

DIVALI

Diwali, known as the Festival of Lights or Lamps “is one of the most prominent and widely celebrated Hindu festivals” (Schomer 8), and “...in the most limited sense refers to the illuminations made on the [festivals] new-moon night...” (Schomer 13). There are several variations in the Diwali festival, its name, rituals, and celebratory meaning. Hence, it is not a festival easily defined or described. Much like any celebration its significance and ritual practice has evolved to meet an individual’s perception of what it should be. The variances in Diwali exist locally, regionally, and globally, based on its historical significance, tradition, and individual interpretation. Schomer states that “certain variations in the stories and rituals related to Diwali can be traced to regional historical events” (13), thus supporting the realization that Diwali is a complex festival. Schomer also explains that there are six principal stories connected to Diwali: Bali story, Story of King Hema’s son, Narakasura story, Govardhan story, Shiva-Parvati story, and Yama-Yamuna story, which are all closely related (28) and may share common rituals. Other factors complicating our understanding of the festival are its globalization and evolution. The global movement of Hindus, Jains and Sikhs allow festivals such as Diwali to be shared, directly or indirectly, with new cultures resulting in an increased popularity. It is believed that Sikh’s originally celebrated Diwali to honour their sixth Guru or the establishment of the Golden Temple in Amritsar (Schomer 25). Jains are said to celebrate Diwali to mark the death of Mahavira and that the lighting of lamps compensate for the darkness left after his passing (Schomer 25).

Diwali, Dipavali (*dip* = lamp, *avali* = row), Dipotsavi, Deepavali and Dipapratipad are alternative names or titles for Diwali, mainly dependant upon what region of India or the world the festival is being celebrated. Variations in the festival’s duration are also observed based on

the location of the festival, and can range from one to five days. Divali is celebrated for five days and in accordance with lunar calendars. It begins in late Asvina (August – September) and ends in early Karttika (October – November). The festival begins on Dhan Teras, the 13th day of the dark half of Asvina, and ends on Yama Dvitiya, the 2nd day of the light half of Karttika, each day marking a day of celebration for one of the six principle stories in which Divali is linked (please refer to Chart 3 for details). Divali is sometimes viewed as a cluster of holidays, earmarked for the worship of all three principal goddesses: Laksmi (Goddess of Wealth), Kali (Goddess of Destruction), and Saraswati (Goddess of Learning) (Bezbaruah 21). Divali is also seen a festival to mark the change of seasons, the end of harvest, the end of monsoon season, a new business year and a new calendar year (Bezbaruah 15, Schomer 10). It is believed that Divali is most important to the farmers and merchants (the *vaisya* class); however, according to Bezbaruah, Divali “is celebrated in full force in Delhi” and “is a universal festival” (20).

The most common or mainstream interpretation of the Divali festival is that it is in honour of the Goddess Laksmi, the Goddess of Wealth & Prosperity. After the monsoons people clean, white-wash, and decorate their homes in order to receive Laksmi into their home during the festival. Her visit brings the hope of prosperity for the new year. Lights and *rangoli* are used to decorate homes and welcome Laksmi [(<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoli>) “**Rangoli** is one of the most popular art forms in [India](#). It is a form of decoration that uses finely ground white powder and colours, and is used commonly outside homes in India. Rangoli can be wall art as well as floor art. The term *rangoli* is derived from words *rang* (colour) and *aavalli* ('coloured creepers' or 'row of colours')”]. Each day a new *rangoli* design is drawn, and in addition to lamps inviting Laksmi into homes lamps are also lit and set afloat on the Ganga or other nearby rivers. The floating lamps are seen as indicators of prosperity in the new year, meaning if they float a long distance and remain lit then prosperity will greet the individual and his/her family in the upcoming year. In addition to lamp lighting some people

prepare sweets and other delicacies, others clear debts and close accounts and open new ones in the New Year hoping that Laksmi will bless them with prosperity and others purchase new clothing and jewellery. Divali rituals vary between people based on what they can afford, what region of the world they live, and what the significance of the festival represents to them.

Globalization of Divali has led various groups and individuals to compare the festival to other existing festivals and celebrations such as the Anglo-pagan Halloween. The comparison of Halloween to Divali is in part due to certain beliefs that “the lighting of lamps at the Divali festival is intended to scare away evil spirits” (O’Malley 133), and Hospital supports this view of commonality between Divali and Halloween through this statement:

“It is intriguing that in both Europe and India this period of transition is linked with the dead, that at both Hallowe’en and Divali (that is, immediately preceding New Year Day) evil and inauspicious forces on one hand, and the dead on the other, were thought to be let loose. Such similarities, of course, again raise the question of a possible common historical background to these practices (Hospital 249).

Although there may be some commonality between Divali and other festivals (local or global), differences exist because of history, translation, and significance.

Diwali Stories As Charters For Ritual (Schomer 29)

Time	Ritual	Story
Dhan Teras (13 th of dark emissaries half of Āśvina)	lighting rows of lamps	Yama's boon to his
Narak chaudas (14 th of dark half of Āśvina)	ceremonial baths	Krishna's boon to Narakasura
Bari Dīvālī (15 th of dark half of Āśvina)	cleaning homes/Lakshmi-pūjā/staying up all night	Lakshmi freed from Bali's jail/looking for place
All three days of the "triplet" (13 th -15 th of dark half of Āśvina)	lighting rows of lamps	Vishnu's boon to Bali
Govardhan (1 st day of The light half of Kārttika)	worship of Govardhan	Krishna's instituting worship of Govardhan and Govardhan saving the land
	gambling	Parvati's boon to Shiva
Yama Dvitīya (2 nd day of Light half of Karttika)	sisters entertaining brothers	Yama's boon to Yamuna

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READING

Babb, Lawrence A. (1975) *The Divine Hierarchy: Popular Hinduism in Central India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Bezbauah, M.P. (2003) *Fairs and Festivals of India Vol. III*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.

Devagupta, Rama; Klaus, M. (Illustrator) (May 2001) *The slaying of Narakasura*. Parabola 26 no 2, May 2001, p 80-81.

Dhal, Upendra Nath (1978) *Goddess Lakshmi: Origin and Development*. New Delhi: Oriental Publishers.

Dogra, R.C., Dogra, U. (2000) *Hindu and Sikh Wedding Ceremonies: with salient features of Hindu and Sikh rituals*. New Delhi: Star Publications Pvt. Ltd.

Fuller, C.J. (1992) *The Camphor Flame: popular Hinduism and society in India*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Gregory, Ruth W. (1975) *Anniversaries and Holidays* Third Edition. Chicago: The American Library Association.

Havell, E.B. (2000) *Benares, the Sacred City: sketches of Hindu life & religion*. New Delhi: Book Faith India.

O'Malley, L.S.S. (1970) *Popular Hinduism: The Religion of the Masses*. New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation. (Original print 1935 at Cambridge University Press).

Pattanaik, Devdutt (2003, c2002) *Laksmi, the goddess of wealth and fortune: an introduction*. Mumbai: Vakils, Feffer & Simons.

Schomer, Karine (Spring 1999) *Divali: The Study of a Hindu Festival*. Journal of Vaisnava Studies.

Vineeth, Vadakethala F. (1987) *Religio-cultural festival of India*. Journal of Dharma.

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoli> April 9, 2006.

Related Topics for Further Investigation

Laksmi
Kali
Saraswati
Bali
Narakasura
Yama Yamana
Sikhism
Amritsar
Jainism
Mahavira
Vaisaya Class
Rangoli
Halloween
Festivals
Rituals
Celebrations
Puja
Govardhan
Shiva Parvati
Rama
Holi

Noteworthy Websites Related to the Topic

<http://amitkulkarni.info/pics/diwali-2005/>

<http://www.diwalifestival.org/>

<http://www.diwalifestival.org/diwali-rangoli.html>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diwali>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoli>

<http://www.diwalifestival.org/the-tradition-of-rangoli.html>

<http://www.sivanandadlshq.org/religions/deepavali.htm>

http://news.bbc.co.uk/cbbcnews/hi/club/your_reports/newsid_1677000/1677032.stm

<http://www.arts.wa.gov/progFA/AsianFest/Diwali/faAsianFestdiwalicontents.html>

Article written by Lisa Shaw (March 2006), who is solely responsible for its content.