The Origin of Diwali

Historically, the origin of Diwali can be traced back to ancient India, when it was probably an important harvest festival. However, there are various legends pointing to the origin of Diwali or 'Deepawali.' Some believe it to be the celebration of the marriage of Lakshmi with Lord Vishnu. Whereas in Bengal the festival is dedicated to the worship of Mother Kali, the dark goddess of strength. Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed God, the symbol of auspiciousness and wisdom, is also worshiped in most Hindu homes on this day. In Jainism, Deepawali has an added significance to the great event of Lord Mahavira attaining the eternal bliss of nirvana.

The most well-known story behind Diwali is in the Ramayana, the great Hindu epic. According to Ramayana, Rama, the prince of Ayodhya was ordered by his father, King Dasharatha, to go away from his country and come back after living in the forest for fourteen years. So Rama went on exile with his devoted wife Sita and faithful brother, Lakshmana. When Ravana, the demon king of Lanka abducted Sita and took her away to his island kingdom of Lanka, Rama fought against and killed Ravana. He rescued Sita and returned to Ayodhya after fourteen years. The people of Ayodhya were very happy to hear of their beloved prince's homecoming. To celebrate Rama's return to Ayodhya, they lit up their houses with earthen lamps (diyas), burst crackers and decorated the entire city in the grandest manner.

This is believed to have started the tradition of Diwali. Year after year this homecoming of Lord Rama is commemorated on Diwali with lights, fireworks, bursting of crackers and merriment. The festival gets its name Deepawali, or Diwali, from the rows (vali) of lamps (deepa) that the people of Ayodhya lit to welcome their King.
Description and Rituals

Diwali is a five-day festival in many regions of India, with Diwali night centering on the new moon – the darkest night – at the end of the Hindu lunar month of Ashvin and the start of the month of Kartika. In the Common Era calendar, Diwali typically falls towards the end of October, or first half of November each year. The darkest night of autumn lit with diyas, candles and lanterns, makes the festival of lights particularly memorable.

Significance

Diwali is one of the happiest holidays in India. It is also one of the biggest shopping seasons in India; people buy new clothes for themselves and their families, as well as gifts, appliances, kitchen utensils, even expensive items such as cars and gold jewelry. People also buy gifts for family members and friends which typically include sweets, dry fruits, and seasonal specialties depending on regional harvest and customs. It is also the period when children hear ancient stories, legends, myths about battles between good and evil or light and darkness from their parents and elders. Girls and women go shopping and create rangoli and other creative patterns on floors, near doors and walkways. Youth and adults alike help with lighting and preparing for patakhe (fireworks).

There is significant variation in regional practices and rituals. Depending on the region, prayers are offered before one or more deities, with most common being Lakshmi – the goddess of wealth and prosperity. On Diwali night, fireworks light up the neighborhood skies. Later, family members and invited friends celebrate the night over food and sweets.

Diwali is also a festival of sounds and sights with fireworks and rangoli designs; the festival is a major celebration of flavors with feasts and numerous mithai (sweets, desserts), as well as a festival of emotions where Diwali ritually brings family and friends together every year.