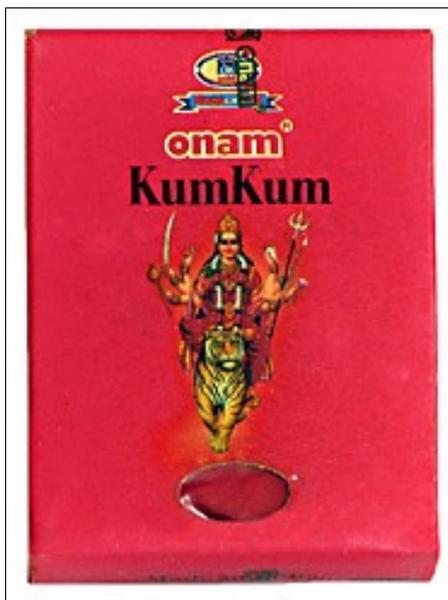


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**KALASH**

Draw a lotus flower over the rice with haldi and place the Lakshmi idol on that flower, along with some coins. Also place the Ganesha idol on her right. Then start the puja by offering haldi, kumkum and flowers to the deities. Offer all these things to the water to be used for the Lakshmi puja too. This is done to invoke the river goddess to make her part of the water.

Chant some mantras on Lakshmi. If you do not know any, simply take some of the holy water in your hand and think of the Goddess, while offering her flowers. Next, place the idol in a plate and perform the abhishek. Bathe the idol with water, panchamritam and then, with water containing a gold or pearl ornament. Wipe the idol clean and place it back on the kalash.



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**KUMUM POWDER**

Offer chandan, perfume, gulal, kumkum and the cotton bead garlands to the deities. Also place the coconuts, fruits, incense sticks and sweets in front of them. Then pour puffer rice, batasha, coriander and cumin seeds in front of the idols.

Perform the aarti to both the deities, while ringing a bell with your left hand. Sing bhajans to the deities and ask your entire family and even friends assembled there to sing along with you.

## The significance of Lakshmi Puja on Diwali

Diwali largely marks the end of the harvesting season in both India and Nepal. Farmers are grateful to have had good crop the previous year and they also offer prayers for a good harvest in the coming year too. In many cultures, this is also the time when businessmen close their accounts and start new ones.

Sri Maha Lakshmi is the deity of prosperity and that is why she is propitiated during Diwali. Both farmers and businessmen pray to her to bless them with wealth and prosperity in the year to come.

There are two legends associated with Lakshmi Puja on Diwali day. They are as follows:

According to the first legend, Lakshmi came up from the Kshira Sagara or the mighty Ocean of Milk during the Samudra Manthan episode.



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**LAKSHMI APPEARS DURING  
SAMUDRA MANTHAN**

As per the second legend, which is more popular in Western India, the Lakshmi Puja is interpreted in a different way. This story is regarding Vishnu's fifth avatar, the Vamana Avatar, where he manifested in order to tame the King Bali. After fulfilling his mission, Sri Maha Vishnu returned back to his abode, Vaikuntha, and back to his wife, Sri Mahalakshmi, on this very day. They say that those who propitiate Lakshmi on this day get benefitted by her benevolent mood and so, are blessed even more with health, wealth and happiness.

In spirituality, there are references of Lakshmi-panchayatana (or a group of five) entering the Universe on this day. This group of five deities include Sri Vishnu, Sri Indra, Sri Kubera, Sri Gajendra and Sri Lakshmi. Of these five elements, Vishnu represents satisfaction and joy; Indra, opulence; Kubera stands for wealth; Gajendra for the one who carries the wealth and Lakshmi, who is the Shakti or divine energy, who provides the verve required for all these activities.

## Kali Puja



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**KALI**

Kali Puja is an integral part of Diwali celebrations, especially in West Bengal. The powerful, dark Goddess is an aspect of Devi Durga, the divine consort of Shiva. She is shown wearing a garland of skulls, holding a severed head in one hand, standing on Shiva's chest, her tongue hanging out. On the other hand, this apparently violent Goddess is also known to be very benevolent, granting many boons to her devotees. There are ten avatars of Kali, out of which Shyama Kali is the most popular.

Goddess Kali is associated with the slaying of the mighty demon, Raktabija, who could generate one more duplicate of himself with each drop of blood he shed on the ground. The Goddess faces him in the battlefield, injures him with her spear and drinks up all his blood before it can land on the ground. She continues her dance of destruction till Shiva decides to intervene and throws himself at her feet, in order that she stops the destruction. Sensing Shiva lying under her feet, Kali immediately stops and calms down, becoming herself again.

The Kali puja is performed so that the seeker gains enough strength to fight off the evil and negative forces influencing his life.

## Diwali in other religions

Diwali is significant not only for Hindus, but Indians from other religions as well. Read on to know more..

### Diwali in Jainism

Diwali is very important for Jains too. In fact, Diwali is as major a festival for them as Christmas is for Christians. According to Jainism, Lord Mahavira, the last among the sacred Tirthankaras, attained Moksha or Nirvana (liberation) on this day. The Tilyapannatti of Yativrashabha states that this holy event took place at Pavapuri on October 15, 527 BC, on the Chaturdashi of Kartika. Mahavira was the one who established the Dharma, which is strictly followed by Jains even today. Even the prime disciple of Mahavira, Ganadhara Gautam Swami, attained Kevalgyana (true knowledge) on this very day. That is why Diwali is celebrated as one of the most major festival in Jainism as well.

As per the Kalpasutra penned by Acharya Bhadrabahu, Mahavira attained Moksha during the dawn of the amavasya or the new moon, during the 3rd Century BC. According to the treatise, there were many deities present to witness the sacred event. They illuminated the darkness. But the next



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**MAHAVIRA**

night was absolutely pitch dark without the presence of those very gods lighting it up. In order to keep the symbolism of their master's light alive, 16 Gana-kings, 9 Malla and 9 Lichchhavi, of Kasi and Kosal, illuminated their doors. They said: "Gaye Se Bhavujjoye, Davvujjoyam Karissmo" ("Since the light of knowledge is gone, we will make light of ordinary matter").

The most ancient reference to Diwali in Jainism is a similar word, "Dipalikaya", which is found in Harivamsha-Purana, authored by Acharya Jinasena and composed in the year 705 during the Shaka Samvat era.

It goes as follows:

*"Tathastuh lokah prativarsham-araat ako  
Prasiddha-deepalikaya-aatra bharate  
Samudyatah poojayitum jineshvaram  
Jinendra-nirvana vibhuti-bhaktibhak"*

The translation of the above verse is as follows:

"Pavanagari was lighted by the Gods, with lamps to mark the sacred occasion. Since then, the residents of Bharat celebrate the famous festival of 'Dipalika' to worship the Jinendra (Lord Mahavira) on the occasion of his nirvana".

The term, "Dipalikaya" loosely translates as "light leaving the body". "Dipalika" could mean the "splendorous light of the lamps".

### **How the Jains celebrate Diwali**

Jains, being a very devout sect, there is a hint of asceticism in the way they celebrate Diwali. They observe Diwali festivities in the month of Kartik for three days. At this time, the Shvetambaras or the devoted Jains, undergo rigorous fasting and keep chanting the Uttaradhyayan Sutra. This contains the last few pravachans (sermons) of Mahavira. They then meditate upon him. Many Jains also take a spiritual trip to Pavapuri in Bihar; to the exact spot where Lord Mahavira attained Nirvana. Jains traditionally start their accounting year starting from the day of Diwali.

In many Jain temples, visitors and devotees are offered sweet laddus as Prasad, on this day of Diwali. The 2500th Nirvana Mahotsava was celebrated by all Jains residing in India, on October 21, 1974.

## Diwali in Sikhism



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**GURU NANAK**

For Sikhs, the relevance of Diwali comes from the fact that they attained freedom on this day. The ruling Muslim king at the time had held Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism in his custody. The Guru undertook a fast and refused to eat even a morsel of the food brought to him. The king then realized that a huge crowd had gathered around the palace, holding candles, torches and lanterns in their hands, protesting against their Guru's seize and demanding his immediate release. The king eventually relented and let Guru Nanak free. The Sikhs celebrate this day as Diwali.

## Bandi Chhorh Divas

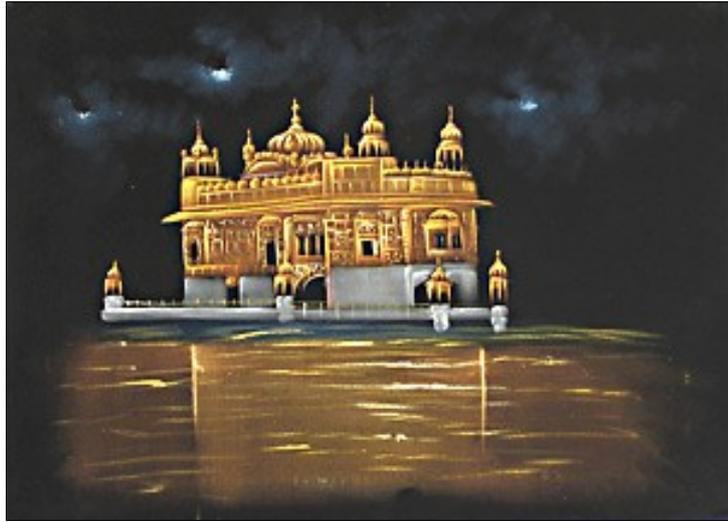
Diwali is also very important to Sikhs because it is the day when Guru Har Gobind Ji had been released from prison. Hence, this is called the Bandi Chhorh Divas. The Guru was responsible for the release of 52 other princes as well, from their detention at the Gwalior Fort in 1619.

Jahangir had detained Guru Har Gobind Ji, as he was intimidated by the Guru's power and influence over the general public. When the Guru asked for the release of the other princes along with him, Emperor Jahangir agreed, on the condition that only those who could hold onto his (Guru Har Gobind Ji's) cloak would be able to leave the prison. The Emperor was hoping to thus limit the amount of people who would leave prison.

But the Guru outsmarted Jahangir, by creating a very large cloak with 52 tassels attached to it. Each of the princes held onto one tassel and that way, they all got out of the dungeon. The Sikhs present then, celebrated the return of Guru Har Gobind Ji by lighting the entire Golden Temple. They follow the tradition to this very day.

## **Bhai Mani Singh Ji becomes a martyr**

Yet another important event that links Diwali to Sikhs is that the highly respected Sikh strategic and scholar, Bhai Mani Singh, became a martyr on this day in 1737. Bhai Mani Singh was the Granthi (reader/keeper of Sikh scripture) at the Harmandir Sahib or the Golden Temple at Amritsar. Bhai Mani Singh had transcribed the penultimate version of the Guru Granth Sahib, which Guru Gobind Singh Ji had dictated to him in 1704. He took over the management of Harmandir Sahib in 1708.



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### **GOLDEN TEMPLE AT AMRITSAR**

Bhai Mani Singh had refused to pay jizya, or tax imposed by the Mughal Empire on non-Muslims. At a religious meeting of the Khalsa, he officially refused to pay up the amount, due to which he was killed, on Diwali day. This and other similar incident sent shock waves through the entire Sikh community, which in turn, gave further momentum to the Khalsa struggle for freedom. Eventually, the Khalsa rule was established in the north of Delhi (the present Dilli).

In the year 1737, the Mughal governor of Punjab, Zakariya Khan, had given Bhai Mani Singh the permission to hold a religious meeting on Diwali, for a tax of Rs.10,000. All Sikhs had been invited to attend the celebrations to commemorate Bandi Chhorh Divas at the Harmandir Sahib. Though Bhai Mani Singh initially intended to collect the tax from all the Sikhs assembled there, he happened to discover that Khan secretly planned to kill all of them who came to the Harmandir Sahib that day. He immediately warned all the Sikhs not to come to attend the event.

When Singh could not pay up the tax, Khan ordered his execution at Lahore. Bhai Mani Singh was ruthlessly cut to death, limb by painful limb. Ever since that incident, the Sikhs also gather to commemorate Bhai Mani Singh Ji's devotion and sacrifice on the day of the Bandi Chhorh Diwas or Diwali.

## **The Sikhs' uprising against the Mughal rule**

The Khalsa was officially established by the Tenth Guru Gobind Singh in 1699. The Sikhs' struggle against the Mughal rule intensified in the 18th Century and peaked around this day. Banda Bahadur had led the uprising in Punjab. This led to his execution in 1716. The Sikhs then started holding meetings to discuss matters concerning the community at biennial meetings at Amritsar. These were regularly held on the first day of Baisakh and at Diwali as well. These get-togethers were called Sarbat Khalsa and the joint resolution passed by this unit became the Gurmata (Guru's decree).

That is how Diwali became the next important festival to the Sikhs, after the Baisakhi.

## **How different regions of India celebrate Diwali**

The Festival of Lights is celebrated in different ways all around India. Read on to find out how each region celebrates the wonderful festival.

### **South India**

In Tamil Nadu, the Naraka Chaturdashi is considered the main day of Diwali, with people lighting firecrackers and offering puja to Sri Lakshmi Devi.

One of the most looked-forward-to Diwali activities among South Indians is to prepare homemade sweets and savouries. People prepare a lot of sweets such as Laddoo, Mysore Pak, Jangiri (Jalebi) and Badushah and savouries such as Mixture (Chivda) during this festival. They then exchange these delicacies with family and friends. The Diwali meal is an elaborate phenomenon, at the end of which follows a Diwali Lehiyam (herbal preparation) for good digestion after all that bingeing!

In Karnataka, the first day, that is, Naraka Chaturdashi and the third day, that is Balipadyami, are considered festive. They do not continue with celebrations on the second day, which is the Amavasey. Water is first stored one day, after which it is used to take a detailed oil bath early next morning. The entire house is cleaned days in advance. This signifies the seeker trying to become a better person, giving up the darkness within him. Oil lamps are then lighted and everyone in the house bursts firecrackers to welcome the auspicious day.

People celebrate the third day or the Balipadyami as Vamana's triumph over Mahabali. This is a very important part of the festivities in Karnataka.

Diwali is not considered a big festival in Kerala, probably because they do not consider the banishing of Mahabali as a happy event at all. They, in fact, consider the episode an utter misfortune for their land. Malayalees, instead, celebrate the festival Onam, when they believe that Mahabali comes back to visit them again, every year.

### **Gujarat**

In Gujarat, people celebrate Diwali from Aaso Vad Agyaras, that is, from the 11th day of the full moon/new moon, right up to Dev Diwali. Here, people illuminate the house with diyas, which they believe, protect them from evil and negative forces.

Here are the details of Diwali celebrations in Gujarat:

#### **Agyaras or Aaso Vad 11**

Diwali celebrations begin in Gujarat on the 11th day of Aaso Vad, even before Dhanteras. People make the best of snacks and savouries and distribute these to friends and relatives, wishing them a happy new year.

#### **Vagh Baras or Aaso Vad 12**

This day, also called Govatsa Dwadashi or Guru Dwadashi, is reserved for the worship of the cow and its calf. "Vagh" is repaying debts, so people close their khata (accounts) on this day and do not enter into any new financial transaction. In some Dhodia villages, men colour themselves in white or even with stripes, representing the Vagh or the cattle. This is a sport

wherein the tiger goes after the cattle. At the end of this little game, all villagers get together for a festive community lunch.

### **Dhanteras**

The 13th day of Aaso Vad is the Dhanteras, which is spent in the worship of Goddess Lakshmi. Gujaratis spend money buying silver, gold and diamonds, as they believe that spending money on this day would bring them yet more prosperity in the year ahead.

### **Kali Chudash**

"Kali" stands for "black" and "Chaudash" means 14. Hence, this day is spent in worship of the Goddess Kali, who goes beyond the reach of black magic. People also offer Vadas to Lord Hanuman, in order to protect them from the dark forces of evil. Tantriks even go to the shamshan (crematorium) to further enhance their powers.

### **Diwali (30th day of Aaso)**

The 15th day, counting from the day of the full moon, is the day of amaavas. This is celebrated as the day of Diwali. This, being the last day of the year, people visit the temple in order to express their gratitude to God and pray for a good year ahead. The entire day is spent in preparation for the New Year and firecrackers are lighted in the evening, lasting right up to night time. The entire house is decorated with beautiful Rangolis and lamps are lit all around, in order to welcome Lakshmi into their home.

### **Bestu Varas or the New Year**

This falls on the Kartak Sud Ekam, which is the first day of the Hindu New Year. Its calculation is based on lunar cycles. Kartak is the very first month of the New Year and "Ekam" means the "first day". People wish each other "Saal Mubarak", "Shubh Varsh" and "Nutanvarsh Abhinandan" (happy New Year) on this day.

Since Hindus believe that the new year starts at 4am, firecrackers start very early in the morning. Some boys collect salt from salt evaporation ponds and sell it. This is "sabras", which means, all flavours, and it is believed to fill the coming year with good luck and prosperity. The whole house is ornamented with aaso palav and marigold, rangolis and torans (door hangings). Snacks and sweets are exchanged with friends, relatives and neighbours, as a symbol of camaraderie. Bali Pujan is also undertaken on this day, which is also known as "Balipratipadaa".

### **Bhai Bij**

Kartak Sud Bij or the second day of the Kartik month is the day for brothers and sisters to strengthen their bond of love and affection. The sister invites her brother home for a meal and prays for his long life and well-being. The brother, in turn, showers her with his love and also many gifts and presents.

## Labh Pancham



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**SWASTIKA - THE HOLY HINDU SYMBOL**

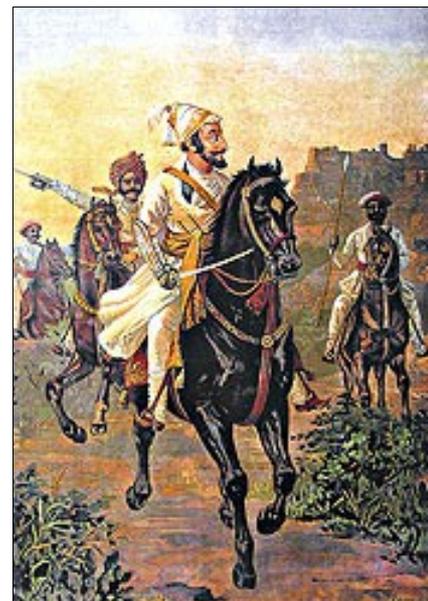
On the Labh Pancham, businessmen and shop owners resume the businesses which they had closed during Diwali. They start new ledgers, after drawing the Swastika (a symbol standing for prosperity) and writing "Shubh Labh" (literally, "auspicious profit") on the very first page of the ledger. People also go shopping on this day, as this is supposed to bring luck for the whole of the year.

## Dev Diwali

The Dev Diwali is celebrated on Purnima, that is, the full moon day of Kartik. It is believed that Lord Vishnu returned to his abode on this day, after vanquishing Bali's might. It is believed that the Gods rejoiced at his homecoming. People burst firecrackers on this day as well and wish all those who they had left out on Diwali day.

## Maharashtra

People clean their homes before Diwali. Schools remain shut for Diwali holidays and employees, helpers and housemaids are given holidays and generous bonuses on auspicious days. People purchase new clothes, gold, silver and fireworks. Children make small structures and forts in memory of the great Maratha leader and founder of the Maratha Empire, Shivaji Maharaj.



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**SHIVAJI**

In Maharashtra, the Diwali festivities are quite similar to those in many other parts of India. Here too, Diwali starts with Vasubaras, wherein Aarti is performed to the cow and her calf. The next day is Dhanteras or Dhanatrayodashi, which is again of import to the business community. The 14th day of Ashwin is sacred as it marks the Narak Chaturdashi. People take an oil bath, after which they, along with family, visit the temple to offer their prayers to the Lord.

### **The Faral**

The Faral or the feast is very important to the Maharashtrians. This consists of special sweet and savoury preparations, such as "Karanji", "Laadoo", "Shankarpaale", "Mithai", "Shev", "Chakli" and "Chivda".

The Lakshmi Poojan comes next. This falls on the amavasya day. As usual, diyas are lit around the house and crackers are burst in the evening. The entire family offers Aarti to Goddess Lakshmi, chanting her mantras and singing Bhajans (hymns). People place cash and jewellery in front of the idol of Lakshmi. People perform the Puja as per the Puja Vidhi mentioned in the scriptures. Some people, especially those living abroad, even use Puja Vidhi audio cassettes and CDs for instructions on conducting the Puja.

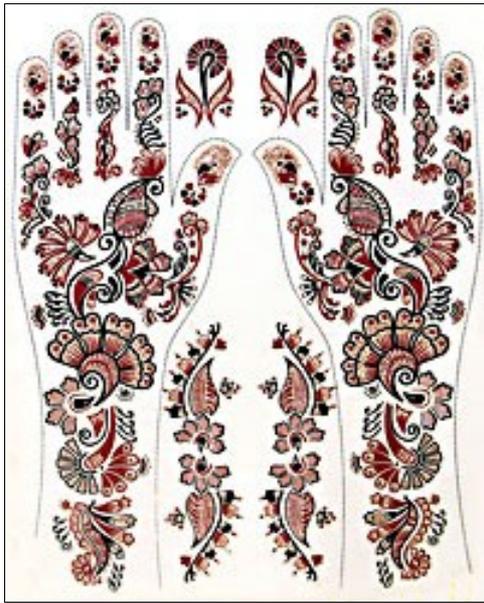
Businessmen open new accounts and the stock exchange places a token bid, which is called the "muhurta" bidding. Traders do not make payments on this day, as it is believed that Lakshmi should not be sent or given away at this time.

Then comes the Padva, which is the first day of the new month, Kartik. The next day is the Bhaubej, which is the same as Bhai Bij in Gujarat.

### **Kolkata**

Diwali is pronounced as Dipabali in Kolkata. This night is reserved exclusively for Kali Puja. This is a time when people remember their deceased ancestors and pray for them by lighting candles for them. Goddess Kali, a powerful aspect of Goddess Durga and the most potent deity to Bengalis, is worshipped this night. Then there are extensive fireworks, lasting well into the night.

## Melas – an integral part of Diwali festivities



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**STICK ON MEHENDI**

An integral part of Diwali festivities is the Mela or a colourful fair. This happens in villages as well as in the towns of India. This is a place where farmers get together to sell their produce. Artisans also exhibit and sell their works of art. Girls and women dress up in all their finery, draw elaborate mehndi (henna) designs on their hands and feet and shop at these fairs.

The main attractions at any fair are the puppet shows, acrobats, snake charmers, jugglers and fortune tellers. Food stalls do brisk business too. People can also avail a number of rides, such as Ferris wheels, animal rides and so on.

The Melas, being tremendously fun-filled events, are a great source of joy to all, especially the young ones in the family.

## Diwali internationally

So major a festival is Diwali, that it is celebrated in many other parts of the world too, such as Nepal, Canada, Guyana, Mauritius, Kenya, Japan, Fiji, the Netherlands, the UK, the US, the UAE, Australia, Africa, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Indonesia and many others. Today's world is a global world, so one can find Indians in any corner of the earth. Along with this migration comes exchange of traditions and customs among everyone. This is how Diwali has now come about to become a veritable global festival.

While in some countries, one can find only colonies of Indian expatriates celebrating Diwali, other nations have adopted and absorbed this festival into the fabric of their own culture. Such countries celebrate the Festival of Lights along similar lines as those in India, with a few minor variations.

## Diwali in Nepal

Nepal is a largely Hindu-dominated country. Buddhists in Nepal also celebrate this festival in a grand way, especially the Newar Buddhists. Diwali is a major national festival both in India and Nepal and is celebrated with great enthusiasm and fervor by most Nepalese and Indians, irrespective of their faith.

The Nepalese refer to Diwali as "Swanti" or "Tihar" and celebrate it during October/November. They also observe this festival for five days, with certain rituals differing from those in India. The first day is known as "Kaag Tihar"; people feed crows on this day, considering them to be divine messengers. The second day, the "Kukur Tihar", is the days dogs are worshipped for their honesty and loyalty. The Lakshmi Puja, along with puja for the cow, is performed on the third day. This is the last day of the year according to the Nepal Sambat, and so businessmen close their accounts and worship Goddess Lakshmi. The fourth day marks the start of the New Year. People indulge in cultural celebrations on this day. The Newars perform the "Mha Puja", which involves the worship of the body, in order to keep it healthy and fit in the year ahead. The fifth day, the "Bhai Tika", is very similar to "Bhai Duj".

Kidha, is celebrated in different ways across diverse communities. Though the actual days of both the festivals fall on exactly the same days in both India and Nepal, they occur in different Gregorian months, depending upon the almanac used in that particular region.

The Amanta version (which ends on the new moon) of the Hindu Calendar, is generally accepted as the standard Indian national calendar. This calendar, which is mostly used by Maharashtra and South India, the festival starts from the last four days of Ashwina and ends after the first two days of Kartika. The Purnimaanta version (ending on the full moon), on the other hand, is more commonly used in North India and falls right in between the month of Ashwayuja/Ashwina. According to the Gregorian calendar, the festival generally falls in the months of October/November.

Nepal goes according to the Nepalese calendar, wherein the festival falls on the last three days and the first two days of the Nepalese era. People play on the swing, called "Dore Ping". The swings are made of thick ropes, called "Rangate Ping" or "Pirke Ping". People here also indulge in the community play, "Deusi" and "Bhailo", wherein they visit all houses and play songs and dances, blessing the hosts. The hosts, in turn, gift them with food, grains, fruits and money. The people then donate some amount of money collected in this way, to welfare and charity groups.

### **Trinidad and Tobago**

Here, all the island communities get together to celebrate the festival. The major fete here is the Diwali Nagar or Village of the Festival of Lights. Here, one gets to watch stage performances by east Indian artists, folk theatre plays and skits, various exhibitions and displays on many aspects of Hindu art and culture, lighting of diyas, food court featuring Indian delicacies and the night-long worship of Goddess Lakshmi.

The grand finale of the Diwali Nagar is the fabulous fireworks at the end of it all, ushering in Diwali with a bang! All the people assembled enjoy the evening with friends and family.

### **Malaysia**

Malaysia is a country filled with Indians. Here, Diwali is referred to as "Hari Deepavali" and is celebrated during the seventh month of the Hindu solar calendar. This is a holiday in Malaysia and is celebrated in almost the same way as in India. The most popular activity undertaken during this time is the "Rumah Terbuka" or the "Open House", wherein Hindu Malaysians invite fellow Malaysians of different religions over to their homes for a grand meal. This practice, which is unique to Malaysia, is a symbol of goodwill and friendly ties. It

is practiced by all Malaysians during any festival.

### **Singapore and Sri Lanka**

Deepavali is a gazetted public holiday in Singapore, again populated by many Indians. Observed mostly by the Indian Tamil people residing in that nation, the festivities start by lighting up the whole of Little India. Many cultural events are also organized by the Singapore government and the Hindu Endowment Board at this time.

Deepavali in Sri Lanka is mostly observed by the Eelam Tamil sect. People celebrate this by wearing new clothes and giving others gifts and sweets.

### **Britain**

Hindus and Sikhs residing in Britain celebrate Diwali with great gusto. The celebrations are similar to those back home in India. People here light special types of candles instead of diyas and also exchange sweets and gifts. Many people also call over friends from all other religions to partake in the festive Diwali meal. Some even send their near and dear ones gifts and cash through post.

Leicester conducts some of the biggest Diwali celebrations outside India. In fact, Diwali also almost happens to coincide with the British Guy Fawkes traditions. The Bonfire Night takes place on November 5th, and so many areas like the East End of London host a joint function, where everyone enjoys the fireworks for their own different reasons.

### **Australia and New Zealand**

In Australia, Diwali is celebrated largely by Indians and locals living in Melbourne. The Australian Indian Innovations Incorporated (AIII), an organization comprising many independent individuals and groups, was formed in 2002, to celebrate all Indian festivals in Melbourne. This has been a huge success ever since its inception seven years ago and continues to be the most sought-after event in that country.

Diwali in New Zealand is mostly celebrated among many South Asian cultural groups. Auckland and Wellington conduct big public festivals to mark the occasion, with some other events gaining more momentum now. The New Zealand Parliament has been holding an official reception since 2003.

### **Fireworks during Diwali**

Lighting firecrackers is probably the best and most fun-filled activity for all of us at Diwali. While this gives one and all of us a great deal of joy, it also raises certain ethical and other issues.

In India, firecrackers are largely manufactured in Sivakasi, Tamil Nadu. The employees here are mostly little children, who work under perilous conditions and are paid a mere pittance for their work.

The other global concern is the adverse effect of crackers on noise and air pollution. Some governments have placed a ban on the lighting of firecrackers, especially the colourful varieties, which give out more smoke. Levels of Sulphur dioxide and Respirable Suspended

Particulate Matter (RSPM) were found to be higher on Diwali day. Considering this, bursting of crackers at silent zones and near schools, courts and hospitals has been prohibited by the government.

## **Conclusion**

Diwali remains the foremost of all Indian festivals and the only one which is celebrated with great gusto countrywide. It is just one more element of the invisible yet unbreakable chain that binds the diversity of India into one beautiful collage.

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This article was written by **Saipriya Viswanathan**. Saipriya is a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Carnatic vocal music and Carnatic Veena. She is a recipient of several awards for both dance and music, including the Sur Mani and Singar Mani titles. She is a recipient Govt. of India Merit Scholarship for dance and is a diploma holder in Carnatic vocal music.

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