

Happy Diwali for New and Old Friends

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Last week I was invited to celebrate Diwali with a friend. I've always had an interest in Indian culture and traditions so this was an opportunity I couldn't pass up. Diwali is the [Hindu](#) festival of lights celebrated every year, usually somewhere between mid-October to mid-November.

One of the most popular festivals of Hinduism, it signifies the victory of good over evil, light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, and hope over despair. My friend told me it was like their New Year celebration. People came from all over Massachusetts and New Hampshire to celebrate together in a small town close to the border of both

Religious Traditions Change With the Times

It's an ancient tradition in India, as a festival after the summer harvest. The festival is mentioned in Sanskrit texts dating back to the second half of 1st millennium AD, but could have started even earlier. It's related to the legends of some Hindu deities.

The religious significance of Diwali varies within India, depending on the school of Hindu philosophy, regional legends, and local beliefs. My friend mentioned it's celebrated on different dates, and with different rituals, depending on what Indian state you live in. The celebration we attended last Thursday had some long chanting sessions, and one woman told me this event was different from the way she was used celebrating the holiday.

I guess you could say that all religious traditions evolve over time and location. Christmas and Easter are celebrated differently among various denominations and in other countries, but all celebrations share some basic themes. I'm sure Christmas and other Christian holidays were also quite different 500 or 1000 years ago.

Beauty, Dedication and Devotion

This was a joyous event which could be seen in the bright smiles and beautiful clothing. Children dressed in their best outfits frolicked barefoot in the hallways. Everyone took off their shoes at the door and put them on shelves with cubbyholes. It was either barefoot or socks, a tradition that made me feel quite at home.



We walked down a stark hallway and entered a huge gymnasium like room, where someone pulled me aside and said, "ladies this way." My friend tried to apologize for not warning me, but I said, "I'm used to this" and waved him off. Ladies on one side and men on the other was fitting as everyone was sitting cross legged on the floor in very tight rows.

The decorations, alters and people were sparkling, golden and colorful. There was a song, candles and incense, then a prayer to open the celebration. Even though I couldn't understand the language, I could feel the heart, dedication and devotion. After this short opening ceremony we were invited to partake of the specially prepared meal at the opposite end of the hallway.

Treated Like Royalty

I had no idea what to expect, but it seemed that everyone wanted to help me and make me feel welcome. I was the obvious foreigner with my light skin, hair and western clothes, but I felt no distance from anyone.

Ladies were eager to talk with me and surprised that I enjoyed the hot vegetarian cuisine. I felt if Christian churches were this genuinely open and friendly they would be filled to the brim with new members.



After the meal we went back to the large room with the altar for the chanting. Although I was offered a chair, I chose to sit on the floor with the majority. Places were set with Styrofoam trays along rows of white paper, and I had no idea what I was in for. But 4 ladies, 2 on either side of me guided me through the chanting and offering rituals that followed. Like a child I mimicked their actions, and with kindness they explained the meaning each step of the way. It was a long way though—at least an hour or more of chanting and repetitive actions of offering rose petals, rice, water, fire and other

rituals. My legs and feet began to tingle, but I was not the only one and we laughed about it.

Swaminarayan Hinduism

The organization that hosted this event is called BAPS, which is an acronym for words that I can't pronounce. BAPS is a worldwide religious and civic organization in the [Swaminarayan branch of Hinduism](#). Swaminarayan was a yogi, and an ascetic whose life and teachings brought a revival of central Hindu practices of dharma, ahimsa, and brahmacharya. He is believed by followers to be a manifestation of God.

BAPS was established as a formal organization on in 1907 by [Shastriji Maharaj](#). It was formed on the founder's doctrinal stand that Swaminarayan had promised to remain present through a lineage of Gunatit Gurus dating all the way back to [Gunatitanand Swami](#) – Swaminarayan's foremost principal devotee. Followers believe in receiving spiritual guidance through the current living Guru.



BAPS is a global Hindu organization with activities aimed at spirituality, character-building, and human welfare. BAPS engages in a host of humanitarian and charitable endeavors, by which its volunteers serve neighbors and communities. Through the BAPS Charities non-profit aid organization, BAPS has a number of projects around the world in the areas of healthcare, education, environmental causes, and community-building campaigns.

Through these activities, it aims to preserve Indian culture, ideals of Hindu faith, family unity, selfless service, interfaith harmony and peaceful coexistence. 55,000 volunteers and 3,300 temples serve 3,300 communities around the world.