

# Diwali

Diwali, known to many as the Festival of Lights, typically falls in October or November. Since Diwali follows the lunar Hindu calendar, the Western calendar dates will shift somewhat each year. In 2017, Diwali will begin on October 19 and will continue for five days until October 23; the main day of celebration will fall on October 19.

Diwali, a New Year festival, is one of the most popular holidays in South Asia, celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and some Buddhists. “Diwali” is also sometimes called “Deepavali,” especially in Southern India. “Deepavali” means “rows of lighted lamps,” which refers to the oil (and electric) lamps called diyas, that 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 these different religious traditions, and the holiday is celebrated in a range of ways.

## **Hinduism**

For many Hindus, Diwali honors Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. Lamps are lit to help guide the goddess Lakshmi into people’s homes and businesses. Many Hindus will start the new business year at Diwali, and will pray to the goddess Lakshmi for a financially successful year. It is also common for Hindus to build a small altar to Lakshmi, and decorate this altar with photos signifying the rewards of wealth.

In some parts of India, Hindus celebrate Rama’s (a Hindu god, central to many Hindus beliefs) return from the fourteen years of exile to Ayodhya after the defeat of Ravana. In the Bengali and Oriya areas of India, the goddess Kali is celebrated at Diwali. And in Nepal, Hindus commemorate the victory of Lord Krishna over the demon king Narakaasura. Even within Hinduism, the meaning and significance of the festival is very diverse.

## **Sikhism**

Sikhs celebrate another festival around the same time as Diwali, called Bandi Chor Diwas. This day marks the time when the 6th Guru, Guru Hargobind was released from prison, along with 52 Hindu princes in 1619. At that time, 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 this day in Sikh history 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 indigenous people of Nepal’s Kathmandu Valley), Diwali commemorates the day in 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 at Diwali. Privately owned stores and other businesses may be closed or have shorter work days 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 snafus, 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 at 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 day like Christmas, and take time off on a preferred holy day like the first day of Diwali, for instance.

Given the breadth of ways individuals may recognize or celebrate Diwali, always 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).

### **Acknowledging Diwali**

More and more, we are seeing examples of corporate companies providing educational resources while acknowledging a range of diverse holidays, holy days and religious festivals. Tanenbaum commends many of those who have reached out to their diverse employee and customer bases with these acknowledgements. We believe that holidays present an excellent opportunity for employers to support their religiously diverse employees and customers, and reinforce their reputation as leaders in Diversity and Inclusion.

If your company is looking to acknowledge the millions of individuals world-wide celebrating Diwali, be sure the acknowledgement is respectful, that the information it contains is accurate, and that other religious groups are treated with the same inclusive attitude and respect year-round.

### **Avoiding Stereotypes**

Although Diwali is widely celebrated by many in South Asia and across the globe, it’s worth mentioning 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, 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 can also be a time for buying and exchanging gifts. Traditionally, sweets and dried fruits were exchanged, but today the festival has become a time for shopping. In fact, in recent years, local business owners in India commonly expect sales to rise significantly in the weeks before the festival.

### **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.” If appropriate, you can also greet your Hindu colleagues in Hindi, with “Saal Mubarak,” which literally means Happy New Year.

**For more useful information on world religions, subscribe to Tanenbaum’s online resource, Religion at Work: A (Human) Resource. Visit <https://tanenbaum.org/religion-at-work-resource/> to learn more or contact Tanenbaum at [workdiversity@tanenbaum.org](mailto:workdiversity@tanenbaum.org)!**