

Primer on Tihar

James Read*

Abstract

In this note I discuss some key aspects of the Nepali festival, Tihar.

1 Introduction

Tihar is a five-day Hindu festival, celebrated in Nepal, as well as the northern Indian states of Sikkim, Assam, and Darjeeling district. After Dashain, it is the most significant festival in the Nepali calendar. The third day coincides with the Hindu festival of Deepavali, i.e. Diwali.

2 Significance

Tihar is a celebration not just of humans and of the Hindu gods, but also of the animals who maintain strong relations with humans—in particular, crows, dogs, cows, and oxen. In honour of these animals, people make patterns on the floor of living rooms or courtyards using materials such as coloured rice, dry flour, coloured sand, or flower petals.

3 Days of Tihar

In this section, I discuss in turn the significance of each of the five days of Tihar.

Day 1: Kaag tihar (Crow day)

On the first day of Tihar, *kaag tihar*, crows and ravens are worshiped by offering sweets and dishes on the roofs of houses. In Hinduism, the cawing of crows and ravens symbolises sadness and grief; devotees offer crows and ravens food to avert grief and death in their homes.

*james.read@philosophy.ox.ac.uk

Day 2: Kukur tihar (Dog day)

The second day of Tihar, *kukur tihar*, is a celebration of the cherished relationship between humans and dogs; on this day, dogs are decorated with various fun garlands, and treated to delicious food.



Figure 1: Pooch.

Day 3: Gai tihar (Cow day) and Laxmi puja

The morning of the third day of Tihar is *gai tihar*—the worship of the cow. In Hinduism, cows signify prosperity and wealth. Historically, people benefited a lot from the cow—its milk, dung, and even urine were used.¹ Thus, on this day, people show their gratitude to cows by garlanding and feeding them with their best grass. Houses are cleaned and the doorways and windows are also decorated with garlands.

In the evening, the goddess of wealth, Laxmi, is thanked for all the benefits bestowed upon families in the intervening year, by lighting oil lamps (*diyo*) or candles in doorways and windows. At night, girls enjoy dancing and visiting all the houses in the neighbourhood with musical instruments, singing and dancing all night long and collecting money as tips.

¹The latter for the purpose of purification.

Day 4: Goru tihar (Ox day)

On the fourth day of Tihar, *goru tihar*, the sturdy and steadfast ox is celebrated. In addition, those who follow *Vaishnavism*² perform *Govardhan puja*—i.e., worship towards the Govardhan mountain.³ Cow dung is taken as representative of the mountain and is worshipped.

Day 5: Bhai tika (Brother day)

The fifth and final day of Tihar is called *bhai tika*. It is observed by sisters applying tika to the foreheads of their brothers, as well as giving their brothers special garlands made from flowers that wilt only after a couple of months, in order to ensure their long life.

It is believed that *Yamraj*, the god of death, visited his sister, *Yamuna*, on this day. On this visit, Yamuna applied to Yamraj auspicious tika, garlanded him, and fed him special dishes. Together, they ate sweets, talked, and enjoyed themselves. On parting, Yamraj gave to Yamuna a special gift as a token of his affection and, in return, Yamuna gave him a gift which she had made with her own hands. That day, Yamraj announced that anyone who receives tika from his sister will never die on this day.

²One of the major traditions within Hinduism, along with *Shaivism*, *Shaktism*, and *Smartism*. It is also called *Vishnuism*, and its followers called *Vaishnavas*, as it considers Vishnu the Supreme Lord.

³A sacred Hindu site in the Mathura district of Uttar Pradesh, India.