

About Deepawali - The Social Significance

Deepa means a lamp and avala means a row. The word literally means a row of lights. We normally think that Deepawali is about a lamplight, a deepa. In fact, Deepawali is not about a single deepa, it is about many. It is about a collective, an organization, a formation of lamps. It is about the relationship between one lamp and the rest of the lamps in the collective. The secret message of deepawali is hidden in its very name.

Let us begin with a short prayer that sums up the essence of this remarkable festival.

Deepawali Prayer



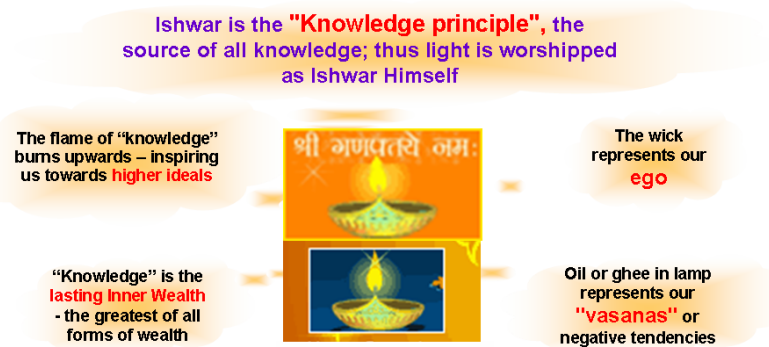
*Om Asato Maa Sat Gamaya
Tamaso Maa Jyotir Gamaya
Mrityor Maa Amritam Gamaya*

Sat means the truth and *a-sat* is its negation or falsehood. So the first line means: lead me from Falsehood to Truth. *Tamaso* is darkness or ignorance. And *jyoti* is light. So the second line means: lead me from darkness or ignorance to light or knowledge. The third line means lead me from death (*mriyu*) to immortality (*amrita*).

Deepawali is the festival of lights symbolizing the lighting of the lamp of knowledge and removing ignorance, in our lives, and in those of others. It is this deeper message of social consciousness behind the glamour of Deepawali that this article attempts to convey.

The Diya - Lamp

The central theme behind deepawali rests on the concept of the Diya, the lamp. In Hindu tradition Ishwara or God is the "Knowledge principle," the Reality, the source of all knowledge. The light enables one to see the reality that is ever present. When you enter a dark room full of furniture, you can see nothing even though it is all there. But as soon as you turn the light on you can see it all. Light makes you aware of the reality as it is. Light in the form of Agni is the eternal witness, the illuminator in whose presence all names and forms become visible and known. Thus Agni is synonymous with God or Knowledge. Agni is worshipped as Ishwar Itself.



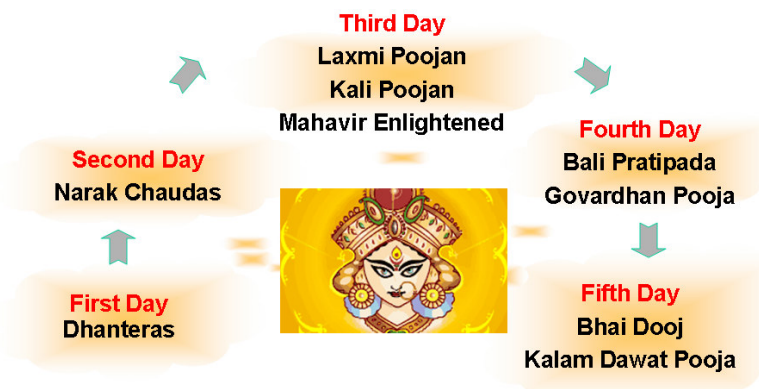
Diwali is generally associated with Lakshmi the goddess of wealth. But wealth does not only mean material wealth. It includes intellectual, cultural and spiritual wealth.

The diya is a symbol of the *self*. It is made of clay, which represents our body, has a cotton wick and oil. "Knowledge" is the lasting inner wealth - the greatest of all forms of wealth. That is what the flame in the diya signifies. Notice the flame of the diya always burns upwards – inspiring us towards higher ideals.

The wick in the diya represents our *ego*. Oil or ghee in lamp represents our "*vasanas*" or negative tendencies. As the lamp burns to produce light for all, the oil is slowly consumed and finally, the wick also burns out. So what does this mean? When lit by spiritual knowledge (i.e. the flame), the "*vasanas*" get slowly exhausted and the ego, too, finally perishes.

Only when we sacrifice ourselves for others like the lamp, by humbling ourselves, by ridding our ego, can we truly serve the society. The greatest lamp is the Sun, slowly but surely consuming itself so all the creatures on the Earth can live. The Sun only gives and asks for nothing. That is why it is called a Devata - the one who gives.

A Five Day Festival



Deepawali is a five day festival and each day is special. It is celebrated all over India from Kerala to Kashmir and Gujarat to Arunachal in slightly modified forms but the essentials are the same. The five day holiday season is for us to renew ourselves spiritually, rejoice with family and friends, reflect on the events of the past year and resolve for the future.

First Day - Dhanteras: The thirteenth day of the moon is dedicated to worship of Maha Lakshmi as Dhanwantari where she is worshipped as the Goddess of wealth alone; one diya is lit on this evening.

Second Day - Narak Chaudas: The fourteenth day of the moon is celebrated for the destruction of the rakshasa Narakasura by Bhagwan Sri Krishna. It is also called Choti Deepavali as 5 diyas are lit on this night.

Third Day Laxmi and Kali Pooja: Then follows Amaavaasya, the new moon day, auspicious for offering prayers and gratitude to Laxmi, Ganesha and ancestors of the family and invoking their memories and blessings for treading the path of right conduct. Kali Pooja and Mahavir's enlightenment are also celebrated on this day.

Fourth Day is Bali Pratipada and Govardhan Pooja: The day when Bhagwaan Sri Krsna lifted the Gobardhan mountain to save the people of Braja. On this day Bali was humbled by Vaman, an avatar of Sri Vishnu.

Fifth Day is Bhai Dooj and Kalam Dawat Pooja - the day when brothers and sisters renew their sacred relationship. It is also the day to close previous accounts and open new account books.



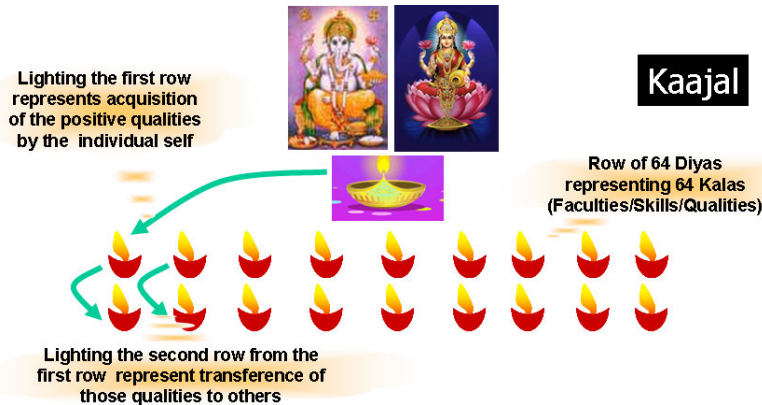
Preparation and Learning

Days preceding deepawali are a time for cleanup. We clean our homes, whitewash houses and offices and beautifully decorate them. Symbolically, this is also the time to rid the "*cobwebs*" from

within us; all the negativity that is stored in the deep corners of our minds. We light up our homes to welcome "Lakshmi," goddess of prosperity who roams the earth on this day and enters the house that is pure, clean and brightly illuminated.

Significance of the Deepawali Pooja

The deepawali pooja is beautiful and very touching once we understand the meaning behind the ritual. The setup consists of one big Diya and two rows of 64 diyas each representing 64 Kalas (Faculties/Skills/Qualities).



The big Diya represents Ishwara the "Knowledge Principle." The first row of 64 diyas represents the individual along with all his or her traits. The second row represents the community. Once Laxmi and Ganesha have been invoked, we light the first row of diyas one by one from the main diya that is Ishwara.

Thus, lighting the first row represents acquisition of the positive qualities by the individual self from Ishwara the source. After all the 64 diyas in the first row are lit, the diyas in the second row are lit one by one from the corresponding diya in the first row. Lighting the second row from the first row represents the transference of those qualities to others. The significance is that not only do we need to acquire knowledge, skill, talents ourselves, but it is our duty to then pass it on to others in the family and the community. A single lamp can light a hundred others; sharing with others does not diminish knowledge.

Celebration

If there is one occasion that is all joy and all jubilation for one and all - the young and the old, men and women - in the entire Hindu world, it is Deepaawali. Celebrated with vigor and gaiety by people of every segment, its magical and radiant touch creates an atmosphere of joy and



festivity. Innumerable lamps are lit on the roofs and window sills of the houses, thus, giving an ethereal and almost divine look to the whole town. Even the humblest of huts will be lighted by a row of earthen lamps. Crackers resound and light up the earth and the sky. The faces of boys and girls flow with a rare charm in their dazzling hues and colors. Deepotsavas in temples and all sacred places of worship and on the banks of rivers symbolize the scattering of spiritual radiance all round from these holy centers. The radiant

sight of everybody adorned with new and bright clothes, especially ladies decorated with the best of ornaments, captures the social mood at its happiest. And all this illumination and fireworks, joy and festivity, is to signify the removal of darkness (ignorance) with the lighting of a lamp (knowledge).

And, of course, children get gifts. However, it is the crackers and the fireworks that attract the children the most and form the highlight of the festival. There is great celebration and fun. Children light fireworks. Families exchange sweets, gifts with friends and relatives. It is celebrated in grand style by Hindus and others all over the world.

Social Significance - Assess and Re-focus

Deepawali is a “Maha Parva” meaning a great expression of social consciousness, for strengthening the social fabric. It is not an individual festival but a collective one in which every village, every town, every city, every state, every region, nay the entire country is connected and reverberates with the message of Deepawali.



It is celebrated on the darkest night of the year – Kartika Amavasya (New Moon). This contrast is deliberate: a reminder to all of us that even in the darkest moments of our lives, there is hope, there is reason to be thankful, to celebrate and be joyful.

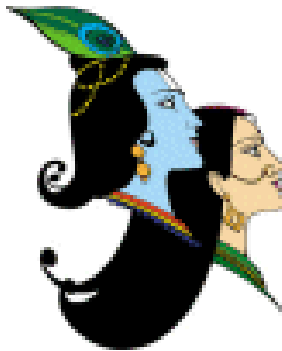
Deepawali marks the beginning of the **fiscal** year. The **calendar** new year, on the other hand, is celebrated in April time frame in the form of Ugadi, Baisakhi and Varshapratipada.

Finance & Business: Deepawali promotes prosperity – sweets, clothing, fireworks, jewelry and grains. It marks the advent of a new season and the sowing of new crops.

The singular message of deepawali is to emulate the lamp, the diya. To purify our ego, like the lamp, in the service of the society.

Supplementary Material --

Sri Krishna Liberates Narakasura



Narakaasura (also known as Bhuma, the son of Bhumi Devi) was an asura king ruling over Praagjyotishapura (the present-day Assam). By virtue of his powers and boons secured from Brahma, he became all-conquering. Power made him swollen-headed and he became a menace to the good and the holy men and even the Devas. He captured Aditi (divine light), the mother of Devas, and threw her into the dungeon. The Devas headed by Devendra implored Sri Krishna, who was at Dwaaraka, to come to their rescue. Sri Krishna responded. He marched from the western end of the country to its eastern end, Praagjyotishapura, destroyed the huge army that opposed him and finally beheaded Narakaasura himself.

The populace was freed from the oppressive tyranny and all heaved a sigh of relief. The 16,000 women kept in captivity by Narakasura were freed. With a view to removing any stigma on them and according them social dignity, Sri Krishna gave all of them the status of his wives. After the slaying of Narakasura, Sri Krishna bathed himself, smearing his body with oil in the early morning of Chaturdashi; hence the invigorating vogue of taking an early morning ‘oil-bath’ on that day. Mother Earth, whose son Narakasura was, requested Sri Krishna that the day be celebrated as one of jubilation. Sri Krishna granted the request and since then the tradition has continued.

Mother Earth reconciled herself to the loss of her son, and knowing, as she did, that the Lord had punished her son for the sake of the welfare of the world, she set a glowing example of how one has to brush aside one's personal joys and sorrows in the interest of society. It is this deliverance of the people from the clutches of the asuras that fill the people with joy.

Lakshmi Puja

This is also the sacred occasion for the worship of Maha Lakshmi, the Devi of Wealth and Prosperity. Young and old, men and women, all dress up in new clothes and buy new utensils on this day. They worship the deities, Lakshmi and Ganesha, and share sweets and gifts with their relatives and friends. It is also the beginning of the new financial year for the business community. They open their New Fiscal Year's account with her worship. This reminds us of the famous saying of the sage Vyaasa, '*dharma-adarthashcha kaamashcha...*' - it is through right conduct that wealth and fulfillment of desires also accrue.



Kali Puja

The love between the Divine Mother and her human children is a unique relationship. Kali, the Dark Mother, is one such deity with whom devotees have a very loving and intimate bond in spite of her fearful appearance. In this relationship, the worshipper becomes a child and Kali assumes the form of the ever-caring mother.

Who is Kali?

Kali is the fearful and ferocious form of the mother Devi Durga. Kali is represented with perhaps the fiercest features amongst all the world's deities. She has four arms, with a sword in one hand and the head of a demon in another. The other two hands bless her worshippers, and say, "fear not"! She has two dead heads for her earrings, a string of skulls as necklace, and a girdle made of human hands as her clothing. Her tongue protrudes from her mouth, her eyes are red, and her face and breasts are sullied with blood. She stands with one foot on the thigh, and another on the chest of her husband, Shiva.



Kali's fierce form is strewed with awesome symbols. Her black complexion symbolizes her all-embracing and transcendental nature. Says the *Mahanirvana Tantra*: "Just as all colors disappear in black, so all names and forms disappear in her." Her nudity is primeval, fundamental, and transparent like Nature — the earth, sea, and sky. Kali is free from the illusory covering, for she is beyond all Maya or "false consciousness." Kali's garland of fifty human heads that stand for the fifty letters in the Sanskrit alphabet, symbolizes infinite knowledge. Her girdle of severed human hands signifies work and liberation from the cycle of karma. Her white teeth show her inner purity. Her sword is the destroyer of false consciousness and the eight bonds that bind us. Her three eyes represent past, present, and future — the three modes of time — an attribute that lies in the very name Kali. "Kali is so called because she devours Kala (Time) and then resumes her own dark formlessness."

Kali's proximity to cremation grounds where the five elements or "Pancha Mahabhuta" come together and all worldly attachments are absolved, again point to the cycle of birth and death. The reclined Shiva lying prostrate under the feet of Kali suggests that without the power of Kali (Shakti), Shiva is inert.

Kali's guises and names are diverse: Shyama, Adya Ma, Tara Ma, Dakshina Kalika and Chamundi are popular forms. Then there is Bhadra Kali, who is gentle, Shama-shana Kali, who lives only in the cremation ground, and so on.

Bhagwan Mahavir's Nirvana

The day is also when Mahavir got enlightened. To the Jains, Deepaawali has an added significance due to the great event of Mahavir attaining the eternal bliss of nirvana. The passing into eternity on the same Amaavaasya of Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the sanyasin who was one of the first to light the torch of Hindu renaissance during the last century, and of Swami Ramatirtha who carried the fragrance of the spiritual message of Hindu Dharma to the western world, have brought the national-cum-spiritual tradition of Deepawali right up to modern times.



Return of Sri Rama to Ayodhya



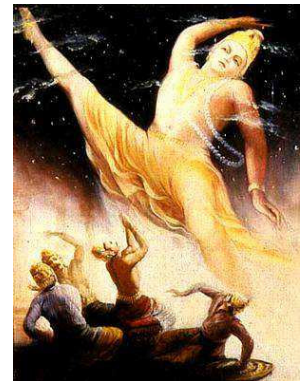
In northern parts of Bharat, Deepawali is associated with the return of Sri Rama to Ayodhya after vanquishing Ravana. The people of Ayodhya, overwhelmed with joy, welcomed Rama through jubilation and illumination of the entire capital. Well has it been said that while Sri Rama unified the north and south of our country, Sri Krishna unified the west and the east. Sri Rama and Sri Krishna together therefore symbolize the grand unity of our motherland.

Govardhan Puja

The pratipada is also the day for Govardhan Pooja and Anna Koota (heap of grains), the former signifying the Govardhan episode in Shri Krishna's life and the latter conveying affluence and prosperity.

Tale of King Bali and Vamana

The third day, i.e., the first day of Kaartik, is named Balipratipada, after the Asura king Bali, the ruler of Patala, who had extended his kingdom over the earth also. On the day, Sri Vishnu, taking the form of a dwarf by name Vamana, approached Bali, for a boon of space equal to his three steps. Bali, known for his charity, gladly granted the boon. Vamana now grew into a gigantic form; with one step he covered the entire earth, with the second he covered the outer sky, and asked Bali where he should keep his third step.



Bali, left with no other choice, showed his own head. Sri Vishnu placed his foot on Bali's head and pushed him down to the netherworld, the rightful territory of Bali's reign. However, Bali prayed to the Lord that he might be permitted to visit the earth once a year. Now it was the turn of Vishnu to grant the boon. People offer their respect to him on this day.

The annual visit of Bali is celebrated in Kerala as Onam. It is the most popular festival for Kerala where every Hindu home receives him with floral decorations and lights and festoons adorn all public places. Onam, however, falls on the 16th day of Aavani in September.

Bhai Dooj

The fourth and final day is Yama Dwiteeya, also called Bahu beej. It is a most touching moment for the family members when even distant brothers reach their sisters to strengthen that sacred relationship. The sister applies tilak and does aarati to her brother, and the brother offers loving presents to the sister.

Nowhere is the bond of brotherly-sisterly love glorified with such grandeur as in Bharat (India).



Hindus celebrate this special relationship twice every year, with the festivals of 'Raksha Bandhan' and 'Bhai Dooj'. Bhai Dooj comes every year on the fifth and last day of Deepawali, which falls on a new moon night. The name 'Dooj' means the second day after the new moon, the day of the festival, and 'Bhai' means brother.

In Bengal this event is called 'Bhai Phota', which is performed by the sister who religiously fasts until she applies a 'phota' or mark with sandal wood paste on her brother's forehead, offers him sweets and gifts and prays for his long and healthy life. Brothers eagerly await this occasion that reinforces the bond between brothers and sisters. It's an opportunity for a good feast at the sister's place, coupled with an enthusiastic exchange of gifts, and merriment amid the resounding of conch shells in every Bengali household.

Bhai Dooj is also called 'Yama Dwiteeya' as it's believed that on this day, Yamaraj, the Lord of Death, visits his sister Yami, who puts tilak on his forehead and prays for his well being. Thenceforth, brothers who receive *tilak* from their sisters on this day are blessed by Lord Yama.

Like all other Hindu festivals, Bhai Dooj too has to do with family ties and social attachments. It serves as a good time, especially for a married girl, to get together with her own family, and share the post-Deepawali glee.

- Abhaya Asthana