# **Teaching About Diwali: Festival of Lights**

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Diwali, or Deepawali, is India's biggest and most important holiday of the year. It is celebrated for up to five days in either October or November. Often called the Festival of Lights, the holiday gets its name from the clay lamps that many people in and from India light to symbolize the inner light that they believe protects



Diwali Lamps (Wikimedia Commons)

them from spiritual darkness. This festival is as important to Hindus as Christmas holiday the Christians. Hindu, Sikh, and Jain Americans, including students and teachers, celebrate the holiday as an important tradition in their communities.

The importance of the holiday to many in the world and in California's schools makes it an important one to learn about in the curriculum. This article is designed to assist in that endeavor.

Diwali celebrants light candles and oil lamps, decorate their homes, exchange gifts with loved ones, light fireworks, cook special foods (especially sweets), and perform special worship ceremonies. They also create beautiful rangoli designs, which are folk-art patterns, usually circular in shape and made from colored rice, flour, sand, or flower petals. (Please see below for images of rangoli.)

Year	Date of Diwali
2015	November 11
2016	October 30
2017	October 19

# Origin of Diwali

Tracing its origins back to ancient times and epics such as the Ramayana, the story of Diwali evolved into a widely celebrated festival, differing from region to region in India. Historically, Diwali was probably an important harvest festival. Some believe it began as a celebration of the marriage of Lakshmi with Lord Vishnu. In Bengal the festival is dedicated to the worship of Kali, the Hindu goddess of strength and empowerment. During Diwali, many Hindus worship the elephant-headed god Ganesh, remover of obstacles and symbol of auspiciousness and wisdom.

Especially in the north of India, Diwali commemorates the return of Lord Rama (along with Sita and Lakshman) from his 14-year exile after defeating the demonking Ravana. In joyous celebration of the return of their king, the people of Ayodhya, the Capital of Rama, lit up the kingdom with earthen oil lamps and set off fire-crackers. Each day of Diwali has its own tale, legend, and myth to tell.

#### Varieties of Celebration for Jains and Sikhs

For Jains, Deepawali (an alternate name for Diwali) has an added significance as the celebration of Lord Mahavira's attainment of the eternal bliss of *nirvana*. Mahavira is the last Tirthankara of Jainism. According to Jain philosophy, all Tirthankaras were born as human beings, but they attained a state of enlightenment through meditation and self-realization. They are the gods of Jains.

For Sikhs, Diwali is particularly important because it celebrates the release from prison of the sixth guru, Guru Hargobind, and 52 other princes with him, in 1619. The Sikh tradition holds that the Emperor Jahangir had imprisoned Guru Hargobind and 52 princes. The emperor was asked to release Guru Hargobind, which he agreed to do. Guru Hargobind asked, however, that the princes be released also. The emperor agreed to release only



The emperor agreed to release only those who could hold onto the guru's Celebrant making rangoli with chalk and rice flour. (Flickr Commons/Kara Newhouse, made available under an Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 2.0 Generic License)

cloak. Guru Hargobind had a cloak made with 52 pieces of string hanging down, and so each prince was able to hold onto one string and leave prison. Sikhs celebrated the return of Guru Hargobind by lighting the Golden Temple, the holiest temple for the Sikhs. This tradition continues today.

#### Web Resources

#### Diwali

http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/holidays/diwali.htm

Diwali is a Hindu festival of lights lasting five days. For many Hindus, Diwali is also New Year's Eve.

#### Diwali

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/hinduism/diwali.shtml

This BBC page on Diwali is written for schools and includes resources for classroom lessons.

## Diwali: Festival of Lights

## http://hinduism.about.com/od/diwalifestivaloflights/a/diwali.htm

This About.com site traces the history and the reasons behind many of the elements of the Diwali celebration.

#### Diwali, India's Festival of Light

## http://kids.nationalgeographic.com/kids/stories/peopleplaces/diwali/

This *National Geographic for Kids* site provides an overview of the Diwali holiday in India, including why and how it is celebrated and how it differs among the Hindu, Sikh, and Jain communities.

## Diwali - Society for the Confluence of Festivals in India

#### http://www.diwalifestival.org/

This rich source of information about Diwali has lots of ads as well for food and gifts to celebrate the holiday. It provides a perspective on the holiday with stories, worship practices, history, and much more from those who follow the tradition. The traditions and practices for each of the five days are explained.

#### Rama

#### http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rama

This Wikipedia article provides background information on the story of Rama's life to show why he is central to the Diwali festival.

#### Rangoli

#### http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangoli

Rangoli are colorful designs made on floors and courtyards during Hindu festivals. They vary by region and festival, reflecting different folklore traditions, and are created from brightly colored flour, rice, tiny rocks, etc.



Rangoli done with colored powders. (Wikimedia Commons/Pon Malar)

# Children's Literature

Gardeski, Christina Mia. Diwali. New York: Children's, 2001.

This brief introduction to the Hindu holiday of Diwali discusses the story of the hero Rama, whose deeds it commemorates, and explains how the holiday is celebrated.

Heiligman, Deborah, and Vasudha Narayanan. *Celebrate Diwali*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2006.

Viewed as a holiday of great joy, Diwali celebrates the triumph of good over evil, and of light over darkness. Celebrations marked by fireworks, sweets, and gifts are described and supported by recipes, a glossary, a map, and a resource list.

Hughes, Monica. My Divali. Chicago, IL: Raintree, 2004.

This simple book provides a brief introduction to Divali (Diwali) for young children.

MacMillan, Dianne M. *Diwali: Hindu Festival of Lights*. Springfield, NJ: Enslow, 1997.

This richly illustrated book puts the celebration of Diwali in religious, historical, and cultural context. A glossary of terms is included.

Parker-Rock, Michelle. *Diwali: The Hindu Festival of Lights, Feasts, and Family.* Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow, 2004.

The author introduces the history, customs, and practices of Diwali, an important Hindu holiday that originated from a harvest festival. Color photos and a craft section help the reader understand how Diwali is observed.

Senker, Cath. My Hindu Year. New York: PowerKids, 2008.

This book about Hindu life, worship, and holidays puts Diwali in the context of Hindu beliefs and practice. It includes a calendar, glossary, and notes for teachers.

Torpie, Kate. Diwali. New York: Crabtree Pub., 2009.

In a question-and-answer style, Torpie describes the five-day "festival of lights" celebration, one of the most popular festivals in the Hindu calendar. Like many Hindu festivals, Diwali celebrates the triumph of good over evil.

Verma, Jatinder Nath, Nilesh Mistry, and Valmiki. *The Story of Divaali*. Cambridge, MA: Barefoot, 2002.

Verma retells parts of the Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, to explore the events celebrated during the festival of Divaali (Diwali). The narrative pace is based on Indian oral tradition and is read best after an introduction to the basic ideas and importance of the Ramayana.

Zucker, Jonny. *Lighting a Lamp: A Diwali Story*. Hauppage, NY: Barron's, 2004. This short book for young children describes the activities of typical families as parents and children celebrate Diwali, the Indian five-day festival of lights that welcomes in the lunar new year.

The material above is available at the California Three Rs Project (CA3Rs) website at <a href="http://ca3rsproject.org">http://ca3rsproject.org</a>. For further information contact the CA3Rs office:

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