

Primary Teacher Guide 2.3

“The Significance of ‘Light’ in the Hindu Tradition”

This sheet was adapted from a guide initially written for secondary level. Despite its shortcomings, it may give the teacher helpful ideas for multi-curricular learning around the theme of light, and specifically how to tie in this theme to the Hindu tradition.

The **festival**, commonly associated with light is Diwali. The word itself means ‘Row of lights.’ Pongal, the harvest festival in January, is related to the sun and the sun-god.

The **symbol** of light is the diva. A useful learning idea is painting divas in the classroom.

The **story** most commonly identified with this festival is that of the *Ramayana* (the story of Rama and Sita). After defeating the demon-king Ravana and reclaiming His kidnapped wife, Lord Rama with Sita, His brother Lakshman and the monkey hero Hanuman, returned in a celestial airplane to reclaim the throne of Ayodhya. It was the night of the new moon and the jubilant citizens lit the way and indeed the whole capital with thousands of lamps. To this day Hindus celebrate by decorating their homes, both inside and out, with lamps and also float them down the river.

Related themes can be drawn from the story, such as light over darkness and good over evil. Philosophically it could be interesting for children to study pairs of opposites such as good-bad, light-darkness, happiness-distress, rich-poor etc. (called ‘duality’ in the tradition itself).

Light can also be easily related to the environment and environmental issues (e.g. the light of the sun, and the light of the moon).

In scripture there are some interesting quotes from the *Bhagavad Gita* - Chapter 7 verse 8 reads, “I am the light of the sun and the moon, I am the heat in fire, etc.” and in Chapter 10 verse 22, Krishna says: “Of lights I am the radiant sun and amongst stars I am the moon.”

Another two **verses from the *Bhagavad Gita*** are relevant: Chapter 10, verses 10 - 11, again to do with understanding and light. “To those who are constantly devoted to serving Me with love, I give the understanding by which they can come to Me. To show them I show special mercy, I dwelling in their heart, destroy with the shining lamp of knowledge, the darkness born of ignorance.

There is also a well-known **prayer**, “Lead me from the darkness to light, from the unreal to the real”. Another quote is “Godhead is light, nescience is darkness. Where there is Godhead there is no nescience.” It similarly expresses the ability of light to drive away the darkness of evil. And yet darkness cannot drive away light. Although in Hinduism God is often represented as a kind of all-pervading light or spirit, there is also a predominant philosophical school wherein the concept that God is actually as a person, the source of all spirit, the source of everything. Some schools compare God to the sun, the source of light; God is the source of his all-pervading authority.

There is another **prayer** that has some connection with knowledge and ignorance. “I was born in the darkness of ignorance, but my spiritual teacher forced open my eyes with the torch of knowledge. I therefore offer my respectful homage unto him.” Passing through the process of repeated birth and death we are certainly subject to darkness.

One **mantra** in this connection is the *Gayatri* mantra, which is traditionally chanted by Brahmins, three times a day, at the rising of the sun, when the sun is at midpoint and at dusk. (This prayer can be found on the Audio-CD, track 23).

In Shankya **philosophy**, light is one of the five elements. Each of these five elements corresponds to one of the five senses and a particular deity. All these three are required for seeing: the light, sun and eyes. The sun **deity** (Surya) is therefore worshipped as the representative of God, since it is the sustainer of the whole universe.

As far as **ceremony** is concerned, the arti in which lamps are offered is very appropriate. These lamps made from cotton soaked in ghee (clarified butter). During the ceremony the lamp represents the light element. Light is also closely connected to fire, and the havan (sacred fire) ceremony