Diwali is the season of festivals

The most important Hindu festival, festival of lights, Diwali is the grandest Home-Coming party for Lord Rama and is celebrated as a five day extravaganza of harvest festival for all, new year for businesses, shopping galore, and a day of family reunion and merriment in general! Don’t forget to share Diwali joy and sweets with your office colleagues and neighbors!

Dipawali (dīpāvalī – row of lights; दीपावली) is the most important festival of almost a billion people of India, the oldest continuous living civilization with most ancient spiritual and faith systems. Commonly, though erroneously, referred to as ‘Hinduism’ by others, this system calls itself as ‘Philosophia Perennia’ or Sanatan Dharma (sanātana dharma – sanātana= eternal, dharma= principles, truth, righteousness, duty, nature, ethics etc.; संतान धर्म). Just like science is only called science no matter which scientist is your parents liked, Sanatan Dharma is an ocean of wisdom of great visionaries across the ages – no personal agenda, no mission against ‘the others’, just pursuit of the truth! Since it was experienced, discovered and envisioned by seers and yogis at a time when religious or faith based rivalry, violence or oppression was unheard of, ‘Hinduism’ is just a way of living and has no specific name for itself. In that sense, by its very definition, every living thing – human, animal and plant – is ‘Hindu’ at various spiritual stages of life cycles.

Dipawali is commonly called by its shortened name – Diwali. It is in every sense the festival of lights. Celebrated on the new-moon night of the month of Kartik (कार्तिक) in October/November, it is primarily a harvest festival. Almost all ancient/original cultures of the world have certain harvest festivals at this time of the year – e.g. Halloween of the pre-Christian Europe, Sukkot of the Jews. But in India, it is a full five day affair, with many important events falling during this period, that kept on adding to the already weighty importance of Diwali. There are wonderful interesting epic legends that bring the joy and meaning of life alive by creating a visual panorama through its characters and events (instead of dry sermonizing).

Diwali is also the grandest home-coming party in the world, celebrated on the occasion of the return of Lord Rama (राम – bene-factor, kalyāṇakārī; कल्याणकारी) from his long fourteen years of exile in the forest, twenty days after killing Ravana.

By modern ‘conservative’ measures, more than two millennia before common era (astronomical references put it seven millennia before), on the day of Vijaya Dashami (vijayā dashami – vijayā= of victory, dashami = tenth day; विजयादशमी), Lord Rama killed the mighty king Ravana (rāvaṇa – one who makes others cry, the biggest bully ever; रावण), who had abducted his wife Sita (सीता – from the plough’s furrow, daughter of king janaka; सीता). For this reason Vijaya Dashami is also called Dashahara (dasha-harā – killing of the ten headed, rāvaṇa; दशहरा). Coincidentally, Jewish Yom Kippur falls on the 10th day of Tishri month, a day after Dashahara. It is followed by the harvest festival Sukkot, just like Dashahara is followed by Diwali!

Lord Rama flanked by Lakshmana and Sita and served by Lord Hanuman!

Every year, on Dashahara a giant effigy of Ravana is burnt to celebrate the victory of Rama over Ravana, representing good over evil - both of which define each other! Without evil there is no good and vice versa! And both are created by the same Supreme Divine! Hence in Hinduism there is no sin by nature but by deeds of free will only. A lion (by his nature) or a butcher (by his duty of profession) get no sins for their acts, but killing is sin otherwise!

There is an interesting and often unknown reason why Divine Lord Vishnu (विष्णु – the all pervading; विष्णु) had to take avatar (avataara – the descent, of divine beings to earth; अवतार) in the human form as Rama. Ravana was a powerful Rakshasa (rākṣasa – the one who chose to protect the primordial waters; राक्षस) and upon his mother’s behest performed extreme austerities to please the Creator Lord Brahma (brahma – the expansive, God The Creator; ब्रह्म). Upon his grace, Ravana asked for eternal immortality which Lord Brahma said could not be bestowed (because of his deeds!). So Ravana asked for “immunity from killing at the hands of Garuda, Naag, Yakshe, Damya, Danava, Rakshasa, Devataa (all ‘other super creations’ of the Creator, much powerful than humans or animals! I am not afraid of other creatures, and humans I consider them (weak) as a straw!”. After his boon, Ravana became the worst bully the world has ever seen. Hence the name Ravana. To kill him and still honor Lord Brahma’s boon to him, Lord Vishnu, the ever practical and wise, takes birth as Rama – the “Best Among Men” and partial avatar as his three brothers!

In the first grand novel of the world, Ramayan (रामायण – the travels of rāma; रामायण), comprising of 24,000 beautiful metrical verses, the life and adventures of Lord Rama in human form are described in the most interesting and poetic way. Its antiquity can be guessed by the fact that it was composed in a time when script was not yet commonplace. Having all the Nava Rasa (nava rasa– nine moods; नवरस), and elements of heroism, romance, mystery, super humans, terror, amorphous bodies, sorcery, surprise, humor, loyalty, bravery, fidelity, idealism, non-compromise on principles – the Ramayan is still unsurpassed in its beauty, wisdom and depth of human emotions and moods and a master story. It has effected every successful story ever told in India or elsewhere in every form of expression. Its direct popularity spread as far from Persia to Cambodia, without the force.
of sword or any allurements! It is the first
classic story of heroism that has been emu-
lated all over the world every day, from
Odyssey to ‘Star Wars’ to Hollywood thrill-
ers.

Lord Vishnu took the Rama avatar to
present before us the epitome of ideal hu-
man being living in social activity. Lord
Rama teaches us the ideal and proper
conduct at every step of his life.

Ramayana has many beautiful poetic ex-
pressions. It has many more real facts that
make it a real history of India. It is one of
the many ancient compositions of India used
by sociologists, anthropologists, historians,
linguists to judge the life of its time. As per
Indian traditions, Ramayana and Mahabharata (mahā-bhārata– the great
(battle of) bhaarat; महाभारत) are called
itihaas – thus happened, history; इतिहास) meaning history. Late in 2002,
NASA discovered an ancient man-made
bridge between India and Sri Lanka. A
similar account is found in Ramayana when
Lord Rama builds a huge bridge of boul-
ders across from present day Rameshwaram
to dispel the darkness of ignorance and
spread the light of knowledge.

Half a millennia ago, the great poet Tulsidas
(tulasī-dāsa; तुलसीदास), translated the
Ramayan that was composed in Sanskrit
(sanskrita – well perfected, the ancient
indian language mother of all; संस्कृत) into
a local dialect of his time – ‘avadi’ for the
benefit of the masses. Some of the gems
from his epic poem are worth pondering
upon, as they explain deepest Indian phi-
losophy in simple couplets called chaupai
(chau-pai – with four parts, two per line;
चौपाई). [Other examples were given in last
issue of tarang and removed from here to
avoid repetition]

1. hari anant hari kathā anantā,
kahahiṁ sunahīṁ bahu bidhi sab santā

Divine Lord is limitless, endless so are the
tales of Divine Play; the wise and noble
say and listen them in various ways!

This reflects the grandest of thoughts
from the oldest composed books of the
entire world – the Veda – that “truth
is one but expressed variously
by the knowers” (ekam sat vipraṁ bahudā
vadanti). If only this simple concept is
understood by all ‘leaders’ in the
world, there would be no violence, oppres-
sion or terrorism in the name of
god and religion. In the last two mil-
lennia, all major wars have been about
who you bow down to in prayer! A
shame for all ‘leaders’ in the business of
god-stuff!

The five days of Diwali

1. Dhan Teras (dhana-terasa – wealth; thirteenth; धनतेरस: धनतेरस; धनतेरस) The first day is the thirteenth
day of the previous fortnight, and two
days before Diwali.

As per the horoscope of the sixteen year old
son of king Hima (hima; हिम), he was
doomed to die by a snake-bite on the fourth
day of his marriage. On that fourth day
of his marriage his wife did not allow him
to sleep. She laid all the ornaments and lots of
gold and silver coins in a big heap at the
entrance of her husband’s bedroom and
lighted many lamps all over the palace. And
she went on telling stories and singing
songs. When Yama (yama – divinity of death;
यम) arrived there in the guise of a serpent,
his eyes got blinded by the dazzle of those
brilliant lights and he could not enter the
prince’s chamber. So he climbed on top of
the heap of the ornaments and gold and sat
there whole night listening to the melodious
songs. In the morning he quietly went away.
(Does it reminds you of the Arabian Nights
and the reason the stories were told?)

Also, on this day, the charitable but proud
king Bali (bali – powerful; बलि) was giv-
ing away alms after a special Yajna (yajña
– fire ritual for a resolution; यज्ञ). Lord
Vishnu, guised as a dwarf brahmana
(brāhmaṇa – knower of the truth, academic,
scholarly class which is the brain of the
society; ब्राह्मण), asked for only as much land
as he could cover in three steps. When Lord
Vishnu covered the earth in one step, the
heavens with the second, humility and sur-
render d awned on Bali and he offered his
head for the third step. When Lord Vishnu
put his foot, Bali was pushed down to the
nether worlds, the narak. But for his gener-
osity, Lord Vishnu granted him the lamp of
knowledge and allowed him to return to
earth every year to light millions of lamps
to dispel the darkness of ignorance and
spread the light of knowledge.

3. Dipawali or Diwali
(dipāvali or diwāli – row of lamps;
दीपावली, दीवाली) The day of Diwali, the darkest night of
Kartik month, is the day of worshipping
Divine Mother Maha-Lakshmi (mahā-
lakshmi – the great divinity of resources;
माहलक्ष्मी) or Lakshmi Puja day. On this day
the sun passes through the zodiac Tula (tula
– weighing balance, zodiac sign libra; तुला)
– which is shown as a balance. This is
the end of the financial year for traditional
merchants even today and old account books
are balanced and new ones started. This day
is also called Chopad Puja (chopad-puja
– worshipping the account books; चोपड़ पूजा)
— i.e. respecting the account books. If companies like Enron and Arthur Anderson had even a fraction of this respect, we won’t have had the biggest business corruption scandal ever in the whole world!

On this darkest night, lot of earthen (or nowadays electric) lamps are lighted all over the house to dispel darkness and invite Divine Mother Lakshmi. Divine Mother Lakshmi is believed to be roaming the fields and farms and the streets showering her grace on houses that are clean and well kept, and homes where people are industrious and don’t fight. (This is symbolic of the fact that families who are united and hard working and hygienic will prosper by their own good deeds!)

There are many important events of this day. The Jain Prophet, Bhagavan Mahavir (mahâvîra; महावीर), attained Nirvan (nirvâna — enlightenment, liberation; निर्वाण) on this day. The young, patient, determined and seeker Nachiketa (nachiketa; नचिकेत) was sent to the door of Yama by his own father out of frustration by his constant questioning. A guilty Yama granted his unattended guest three boons and Nachiketa asked for the highest knowledge even when tempted with wealth, women and even eternal life! The more Yama tempted him, the more resolved he got to get the truth about “after death”.

And, on this day Lord Rama, returned to his home capital Ayodhya, after killing king Ravana.

On this day, people express their joy by making special dishes, making and sharing sweets, and bursting fire crackers of many kinds. They invite and go to friends and neighbors.

4. Govardhan Puja
(go-vardhana pujâ – worship of the (mountain that is) cattle-nourisher; गोवर्धन पूजा)
The cowherds of Vraj used to worship Indra — the rain god. Lord Krishna still in his youth, advised the cowherds to worship the nearby mountain Govardhan instead. In this way, Lord Krishna taught the local farmers and cowherds about the importance of the mountain which actually brings the rains (and not some abstract god), bringing them rain of prosperity, and conserving top soil, rich flaura and fauna of the mountain. (This is not modern interpretation, this is the classical account found in Bhagavat Purana). This was perhaps the earliest lesson in the world in ecology and conservation.

This day also marks the coronation of emperor Vikramaditya (vikram-âditya; विक्रमादित्य) and the Vikram Samvat, one of the ‘recent’ Indian calendars prevalent even today, started on this day in 57 BCE. This year is 2060 Vikram Samvat. Hence, Diwali also marks as the new year eve.

5. Bhai Dooj
(bhâi dûja – (meet) brother (on) second day; भाई दूज)The fifth day is celebrated as Bhai Dooj or Bhaiya Dooj, and brothers visit their sisters home. Sisters put the auspicious tilak on their brothers’ forehead, pray for them, and they eat delicious dishes and sweets together.

In these days when life is in the fast lane, pressure of work and bills, Diwali season stands out in its importance to give it a perspective, sit back and enjoy personal relationships, reflect back on the year gone by, resolve to work hard for the next year, and conduct business in an ethical and moral way. This is also the season to let bygones be bygones, forge new friendships and strengthen old ones.

— Shashikant Joshi

Don’t forget to share Diwali joy and sweets with your office colleagues and neighbors!

How will they know, if you don’t tell them?