If you rolled a bit of Christmas, New Year's Eve and the Fourth of July all into one, then catered the affair with mountains of sweets and savory snacks, you would have a taste of what it means to celebrate Diwali, India’s best-known festival. It is a day of Hindu solidarity, when all Hindus gather in love and trust. It is observed by lighting rows of oil lamps and exchanging greeting cards, clothing and other gifts. Family bonds are strengthened and forgiveness sought. For many, Diwali marks the beginning of the new year. Joyous festivities and parties abound.

What occurs on Diwali?
Diwali (or Deeposal, “row of lights”) is celebrated by Hindus worldwide to commemorate the triumph of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, hope over despair, oil-wick lamps over the darkness of ignorance, hope over despair. Oil-wick lamps symbolize the triumph of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, light over darkness. Oil-wick lamps are lit in every household, along with colorful strings of electric lights, adorning the home, village and community to sparkle with dancing flames. The festival falls on the day before the new moon in the month of Ashwin (October/November). Communities spare nothing in their preparations for an ablation after an oil massage. The special bath cleanses the physical and astral energies of the individual. Fragrant powders of dried flowers are used to remove the oil. Families then don fine new clothes, beautiful patterns are drawn on the ground, and lamps are lit until entire streets glow. Even the White House in Washington, DC, is illuminated by the gentle glow of oil lamps during its annual Diwali observance.

Does ritual bathing play a part?
Diwali marks the conquest of negativity. To wash away all traces of life’s struggle, the negative and draining energies of evil, Hindus immerse the waters of India’s holiest rivers —Ganga, Yamuna, Godavari, Saraswati, Narmada, Indus and Kaveri—into water collected in urns in preparation for an ablation after an oil massage. The special bath cleanses the physical and astral energies of the individual. Fragrant powders of dried flowers, seeds, leaves and flowers are used to remove the oil. Families then don fine new clothes, beautiful patterns are drawn on the ground, and lamps are lit until entire streets glow. Even the White House in Washington, DC, is illuminated by the gentle glow of oil lamps during its annual Diwali observance.

Tidbits About Diwali

What else is done for Diwali?
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HINDUISM TODAY

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What legends are associated with Diwali?
In the sacred text Ramayana, Diwali marks the return of Rama to his kingdom after defeating Ravana, the demon king who ruled Sri Lanka and kidnapped Rama’s pious wife, Sita. It also celebrates Krishna’s victory over Narasimha, the demon of ignorance. Rama and Krishna are earthly incarnations, or avatars, of Vishnu.

Indian Carrot Sweet
Carrot Halwa
Preparation time: 30 minutes
Cooking time: 45 minutes
Serves: 8
Equipment: A small wide or round-bottomed pan, a ladle and a serving dish.

Ingredients
• 3 cups grated carrots
• 1 cup sugar
• 1 cup milk
• 1½ tablespoons ghee
• 2 cardamom pods
• A few cashews and raisins

Method
1. Grate the carrots and cook on low heat, stirring occasionally, until carrots are soft. Keep adding milk, a little at a time, until milk thickens, then stir in the sugar.
2. Cook over low heat until everything blends together into a firm mass that separates from the sides of the pan.
3. Garnish with the fried cashews, cardamom pods and raisins. Top with a little ghee and pinapple slices for extra flair.

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FAN FACT

FACT: Believing that the Divine resides in all things, Hindus practice non-injury and hold a deep respect, bordering on reverence, for all living beings. This embracing attitude is reflected in India’s history of welcoming refugees from all cultures and faiths. By following dharma, Hindus echo love and inner peace. Secure in their faith, they interact harmoniously with their neighbors, regardless of religious affiliation.

FICTION: Many people wrongly believe that Hindus, being proud of their religion, may declaim other cultures. In fact, Hindus freely accept the spiritual efficacy of other paths and never proselytize.

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