

Enlightened - Diwali

Written by Chemona Nagan

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In Hinduism, festivals are religious expressions. The Hindu month of *Kartika* (October – November), heralds the arrival of the popular festival namely Diwali or is that Divali maybe it is Deepavali. These names are all accepted variations of *dipavali*

, a Sanskrit (Hindu sacred language) word, meaning a row of lights. This festival is a celebration of light.

This anticipated day is literally colourful in the donning of traditional attire, food that is prepared and the decorating of one's home. The figurative aspect of Diwali centres on the spiritual meanings of the word light such as prosperity. The core of this festival is the celebration of light over dark and good over evil.

Hinduism has many mythologies surrounding Diwali, one of the popular ones is the story of Hindu lord, Rama. Briefly, the story is about Lord Rama (incarnation of a Hindu god, Vishnu) who attempts to rescue his kidnapped wife, Sita. He defeats the demon, Ravana to save her. The villagers light up their homes to guide Rama and Sita's return to their home of Ayodha. Diwali is about celebrating the positive aspects of light.

The relevance of Diwali celebrated in South Africa dates back to the 1860's. In this year, there was an immigration of Hindu labourers to Natal in South Africa. The formation of the Hindu community here saw the practice of religious rituals and festivals but with adaptations. In South Africa, the celebration of Diwali occurs on one day as opposed to India, which celebrates the festival over five days. In India, the true Diwali day is the third one. South African Tamil-speaking Hindus celebrate a day earlier to other Hindi, Gujerati, and Telegu speaking

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Hindus. The latter group also worships the Hindu goddess of prosperity and wealth, Lakshmi, and celebrates the Hindu New Year on their appointed day of Diwali.

The commonalities of an Indian and South African Diwali exist. The day begins with a ritual bath and prayers. South Africans still choose to wear their traditional clothing with the women favouring intricate saris. Diwali invokes a sense of festivity that is seen as unifying across cultures. It is common for the Hindu household to be the meeting place for family and friends on Diwali. Here there is indulging in the sumptuous feasts prepared with gifts of sweetmeats (type of Indian desserts) given to guests and neighbours. This festival affords a sense of unity that is lacking throughout the year.

The crowning detail to the festivities is the afternoon. With the waning light, each Hindu household lights lamps of clay and candles, which are placed at the doorway, windowsills and the outer borders of the home. The luminescence is a remarkable sight. The general notion is that here light is being celebrated as a beacon of goodness and as an invite to gods to bestow blessing and prosperity to the home.

Diwali ends with fireworks exploded in the night sky. Diwali affords Hindus a personal experience in a religious festival.

- The team at 'Indians in Africa' wishes all our Hindu readers a joyous and light-filled Diwali.