

V.I.P. ARTICLE SUBMITTED BY:
Kamal Sharma
PhD student in Computer Science
Rice University



Diwali in India

Diwali is the most auspicious Hindu festival celebrated all across India. The celebration is also referred to as the festival of lights, due to the use of lamps or *diya* as they are called in India. Diwali (Deepavali , Hindi name) marks the good over evil, signifies a new beginning and wishes to bring a prosperous new year to all. This is the start of a new year in Hindu calendar.

Diwali is celebrated in October or November, based on the dates from the Hindu calendar. For 2010, Diwali falls on November 5.

History

Rama (Ram as pronounced in Hindi) was a legendary king of Ayodhya in ancient India. Rama is one of the avatars of Vishnu, a Hindu God, who took a human form to destroy evil present on the earth. Ramayana, a popular epic details the life of Rama.

The story evolves around Rama, who was exiled for 14 years from his kingdom and forced to live in a forest. He was accompanied by his wife, Sita and his younger brother, Laxman. During this period, Ravana king of Lanka, kidnapped Sita. This resulted in a war between the two kings. Ravana represented the evil side whereas Rama represented the good side. Rama beheaded Ravana in the war, thus signifying victory of good over evil and returned to his kingdom, Ayodhya. This return date marks the celebration of Diwali, where residents of the kingdom rejoiced their prince coming back to their heartland with lights all around.

Different parts of India have other tales associated with Diwali, the most significant being the return of Rama.

They say that a portion of Rama and Ravana are present in every human being. Triumph of good over evil is the true path of enlightenment for a human.

Festival

Diwali spans a week long of celebration than just a single day. This celebration comprises of Vasu bars (worship the cows), Dhan teras (day to buy gold), Chaturdashi (small Diwali) , Laxmi Puja on Diwali (worship goddess of wealth) and Bhaiduj (day when brothers and sisters meet).

Each of the above events has its associated traditions that follow with it. Hinduism believes in love for all, showing affection for cows (sacred to Hinduism) and towards family during this festival.

Celebration

On the day of Diwali, there is great enthusiasm in the air. All family members get up early in the morning to prepare for the occasion. Women usually prepare good delicacies for the day. They also decorate the house with flowers and lighting for the day. A unique drawing with colors is often made outside the house. This is known as rangoli. Often it is very creative and made out of bare hands.

Men head out for their work. Even though, it is a national holiday, everyone visits their workplace on this day. Everyone at the workplace offer prayers to the Lord for a good year and distribute sweets amongst themselves. Yearly bonuses from employers are also dispersed on this day.



Preparations for prayer to Goddess Laxmi, Saraswati and Ganesh

In the evening, family and relatives get together to carry out the traditional rituals at their home. This is a main event of the Diwali festival. The house is lit up with earthen oil lamps (*diyas*) just before the start of this ceremony. It looks spectacular to see every house lit up with these lamps. They worship Goddess Laxmi (creator of wealth and prosperity), Goddess Saraswati (creator of knowledge) and Lord Ganesh (remover of obstacles) in this ritual. Holy songs are enchanted by all members. After the prayer is complete, elders often give out money as a token of love and care to youngsters. In turn, youngsters touch their feet showing respect towards them.



Diyas lit up for the celebration

This is often an enthralling time for children. They are free now to go and burst crackers. Fireworks is a must-have occasion for this festival. All over the city, the sky is lit up with fireworks. The view is just spectacular. Laws are a bit relaxed on this day, so anyone can burn fireworks. However, loud noise often accompanies these fireworks, but most people don't mind it for a day. Family and relatives then have dinner together, which often consists of very good delicacies.



A child playing with fireworks

The next day early in the morning, people visit their neighbors, friends and a lot of distant relatives to mark the beginning of a new year. Often this is for a short duration and people share sweets when visiting each other. The reason it is for a short duration is that families in India are usually very big and visiting everyone usually takes a lot of time.

It is hard to describe the details about every religion in India celebrating this occasion, due to presence of different regions across India, but the overall essence remains the same.

Around the World

Diwali is now just not limited to India itself. It is celebrated by Indians living abroad in many parts of the world. The most prominent celebration being at the White House. San Antonio city does host fireworks display during Diwali.

