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OUACHITA BAPTIST UNIVERSITY

DIWALI AND ITS ORIGINS

WORLD RELIGIONS

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BY

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Hinduism is a religion that has many rich and fascinating traditions that go back thousands of years. There are many variations of Hinduism across India (and across the globe), and because of this it can be hard to find the commonalities that all adherents to Hinduism share. One thing that is common across most of the variations of Hinduism is the celebration of Diwali. While the way that this holiday is celebrated may look different depending on what region of India/the world that you live in, it is the one that is the most widely recognized and celebrated, no matter what branch of Hinduism one is a part of. In order to better understand Hinduism's beliefs as a whole, this essay will examine the holiday of Diwali, how it is celebrated, and the ancient stories that it is based on.

The word "Diwali" is a contraction of the Sanskrit word "Dipavali," which means "row of lights."¹ Diwali is a festival of lights that occurs at the end of the Hindu month of Ashwayuja, which would be somewhere between October and November on our calendar.² Diwali is celebrated over five to six days, depending on which days of the holiday one recognizes. Throughout the holiday, oil lamps are put out all along the roads, people's businesses, and around their homes. There are varying reasons for this. One reason is to welcome Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, into their homes and businesses. This grants them good fortune for the year to come.³ Another reason for this is because of the legend of Ramayana, which is one of the main stories that Diwali is based on. In order to better understand Diwali, it is important to know each of the stories that it is based on, especially the Ramayana.

¹ Frank A. Salamone, *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals, and Festivals* (Routledge, 2004), 112.

² Sibylla Putzi, *A to Z World Holidays & Festivals : 175 Countries - Holiday Calendar, Special Seasons, National Holiday Descriptions and Festival Descriptions* (World Trade Press, 2008).

³ Salamone, 112.

The Ramayana is a legend that tells the story of Rama, who was the crowned prince of Ayodhya. He was revered across the kingdom as a good and wise prince who upheld Dharma. He was married to Sita, daughter of king Janaka. Rama was a strong warrior, and he defeated many Rakshasas (demons). Because of this, the king of the demons, Ravana, sought to bring Rama down by kidnapping Sita. After she was taken from him, Rama recruited an army of monkeys, led by Hanuman. Working with Hanuman and his forces, Rama defeated Ravana and his army of Rakshasas. After proving that she was pure by going through fire unharmed, Sita was reunited with Rama, and together they returned to Ayodhya. The people welcomed them back to the kingdom by lining the streets with oil lamps, and Rama ruled as the king of Ayodhya for many years. He lived as an example of how to follow the path of Dharma.⁴

There are several parts of the epic of Ramayana that are essential parts of celebrating Diwali. The lining of the streets with oil lamps during Diwali is to celebrate the triumphant return of Rama and Sita at the end of the Ramayana story. The greatest impact that this story has, however, is not the traditions that it created, but the way of life that it teaches. Throughout the story, Rama always makes decisions that are in line with the Dharma. Even when others try to persuade him to break away from this, he tells them that being in line with one's dharma is more important than anything. By celebrating the story of Ramayana during Diwali, it reminds the adherents of Hinduism that their dharma should be of utmost importance in their lives.

While Diwali is a festival of lights in a very literal sense (with lamps being placed anywhere and everywhere), it also has a spiritual meaning. Diwali celebrates having an awareness of one's inner light, or atman. This inner light dispels the darkness of ignorance and

⁴ Subba Rao, *Valmiki's Ramayana* (Amar Chitra Katha, 1975).

awakens the individual to their true nature, which is ultimate reality.⁵ This is a key belief to the Hindu faith, and Diwali brings special attention to it through the emphasis of themes such as light and darkness, good and evil, etc. It is important to note that each of the traditions of this holiday further illustrate the central tenets of Hinduism.

The first day of Diwali is Dhanatrayodashi, or Dhan Teras. “Dhan” means wealth and “trayodashi” means thirteen, as this falls on the thirteenth day of the second half of the lunar month. This is the day that the God Dhanvantri came out during the churning of the milk ocean.⁶ During this day, people usually purchase new clothes and ensure that their house is clean. Some people also whitewash their homes. They do this because Lakshmi is said to only be attracted to clean homes. The first customer for a vendor each day is considered to be a manifestation of Lakshmi. Because of this, it is believed that bargaining should not be pressed upon the first customer.⁷

In order to understand exactly what is celebrated on this day, knowing the legend of the stirring of the milk ocean is important. One day, a seer named Durvasas, an avatar of the god Shiva, was traveling and came across a beautiful garland. Durvasas proceeded to give the garland to Indra, the lord of the three worlds. Indra threw this wreath to the ground, which made Durvasas very angry. Durvasas cursed Indra, saying that the three worlds would no longer be blessed because of his arrogance. When Indra tried to seek forgiveness, Durvasas proclaimed that forgiveness is not part of his nature. From this point on, the three worlds had no good

⁵ *Hindu Holy Days: Diwali, Holi, Vijayadashami, Maha Shivaratri, Lakshmi Puja, Ayya Vaikunda Avataram, Krishna Janmashtami, Akshaya Tritiya* (Books LLC, 2010), 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ Salamone, 113.

fortune. At this point, the daityas, a race of giants, defeated the powerless gods. The gods, led by Indra, went to Brahma for refuge. Brahma instructed them to go to Vishnu, saying that he will bestow upon them supreme good. Brahma accompanied them to Vishnu, and Vishnu said that he would help them. He instructed them to take all of the herbs, throw them into the ocean of milk, and then stir it together so that it would make a nectar of immortality. Following his instruction, the gods churned the ocean, and this gave them great power. Out of the middle of the ocean came the god Dhanvantari, an avatar of Vishnu. The churning of the ocean also created Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. The daityas then attacked the gods again, but they were defeated and fled back to the underworld. Indra ruled the three worlds again, and good fortune returned to the earth.⁸

The most significant part of this story is the creation of Dhanvantari and Lakshmi, as these are two of the main gods that are worshipped during Diwali. This story is told as a reminder of these gods' beginnings, and it also highlights the power of Vishnu and the importance of showing respect when someone gives you a gift. Because Indra disrespected Durvasas' gift, his power was stripped away from him. Another interesting thing to note about this story is how Durvasas said that forgiveness is not part of his nature. This shows a stark contrast between Hinduism and Christianity. While forgiveness is a central tenet of the Christian faith, it is not highly valued in Hinduism. The gods do not consider forgiveness as part of their nature, and karma does not give forgiveness a place in their society. While this fact is not highlighted in Diwali, it is important to see how this story shows the lack of forgiveness that is at the core of the Hindu faith.

⁸ Cornelia Dimmitt and J.A.B. van Buitenen, *Classical Hindu Mythology* (Temple University Press, 1978). 94-98.

The second day of Diwali is Naraka Chaturdashi. It is believed that on this day, Krishna defeated the demon Narakasura. According to legend, Narakasura was a clever human who sought to have absolute power over the world. He took over all of the kingdoms on earth. He was so powerful that many of the gods retreated as he attacked. When Krishna heard of what was happening, he and his wife, Satyabhama, went and confronted Narakasura. Narakasura sent many forces to attack Krishna, but Krishna defeated them all. Finally, Narakasura was the only one left on the battlefield. Narakasura was then killed by an arrow shot by Satyabhama. Krishna was victorious, and when he arrived home from battle the people celebrated his victory. After they returned from battle, Krishna and Satyabhama were covered in blood and grime, so they took an oil bath to clean themselves off. This led to the tradition of taking an oil bath during the second day of Diwali.⁹

This story has several of the key tenets of Hinduism embedded within it. Narakasura was a very violent human leader who sought to have total control over the world. This directly goes against ahimsa, which means “no harm.” Because Narakasura was such a violent man, he is clearly the enemy of the story. He also did not show respect to any of the gods. Because of this, Narakasura was swiftly defeated by Krishna, giving an example of the effect of karma. Because Narakasura hurt many people and showed disrespect to the gods, karma caused him to be punished by his sins.

On Naraka Chaturdashi, it is believed that taking an oil bath before sunrise (while the stars are still in the sky) is equivalent to taking a bath in the Ganges River.¹⁰ Because the Ganges River is such a holy site to them, this bath is the most significant Diwali tradition that they

⁹ Reeja Radhakrishnan, *Narakasura Diwali Story*, New Indian Express.

¹⁰ Hindu Holy Days, 23.

perform on this day. During Naraka Chaturdashi, they also perform a special puja (meaning a ritual act of worship) where they give offerings to Krishna/Vishnu. This further commemorates the victory that Krishna had over Narakasura.¹¹

The third day of Diwali is called Lakshmi Puja, and it is the day where the worship of Lakshmi is prioritized. When the lamps are lit on this day, it is to welcome prosperity and wellbeing into the homes of the worshippers of Lakshmi. As recounted in one of the legends earlier, Lakshmi was created through the churning of the ocean. Lakshmi was viewed as a beautiful goddess who brings blessing to all those whom she encounters. Lakshmi is one of the main focuses throughout Diwali, but she is given special priority on this day. Another tradition that the people take part in on this day is the banging of drums and the use of firecrackers to create a bunch of noise. They create this huge racket to scare away Alakshmi, the counterpart of Lakshmi.¹²

The fourth day of Diwali is celebrated differently depending on which part of India you are from. The northern Indian states celebrate it as Govardhan Puja, the day that Krishna defeated Indra by lifting Govardhana hill. In southern India, this day is celebrated as Bali Pratipada, the day that Vamana defeated the demon king Bali. To better understand what exactly is celebrated on this day, we will examine stories behind both the northern and southern Indian traditions.

According to tradition, one day the avatar Krishna convinced the cowherds to make their offerings to the mountain instead of to Indra. This made Indra furious, so he sent a great storm to

¹¹ Hindu Holy Days, 23.

¹² Jones.

the cowherds to flood their land and destroy their cows. The land was flooding, causing some of the cows to die. Krishna, seeing what Indra had done, decided to take action to protect the cowherds and their livestock. He lifted up Mount Govardhana with one hand and used it to cover the cowherds and provide them protection from the rain. Because they were protected, Indra decided to call off the rain and disperse the clouds. Krishna returned the mountain to its place, and the people worshipped Krishna because he protected them.¹³ Ever since then, the people of northern India worship Krishna on the fourth day of Diwali to thank him for the protection that he provided then and continues to provide for his people today. It is also tradition to create a large pile of food to represent Mount Govardhana and then to worship it. Finally, the people create a rope of grass that is tied to a tree and a pole. They pass under it to ensure safe journeys for the next year.¹⁴

While many in southern India may recognize the Krishna story, they use this day to celebrate a story concerning Vishnu. According to this legend, the demon king Bali made a great sacrifice, but it was not being accepted by the Fires. When Bali asks why, he discovers that it is because Vishnu has taken the form of a dwarf, named Vamana, and he was coming to the sacrifice. Because Vishnu has great power and supports all of the gods and demons, the demons were not entitled to their portion of the sacrifice. Once Vamana arrived at the sacrifice, Bali offered him all of his possessions, yet Vamana refused them. Vamana then manifested his form consisting of all the gods, with his eyes being the moon and the sun and his feet being the earth. At this point, all of the demons began to attack him. Vishnu proceeded to protect the gods and

¹³ Dimmitt, 116-117.

¹⁴ Constance A. Jones and James D. Ryan, *Encyclopedia of World Religions: Encyclopedia of Hinduism* (Facts on File, 2016).

defeat the demons. He then gave the three worlds to Indra and the underworld to Bali, declaring that Bali would remain there for all time.¹⁵ It is believed that the only day that Bali can leave the underworld is on the fourth day of Diwali. On this day, he bestows gifts upon the people who worship him. It is tradition for people to stay up all night on this day.¹⁶

The fifth and final day of Diwali is called Bhaiduj. This is the day that brothers and sisters meet and express their love and affection for one another. Traditionally, the sisters will invite their brothers over to their home for a meal. This is because of the legend of Yam, the god of death. The legend says that one day, Yam went to visit his sister, Yami. Yami welcomed him with an Aarti (a part of puja where light is offered). After this, they enjoyed a feast together. As he was leaving, Yam gave Yami a gift that served as a token of his appreciation. It is because of this that the sisters are the ones that host their families on this day, and the brothers are the ones that give their sisters a gift. This story shows the importance of familial relationships, and this is why Diwali is primarily a time where familial and social relationships are strengthened.¹⁷

One thing that is important to note when examining each of these stories that Diwali is based on is to note the greater themes that are being emphasized throughout Diwali. The theme that is most prevalent across all of these stories is good triumphing over evil. The evil characters, such as Bali and Narakasura, are always defeated by the heroes, such as Rama and Krishna. This theme serves as a comforting reminder that good always prevails in the end, and it encourages the people to avoid bad karma in order to continue their pursuit of moksha. These stories also encourage the people to live the best lives that they can within the limits of their dharma. The

¹⁵ Dimmitt, 80-82.

¹⁶ Jones.

¹⁷ Hindu Holy Days, 24.

dharma is prioritized over everything else, and these stories essentially tell them to bloom where they are planted.

Another important thing to remember when examining these stories is the way that a “westerner” would approach these stories is far different from the way that an eastern mind would. When a westerner reads these stories, they immediately assume that they are false because of how outlandish they sound. Because the story cannot be true, they immediately think that it has little to no value. The eastern mind, however, is not as concerned with how factual these stories are. Rather than focusing on the facts, they focus on the meaning and tradition that is behind the story. It is not that they do not believe these stories to be true; rather, they are not as concerned with empirically proving all of the details. Instead, they focus on what the story is trying to teach them about how they are to live their lives.

As you can see, there are many traditions that are a part of Diwali that have great cultural and religious significance to those who celebrate the holiday. While all of these traditions may seem confusing and convoluted to the western eye, each part of the Diwali celebration symbolizes what is most important to the followers of Hinduism, such as the emphasis on family, dharma, and the victory of good over evil. By observing Diwali, it creates stronger connections between family and friends, and it reminds the people of where they came from and the ones who came before them. Because Diwali has so much meaning to those who adhere to the Hindu faith, it is important to have a decent understanding of why this holiday is sacred to millions of people across the globe.

Word Count: 2,830 words

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