



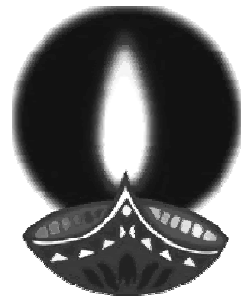
Diwali Dinner - 16th November 2004

Programme for the evening

- 7:00 – *Pooja*
8:00 – *Entertainment*
8:30 – *Dinner*

Diwali (from Deepavali, meaning row of lights) is one of the most popular and widely celebrated Hindu festivals. Although some celebrate for only one or two days, many people celebrate for five days:

1. ***Dhanatryodashi***, the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of the lunar month of *Ashwin*.
2. ***Naraka-Chaturdashi***, the fourteenth day.
3. ***Deepavali***, celebrated on the night of *Amavasya* (new moon), hence 'dark fortnight' above.
4. ***Padwa***, the first day of the *Kartik* month and New Year of the *Vikram Samvat* calendar system. This is not to be confused with various other lunar and calendar systems, which have their own New Year's Day, such as *Ugadi* (the Telugu New Year).
5. ***Bhai-Dooj***, dedicated to brothers and sisters.



A diya (lamp)

There are many stories behind the festival. In the north of India, Diwali is celebrated as the coronation of Lord Rama, returning from fourteen years in exile. Having rescued his queen Sita, from the demon Ravana, rows upon rows of *diyas* (lamps) were lit up to welcome home the divine King. Also, Diwali marks the return to Indraprastha of the righteous Pandava brothers from exile, to which they were unfairly sent as a result of a rigged dice game. This story is often used in Hinduism to preach the sins of gambling. Curiously, however, many in Northern India celebrate Diwali by indulging in gambling. This custom stems from the belief that the Goddess Parvati played dice with her husband Siva, and decreed that whosoever gambled on this night would prosper over the following year.

In the south, Diwali is strongly connected to the story of Bali, a philanthropic demon king. The story goes that Lord Vishnu, disguised as a dwarf requested Bali for the amount of land he could cover with three steps. After Bali happily granted this, Vishnu revealed his true form, covering Heaven and Earth with his first two steps. Seeing this, Bali offered his own head for Vishnu to take his third step upon. Vishnu then took his step, pushing Bali into the underworld. In return, Vishnu gave him the lamp of knowledge to light up the underworld, and also blessed him with the ability to return to his people once a year so that he may light millions of lamps from the lamp of knowledge. Therefore on the new moon night of Diwali, the blinding darkness of ignorance, greed, jealousy, lust, anger, ego, and laziness would be dispelled and the radiance of knowledge, wisdom and friendship would prevail.

Also, Naraka-Chaturdashi (the second of the five days mentioned above) commemorates the vanquishing of the demon Narakasura by Lord Krishna. Today, many people smear themselves with kumkum (vermillion), just as Krishna smeared his forehead with the blood of the demon.



Common to all the hundreds of stories characterizing Diwali is the concept of light, either literal (such as in the case of Lord Rama's return) or symbolic (like the defeat of the demon Narakasura offering liberation to the people). It is often forgotten that the

cliché that is the word ‘light’ refers to more than such entities as ‘hope’ and ‘joy’, and that light is not merely an adjective meaning ‘glittering’. Light is, of course, the opposite of heavy, and it is this elevated feeling of reduced weight that should pervade the consciousnesses of those celebrating Diwali.

Amongst the numerous customs associated with each specific day during the festival period is *rangoli decorating*. *Rangoli* is an artistic sketch made from coloured powder, and is placed on the floor by doorways. Together with lit lamps, they drive away evil spirits and welcome the Goddess Lakshmi into the home. Poojas at this festive time are principally offered to the Goddess Lakshmi, so that she may grant wealth.



Entertainment

Bharatanatyam is one of the oldest Indian classical dance forms and originated as a form of Hindu worship in the temples of South India. *Bharatanatyam* is compounded from “bha” for *bhava* (emotional projection), “ra” for *raga* (melody), “ta” for *tala* (rhythm), and *natyam* (the art of dance). This vibrant dance style portrays stories from Hindu mythology and is based on the *Natya Shastra*, a work about the science of dance written in the 2nd century BC by the sage Bharata, under instructions from Lord Brahma.

“Pari pari ni padame” is a dance dedicated to Lord Ganesh, the elephant-headed God of knowledge and remover of obstacles. Sujata trained and performed *Arangetram* at Kalamandalam Calcutta, India, under Smt Thankamani Kutty.

Also dedicated to the God of knowledge, the *Ganesh Vandana* is performed by Pia.



Why we perform Pooja

"Pooja" is a way of recognising our insignificance and the power behind the entire creation. Pooja can also be seen as an excuse to remember God. We perform pooja in order to remind ourselves to be humble and realise how limited our knowledge is.

Lakshmi Pooja and Deepaavali

Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth. This means not just materialistic wealth, but wisdom. What makes one truly rich is wisdom. When this festival was started it is with this meaning in mind that Lakshmi pooja was performed. One will have wealth only when one has the relevant wisdom to create wealth.

Shodasha Upachaara Pooja

This is a traditional structure for performing a pooja and, as the name suggests, consists of 16 steps. It represents the traditional welcome given to guests in India. Here we are welcoming God as our guest, and need to offer him the traditional hospitality that all guests would be offered. Steps include offering a seat (*aasana*), washing of the feet (*paadya*), offering a bath (*snaana*) and fresh clothes (*vastra*). Traditionally, guests are always fed first, so during the pooja, all the items prepared are offered to god (*naivedya*) before being partaken by those assembled. At the end of the pooja is the *Mangalaarti* or *Aarti* and represents the final showing of respect to God; the light of the *aarti* representing the light in God which we want embedded within ourselves. In the middle of the pooja, we will be saying the *ashtotra* or one-hundred-and-eight names of Goddess Lakshmi - each name describes one of Lakshmi's qualities. These 108 are in fact the most special of the thousands of different names she has.