

Diwali Celebrations
International Women's Club
1 November 2021
Stockholm

Remarks
Ambassador Tanmaya Lal

A very warm welcome to all of you at the Embassy of India.

We shifted to these premises last April. It is only now that we are starting to host gatherings for friends here.

This is a heritage building and it was originally constructed in 1750, 270 years ago !

You see all these old photographs here in this room. We call it the *Sambandh* gallery. It provides some glimpses of the many facets of India Sweden friendship.

A special welcome also as we enter the festive season in India at this time of the year. Diwali, the festival of lights, one of the most popular festivals in India, will be celebrated in two days' time.

Today Diwali is celebrated enthusiastically not only in India but in many other parts of the world.

This festive season in India clusters around the post-Monsoon autumn and winter harvest.

Diwali is associated with a wide range of legends from the Hindu mythology, with various avatars of Lord Vishnu such as Shri Rama and Shri Krishna and Goddesses Laxmi and Kali.

Each of these spread the message of the victory of the good over evil, hope over despair, and light over darkness.

In north India, Diwali celebrates the return of Lord Rama to Ayodhya after a long exile of hardships and after he vanquishes Ravana. In south India the festival is called Deepawali and marks the defeat of Narakasur by Lord Krishna. In east India the festival is linked to Goddess Kali who vanquished another demon. Goddess Laxmi and Lord Ganesha are also widely worshipped.

In Kerala it is associated with the annual return of MahaBali and the victory of Vamana avatar of Vishnu. There are stories associated with the Goddess Kali and Shiva also in this context.

Diwali also has a deep resonance for followers of Buddhist, Jain and Sikh faiths. Lord Mahavir, the 24th and the last Jain Teerthankar attained Nirvana on Kartik Amavasya around 2,500 years ago. It is believed that Emperor Ashok adopted Buddhism on this day over 2,200 years ago. For the Sikh

community, Diwali marks the day of the release and return of their sixth Guru Hargobind in early 17th century.

References to the festival of Diwali are found in ancient Sanskrit texts and also in later memoirs recorded by travelers to India from Persia, Italy and Portugal over the last millennium.

Diwali's popularity continues to grow and today Diwali is among the most favourite and widely celebrated festivals across the world in scores of countries. These include countries in India's neighbourhood like Nepal and Sri Lanka and those far and wide where the Indian Diaspora has substantial presence.

Diwali has now traveled across oceans and is a popular festival in distant parts of the world. These include Singapore & Malaysia in the east where Tamil origin Diaspora has large presence, to Guyana, Suriname, Trinidad & Tobago in the Caribbean and Fiji in the Pacific; and from UK, USA Canada and Europe to Africa, where Diaspora trace their roots to different regional and linguistic communities. Famously in recent times, Diwali celebration pictures from the White House in Washington DC and other prominent leaders also spread cheer.

During one of my earlier assignments in New York, missions of several countries came together to jointly celebrate Diwali at the United Nations and the UN Building was lit up with an image of Diya or earthen lamp on Diwali day. Special Diwali postage stamps were also issued by the UN.

In recent days we have also seen Indian Diaspora groups organizing celebrations here in Sweden.

This growing popularity and the longstanding traditions across communities and geographies celebrate the underlying unity in diversity, a distinguishing feature and strength for all of us.

This year as many parts of the world continue to battle a global pandemic that is impacting lives and livelihoods, the festival of Diwali offers us the opportunity to renew our collective determination to overcome this unprecedented challenge.

May I conclude by offering best wishes to all of you for good health and prosperity on this auspicious occasion of Diwali.

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Remarks
Counsellor Anita Shukla

- In the last couple of years women across the world have done outstanding work as researchers, doctors, nurses, healthcare workers, entrepreneurs, security personnel, NGOs and home makers during an extremely difficult period.
- It is, therefore, a great occasion for us to welcome you here at our Embassy as we organise the first such event for women.
- Often there is not enough information or appreciation in the West about the status or role of women in the developing country societies.
- In India, women have served as Heads of State and Government – President and Prime Minister. Several women have served as Speakers in the national Parliament and Chief Ministers of several states in India.
- There are several women Ministers in the current cabinet including the Minister of Finance and the Minister of State for External Affairs.
- A large number of women in India are active as political leaders and workers at the grassroots level. There is reservation of seats for women - between one-third to half of total seats - in local government down to village level. This translates into one million women actively participating in decision making.
- Today, Indian women scientists play a prominent role in satellite design and launch and many other cutting-edge fields. The team of scientists behind the Indian Mission to the Mars was led by women. The two Departments of Science & Technology and Biotechnology are headed by a woman scientist.
- CEOs of a number of large businesses and banking institutions are women. The Indian Air Force has women pilots. Air India has several all-women crewed long haul flights.
- An ever-larger number of young women are joining the workforce after completing their education and are competing for jobs with their male counterparts.
- An estimated 120 million Indian women, 80% of the total female workers, are employed in the rural sector. This is around 30% of the total number of workers in rural areas.
- Nearly 60% of the workforce under the world' largest employment generation programme under implementation in India is women.

- The maternity leave duration has now been extended from 12 to 26 weeks. Any establishment with 50 or more employees is now required to provide a mandatory creche. Establishments are also required to facilitate work from home.
- We have a unique direct online digital marketing platform called e-Haat for women entrepreneurs, self-help groups and NGOs.
- Large scale efforts are underway in India towards vastly expanding financial inclusion. More than 350 million new bank accounts have been opened in recent years.
- Another major campaign is the *Beti Bachao Beti Padhao* that focuses on empowering the girl child through education.
- One of the innovative initiatives has been the training and empowerment of rural women, with no formal education, as solar engineers who are then bringing solar energy to villages. This initiative led by civil society and assisted by the government is now reaching out to several of our partners in Africa and other countries.
- During the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1940s, it was the Indian woman delegate Hansa Mehta who got the reference in its Article 1 changed from ‘All men are created equal’ to ‘All human beings’.
- The first woman President of the UN General Assembly was Ms. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit from India.
- India was the first country to deploy an all women Formed Police Unit for UN peacekeeping operations a few years back.
- Indian girls and women are also now excelling in a number of sports for instance archery, shooting, chess, cricket and hockey.
- Indian women athletes won several medals at the Tokyo Olympics like boxing, badminton weightlifting. Indian women also featured prominently in several sports at the Olympics for the first time for instance – fencing, sailing, swimming, gymnastics, golf.
- The Indian women played Sweden in table tennis and wrestling at the Olympics.
- Last week the Indian women football team played friendly matches in Stockholm. They are being trained by a Swedish coach.
- And since we are meeting at the start of the festive season, I may mention that in the Indian tradition the feminine aspect of divinity is central to devotion. The festival of Durga Puja was celebrated recently which celebrates the woman deity representing both sustenance of life as also destroyer of evil. There is also a concept of *Ardhanareeshwar* that combines both the male and female aspects of the divine in one.
- It is in this spirit that we welcome all of you here today.

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Remarks
Sumita Lal

May I also welcome all of you.

Thank you for joining us. We hope you are enjoying this Diwali celebration.

I haven't been able to interact with the group much so far. So, we thank the President of the IWC Ms. Mary Stenulv for her suggestion regarding organizing today's event. We are happy that after a long difficult period, we are able to celebrate the festive season together.

As you know, Diwali or Deepawali is the festival of light. It is celebrated on the darkest, moon-less night called Amavasya in the Kartik month of the Hindu Calendar, which corresponds to October or November.

The festivities are spread over five days. They recall different episodes from mythology.

The first day commemorates an event from one of the most well-known episodes in Hindu mythology - the *Samudra Manthan* or the Churning of the Ocean of Milk - called *Kshirsagar* - jointly by the Devas or the Gods and the *Asuras* to search for *Amrita* or the nectar of immortality. Those who have traveled to Bangkok airport would have seen a huge sculpture of the *Samudra Manthan* installed there. Many things emerged from this churning. These included the Lord Dhanvantari who carried with him the science of *Ayurveda*, the traditional healing system of India. So, the day celebrates good health.

The second day is celebrated as *Narakasur Chaturdashi*. It marks the destruction of a demon named *Narakasur*. He was the son of Goddess Earth - Bhudevi and - Varah - one of the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu. *Narakasur* started becoming very powerful and became arrogant and started attacking everyone. He was finished by Lord Vishnu in his avatar as Lord Krishna. The celebration is believed to take place as a boon requested by *Narakasur* himself before his death.

The third day is Diwali itself. It celebrates the return of Lord Rama, alongwith his wife Sita and brother Lakshman, to his capital *Ayodhya* after their 14-year exile and the defeat of Ravana. The story of Lord Rama is found in one of the most popular Sanskrit epics the Ramayana. Episodes from the life of Lord Rama are performed as Ram Leela not only in India but in many other parts of southeast Asia. In Thailand there is a city by the name of *Ayuthaya*.

The day following Diwali is celebrated as *Govardhan Puja*, or the prayer of the *Govardhan* mountain. This refers to an episode when Lord Krishna saved the people in the town of *Vrindavan* from the wrath

of *Indra* who unleashed storms and heavy rains, by raising the *Govardhan* on the tip of his finger. All the people took shelter beneath the mountain. *Indra* can remind some of the Scandinavian God *Thor*.

The fifth day is dedicated to the brother-sister bond. According to legend, *Yamaraj*, the Lord of death granted a boon to his sister *Yami* – the Yamuna river - that whoever visits their sister on this day will be freed from their sins and earn merit or *Punya*.

Diwali is also associated with Goddess *Laxmi*, who is the Goddess of wealth and prosperity. *Laxmiji* also emerged from the churning of the Ocean and married Lord *Vishnu* on this day.

Some other legends from *Mahabharata* connect the return of *Pandava* brothers to *Hastinapur* after completing their 13-year exile.

Both *Ramayana*, the story of Lord Rama; and *Mahabharata*, which has the Gita as its center piece, are two Sanskrit epics going back to several thousand years ago. Both remain very popular.

The next performance brings welcomes Lord Rama and also presents a scene from his wedding.

I would like to thank all the young artistes presently today's performances. They are led by very talented artistes – Ms. Alen and Ms Usha Balasundaram – who run two schools to teach various classical dance forms of India.

Before I conclude, I would like to thank Counsellor Mrs. Anita Shukla for the coordination of all the arrangements today. I also thank her for speaking about the Women in India today. Not enough is normally known about this through media.

I also thank Ms. Richa and Rakesh who are here with us, and all the other members of the Indian Embassy for helping put together this programme.

Happy Diwali and Thank you all for joining.