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Exploring Diwali: A Celebration of Light, Unity, and Tradition

Uncover the rich history and traditions of Diwali, a festival that celebrates light, unity, and the triumph of good over evil.



Figure 1 A Diwali celebration illuminated by glowing oil lamps, symbolizing the triumph of light over darkness and unity in diversity. Image by Dibaker Roy for Unsplash

Diwali—often spelled *Deepavali*—is known around the world as the Festival of Lights, but I didn't truly understand its depth until I had the chance to experience it up close, both in the community and in the workplace. What I witnessed was far more than a holiday; it was a living lesson in history, hope, and inclusion.

Diwali has ancient roots in Hindu tradition and is celebrated by millions of people across India and the global South Asian diaspora. While customs vary across regions and religions, one theme remains constant: the triumph of light over darkness, good over evil, and knowledge over ignorance.

In North India, Diwali is most commonly linked to the epic *Ramayana*. After 14 years in exile and a fierce battle to rescue his wife Sita from the demon king Ravana, Lord Rama returns to his kingdom of Ayodhya. The people welcome him home by lighting rows of small oil lamps, or *diyas*, to illuminate the path and celebrate the victory of righteousness. The

November 18, 2025

regions connect Diwali with different stories: Lord Krishna defeating the demon Narakasura in parts of South India, the worship of Goddess Kali in West Bengal, or celebrations of Goddess Lakshmi, who represents prosperity and abundance. This diversity of legends reminds us that Diwali is not a single story, but a tapestry of meanings gathered over centuries.

Despite these variations, the imagery is consistent: homes cleaned and decorated, colorful *rangoli* patterns drawn at doorways, sweets shared with loved ones, prayers offered, and lamps lit everywhere. Together, these traditions create a powerful metaphor: when we choose compassion, courage, and justice, we bring light into the darkest places)



Experiencing Diwali in community

My understanding of Diwali changed when I had the opportunity to experience the celebration firsthand. Stepping into a Diwali gathering is like walking into a moving painting: marigold garlands draped along doorways, the warm glow of *diyas* arranged in circles, and children excitedly running around in vibrant traditional clothing. The air is filled with the fragrance of incense and spices, and the sound of laughter, music, and prayer.

What struck me most was the spirit of welcome. Even as a guest from another culture, I was invited to light a lamp, taste homemade sweets, and learn the stories behind the rituals. People didn't just say "Happy Diwali"; they took time to explain *why* it was happy—what it meant for their families, their faith, and their sense of identity.

That sense of inclusion of being gently drawn into someone else's sacred celebration—was as powerful as the history itself. It reminded me that cultural traditions are not meant to be observed from a distance like museum pieces; they are meant to be shared, experienced, and respected.

Diwali in the workplace: inclusion in action

Experiencing Diwali in the workplace added another layer of meaning. In many organizations today, team members decorate common areas with lights and *rangoli*, host potlucks featuring South Asian dishes, and organize brief teach-ins where colleagues explain the festival's history and traditions.

November 18, 2025

What might seem like “just another office celebration” is actually a powerful act of inclusion. When a company makes space for Diwali—alongside other cultural and religious observances—it sends a message: *your identity belongs here*. Employees who celebrate Diwali see parts of their lives reflected in the workplace, and those who don’t celebrate gain the chance to learn and connect.

In the celebrations I witnessed, leaders didn’t simply sign off on decorations; they showed up. They listened to stories, tried new foods, asked questions respectfully, and participated in lighting lamps. That visible engagement from leadership transforms a cultural moment into an organizational value: we respect and honor the diversity in our midst.

What Diwali teaches all of us

You don’t have to be Hindu, Jain, Sikh, or part of the South Asian diaspora to feel Diwali’s message. At its heart, Diwali asks each of us a simple question: *Where do you need more light in your life, your workplace, and your community?*

The lamps symbolize more than celebration; they represent commitments:

- To choose integrity over convenience
- To stand up against injustice, even when it’s uncomfortable
- To create environments—teams, families, communities—where everyone can show up as themselves

When I think back to the Diwali celebrations I’ve experienced, I remember the beauty of the lights, the taste of the food, and the joyful energy. But what stays with me most is the feeling: that in that moment, people from many backgrounds came together not just to “observe” a holiday, but to share in a collective hope that light will indeed overcome darkness.

In a world that often feels divided, Diwali offers a gentle but powerful blueprint: clear out what no longer serves us, light a candle of intention, and celebrate the possibility of new beginnings together.

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