

In the many Diwalis, plural core of a faith

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Oct 31, 2024 05:12 AM IST

How different regions celebrate the festival represents historic social pacts developed by local communities

Diwali is one festival that every corner of India celebrates, in some form or the other. As there is no central model or standard protocol, the diverse local-level celebrations are not really regional variations, but represent the cultural tradition of that part of India. Each region, sub-region, cult or sect has evolved its mode of celebration, based on its history and ancient beliefs, but each is definitely connected to the main festival of Diwali. This loose confederation of festivities epitomises the actual operation of Hinduism's core plurality and explains how a religion that has no central command or headquarters or even an agreed-upon "Bible" has grown from strength to strength. It has succeeded in uniting incredibly diverse ethnic communities in a vast country.



Mathura, Oct 29 (ANI): Widows participate in a programme organised by Sulabh Hope Foundation on the occasion of Diwali festival, at Kesi Ghat in Mathura on Tuesday. (ANI Photo) (KK Arora)

Let us see how while much of India celebrates Lakshmi's glittering festival of lights, Bengal and large parts of the East worship the fearsome, blood-drenched ebony Kali on this darkest, moonless night of Amavasya. The fact is that the East is over with its chief harvest festival during Durga Puja, three weeks before, and also has thanked Lakshmi by then. The monsoon hits eastern India (and the western coast) much before it crawls up the Gangetic valley to reach the northern and western states, hence, these areas celebrate later.

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On Diwali night, much of the East invokes Kali through a one-day worship — unlike the five days of North India's Diwali. The Deepavali of South India is also basically for one night, but like in North India, oil lamps light up homes and Lakshmi is invoked with Ganesha. Friends and family members exchange gifts and clothes as in North and West India, while the East has already done this, during Durga Puja.

The long Diwali celebrations of the North and the West begin with Dhanteras on Kartik Trayodashi. It recalls Dhanvantari, the medicine-god, who brought out amrita, the nectar of immortality, from the legendary churning of the ocean. On Dhanteras, people feel they must bring home some gold, silver or valuables, and if nothing else, then at least some metal. Religion thus ensures that the wheels of commerce move, along with piety.

Maharashtra, however, insists that Diwali starts a day earlier, with Vasu Baras. Several areas of North India also celebrate this day as Govatsa Dwadashi or Nandini Vrat by honouring cows and calves through specific rituals. People feed them wheat-based products, while they themselves refrain from consuming these, and milk products. Cleaning and decorating cattle is also compulsory in many other parts of India during this season.



The second day is Chhoti Diwali in the North, but the Deccan celebrates it as Naraka Chaturdashi in honour of Satyabhama's (and her husband, Krishna's) victory over the demon Narakasura. Kali also came in to help and many in the West observe the day as Kali Chaudas — factoring in, thereby, older layers of Kali beliefs — so far away from the East.

Incidentally, Narakasura has now started emerging as a historic symbol of valourising heroes of indigenous origin, who, it is said, were unfairly vanquished by the aggressive Sanskrit civilisation. By the way, Bengalis call this day Bhoot Chaturdashi and place 14 lamps in different corners of their homes to ward off some restless ancestors who prowl on this fearsome night as ghosts. The South also prays to ancestors, not the ghostly variety, and it celebrates its Deepavali on this night — a day before the main Diwali of the North.

While we are aware of Lakshmi being central to Diwali in many regions, several families of Western Bengal and adjoining regions are busy driving out her elder sister, called Alakshmi. They have first to cleanse the household of this malicious and inauspicious Alakshmi, before invoking Lakshmi and getting ahead with Kali worship.

It is quite intriguing that the core Diwali legend of the North about the victorious return of Ram to Ayodhya, hardly finds mention in the South and the East. They are no less Hindu for this omission. The bursting of firecrackers, however, became universal from the 1940s, when dreadful sounds appeared more exciting than benign light. But this culture may also disappear soon, as

environmental laws become tighter.

In many regions of India, all festivities are over on Diwali night itself. But the North and the West move on to celebrate Govardhan Puja or Annakut, the next day, feeding Krishna with the choicest of foods. This day also marks the beginning of the Vikram Samvat New Year in Gujarat and some other areas. It is also observed as Bali-Pratipad or Bali-Padyami in Gujarat, Maharashtra and Karnataka and some pockets in the North.

Societies the world over devise religious mandates for the redistribution of wealth, and one such questionable method is gambling. The South legitimises the roll of the dice on this occasion, while the North and the West play cards with piles of cash, rather obsessively.

The last of the series, Bhai Dooj, is celebrated all over, except in the South. Sisters place an auspicious black tilak on the forehead of their brothers to ward off danger and death, recalling god of death Yama's affection for his sister, Yami or river Yamuna.

Through this journey, we observe how Hinduism has survived and prospered, because it never insisted on rigidity or homogeneity. Its respect for diversity and flexibility has been the source of its strength. While the overarching theme of (say) Diwali is accepted by all, the occasion is celebrated in myriad ways, often so distant from each other. These regional customs represent the historic social pacts developed by the local communities. The resultant Hindu equilibrium is a delicate balance, established rather painstakingly over centuries, and any attempt to tamper with or standardise it may destroy the balance and the harmony.

Jawhar Sircar is a former MP and former CEO, Prasar Bharati. The views expressed are personal

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Nov 03, 2024 07:00 AM IST

Classical dance isn't mere entertainment but a sadhana or practice, resonating with the spirit of Diwali and other festivals in India.

In the celebrations of Deepawali, I was watching recently a beautiful Odissi dance performance, depicting the theme of the festival of lights. I am surprised that even educated Indians, who