

Holy Festivals

Insights into the Annual Celebrations Hindus Enjoy the World Over



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WHEN IT COMES TO HINDU FESTIVALS, NEPAL EXCELLS. THE NEPALESE CELEBRATE 19 per year on their official calendar, three of them exclusively for women. India, by contrast, sets aside just two Hindu days a year on its national calendar—Navaratri and Dipavali. But whatever official calendars say, Hindus miss no opportunity to set mundane matters aside and join with friends, neighbors and strangers alike in invocation of the One Supreme God and the many Gods, in honor of the guru or in celebration of the passing of the seasons. These are times when all three worlds—of men, of devas and of Gods—come close and commune with each other. While anthropologists generally assign mere social significance in our cycles of festivals, the devout Hindu knows these are times of profound mystical connection to the inner worlds, times when God and the Gods touch our world, revitalize our very souls, lighten our karmas and bless our families. In this chapter we present the nine most popular Hindu festivals. While a few are celebrated by all Hindus, most are specific to one or more of the four main denominations.

In celebration: (left) one million Hindus gather at Batu Caves, Malaysia, to celebrate Thai Pusam in honor of Lord Murugan; (below) family and neighbors in North India join in kirtan, ecstatic religious singing, for Janmashtami, the birthday of Lord Krishna



LEFT, SHAMSHAHIR SHAMS UDIN

DINODIA/SHAMA M. KETKAR

The nine festivals described here are celebrated India-wide—or rather, worldwide, wherever Hindus live. There are also many regional festivals, some of which are locally celebrated on an even grander scale than some of these nine.

Ram Navami

Lord Rama, the seventh incarnation of Vishnu, was born on *navami*, the ninth lunar day, or *tithi*, of the bright half of Meena, or Pisces (Chaitra—the lunar month of March/April). Devotees observe this day with non-stop recitation of the *Ramayana*, the story of Rama's life. In the evening, crowds attend Ramalila, dramatic performances recounting Rama's deeds. Every home will resound with devotional singing. This festival is especially popular in Uttar Pradesh, where Rama's ancient kingdom of Ayodhya was situated. Sometimes Ramalila and other devotional observances are done during the nine days before or after *navami*. People will keep fasts or eat only fruit or a special *prasadam* prepared for the day. If celebrated for nine

Of brothers and Gods: (below) women toss colored powders in the air at each other in celebration of Holi; (right top) A sister ties the *rakhi* around her brother's wrist; (right below) a huge crowd escorts Lord Ganesha to the ocean in Mumbai on Ganesha Chaturthi

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days, it is common to remain awake the whole ninth night, engaged in devotional practices. Devotees also contribute generously to temples and other charitable organizations on Ram Navami. Lord Rama is honored not only as an incarnation of God, but also as an ideal man who exemplified the virtues of reverence, obedience and duty.

Raksha Bandhan

On the full moon of Karkata, or Cancer (Shravana—July/August), sisters tie a *rakhi* around the wrist of their brothers, who in return give a present of clothing, cash or jewelry and become obligated for the safety of the sister. The *rakhi* can also be given to anyone chosen as an “adopted brother,” even outside the Hindu community. It signifies that she is praying for his welfare and that he is determined to give protection to her. Originally the *rakhi* was a handspun cotton thread dyed yellow with turmeric, but now many colors and materials are used. Three knots are made in the thread to signify protection in thought, word and deed. This day is also celebrated as Narali Purnima, “coconut full moon,” when coconuts are offered to Varuna, God of the Sea, by throwing them into the ocean. It is also called Avani Avittam, the ceremony of changing of the sacred thread among the brahmins. This tradition dates back to Vedic times when the year's studies were commenced on this day.

Ganesha Chaturthi

The fourth lunar day of the bright half of Simha, or Leo (Bhadra—August/September), is celebrated around the world as the birthday of Ganesha, the elephant-headed God of Wisdom and Lord of Obstacles. As with other festivals, the homes and temples are elaborately decorated for the day. The special activity is the making of clay images of Ganesha, reverently formed and decorated. Some are huge works of art created by craftsmen, others are tiny icons painted and decorated by children. At the end of the day, or seven or ten days later, these images are ceremoniously immersed in the ocean or a nearby stream or lake, signifying the creation of Ganesha from the Earth and His return and dissolution in the ocean of universal consciousness. So intense has been His presence at this time that even grown men weep at His auspicious departure. His worship on this day removes obstacles and ensures smooth progress in all ventures through the year. As Ganesha is common to all Hindu sects, this festival is serving both inside and outside of India as a day to celebrate Hindu solidarity and unity.

Dipavali (or Diwali)

The festival of lights, Dipavali, or Diwali, takes place on the fourteenth lunar day of the dark half of Tula, or Libra (Karttika—October/November), with related festivities on adjacent days. It is the most widely celebrated Hindu festival in the world, and possibly related to the European Celtic festival of Samhain, observed at the same time of the year with huge bonfires set on hilltops. This is the day that Rama returned to Ayodhya after spending 14 years in exile, though many other reasons for the day are cited. It is a celebration of renewal as the New Year commences in the Vikram calendar. Everyone takes a special bath in the early morning and puts on new clothes. Houses are cleaned, painted and decorated. Goddess Lakshmi is invoked for prosperity, and Her presence is felt in every home. Businesses close out their books for the past year and open new ones, even conducting a mock first business deal of the year. In the evening, every house, store, temple and wall is decorated with thousands of small lamps, while fireworks are set off overhead and firecrackers by the hundreds of thousands below. Family bonds are renewed, especially between brothers and sisters, and forgiveness is requested from friends for any misunderstandings during the previous year. Of all festivals, Dipavali holds a special place, and is the premier international one, holding official holiday status in nine countries—India, Nepal, Fiji, Mauritius, Guyana, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Singapore, with attempts being made to add more countries where Hindus live.

(LEFT) DESHAKALYAN CHOWDHURY (RIGHT) DINODIA/LAL BAUG



Holi

Bonfires and the splashing of friends and strangers alike with brightly colored waters, powders and paints mark this most high-spirited of Hindu festivals. It is celebrated on the full moon day of Kumbha, or Aquarius (Phalguna—February/March), and in many places for the several days preceding. Giant bonfires are built by neighborhood boys, where effigies of various demons are consumed. Friends are visited and presents of sweets exchanged. This is essentially a celebration of spring, at which different events are commemorated. This is the day the infant Krishna killed the demoness Putana; the day that Lord Vishnu's devotee Pralada, son of the demon Hiran-yakasipu, survived a fire intended to kill him, and the day that Siva burnt Kama, the God of Love, to ashes. Holi is very popular among devotees of Krishna at Mathura, Krishna's birthplace. Also known as Hutasani, "fire consuming," Holi signifies the triumph of good over evil, the beginning of the new agricultural season and the renewal of relationships.

Guru Purnima

In ashrams around the world, the spiritual preceptor is honored on this full moon day of July with garlands, gifts and donations to show love and gratitude for his wisdom through the year. Devotees renew their commitment to following his teachings and guidance for the coming year. The traditional worship is *pada puja*, ceremonial bathing of the guru's feet (or, in his absence, his sandals) with water, milk, honey, sandalwood paste and offering gifts of precious items including 108 gold coins. This day is also known as Vyasa Puja, in honor of Sage Vyasa, codifier of the *Vedas* and author of the *Mahabharata* and *Puranas*. He is honored in temples with offerings of limes and rice, the latter being taken home by devotees and mixed with their own store of rice. This is also a day for reading religious books while remembering the auspicious form of the *satguru* through whom God grants the grace of enlightenment to seekers.

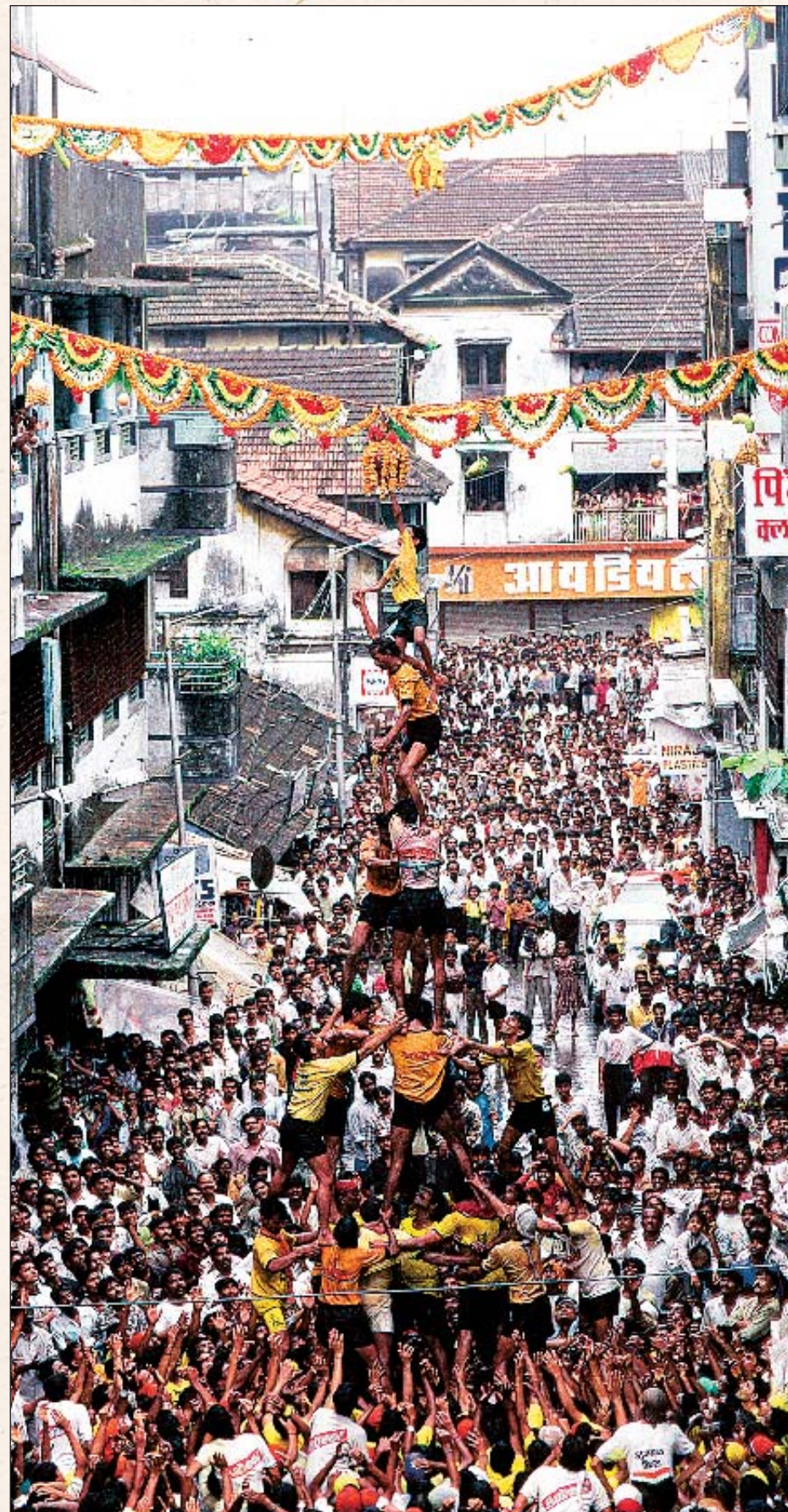
Krishna Janmashtami

Lord Krishna, eighth incarnation of Vishnu, was born on the eighth lunar day (*ashtami*) of the dark half of Karkata, or Cancer (Sravana—July/August). Devotees fast the preceding day until midnight, the time that Krishna was born to Vasudeva and Devika in the Mathura kingdom's prison 5,000 years ago. At midnight, amidst grand ceremony the temple priest places the image of the newborn Krishna in a swinging crib. Among the traditional observances, pots of sweets, curd and butter are hung near homes, on trees and street poles in recollection of Krishna's love for these things. Teenage boys dressed as cowherds form human pyramids to reach and break the pots. The following day is again one of festivity, including puja, storytelling and the Ras Leela, a folk theater depicting major events of Krishna's life. "Dark as a rain cloud," reads one account of His birth, "He made the prison glow with the splendor of His crown, His jewelry and His yellow silk robes. He was the Lord God incarnate."

Navaratri

The festival of "Nine Nights," Navaratri, honoring the Goddess, begins on the first lunar day of the bright half of Kanya, or Virgo (Asvina—September/October). Three days are devoted each to Durga (Goddess of valor), Lakshmi (Goddess of wealth) and Sarasvati (Goddess of knowledge). In eastern India the festival is known as Durga Puja. There, images of the Goddess are created,

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God, Gods and guru: (above) priest offers holy ash to the guru's sacred sandals on Guru Purnima; (below) North Indian devotees crowd about a Sivalinga to offer milk and garlands during Mahasivaratri; (far right) a pyramid of daring youth attempt to knock a pot strung high above the street in this competition held in imitation of the child Lord Krishna's stealing butter



worshiped for ten days, then immersed in the sea. In southern India, houses are decorated with displays of dolls, toys and images of the Gods. In western India, the traditional *garbha* dance is performed nightly. On the fifth day (Lalita Panchami), all books of a household are gathered, sacred lamps lit reverently by their side and the blessings of Sarasvati invoked. Artisans give their tools a "day of rest," worship and seek blessings for them. Day ten, variously known as Vijaya Dasami, Dasara and Dussehra, marks the commencement of learning. In many localities huge effigies of Ravana are burnt to celebrate Rama's conquest of the demon.

Mahasivaratri

On "Siva's Great Night," Mahasivaratri, the fourteenth day of the dark half of Kumbha, or Aquarius (Phalguna—February/March), devotees fast all day in preparation to worship Lord Siva from evening until early dawn—bathing the sacred Siva Linga with water, milk, honey and saffron water, then offering bilva leaves while chanting *Sri Rudram*, the pre-eminent Vedic hymn to Siva, or reciting His 1,008 names are the highpoints of the all-night vigil. Only when the last puja is finished in early morning do devotees break their fast by eating the sacred *prasadam* offered earlier to the Lord. The following day is one of feasting and gaiety, especially at grand fairs held in many parts of India. On Siva's night we contemplate Siva as the Un-manifest Reality. We dive deep in yogic meditation on His endless/beginningless Radiance.

Setting Festival Dates

Most festivals are held on astrologically auspicious times for a particular deity in the same zodiac sign of the Sun each year. Ram Navami, for example, takes place in the sign of Meena or Pisces, which corresponds to the north Indian month of Chaitra or the Tamil month of Panguni. Each festival day is designated on a particular lunar day, or *tithi*, during a particular sign. There are 30 *tithis* from new moon to new moon. The month's "bright half" (*shukla paksha*) starts from the new moon (*amavasya*) to the full moon (*purnima*) and the "dark half" (*krishna paksha*) from the full moon to the new moon. Because the cycle of the Moon around the Earth (about 29.5 days) and the Sun through one zodiac sign (about 30.4 days) do not match, the month may begin on varying *tithis*. *Tithis* also vary in length from 20 to 26 hours, because of the Moon's orbit in relation to the sun. When a *tithi* occurs twice in one month, the second is chosen for the festival. Because a *tithi* is not the same as a 24-hour day and the calculations depend on location, one must consult a Hindu calendar (*panchanga*) computed for a particular place to determine a festival date. One cannot simply go by the dates for India. Some festivals are calculated using the *nakshatra* system. There are many regional variations in calendars and hence even dissent on festival calculations.



DINODIA/D. BANERJEE

COMMENTARY

The Inner Light

Amidst the parties and fireworks, let us not forget the real meaning of Dipavali

BY RAMA DEVAGUPTA

“FROM FALSEHOOD LEAD ME TO TRUTH, FROM DARKNESS lead me to light, from death lead me to immortality.” Nowhere else is the symbolism of these lines from the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* better expressed than in the celebration of Dipavali. Popularly known as the Festival of Lights and abbreviated to Diwali in contemporary usage, Dipavali is the most important festival for the world’s Hindu population. With its arrays of lighted lamps, firecrackers and festivities, Dipavali transforms the desolate, fall moonless skies by filling them with laughter, happiness and radiance. Like other religious festivals of the world, Dipavali is associated with several different legends and has deep social and spiritual significance. It is primarily known for the worship of the Goddess Lakshmi, who symbolizes wealth and prosperity. In North India, it

is a commemoration of Lord Rama’s triumphant return to Ayodhya after vanquishing the forces led by Ravana. In South India, Dipavali is celebrated in remembrance of Lord Krishna’s victory over Narakasura. In addition, it marks the end of the rainy season and the harvesting cycle, and therefore it is also the festival of the Kharif or new crop.

Whichever story one might prefer, Dipavali celebrations all over the world are universally marked by majestic fireworks, a variety of cultural programs, a spirit of sharing and brotherhood, and, most importantly, the lighting of lamps (*dipas*) in several rows (*vali*) inside and outside the house. It is these luminous *dipas* that contain the

essence of Dipavali. Just as light dispels the darkness of the night and shows the right path to a weary traveler, the lighting of lamps on the night of Karttik Amavasya, when the new moon is in Tula or Libra, symbolizes the victory of goodness over evil, justice over injustice, light over darkness and wisdom over ignorance.

Since the beginning of time, spiritual aspirants have sought light as the culmination of their journey. What is this internal, divine light of which the *dipas* on Dipavali night, or those set before the family deity during morning and evening prayers, are only an external representation?

One of the most illustrious conversations on this subject can be found in the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, wherein King Janaka of Videha, whose courtroom was famed for spiritual discussions con-

Dipavali: (left) devotee contemplates her offering tray and sacred lamps; (right) traditional clay lamp is set upon the drawing of a swastika and other auspicious symbols made with colored rice flour

ducted by the most distinguished rishis of his time, once asked of Sage Yajnavalkya: “Revered Sage, enlighten me! What is the light of man? What is it that allows him to function in this world?”

Yajnavalkya gave a simple and straightforward answer. “The sun is his light, O King!” he said. “If there were no sunlight, people would be unable to perform their duties in this world. By the light of the sun activity is possible, and it is by the light of the sun that one sits, moves about, completes all work and becomes content.” In a series of questions, Janaka presses the sage on the issue, finally asking what light there would be in the absence of all external manifestations. Yajnavalkya gave a very revealing answer. “O King Janaka!” he said. “Know that when everything else fails, the Soul, the inner Self, will be the guide. It is the Self that will be the light.”

This light, which is equated with the Supreme and supposed to be the consciousness of life, is expressed as follows in the *Chandogya Upanishad* (3.13.7): “There is a Light that shines beyond all things on Earth, beyond us all, beyond the heavens, beyond the highest, the very highest, heavens. This is the Light that shines in our heart.”

Unfortunately, we are oblivious to it most of the time. Even when we read and hear about its presence, we are unable to see the Light, mainly because this flame, which the *Vedas* say is tinier than the tiniest of atomic sparks and hidden in the innermost chamber of the human heart, is now covered by layers of grossness, complexities and impressions. Also, due to our outward-turning senses, tendencies and attachments to the fruits of action, we are unable to turn our eyes inward—at least not until compelled by external circumstances. But we must be able to do so somehow, if the lower self is to become one with the Ultimate Being. But this union is not as easy as it appears in words. The journey is filled with obstacles: darkness and ignorance, misleading visions.

In Arjuna’s vision of Lord Krishna in His Cosmic Form on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, the experience of the transcendental Reality is associated with brilliance, splendor and light: “If a thousand suns should rise all at once in the sky, such splendor would resemble the splendor of that great Being.... Then Arjuna, who was filled with amazement, whose hair was standing on end, bowing his head to the Lord with joined palms, said: ... ‘With infinite power, without beginning, middle or end, with innumerable arms, the Moon and Sun being Your eyes, I see You, the blazing fire Your mouth, burning all this universe with Your radiance.’”

Fascinating and awesome as such visions might be, even the experience of light ought not be the final goal. If that were so, the *Bhagavad Gita* would have ended with the Eleventh Teaching. But it does not. According to Krishna Himself, the supreme state is that which the Sun does not illumine, nor the Moon, nor the fire, for it is the Light of Pure Consciousness. These words are analogous to those found in the *Svetasvatara* (6.14) and *Katha Upanishad* (5.15). “There the Sun shines not, nor the Moon, nor the stars; lightnings shine not there and much less earthly fire. From His light all these give light, and His radiance illumines all creation.”

In the modern era, Shri Ram Chandra of Shahjapur for almost fifty years taught meditation on the “divine light in the heart,” according to the Sahaj Marg system of Raja Yoga. In *Voice Real*, he writes, “Every saint has used the word *light* ... and that is the best expression for Reality. But that creates some complication, because when we talk of light, the idea of luminosity becomes prominent, and we begin to take it

as glittering. The Real Light carries with it no such sense and may be represented as ‘light without luminosity.’ It refers only to the real substance or, more appropriately, to ‘substanceless substance,’ which is associated with neither light nor darkness, but beyond both.”

It is painfully evident that words and descriptions of spiritual Light can convey only so much. As Babuji says, understanding comes by intuitive capacity and practical experience in the spiritual field.

We should be celebrating the Festival of Lights in renewal of our quest for that spiritual Light. But today, few, if any, attach such reverence to the occasion. Instead, it has become a night of entertainment, gambling, pleasure and consumption. Just as the candles and electric lights of modern society have gradually replaced the traditional *dipas*, the focus of the prayers has shifted from the journey from darkness to light to the quest for fortune and wealth.

To appreciate the spirit behind this festival and pass on its significance to others, one needs only to consider the traditional lamps that are popular even today in the small towns and villages of India. These *dipas* represent the four essential elements that are required in the seeker: detachment (the clay container), devotion to the Lord (the oil), prayer and meditation (the cotton wick), and spiritual wisdom (the matchstick to light the lamp). It is noteworthy that on Dipavali the first lamp is lit with a matchstick, after which that lamp is used to light the whole array of lamps inside and outside the house. The first lamp symbolizes divine effulgence, while the other lighted lamps represent the light in individual hearts. Together, they reiterate the eternal truth pronounced in the *Vedas*: “The One willed to become the Many.”

As the flames of all these lamps burn brightly and reach upward through the entire night, they show the possibility that, with the removal of darkness, grossness and ignorance, the tiny flickering light in our hearts can also shine brightly, illumining the whole universe. May we all progress speedily to the highest levels of spirituality—from darkness to light, and beyond.



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