



DIWALI - THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

Diwali is the most joyous festival celebrated by Hindus all over the world with great cheer and enthusiasm. It is celebrated on the dark (moonless) night of the month of Kartika (usually November) and it starts the Hindu New Year. Diwali has been celebrated for many thousands of years to celebrate the joyous occasion when Lord Ram (considered an Incarnation of God by Hindus) returned to his kingdom in Ayodhya (in north India) after spending 14 years in exile.

The story goes like this: As the eldest son of an old king, Dashrath, Ram was the rightful heir to the throne, but when the king decided to coronate Ram, Queen Kaikayi, Ram's step mother, forced the King to crown her son Bharat as the next king and send Ram into exile for 14 years. Ram went away to the forests and mountains of south India to serve his undeserved exile, but his stepbrother, Bharat, refused to occupy the throne. Like Ram, Bharat also held high ethical and moral standards befitting a Hindu Prince. He knew that it was wrong for him to become the king while his elder brother Ram was alive. He loved Ram and insisted that the throne belonged to Ram. So, in his absence, Bharat discharged the duties of the king as a delegate of Ram, but did not accept the crown, or the title of the king, nor occupied the throne. When Lord Ram returned to Ayodhya after 14 years in exile, he was crowned the king and occupied the throne.

In the history of mankind, in all the countries of the world, brothers have fought and killed brothers, and millions of innocent people, to occupy the throne and rule the kingdom. But such unselfish love between brothers, respect for the rights of family members, and sacrifice for the loved ones, as Ram and Bharat displayed, has never been seen anywhere else in the world. Ram lived a life that set an example of a good moral life for all mankind to follow. He also set examples of ideal relationships between family members: siblings, parents and children, husband and wife, and between a king and his subjects.

Ram always tried to settle disputes with peaceful means. But during his exile, he had to fight and ultimately kill a powerful but notorious villain, called Ravan, the ruler of Sri Lanka, who had kidnapped Ram's virtuous wife, Sita from the forest, and tortured her for months. Ravan did not listen to the pleas of Ram's emissaries, so finally, Ram had to fight him and defend Sita's honor. In order for his army to cross the ocean from India into Sri Lanka, Ram had to build a very long bridge across the ocean. The ruins of this bridge can still be seen from satellite photos.

The day Ram returned from exile, his kingdom had an incredible celebration and since that day, Diwali is celebrated as one of the biggest holidays in India and other countries in Asia. The best part of Diwali is in the evening. First, Mother Lakshmi (the Goddess of Prosperity and Wealth) is worshipped in every home and temple, and offered sixty four varieties of fruits and desserts. Then, after prayers, children light the candles and lamps inside and outside the house. Every Hindu house in India glitters in the glow of candles and is filled with the sweet aroma of fresh cooked Indian food. Every one wears new clothes, and gifts are exchanged. Later in the evening, masses of fireworks are set off and the sky explodes with the dazzling colors and light. The brilliance of candles lighted everywhere, the beautiful fireworks, the feasts, the parties, and the family get togethers are all very cherished traditions of this great holiday.

Diwali is a holiday probably as big as the New Year's eve in New York, combined with the Christmas and Thanksgiving all in one day. It is an incredible day and always a lot of fun!

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