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Pancha Ganapati

The Family Festival of Giving

Think of this as the Hindu Christmas, a modern winter holiday full of family-centered happenings, but with five days of gifts for the kids, not one. From December 21 to 25 Hindus worship Lord Ganesha, the elephant-headed Lord of culture and new beginnings. Family members work to mend past mistakes and bring His blessings of joy and harmony into five realms of their life, a wider circle each day: family, friends, associates, culture and religion.

What is the nature of the festival?

Pancha Ganapati includes outings, picnics, feasts and exchange of cards and gifts with relatives, friends and business associates. A shrine is created in the main living room of the home and decorated in the spirit of this festive occasion. At the center is placed a large wooden or bronze statue of Lord Panchamukha ("five-faced") Ganapati, a form of Ganesha. Any large picture or statue of Ganesha will also do. Each morning the children decorate and dress Him in the color of that day, representing one of His five rays of energy, or shaktis.

What happens on each of the five days?

Each day a tray of sweets, fruits and incense is prepared and offered to Lord Ganapati, ideally by the children. Chants and songs are sung in His praise. After the worship, diverse sweets are shared by one and all. Each day colorfully wrapped gifts are given to the children, who place them before Pancha Ganapati to open on the fifth day. The adults receive gifts, too! On each day one of the five faces of Pancha Ganapati is worshiped.

December 21, yellow: The family discipline for this day is to create a vibration of love and harmony among all members. Rising early, they decorate the shrine, then perform a grand puja invoking Ganesha's blessings. Sitting together, they make amends for past misdeeds, insults, mental pain and injuries caused and suffered. They conclude by extolling one another's best qualities.

December 22, blue: Day two is devoted to creating or restoring a vibration of love and harmony among neighbors, relatives and close friends. This is done by presenting heartfelt gifts and offering apologies to clear up any ill-will that may exist. Relatives and friends in far-off places are written to or called, forgiveness is sought, apologies made and tensions released.

December 23, red: Today's discipline is to establish love and harmony among business associates and the public. It is the day for presenting gifts to fellow workers and customers and to honor employers and employees with gifts and appreciation. It is a time for settling all debts and disputes.

December 24, green: The spiritual discipline of day four is to draw forth the vibration of joy and harmony that comes from music, art, drama and dance. Family, relatives and friends gather before Ganesha to share their artistic gifts, discuss Hindu Dharma and make plans to bring more cultural refinements into the home.

December 25, orange: The discipline for this day is to bring forth love and harmony that comes from charity and religiousness. As the gifts are opened, one and all experience Ganesha's abundant, loving presence filling their home and hearts, inspiring them anew for the coming year.

Tidbits About Pancha Ganapati

How did this festival begin? In 1985, Satguru Sivaya Subramuniaswami, founder of Hinduism Today magazine, conceived of and introduced Pancha Ganapati during the thirty days of the Markali Pillaiyar home festival. With five days of gift giving at the time of year when Christmas is widely celebrated, it offers Hindu families, especially in the West, a meaningful way to participate in the holiday season without compromising their Hindu values. Their children receive and give gifts just as do their non-Hindu friends. Adults can fulfill the season's social custom of sharing gifts and greeting cards, as well as accepting them from relatives, neighbors, friends and business associates.

How is the Hindu tone maintained? While the festival occurs at Christmas time,

Hindus celebrate Pancha Ganapati in a distinctly Hindu way, without Christmas trees, Santa Claus or symbols of other religions. Greeting cards are Indian in design and content, conveying Hindu wisdom from scripture. Hindu music and bhajans take the place of Christmas carols.

How is the home decorated? Lord Ganesha is depicted as coming from the forest; therefore, pine boughs, bamboo, palm fronds or banana leaves may be used. Durva grass, sugarcane, garlands of limes, vadai or sweet modaka enhance the home shrine. Flashing lights, oil lamps and colorful hanging ornaments are often added. After each puja, the sweets prepared for the day are given to the children.

Making Vadai

Spicy donuts to enjoy as a snack or with a festive meal

Preparation time: 4 hours

Cooking time: 40 minutes

Serves: 6-8

Equipment: A small wok or round-bottomed pan, a ladle and a serving dish.

Ingredients

1 cup urad dal, 1 onion, 2 green chilies, curry leaves, ghee, salt

Method

1. Soak the dal in water for 4 hours.

2. Drain and grind to a coarse paste.

3. Mince the onion and chilies.

4. Add to the dal with salt and curry leaves. Stir well.

5. To make each vadai, roll a small piece of dough into a ball and flatten it. Vadais are usually about 2 1/2" in diameter and may have a hole in the middle like a donut.

6. Deep fry the vadai in ghee until golden (about 5 minutes).

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

FACT: Hindus believe that even harsh karma--which comes in the form of difficult experiences--when faced in wisdom, can be the greatest catalyst for spiritual growth. The Hindu knows that when something happens that seems unfortunate or unjust, it is not God's punishment. It is the result of one's own actions in the past. Understanding the way karma works, Hindus seek to live a good and virtuous life through right thought, right speech and right action. This is called dharma.

FICTION: It is not true that Hinduism is alone in its belief in reincarnation. The doctrine is found in all other Indic religions--Jainism, Sikhism and Buddhism--as well as indigenous faiths, including the Native Americans and the pagans of Europe. Even Christianity originally taught reincarnation, and some schools of Judaism still do. Today one-fourth of Americans believe in reincarnation. It is one of most widespread articles of faith on Earth.

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