

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GSA - 6
India : Diwali

Marina Hotel
New Delhi
Room 24

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Dear Dick,

A 'deep' is a clay, oil lamp; 'deepawali' means an array of lights; and Diwali is the festival of lights on the last day of the Hindu year when North India flickers and sways awaiting the visit of Lakshmi, consort of Vishnu, Goddess of Wealth and Prosperity. (Vishnu is the preserver of life, the second diety in the Hindu hierarchy. Brahma, the creator of life, is the first and Siva, the destroyer and reproducer of life, is the third diety.) Lakshmi will not visit a dark, unclean house. One must greet her with lights and with a freshly swept, whitewashed, or painted house and with rice flour patterns on the doorstep.

As the New Year begins the day after Diwali, people bathe, sometimes with oil, to wash away the evils of the past year and to purify themselves for the new. Firecrackers scare away the evil spirits on Diwali Day morning -- and scare everyone else during the week preceeding. But Diwali is not just Lakshmi's festival; stories of other gods are connected with it.

Rama was the seventh incarnation of the Lord Vishnu, born as the son of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya. The Ramayana tells the story of his exile, his adventures, and his return to an adoring people. Rama's festival is Dussehra, which fell this year on 30 September, and the entire epic of the Ramayana is celebrated then. But legend also has it that Rama returned to his kingdom on Diwali and many worship him during both festivals.

The Emperor Bali was a mostly evil ruler and Vishnu, appearing in the guise of a little boy, disposed of him by a trick that allowed him finally to step on Bali's head and drive him into the nether regions. Many North Indians celebrate this triumph of good over evil on Diwali. There is another belief that Bali, because he wasn't all bad, was allowed his dying wish and so returns to visit his people for three days during the Diwali celebrations.

Diwali is a North Indian festival and is nearly ignored in the deep South. Among the North Indians, the Banias and the Marwaris, two groups of businessmen, celebrate Diwali as their most important festival of the year. I saw Diwali in the heart-city of the Bania community, Bombay. India means variety, however, so don't take what you now read to be a description of Diwali anywhere else in India.

My host for the evening was a short, cheerful, young man named Captain Malvankar, chief pilot for a large tea garden near Darjeeling, home for Diwali with his father, Doctor Malvankar, who had arranged the whole tour for my benefit. It was 6:30 p.m. on 19 October when we went from my hotel into the crowded, pink-and-orange streets to find a taxi. We drove into a typical Bombay shopping-cum-business area with small shops lining the streets as regularly as apples in a box. Merchants' offices filled the floors above them. When our route became dammed with taxis, cars, barouches and people, we got out and twisted through the din to a doorway yawning between two hardware stores -- watched over by their Vora owners in caracul caps. We stepped around a cross-legged betel seller, went through a black stairwell smelling strongly of urine, up trashy stairs to the first floor, and down a long hallway. (The tenements I'd visited in Bombay had not been this dirty.) Malvankar led me to a room at the end of the hall and we stood tentatively at the doorway, waiting for the welcome his father had arranged.

The room into which we were invited was obviously an office on ordinary days. On the walls hung several calendars, photographs of the office staff, a photo of a dignified old man -- probably the company's founder -- and a colored picture of Lakshmi garlanded with marigolds above the safe in the corner.

The floor was covered by a white cloth laid over cushions and seated crosslegged on it were two dozen men dressed in white dhotis and the short white coat called the kurta. Most of them wore khaki caps -- rather like an American Army overseas cap -- with embroidery around the bottom, the ceremonial cap of the Bania. A few wore Gandhi caps -- the same style, but white and no embroidery -- and one old man with authoritative jowls wore a red and gold turban. Everyone was writing mantras, or scriptural verses and incantations, in big, red-bound books with black, red, or yellow ink: opening their account books for the new year with the appropriate blessings. A boy in front of me didn't know his verses and was copying them from a piece of paper. The priest for the evening, in unusually unecclesiastical garb, Malvankar said, rose from the center of the group and went from man to man murmuring incantations and with his finger put a red spot or Tilak on the center of each forehead with paint from a small, brass pot. After marking the Tilak, the priest pressed several grains of yellow rice in its center as a symbol of prosperity. He never got to our side of the room and a greybearded man placed the Tilak on the rest of us without incantations.

The group had two focal points. Under Lakshmi, beside the safe, three brothers sat shoulder to shoulder with the senior, fatter, pock-marked, and most cheerful brother in the center. He was the head of the firm and was engaged with the priest in the necessary rites, making the namaste gesture -- palms together, fingers pointed upward in the prayer position -- with certain objects between his hands, tossing bits of grain into the group, and other things I couldn't see. Occasionally

he would make a remark to a brother or jog the priest to keep at it. Near me was a big man -- I guessed that he was the manager and ranked after the brothers -- who, when he wasn't writing in his account books, talked loudly on the telephone. The brother nearest the safe talked almost continually on another telephone. Everyone wrote steadily. The priest and the chief brother were busy. A hand passed me some orange pop.

Near the pillar, in the center of the room in the altar area lay shallow, flat baskets and trays of barley, vermilion powder, flowers, fruits, and ritualistic condiments. A small fire glowed ready for incense burning and seven flames burned in a brass lamp seven-notched for the seven wicks to feed from the central pool of oil. This lamp must be kept burning all night, Malvankar told me.

The manager was talking again. It was a trunk call from one of the firm's suppliers who had rung up to conclude a deal on this auspicious day, a blessed deal and the first transaction of the new year between the two firms.

Generally, the brother on the far telephone would check the market quotations so the manager could make the bargain on his telephone with the information. All these were word-of-mouth, gentlemen's agreements. The firm dealt in groundnut oil, castor seeds, cotton, grains, and lord knows what else. All the men present were either part of the firm or did a lot of business with it. Some of the group were making deals among themselves to open their books, thus beginning the new year auspiciously. When the manager wasn't doing business he was impatiently dialling someone to check on the position of the stars, as the time of the most important Puja or prayers depended on the rising and setting of certain stars. THE TIME would be 7:15, we were told.

Some of the men had finished writing mantras in their three or four account books and began dipping their index fingers into pots of vermilion or yellow ink. They made the sign of the Swastik in each book over the scripture they had written. Some also wrote Hindi letters over the mantras. Then they flicked red and yellow ink over the first few pages of the books. A very old, slow moving man at my feet had trouble drawing his Swastik, the feet went the wrong way, as a child mixed up by S and Z. The manager stopped dialling long enough to set him right. Several helpers began passing around the proper items to be laid on the spread-out account books. The manager seemed to know best so I watched him continue the ritual. He first placed a shiny betel leaf on his mantras. On this he put marigold blossoms and yellow flowers like zinnias. He scattered flower petals over the other pages. Then he spread out over the books oranges, bananas, a small fruit like a walnut, spears of a special grass, grains of barley, pieces of raw sugar cane about 18 inches long, vermilion powder, ground ginger, and sandalwood powder. A man behind the pillar threw incense on the coals and the blue smoke drifted toward me carrying the smell, not of tar or sandalwood as I'd expected, but of mountain balsam trees and tourist cushions with balsam cones and the Old Man of the Mountain painted on them.

The right stars were in the right position and the group was immediately on its feet. The priest began a furious chanting as he lit a piece of camphor on a tray; the camphor was resting on a betel leaf and had a marigold blossom on it. While the chief brother moved the tray in a circle, the priest chanted and banged on the inside of a metal vessel. The bells of a Lakshmi Temple nearby rang frenziedly. Firecrackers exploded outside the open windows. The telephone rang and the manager squatted to answer it. At the proper time, the chief brother gave the burning camphor tray to a man who carried it swiftly around the room. Each man passed his hands through the wispy black smoke and raised them to his face; some touched their foreheads. Then they all sat down again and lackeys scurried around giving everyone a handful of marigold petals. When all had petals they stood up and spoke something as they tossed the petals at one another. Then they stood silently for a moment, each man with his fingers resting on the back of the man in front of him.

Just like that the whole thing broke up. All bowed and made namaste to each other. The tallest of the brothers came over, offered me a cigarette, and invited us into the inner office. In the office everyone talked at once. Three telephones were busy. A lackey served pieces of banana, apple, orange, peeled sugarcane, and some candied red berries. The chief brother was swiftly counting out the yearly bonus of each employee from a sizeable stack of bills and bellowing for him to come get it. The manager asked me if New Year's celebrations in America were like this. I said sort of. And then Malvankar and I said thank you and goodbye, put on our shoes, and went into the street.

The outside world was noisy and gay: firecrackers banged everywhere, families in barouches -- often old ladies with children on their laps -- clipclipped by seeing the sights, shops were filled with men and women chatting or finishing their Puja (many telephones in use), cars drove by festooned with marigolds, shop fronts were looped with marigolds and betel leaves. With good luck we found an empty taxi and left the Gujarati quarter, where we were, for the Maharashtrian section, where houses were hung with Chinese lanterns instead of naked bulbs. We passed a procession and stopped the cab in front of Volga, Tailor of Distinction, to have a look. It was a procession of Kali worshippers -- Kali is a favorite diety in Maharashtra. She is the black goddess who conquered time and who is propitiated by sacrifice, the third aspect of Siva's consort Parvati. She is also the Goddess of Rhythm and two lines of men near the front of the procession did a shuffling dance, accompanying themselves by shaking sticks from which hung bells and rattles. The rhythm got me, too, and I wanted to dance. A red and orange draped ox pulling a cart, which sprouted sugar cane and carried tom-tom drummers, led the parade, then came the dancers and behind them came a brass band in red and white uniforms -- no majorettes -- and behind them came a second group of dancers beating small, brass, half-spheres together like cymbals, making a mellow clanging, and last of all came a group of women in highly colored finery surrounding men carrying a silver sedan chair with a picture of Kali in it. Men with lanterns on their heads surrounded the procession.

Malvankar had to return to his family, so I went back to the hotel and listened to the firecrackers and tried to write down what I'd seen.

Sincerely yours,

Red Austin
Granville Austin