



UNIVERSITY OF
TORONTO

DIWALI AND BANDI CHHOR DIVAS IN THE WORKPLACE

Inclusive Employer Guide

EQUITY · DIVERSITY · INCLUSION

WHAT IS DIWALI AND BANDI CHHOR DIVAS?

Diwali, also known as Deepavali or the “Festival of Lights”, is a festival celebrated by Hindus, Jains, and Sikhs from around the world.

Diwali takes place on the day of the New Moon in the Hindu month of “**Kartika**”. The date of Diwali changes according to the lunar calendar but always falls between the middle of October and the middle of November and is typically observed in a variety of ways.

This is also an important day for Sikhs who celebrate Bandi Chhor Divas or the “Prisoner Release Day” on the same day. In 2024, Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas will be celebrated on October 31.

WHAT DO DIWALI AND BANDI CHHOR DIVAS MEAN, AND WHAT DO THE DAYS COMMEMORATE?

Diwali is a variation of the Sanskrit word “**deepavali**” meaning “row of lights” and refers to the earthen lamps or “**diyas**” that families place around their homes during the celebrations.

Hindus believe that the light from these lamps symbolizes the illumination within the individual. The holiday also coincides with the Hindu New Year, celebrating hope, prosperity, and new beginnings, though each faith has its own reason to celebrate.

Jains celebrate Diwali to mark the attainment of “**moksha**” or spiritual liberation. It is believed that many gods were present on the night when Mahavira reached moksha and that their presence illuminated the darkness.

Bandi Chhor Divas directly translates to “Prisoner Release Day” and was first celebrated in the autumn of 1619. This holiday marks the release of the sixth guru, Guru Har Gobind, and 52 kings from Fort Gwalior prison and their arrival at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India. The story of their release reminds Sikhs of freedom and human rights.

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While each region and religion celebrate Diwali according to their own spiritual, cultural, regional, and historical contexts, Diwali is seen as a universal celebration of the victory of good over evil, light over darkness, and knowledge over ignorance.

HOW ARE DIWALI AND BANDI CHHOR DIVAS OBSERVED?

Diwali is a five-day celebration that peaks on the third day with the main celebration. In the lead-up to the main celebration, followers will prepare by cleaning and decorating their homes, streets, and workplaces with “rangolis” (colorful art circle patterns).

On the night of Diwali and Bandi Chhor, people light up their homes, streets, “mandirs” (Hindu temple), and “gurdwaras” (Sikh temples) with dozens of candles, lights, and clay lamps. Families and friends gather to share festive meals and sweets, exchange gifts, enjoy music, and light fireworks.

Many also attend religious ceremonies in temples and holy sites, offering prayers for good fortune and health to the gods.

HOW CAN WE CREATE AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT?

1 **Get educated.** Ensure staff, who supervise colleagues that celebrate Diwali or Bandi Chhor Divas, are aware of the festivities and how they can be supportive.

2 **Intentional planning and accommodations.** Update your scheduling tools to reflect religious observance dates and to support the planning activities. Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on Diwali and Bandi Chhor if possible.

The University of Toronto recognizes its obligation to prevent discriminatory impacts on members of its community that arise from the failure to accommodate based on religion or creed. It is the responsibility of both the Manager and the individual seeking accommodation to work cooperatively and respectfully to explore and implement appropriate accommodation options. Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to switch shifts to observe Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas. Look for solutions that suit all parties.

3 **Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Hindu, Jain, or Sikh colleagues may take the time off, but they may still observe in various ways.