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Religion 100Q

Research Project

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Diwali: The Festival of Lights

According to a National Geographic article, Diwali and those who celebrate it are analogous to Christmas and Christians; Living Hinduisms by Nancy Auer Faulk additionally describes Diwali in New Delhi as “Christmas and the Fourth of July wrapped up in a single package.” For those unfamiliar with Diwali, this provides new insight into a significant event in Hindu culture that is recognized all over the world. Even in the U.S., a number of schools, groups and communities associated with Hinduism, and Indian organizations and businesses all become involved in this widely celebrated festival. In fact, even presidents and various politicians have voiced their warm sentiments towards those celebrating. Obama became the first president to light the traditional diyas (clay lamps) in 2009, making note of the festival by saying, “You celebrate life’s blessings – the triumph of knowledge over ignorance and good over evil. But Diwali is also a time for prayer and contemplation, to reflect on our obligations to help our fellow human beings, particularly the less fortunate.” (Hardikar “President Obama: Happy Diwali”) The widespread participation and observance of Diwali inspires deeper questioning into the origins and traditions of this celebrated festival.

The word Diwali originates from the Sanskrit word deepawali, where deep is translated to be light, while avali is translated to mean a row. Therefore, deepawali is translated to be a row of lights. According to the article “Diwali” featured on the National Geographic website, Indians light diyas outside of their homes to symbolize the light within that protects a person from spiritual darkness.

Diwali’s five days of celebration vary from year to year as it is assigned a date according to the Hindu lunisolar calendar and the position of the moon. This year Diwali began on November 9th; the date usually falls around October or November.

It is believed that the Diwali festival was “first celebrated as a harvest festival with the significance of being the last harvest before winter.” (“Diwali – Festival of Lights”) Although there are various legends featuring different characters attributed as being the inspiration for the widely popular Diwali festival, they all share the common theme of the victory of good over evil and therefore light over darkness. There are three legends in particular that are found to be most common among those who celebrate.

The most well known legend accepted as the origin for the Diwali celebration is rooted in the great Hindu epic of *Ramayana*. In this legend, the king of Dasharatha exiles his son Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, to live in the forest for fourteen years. Rama accepts this, and along with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana, goes to live in the wilderness. During this period, Sita is kidnapped by Ravana, the demon king of Lanka, and she is taken away to his kingdom. Rama fights and kills Ravana, rescues Sita, and returns to Ayodhya following his exile period of fourteen years. Upon his return, the people of Ayodhya are so overjoyed to hear of his return that they light their houses with diyas, light firecrackers, and litter the city with decorations. People who believe this particular legend is the origin for the festival of Diwali celebrate it as the homecoming of Lord Rama.

Another common legend used to explain the celebration of Diwali comes from the Hindu epic *Mahabharata*, which features the story of five royal brothers: the Pandavas. In this legend, the Pandavas are defeated by the Kauravas while gambling. As a result of this defeat, the Pandavas are obligated to spend thirteen years in exile. Following this period of exile, the brothers return to their birthplace Hastinapura on “Kartik Amarashya,” which is known as the new moon day of the Kartik month (when Diwali is now celebrated). The Pandavas were loved by all of their people and diyas were lit everywhere to celebrate their return. Believers of this legend celebrate Diwali as the homecoming of the Pandava brothers.

Still others celebrate Diwali due to their belief in the story featuring Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, fortune, and prosperity, rising up from the ocean. This legend is based in Hindu scripture that describes Devas, gods, and Asuras, demons, as being mortal at one time. However, they sought immortality and churned the ocean to find Amrita, the nectar of immortality. This is referenced in Hindu scriptures in an episode known as “Samudra mathan.” When the Devas and Asuras went to find Amrita in the ocean, the goddess Lakshmi, the daughter of the king of the ocean, arose and was immediately married to Lord Vishnu. Lakshmi is believed to have risen on the new moon day of the Kartik month, which is the day Diwali takes place. People who believe Diwali is rooted in this story celebrate Lakshmi’s birth and her marriage to Lord Vishnu.

These various interpretations of Diwali are also based on one’s location in India. North India follows the legend of Rama and his defeat of Ravana, while South India celebrates Diwali as the day that Lord Krishna defeated the demon Narakasura. Western India, however, believes Diwali “marks the day that Lord Krishnu, the Preserver, sent the demon king Bali to rule the nether world.” (“Diwali – Festival of Lights”)

According to an article entitled “Diwali in History,” Diwali is not solely about decorations, fireworks, and lights celebrating the legends found in Hindu scriptures and epic poems; this article finds a deeper meaning and forms a comparison between the lighting of diyas and knowledge, saying that “lighting the lamp of knowledge within us means to understand and reflect upon the significant purpose of each of the five days of festivities and to bring these thoughts to our day to day lives.” These five days of Diwali, in order, are described or named as Dhanvantari Triodasi, Narak Chaturdasi, the Hindu New Year (the actual day of Diwali), the fourth day is characterized by Govardhana Pooja, and the fifth and final day is called Bhai teeka.

On the first day of Diwali, Dhanvantari Triodasi (also called Dhanwantari Triodasi and Dhan Theras), women clean their houses and shop for certain items such as gold and kitchen utensils, believing these actions will make them successful and bring them luck. For Hindus on this day, the standard practice is to bathe and offer a dija featuring Prasad (literally translated to mean gracious gift), to Yama Raj, who is the God of Death. This offering is believed to be in exchange for Raj’s protection of them from untimely death. One legend associated with this exchange involves the story of King Hima and his new bride. It is said that King Hima’s horoscope foreshadowed his death by snakebite; in an attempt to save him, his wife prevented him from sleeping on that particular night and instead littered the entrance to his room with gold, lamps, and coins. She kept him from falling asleep by telling stories and singing, and when Yama Raj arrived as a serpent, he became distracted by the lamps and gold and listened to the wife’s storytelling instead. This day is therefore a celebration of both the saving of King Hima and his wife’s intelligence.

Narak Chaturdasi is the second day of Diwali; on this day, homes are decorated with diyas and rangolis are created on the floors of homes. Rangolis are patterns designed using rice, colored powders, sand, flower petals, or paint. They are usually placed in living rooms, courtyards, or any entryway of the house and are believed to welcome the goddess Lakshmi. In some homes, windows are also opened to let Lakshmi enter and bring wealth and success to the home. According to legend, this is the day Lord Krishna saved the world by conquering the demon Narakasur; therefore, on this day, believers of this particular legend are to bathe, cleansing the body, and rest in preparation for the further celebration of Diwali.

“Also on the third day, which is called ‘Lakshmi-puja,’ the goddess Lakshmi is worshipped in the evening, after an all-day fast.” (Nigosian, World Religions: A Historical Approach) This is considered to be the main day of the festival and the Hindu New Year, involving families converging for Lakshmi puja followed by feasts and fireworks.

Following the Hindu New Year, friends and families exchange gifts and warm wishes for the new year to come, and Godvardhan Pooja is observed. Godvardhan Pooja is also referred to as Annakut Pooja, which means, “worshipping this pile of grains.” (Singh “Godvardhan Pooja 2015: Date, History, Legend, Significance and Celebration”). It is celebrated as a remembrance of Lord Krishna’s defeat over the Lord of Heaven, Indra. In this story, Lord Krishna tells the people of Vrindavan to stop worshipping Indra and instead worship the Godvardhan Mountain, which brings rain to the earth. Hindus have continued to worship Godvardhan to further this tradition. In some parts of India, Govardhan Poooja is celebrated by forming mounds of cow dung, which symbolize Mount Govardhan. These mounds are then decorated with items such as flowers and worshipped. Many also celebrate this day to commemorate King Bali (Mahabali), who was a benevolent Asura king. In some parts of India, this day is additionally known as Vishwarkarma Day, celebrating the birth of Lord Vishwakarma. Lord Vishwakarma is a Hindu God who, according to legend, constructed weapons used thousands of years ago. He remains a symbol of excellent craftsmanship and quality, with one of his creations being the capital of Lord Krishna.

The final day of Diwali is referred to as Bhai Tika and is a day dedicated to sisters. Brothers visit their sisters and husbands to ensure their happiness and well being. This tradition is rooted in the legend that features Yama Raj visiting his sister Yamuna on this particular day in the Vedic period. In this story, Yama gives his sister a Vardhan, or a boon (blessing), that anyone who also visits her on this day will be forgiven of all of his or her sins. This day, then, is a celebration of Yama Raj and his blessing upon his sister. This day is also know as Bhai fota for Bengalis; in their tradition, this day is has a reversed meaning as it is when the sister prays for her brother’s happiness and well being.

Although it is best known for its religious significance within Hinduism, Diwali is also recognized by other entities; “businesses in India recognize the day after Diwali as being the first day of the new financial year.” (“Diwali – Festival of Lights”) It also has significance for religions other than Hinduism, including Sikhism and Jainism. “In Jainism, it marks the *nirvana* or spiritual awakening of Lord Mahavira in Oct. 15, 527 B.C. In Sikhism it marks the day that Guru Hargobind Ji, the Sixth Sikh Guru was freed from imprisonment.” (“Diwali – Festival of Lights”) One article even describes Diwali outside of India as being more than a Hindu festival and additionally being “a celebration of South Asian identities.” (Das "Diwali: The Biggest and Brightest Hindu Festival")

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