Deepavali: The Hindu Festival of Lights

Posted on

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For children, the festival is a time for lighting crackers.

Religious festivals are the most popular, the most colourful and perhaps the most lavishly celebrated events in our multi-racial, multi-ethnic island, On October 17, the

large Hindu population here joins Hindus worldwide in celebrating Deepavali.

Popularly called the Festival of Lights, Deepavali comes from the Sanskrit for “garland of lights” and signifies the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and JOY over sorrow.

It is an event that is celebrated with rejoicing in every Hindu home. Myriad coloured lights illuminate the houses of all those observing the festival.

No one really knows how the festival originated. In Sri Lanka, popular legend believed by many Hindus relates to the giant demon, Naragasuran, who unleashed a reign of terror. The people appealed to Lord Vishnu for help and Lord Vishnu vanquished the demon.

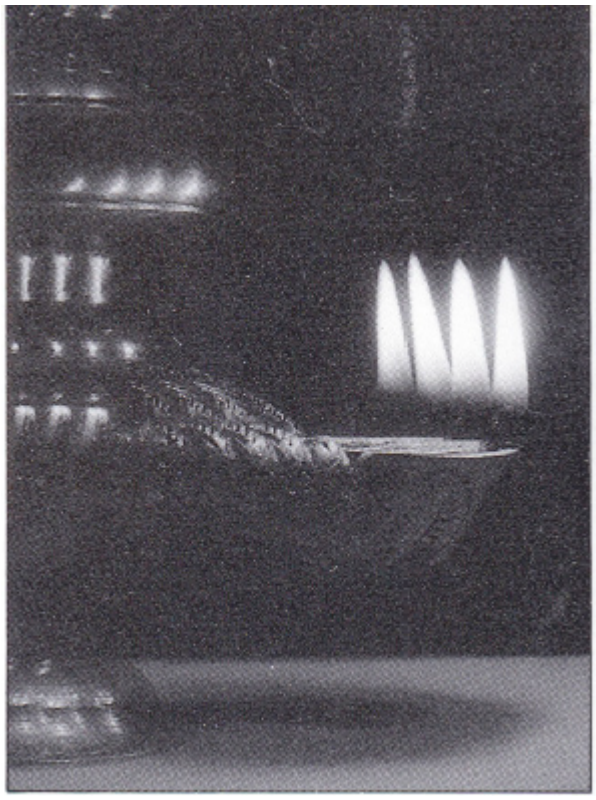
When he was about to die, Naragasuran realized his folly and begged for forgiveness. He asked that whoever sought to get rid of his tyranny should celebrate his death by purifying himself inwardly and outwardly and make it a day of rejoicing.

“With my demise, let there be tranquillity and happiness,” were his dying words. With no less nobility of character did his mother make a similar request. “My loss in the passing away of my beloved son is more than recompensed by the universal joy in the heart of everyone,” she said.

The plea of his dying enemy was heeded by Lord Vishnu and to this day it is said Deepavali is observed to celebrate the event.
The most interesting and colourful aspect of this festival is its rich fusion of customs and rituals, which visitors can witness in the homes of Hindu families. Deepavali is essentially a family festival, celebrated with much merrymaking.

The rituals include oil baths (a symbol of purification), lighting of crackers (to dispel the forces of evil) and the wearing of new clothes (symbol of purity).

It is a simple manifestation of our rich cultural heritage.





Deepavali is a day for visiting temples.

Weeks before Deepavali, housewives begin clearing their homes and painting them afresh. They sew new curtains and make preparations for the titilating feast of sweetmeats and other foods that adorn the table on Deepavali day.

In some compounds, the entrances to houses are decorated with beautiful kolam designs made from coloured coconut. Mango leaves entwined with lemons and chillies are hung on doorways to ensure prosperity and ward off evil. For children, the festival is a time for lighting fire crackers and fireworks, for exchanging gifts and for partaking of the delicious sweetmeats.

Hospitality is abundant and visitors invited to a home where Deepavali is being celebrated will be able to share the food and presents of their hosts. For the religious minded, it is a day of visiting temples and of spiritual cleansing.

However. do not expect Deepa li to be celebrated with the pomp and pageantry of Vesak (the main Buddhist festival) or Christmas. It is a simpler manifestation of the rich cultural heritage we have inherited through the ages.