

Happy Diwali

Celebrate India's festival of lights

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[Diwali](#) is India's biggest and most important [holiday](#) of the year. The [festival](#) gets its name from the row (*avali*) of clay lamps (*diya* or *deepa*) that Indians light outside their homes to [symbolize](#) the inner light that protects us from spiritual darkness.

Diwali, also called Dipawali or Deepawali, is [celebrated](#) every [autumn](#), around the [new moon](#) between the [Hindu](#) months of Asvina and Kartika. The holiday is celebrated on different days every year, because the Hindu religious calendar is a [lunar](#) calendar, while the [secular](#) calendar used by most civic and national organizations is a [solar](#) calendar. Diwali usually falls in October or November.

Diwali originated as a festival that marked the last [harvest](#) before winter. India was an agricultural society where people would seek the [divine](#) blessing of Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, as they closed their [accounting](#) books and prayed for success in the new [financial](#) year. Today, this practice extends to businesses all over the [Indian subcontinent](#), which mark the fourth day of Diwali as the first day of the new financial year.

Indians celebrate with family gatherings, glittering clay lamps, festive [fireworks](#), strings of electric lights, bonfires, flowers, sharing of sweets, and [worship](#) to Lakshmi, the Hindu goddess of wealth, fortune, and prosperity. Some believe that Lakshmi wanders the Earth looking for homes where she will be welcomed. People open their doors and windows and light lamps to invite Lakshmi in.

Over the centuries, Diwali has become a national festival that is enjoyed by most Indians regardless of faith: Hindus, [Jains](#), [Buddhists](#), and [Sikhs](#).

The Hindu Diwali story has variations across India, all involving deities and [demons](#), kings and [karma](#). In all interpretations, one common thread rings true—the festival marks the victory of good over evil.

- In North India, people celebrate the story of Rama's return to the [ancient](#) city of Ayodhya after he defeated Ravana by lighting rows of clay lamps.
- In South India, people celebrate Diwali as the day Krishna defeated Narakasura.
- In western India, the festival marks the day that Vishnu sent Bali to rule the [netherworld](#).

Non-Hindu communities have other reasons for celebrating the holiday:

- In Jainism, it marks the [nirvana](#) or spiritual awakening of the spiritual leader Mahavira in 527 BCE.
- In Sikhism it marks the day that Guru Hargobind Ji, the Sixth Sikh [Guru](#), was freed from imprisonment.

Five Days of Diwali

The first day of Diwali (sometimes called *Dhanteras*) is celebrated by cleaning and renovating homes and businesses. It's considered good luck to purchase gold or silver items, and at least one or two new kitchen [utensils](#).

On the second day of Diwali (sometimes called *Chhoti Diwali*), people [decorate](#) their homes. The most common decorations are clay lamps (*diyas*) and designs called rangoli. [Rangoli](#) are created on floors and [pavements](#), usually using colored powders, sand, flour, rice, or flower petals.

The third day of Diwali is the main day of the festival. This is when families gather together for Lakshmi [puja](#), a prayer to the goddess. The Lakshmi puja is actually a celebration of three deities: Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth; Ganesh, the elephant-headed god of wisdom; and Kuber, the lord of wealth. The Lakshmi puja is followed by music, mouthwatering feasts, and fireworks festivities.

The fourth day of Diwali (sometimes called *Padwa*), is the first day of the new year. On this day, friends and relatives visit with gifts and best wishes for the season.

The fifth and last day of Diwali (sometimes called *Bahu-dooj*) honors [siblings](#). Brothers and sisters celebrate with food, gifts, and parties.

Questions

- Diwali originated as a festival that marked the last harvest of the year before winter. Why would people celebrate the end of the harvest season, and why would they do so with a “festival of lights”?

People celebrate the end of a harvest for two major reasons, both tied to agriculture.

- In ancient agricultural societies, the end of the season traditionally meant less need for the backbreaking work of harvesting crops. If the harvest was successful, the end of the season also meant the community had abundant food for the winter. Less work, more food—those are both good reasons to celebrate!
 - A festival of lights is perfectly timed as autumn turns to winter. Days start getting shorter and nights start getting longer as the winter solstice approaches.
- Can you think of any other autumn harvest festivals?
 - *Thanksgiving* is probably the most familiar.
 - *Mehregan* is a Persian festival associated with the end of the harvest and financial seasons—just like Diwali.
 - The *Mid-Autumn Festival* is considered “intangible cultural heritage” in China, and is also celebrated in Vietnam.
 - *Oktoberfest* is a harvest festival associated with the autumn grain harvest in Germany.
 - *Sukkot* is a Jewish festival associated with the autumn harvest.
 - *Samhain* is an ancient Celtic celebration of the end of the autumn harvest season.
 - *Chuseok* is a three-day harvest festival celebrated in the Koreas.
 - *Onam* is another Indian harvest festival, this one celebrated largely by the people in the state of Kerala, honoring the traditional end of the rice harvest.
 - *Crop Over* is a little-known festival on Barbados tracing its roots to the sugar cane harvest.
- Can you think of any other autumn or winter “festivals of light” celebrated in the

Northern Hemisphere?

- *Hanukkah*, the Jewish festival of light, is probably the most familiar.
- *Christmas* is often associated with bright lights.
- *Tazaungdaing* is an ancient Buddhist festival that is a national holiday in Burma (Myanmar).

Fast Facts

As Indians have emigrated from the Indian subcontinent, they have taken their culture with them. Today, Diwali has gone global!

- Leister, England, may have the largest Diwali celebrations outside India, with more than 37,000 people attending the festivities.
- Some attendees have claimed the Diwali celebrations in Melbourne are the biggest public parties in Australia.
- In Nepal, Diwali is more frequently known as Tihar. In addition to traditional Diwali celebrations of family and good fortune, Tihar also honors pets and other animals with which people have strong relationships. Dogs, cats, crows, and cows are celebrated with special treats during Tihar.
- On the Caribbean island of Trinidad, the Diwali celebrations last nine days, not five.
- More than 100 communities in the United States plan Diwali festivals. One of the biggest celebrations takes place in Times Square, New York City.
- East African countries such as Kenya and Tanzania have large Indian communities and often have subdued Diwali celebrations.
- In the South American country of Guyana, Diwali is celebrated with a parade featuring lavish floats depicting Hindu deities.

Vocabulary

| Term | Part of Speech | Definition |
|--------------------|------------------|--|
| accounting | <i>noun</i> | management of financial information. |
| agriculture | <i>noun</i> | the art and science of cultivating the land for growing crops (farming) or raising livestock (ranching). |
| ancient | <i>adjective</i> | very old. |

| Term | Part of Speech | Definition |
|----------------------------|-----------------------|---|
| autumn | <i>noun</i> | season between summer and winter. Also called fall. |
| Buddhist | <i>noun</i> | person who follows the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha). |
| celebrate | <i>verb</i> | to observe or mark an important event with public and private ceremonies or festivities. |
| decorate | <i>verb</i> | to design, garnish, or adorn with festive additions. |
| deity | <i>noun</i> | very holy or spiritual being. |
| demon | <i>noun</i> | evil spirit or magical creature. |
| divine | <i>adjective</i> | having to do with a god. |
| Diwali | <i>noun</i> | Hindu festival of lights, celebrated every autumn throughout India by citizens of all faiths. |
| festival | <i>noun</i> | day or other period of time set to celebrate or commemorate an event, usually with a series of parties, ceremonies, or observances. |
| financial | <i>adjective</i> | having to do with money. |
| fireworks | <i>plural noun</i> | controlled explosive devices that produce a striking display of light and loud noise, used for signaling or as part of a celebration. |
| guru | <i>noun</i> | most elevated title in the Sikh religion, applied to only 10 Sikh leaders who have provided divine guidance to humanity. The eleventh guru is the Sikh book of holy scriptures. |
| harvest | <i>noun</i> | the gathering and collection of crops, including both plants and animals. |
| Hindu | <i>noun</i> | religion of the Indian subcontinent with many different sub-types, most based around the idea of "daily morality." |
| holiday | <i>noun</i> | period of celebration or honor. |
| Indian subcontinent | <i>noun</i> | landmass in south-central Asia carried by the Indian tectonic plate, including the peninsula of India. |
| interpretation | <i>noun</i> | way of understanding an event or set of facts. |
| Jain | <i>noun</i> | follower of the religion of Jainism, which supports nonviolence toward all living things. |

| Term | Part of Speech | Definition |
|--------------------|------------------------|---|
| karma | <i>noun</i> | spiritual principle mostly associated with Hinduism and Buddhism, in which the intentions and actions of an individual influence the future of that individual. |
| lunar | <i>adjective</i> | having to do with Earth's moon or the moons of other planets. |
| netherworld | <i>noun</i> | spiritual or mythological world and culture that exists beyond death. |
| new moon | <i>noun</i> | dark phase of the lunar cycle when the moon is invisible or barely visible, occurring when the moon passes between the sun and earth. |
| nirvana | <i>noun</i> | in the Buddhist religion, an end to personal reincarnations, achieved by the highest enlightenment and freedom from personal passion, hatred, and delusion. |
| originate | <i>verb</i> | to begin or start. |
| pavement | <i>noun</i> | hard-surfaced road or path created with asphalt, concrete, brick, or rocks. |
| puja | <i>noun</i> | ritual worship of a particular Hindu god. |
| purchase | <i>verb</i> | to buy. |
| rangoli | <i>noun</i> | folk art in which colorful and intricate designs are created on floors using colored sand, powder, flour, or flower petals. |
| renovate | <i>verb</i> | to restore or make better. |
| secular | <i>adjective</i> | not having to do with religion or spirituality. |
| sibling | <i>noun</i> | brother or sister. |
| Sikh | <i>adjective, noun</i> | people and culture that believe in one God, equality, freedom of religion, and community service |
| solar | <i>adjective</i> | having to do with the sun. |
| symbolize | <i>verb</i> | to represent an object, idea, organization, or geographical region. |
| utensil | <i>noun</i> | tool or instrument for preparing or eating food. |
| variation | <i>noun</i> | difference. |
| worship | <i>noun</i> | honor, adoration, or glorification, usually to a religious god. |

Articles & Profiles

- [National Geographic Kids: Diwali](#)

Instructional Content

- [BBC: Diwali—Classroom Activities](#)
- [Hindu-American Foundation: Teach Diwali in School](#)

Worksheets & Handouts

- [Hindu-American Foundation: Diwali Coloring Pages](#)

Websites

- [Society for the Confluence of Festivals in India: Diwali](#)



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