

A festival of light, colours and food

Diwali is the time when Hindus spread a message of peace and love.

On 30 October the five-day festival of Diwali, or Deepavali, will begin. Millions of Hindus, Sikhs and Jains around the world will join together to spread Diwali's message of peace.

Celebrations around the UK began a couple of weeks before Diwali. Thousands of people flocked to Trafalgar Square on 16 October to watch London's mayor, Sadiq Khan, launch the festival. In his speech, Khan praised the capital city for its diverse population. "London is open to all people and all communities. ... Diwali's central message of peace and mutual respect is one that we can all learn from," he said.

What is Diwali?

Diwali is also known as the Festival of Lights. It is a five-day celebration of good over evil and knowledge over ignorance. It is celebrated in many countries including Fiji, India, Nepal, Singapore and Sri Lanka, where there are large populations of Hindus. It is also celebrated by two other religions: Jainism and Sikhism. For this reason, Diwali is the most celebrated public holiday in India.

The first two days of the festival are a chance for Hindus to clean their homes and decorate their houses with colourful pictures. Women also paint patterns on their hands. The third night is the main celebration and is called Lakshmi Puja, when Hindus light lanterns and have huge firework displays. The last two days celebrate the bond between families.

What is Hinduism?



Hinduism is the third-biggest religion in the world and has around one billion followers. It dates back 4,000 years and many believe that it is the world's oldest religion that is still practised today. Hindus believe in one true god called Brahman. They believe Brahman is present in every person.

Hindus believe in rebirth – the idea that after you die you will be reborn in another form. The form depends on how you lived in your previous life. They also believe in karma: the idea that your actions will affect your destiny in your next life. So, if you are well behaved then you will be rewarded in your next life but if you are bad then your next life might not be so good.

The holy texts of Hinduism are called the Vedas. This is a collection of four books that contain hymns, chants and rituals from ancient India.

THE LOTUS FLOWER

In Hinduism, the lotus flower is considered sacred because it symbolises purity. During Diwali many families draw lotus flowers outside their homes using colourful rice flour.



LARGEST DIWALI IN BRITAIN

Leicester hosts one of the largest Diwali celebrations in the UK. This year, Leicester began its Diwali celebrations two weeks early; 30,000 people turned out to see a dazzling fireworks display.

GREETING

The customary greeting during Diwali is "shubh Deepavali" which means happy Diwali.

A colourful decoration called a rangoli.

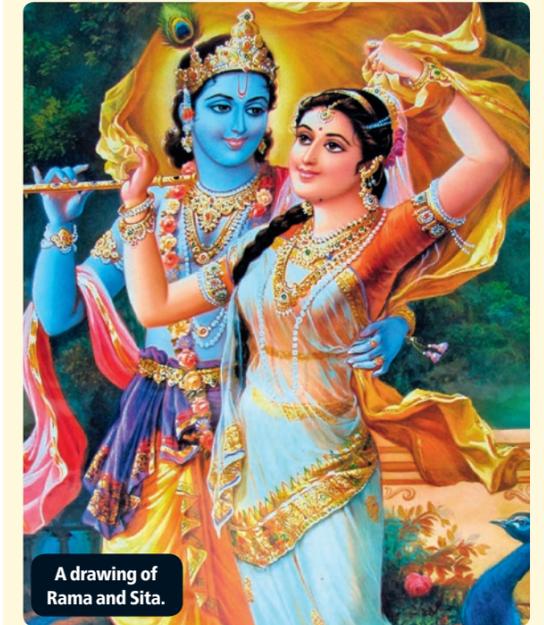
The legend of Rama and Sita

Diwali celebrates Rama and Sita's story. A long time ago there was a brave prince called Rama who was married to Sita. Rama was destined to be the next king but some people were jealous of him and persuaded his father, King Dasaratha, to make another of his sons his heir. Rama was sent away for 14 years, along with Sita and his brother Laksmana.

During their absence, an evil demon called Ravana, who had 10 heads and 20 arms, fell in love with Sita and took her to a remote island. Rama searched for

his wife until he met the monkey king, Sugriva. He befriended Rama and agreed to help him save his wife. The monkey king assembled an animal army and built a bridge across to the island where Sita was imprisoned. The army rushed across and a huge battle was fought. Rama killed Ravana with a special arrow and saved Sita.

Rama and Sita began their journey home under the cover of darkness but all the people in the land lit oil lamps to guide the couple home.



A drawing of Rama and Sita.

Lamps

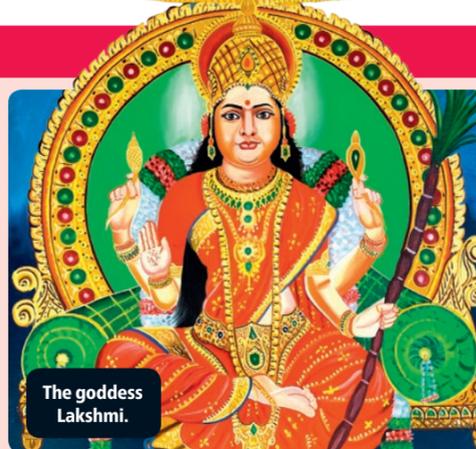
The name Diwali comes from the Sanskrit word and means "row of lights". During Diwali, Hindus fill their homes with rows of oil lamps, known as *diyas*, so that the goddess Lakshmi (the goddess of wealth) can find her way to their homes to bless them. In India, oil lamps are floated across the River Ganges. If they reach the other side it is a sign of good luck.



Small oil lamps, called *diyas*, are lit during Diwali.

Money

The idea of wealth is very important during Diwali. Hindus pray to the goddess Lakshmi and leave windows open in their houses to welcome her inside. Diwali is also a time when businesses start a new financial year. Business owners will pray to the goddess for a successful year ahead. Some people build altars in their homes and decorate them with pictures of cars and houses, the rewards of wealth.



The goddess Lakshmi.

Food

Traditional foods are important during the five-day festival and different dishes are served every day. One popular sweet is called *mithai*. These are soft snacks sometimes made from milk and covered in tasty toppings. They can also be covered in thin sheets of real gold.



A collection of sweets called *mithai*.

Gifts

Giving presents is very important during Diwali. It celebrates the love between friends and family. Gifts, such as sweets and dried fruit, are also given to wish each other a good year ahead.

