

## TIHAR FESTIVAL

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*To children with love and blessings, Tilak B. Shrestha, Ph.D. <tilakbs@hotmail.com>*

We Nepalese have many festivals to enjoy. 'Tihar' is one of the biggest and enjoyable festivals. It is also called 'Swanti', 'Deepawali', 'Deewali' or the Festival of Light. The festival is mainly about honoring and worshipping Mother Lakshmi, Goddess of Sustenance, Prosperity, Good fortune and Spirituality. The festival is also associated with other celebrations including 'Mha puja – self celebration' and 'Celebrating brothers.' Mother Goddess Lakshmi is shown sitting on the Lotus flower, a symbol of purity, happiness and prosperity. Lotus flowers grow out of mud, yet remain pure and beautiful. Children get all kinds of sweets, fruits and blessings from seniors. Houses are cleaned and in the evening candles \ diyo \ pala are lit in windows and doors. Houses, neighborhoods and villages all are bright with lights to welcome Mother Goddess Lakshmi. The season is mild, harvest is just in, and people are in jovial mood.

The five days long festival begins on the 3 days before the 1<sup>st</sup> moon day of the Kartik (around November) month. We consider our self as a part of nature and also celebrate birds and animals, especially cows. After mother's milk, we drink cow milk for sustenance. Also the bulls are used both in ploughs \ agriculture and carts \ transport, the base of ancient economic infrastructure in the Indian sub-continent. Thus in case of famine (El Nino effects), saving cows became an important socio-economic issue.

1. Day of the crow: We consider crows as the divine messengers. We give good food and tell them to bring good news.
2. Day of the dog: We consider dogs as our friend and protector.
3. Day of the cow and Lakshmi Puja: In the morning cows are cleaned, garlanded and given good food.

In the evening Mother Goddess Lakshmi is worshipped. Candles \ diyo \ pala are lit inside and out side the house. The windows and doors are lit with candles to welcome Goddess Lakshmi. The singsong Deussi and Bhailo begins. Both boys (Deusi) and girls (Bhailo) will go around the neighborhood and sing for their prosperity \ happiness and spirituality. In turn, neighbors gift them with sweets, selroti, flowers, rice and money.

4. Day of the self celebration 'Mha puja', Gobardhan puja and Nepal Sambat: Different communities celebrate different events. Mha puja is mostly celebrated by Newar community. It is the celebration of the self or own body, and comes from 'Tantra' Dharma. According to Tantra, the directly experienced nature is not merely an illusion but a part \ a projection of the universal reality (Brahman \ Bodhi). In depth study of direct experience can lead to the salvation. Pluck a ripe grape and enjoy. The taste is real, with full realization how it grew and how it would decay. Similarly our own body is also divine, meant to be enjoyed with full understanding of its frailty.

Gobardhan puja is to commemorate the protection of the world by Bhagwan Shree Krishna. The legend goes that once there was a terrible rain and the whole world was about to be sunk into the deluge. But Krishna lifted the Gobardhan mountain and used it as a giant umbrella to protect all. It is taken as the love and protection of divinity to all.

It is also the new year of 1134, 'NS' Nepal Sambat \ Era \ calendar. NS is a lunar calendar adjusted to the solar cycle – lunisolar. Its association with the Moon phase makes it an ideal calendar for the Dharmic festivals. Most of the business people close their business account on this day. It is an indigenous Nepalese creation with its own legend, and a pride of all

Nepalese. The Era was initiated in the reign of King Raghav Deva on October 20, 879 AD. The legend associated with NS goes that a commoner Sankhadhar Sakhwa, who paid everybody's debt and made all Nepalese free. To commemorate the occasion (national, economic and spiritual) the Sambat was instituted. The importance of the legend is the very idea of a simple man rising to the occasion and contributing in the national level. He remains our ideal and a source of inspiration. He is recognized as the 'Nepali Bivuti', Hero of Nepal.

5. Day of the brothers: On this day sisters wish long and happy life to brothers. In turn brothers give gifts and promise to love and protect sisters. There is a legend that once Yamaraj, the lord of Rule and Hades, came to imprison a brother. But his sister was able to trick him and saved her brother. Sisters give garland made of flowers called 'Makhamali \ Gwe swan' and walnuts, which stays fresh for very long time, symbols of long life. People without brothers and sisters may take others as brothers and sisters, a relation for life time. It is about one of the bed rocks of our society – 'bond between brothers and sisters.'

We philosophize that to feed and provide for young by elders is a universal phenomenon, inherent in the very nature. Even a mother hen will feed her chicks. The sense is very potent in the motherly instinct. Similar other universal phenomena may be recognized like seniors blessing juniors with 'knowledge' and 'security.' We honor and worship Mother Sharaswati as Goddess of knowledge and Mother Bhagawati is the Goddess of protection. Mother Lakshmi is the Goddess of sustenance and prosperity. Here in this world, mother is the first to feed, teach and protect her baby.

The most important feature of the festival is to be happy and light candles within and without. That is **'True happiness comes from within and being with family, friends and sharing.'**

### **Mother Goddess Lakshmi**

