

Diwali Fact Sheet

Diwali is known as the “Festival of Lights” and is a Hindu holiday widely celebrated in India, in South Asia, and across the Hindu Diaspora.

The word ‘Diwali’ derives from Sanskrit and means “a row of lights.” Festivities include the illumination of lights, candles, firecrackers, and diya (clay lamps) to symbolize the victory of good over evil, inner light over spiritual darkness, and knowledge over ignorance. Diwali is a time for gathering with loved ones, celebrating life, and committing to making the right decisions in life.

When is Diwali? Like many Hindu holidays, Diwali is synchronized with the lunar calendar so the actual date varies from year to year.

Diwali typically falls between October and November.

Who Celebrates Diwali? Diwali is celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, Buddhists, and people of Indian heritage and non-Indian heritage. Despite each faith having its own historical legends and celebratory events, the holiday represents the same symbolic victory of light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, and good over evil.

Where is Diwali Celebrated?

Celebrations can take place at home, in mandirs (local temples), community centers, and other gathering places. Diwali is celebrated by people around the globe.

Why Is Diwali Celebrated?

Many Hindus recognize Diwali as a day celebrating the return of Prince Rama of Ayodhya, his wife Sita, and brother Lakshman after 14 years of exile. Prince Rama is considered to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu and an embodiment of dharma or righteousness; and Sita is an incarnation of Lakshmi, who is the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. The residents of Ayodhya were overjoyed at the return of their rightful King and lit lamps in his honor. Thus, the entire city looked like a row of lights.

Other Hindus commemorate Diwali as the day Lord Krishna defeated the demon king Narakasura. For some regions of India, Diwali coincides with the Hindu New Year.

Ever since, people light lamps at Diwali to remember that light triumphs over dark, knowledge prevails over ignorance, and good triumphs over evil.

How is Diwali Celebrated? Diwali is one of the most widely celebrated Hindu festivals in India and around the world. The rituals and customs associated with celebrating Diwali vary based on the regional traditions of India and the cultural customs that are popular in those areas.

However, most families light diyas or candles in their homes and celebrate this special holiday by enjoying sweets and delicious food. Generally, Diwali is celebrated over five days with each day holding a special significance.

Day 1: Dhanteras On this day, many dedicate their worship to Goddess Lakshmi. People will clean the house, make rangolis or kolam (colored patterns made on the floor with flowers, powder, rice or sand), go shopping, and make sweet and savory Indian treats.

Day 2: Chhoti Diwali, Kalichaudas This day is referred to as small Diwali and people will decorate their homes with rangoli, and clay lamps are displayed.

Day 3: Diwali People dress in new clothes, visit the temple to perform a puja (a worship service) for Goddess Lakshmi and Lord Ganesh, light diyas around the house, keep all the lights on, eat delicious food and sweets, and enjoy fireworks celebrations with family and friends.

Day 4: Annakut, Padwa, Govardhan Puja This is the first day of the new year for many regions and people celebrate by exchanging gifts and best wishes. Many will take time to be grateful for all of what they have and to share with others.

Day 5: Bhai Duj, Bhai Bheej This day is dedicated as a siblings day to honor sister-brother bonds. It is common for all siblings to get together on this day. Brothers will visit their sisters and enjoy a nice meal together.

The Origins of Diwali

Diwali is one of the world's oldest religious holidays. It's celebrated annually by Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains throughout India and the rest of South Asia, the United States, and across the globe.

Celebrations for Diwali last up to five days and while there are several stories about the origins of Diwali, most would agree that the common theme to Diwali is the victory of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, and light over spiritual darkness.

Inviting Prosperity and Engaging in Service

Most Hindus begin the festival with a deep cleaning of their homes and surroundings, similar to spring cleaning in America. Homes and streets will be illuminated with colorful lights, rangoli art, and other festive decorations. It is believed that cleanliness invokes the presence of Goddess Lakshmi, who is the Goddess of Prosperity and Wealth.

Diwali is also a time for dana (charitable giving) and seva (selfless service), so as to share the blessings of Goddess Lakshmi. Common acts of Diwali celebrations include feeding the hungry, giving money to charities, donating time and materials to worthy causes, and finding ways to alleviate the suffering of others.

The festival is also a time for friends and family to gather, share meals, and take part in special rituals. People often recite scriptural stories and contemplate on their meaning and the values they wish to live by. Many people will start the new business year at Diwali and offer special prayers to the Goddess for a prosperous year ahead.

Regional Celebrations

India is a diverse country with many different cultural customs and traditions so the celebrations of Diwali range from state-to-state and region-to-region. Celebratory foods are prepared and vary based on local traditions and ingredients available. Songs are sung and prayers are said in regional languages heard in different parts of India. For many, Diwali also marks the start of the new year.

One common thread of Diwali is honoring the incarnations of Lord Vishnu and Goddess Lakshmi. In northern India, traditionally the story of Prince Rama's return to Ayodhya is celebrated, whereas, the story of Lord Krishna dominates celebrations throughout the southern states of India. In western India, the festival marks another story in which Lord Vishnu banished the demon King Bali to the nether world.

The Legends

The Return of the Exiled Prince

One of the most popular stories of Diwali is the Hindu epic, the Ramayana. The Ramayana was originally composed in Sanskrit, but there are hundreds of tellings of it in India's many regional languages. It is also very popular throughout Southeast Asia, in countries like Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Thailand. Very often during Diwali, communities will showcase retellings of the tale through music, dance, and drama.

Thousands of years ago in the kingdom of Ayodhya (located in the northern part of India), there was a kind and humble prince named Prince Rama. Prince Rama was adored and respected by many, and considered to be an embodiment of dharma (right living). Prince Rama is believed to be an incarnation of Lord Vishnu.

Prince Rama, as the eldest son, was set to become King, but his evil and jealous stepmother banished him to the forest for 14 years in exile so that her own son could become king instead. Prince Rama did not go alone as his wife, Princess Sita, who is considered an incarnation of Goddess Lakshmi and the embodiment of nature, and his loyal younger brother Lakshman, accompanied him.

One day, a powerful king named King Ravana of Lanka saw Princess Sita and fell in love with her immediately. King Ravana hatched a plan to distract Prince Rama and Prince Lakshman so that he could kidnap Princess Sita and make her his wife. When Princess Sita went missing, Prince Rama went searching for King Ravana and sought the help of the great warrior Hanuman who agreed to help find her. Prince Rama, Prince Lakshman, and Hanuman had to fight the powerful King Ravana to get Princess Sita back. After a fierce battle, they all survived and were reunited. After completing their 14 year exile, Prince Rama, Princess Sita, and Prince Lakshman, returned home to Ayodhya, where the people rejoiced and lit lamps all over the kingdom to welcome them back and usher in the just and kind rule of Prince Rama.

The entire city looked like a row of lights and this is part of the reason why Diwali is referred to as the “Festival of Lights” and is a celebration of the victory of good over evil. This theme is most commonly associated with the celebration of Diwali.

The Prince and The Demon

Another commonly heard story about the origins of Diwali is also centered around another incarnation of Lord Vishnu named Lord Krishna. Many of the stories about Lord Krishna's childhood are found in a sacred text called the Bhagavad Purana, and his lessons about life are found in an epic called the Mahabharata and Bhagavad Gita (another sacred text which is a part of the Mahabharata). The original texts were composed in Sanskrit, but are retold in India's many regional languages. They are also reenacted through music, dance, and plays, especially during Diwali. Many years ago, Bhumidevi, who is also known as Mother Earth, had a son named Prince Narakasura who was very easily influenced.

Though he was the son of a divine spirit, he gave into wicked temptations of power and greed, and became evil in his thoughts and actions. Narkasura was horrible to all the people of his kingdom and caused destruction on everything around him. He started taking over neighboring kingdoms and soon set his sights on a beautiful kingdom called Svargaloka. Narakasura felt unstoppable and decided to kidnap all the beautiful young women in the kingdom of Svargaloka. The residents of Svargaloka were very upset and called upon Lord Krishna to save them from Narkasura's terror. Lord Krishna came as soon as he heard and fought in a fierce battle defeating Narakasura and stopping the evil demon from harming others. As a result of this conflict, Lord Krishna brought back peace and prosperity to the people of Svargaloka. In this story, we also see the significance of light over darkness and good over evil.

Additional Religious Significance

While it has great significance to Hindus, Diwali is also celebrated annually by Sikhs, Buddhists, and Jains throughout the United States and across the globe.

The Sikhs recognize Diwali as a celebration of the release of the Sixth Guru, Hargobind, who was one of their spiritual leaders, from captivity by the Mughal Emperor Jehangir. In his honor, lamps were lit all the way to the Golden Temple, welcoming his return.

For Jains, Diwali is the day Lord Mahavira, the last of the Jain Tirthankaras (the great teachers of Jain dharma), achieved moksha or enlightenment/nirvana.

Whereas Buddhists, especially newer Buddhists, commemorate Diwali as Ashok Vijayadashami, the day the great Emperor Ashoka embraced Buddhism as his faith.