

Diwali

Diwali is known to many as the Festival of Lights. It is celebrated during the Fall months, usually during October or November. Since the date for Diwali is set by the cycle of the moon, it shifts according to the Western Calendar. In 2024, it will take place on **November 1st**. Please note that the date of this holiday may shift depending on location.

Diwali is one of the most popular holidays in South Asia and is celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs, and some Buddhists. “Diwali” is also sometimes called “Deepavali,” especially in Southern India, and “Tihar” in Nepal. “Deepavali” means “rows of lighted lamps,” which refers to the oil lamps called *dipas* or *diyas*, which are often used to decorate houses, shops, and public places. In India, diyas are floated across the river Ganges. In general, these lamps symbolize the victory of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance. Diwali’s significance varies across different religious traditions, and the festival is celebrated in a range of ways.

Hinduism

For different groups of Hindus, the holiday carries unique meanings and is associated with different traditions and legends. Even within Hinduism, the significance and meanings of the festival are very diverse. For many Hindus, Diwali honors Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth. Lamps are lit to help guide her into people’s homes and businesses. Many will start the new business year at Diwali and will pray to her for a financially successful year. It is also common for Hindus to build a small altar to Lakshmi, perform worship (*puja*), and decorate this altar with photos signifying the rewards of wealth.

In some parts of India, Hindus celebrate the return of Rama (an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu) to the city of Ayodhya. He defeated Ravana, *rakshasa* (demigod) king after fourteen years of exile, following the defeat of the evil king Ravana, *rakshasa* (demigod) king. In other communities, especially among Bengali and Oriya speakers, the Goddess Kali is celebrated during this holiday. Some Hindus commemorate the victory of Lord Krishna over the cruel king Narakaasura.

Sikhism

Sikhs celebrate a different festival that falls coincides with Diwali, called Bandi Chhor Diwas (Prisoner Release Day). In 2024, Bandi Chhor Diwas will take place on November 1st. This day marks the day when in 1619 the 6th Guru, Guru Hargobind, after being released from prison along with 52 Hindu princes arrives at the holy city of Amritsar. The Sikhs celebrated the return of Guru Hargobind by lighting up the Harmandir Sahib (also known as the Golden Temple), a prominent Sikh *gurdwara* (a Sikh place of worship), located in India. This tradition of lighting lamps and candles to celebrate continues today.

Jainism

For many Jains, Diwali celebrates the day in which Mahavira (the Indian sage who established the central tenets of Jainism), gave his last teachings and attained ultimate liberation. Some very religious Jains will fast for two or three days of Diwali.

Newar Buddhists

For some Buddhists, particularly Newar Buddhists (Buddhism practiced by the Newari ethnic group from Nepal's Kathmandu Valley), Diwali commemorates the day on which Emperor Ashoka (an Indian Emperor of the Maurya Dynasty) converted to Buddhism. Buddhists also know the festival as Ashok Vijayadashami. Some Buddhist temples and monasteries are well decorated during this time.

How Will Diwali Affect the Global Workplace?

Diwali is an official holiday in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Mauritius, Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago, Suriname, Malaysia, Singapore, and Fiji. In these countries, government offices, post offices, and banks are typically closed on Diwali. Privately owned stores and other businesses may be closed or have shorter workdays as well, to allow employees the opportunity to participate in the festivities. In countries where Diwali is not an official holiday, individual businesses may close early to allow employees to celebrate. To eliminate scheduling complications, ensure that all employees are aware of office locations that plan to close or modify their work hours at Diwali.

Though it is not forbidden to participate in or attend work during Diwali, individuals may request time off to spend with family and friends. Be proactive and encourage employees to bring time-off and scheduling requests to managers or HR as soon as possible. Flexible personal day policies make it easier for employees to observe their personal holy days. If possible, companies may wish to allow for "holiday swapping," in which an employee can offer to work on a holiday not their own, and take time off for their holy day.

Given the breadth of ways individuals may recognize or celebrate Diwali, remember to keep an open mind and to check in with employees about their specific needs. Employees may request time off, extra breaks to pray, or a modified schedule if they choose to fast (to allow time to break the fast, or a request to reschedule a lunch meeting, for instance).

Although Diwali is widely celebrated by many in South Asia and across the globe, note that Christian South Asians, a significant minority population in South Asia, do not typically acknowledge Diwali.

Common Practices and Celebrations

In addition to the lighting of lamps mentioned above, fireworks are a large part of the Diwali celebration across traditions. For many, Diwali is a time for cleaning and redecorating the home, wearing new clothes, and eating large feasts with family and friends. To add to the celebrations, cities, and towns in India will often hold street processions and fairs. Diwali is also a time for exchanging gifts. Traditionally, sweets, dried fruits, and even livestock were exchanged. Gift-giving is an expression of love and appreciation of family and friends, and of blessing for prosperity.

Greetings

If you would like to recognize the festival with your colleagues and friends, it is appropriate to greet them with a simple “Happy Diwali.” You can also greet your Hindu colleagues in Hindi, with “Nya Saal Mubarak,” which literally means Happy New Year.

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