

Celebrating Diwali, the festivals of lights, in Waldorf Kindergartens in India

by Sucheta Garud

It is believed that during Diwali festival, Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth) visits the houses that are the cleanest. Hence, the festival of Diwali begins with the cleaning of houses.

The Waldorf Kindergartens in India also begin their two-week Diwali celebrations with the activity of cleaning their classrooms- scrubbing of the floor, dusting of the walls, cleaning the toys, washing the clothes. This year, in Inodai Waldorf School in Mumbai, a little girl, on her own accord, cleaned up the shoes and the shoe-rack, which was kept outside the entrance of the class. Such is the involvement of children in the cleaning activity. This activity lasts for two days.

After the class is sparkling clean, on the third day the children begin to make pom-poms with golden yellow colour woolen threads, which look like marigold flowers. The marigold flowers are considered auspicious and the doors and windows are decorated with these flowers in the second week.



The children then make decorative paper lanterns. The children work in small groups and the lanterns are made by sticking small colourful papers together. The divinely beautiful lanterns are hung in the classroom during the second week.

Cleaning, making flowers and lanterns are the activities of the first week. In the second week the decoration activity begins.

The flowers and lanterns are placed very aesthetically in the classroom. The joy reflected on the faces of the children is radiated in the atmosphere of the room.

The children then make sweets and savouries, which are essential elements of Diwali celebrations. Ladoos are made with chick-peas flour, sugar and melted butter. Ladoos are small balls made by mixing these ingredients.

Clay lamps are painted and beautified with designs put with glitter powder.

On the last day of school, just before Diwali vacation begins, the children and teachers come in their traditional costumes, rangolis (designs made with colourful powder on the floor) are made, beautiful diyas are filled with oil and are lit and every one wishes each other 'HAPPY DIWALI'. Sweets and savouries made by the children are, then, distributed among all present in school.

Throughout two weeks of Diwali celebrations, children and teachers sing many Diwali songs. One of these songs is:

DIWALI HAS COME, DIWALI HAS COME
LET'S LIGHT THE DIYAS..ONE BY ONE..
DIWALI HAS COME, DIWALI HAS COME
LET'S MAKE A RANGOLI..A COLOURFUL ONE..
DIWALI HAS COME, DIWALI HAS COME
LET'S JOIN OUR HANDS AND GREET
EVERYONE.



Older kindergarten children expect the same activities to happen each year, and they begin to feel the joy of anticipation of the festivals as they come round. Discussion of the underlying meaning and importance of the festival is reserved for the later years of development.

For now the young children are given an opportunity to feel and assimilate the meaning which lies in doing things. This leaves a deep impression on the life and formative forces of the young children.

The festival of lights, Diwali, is a very good example of this. The festival is celebrated in remembrance of Lord Rama coming back to the Kingdom of Ayodhya from his 14-year exile in vanvas, the forest. It symbolizes the victory of 'light' of knowledge (enlightenment) over the darkness of ignorance.



To start with, the 'season's table' which is the focus point and the miniature representation of outside season changes in the kindergarten is changed to yellow and red - colours of light. When the children see the 'season's table' the harmonious colours on it work on their sense of sight. In the centre of the circle during circle time, 'muggu' or 'Rangoli,' colored sand patterns, are made and the children join in. As they

try to draw the 'muggu' and not to let the 'muggu' slip through their fingers by gripping it hard, their fine motor skills are put to work. As we come close to the festival day a 'diya' oil lamp, is lit, and in front of the children, the teacher makes a beautifully carved watermelon or muskmelon shell, which on the festival day covers the diya to add a magical touch. Subtle additions like these go a long way in building the child's sense of life.

A new seasonal rhythmic game is introduced during circle time, keeping in mind the seasonal changes that happen during Diwali time - cold weather, taking out razai quilts and sweaters and dusting and drying them in the warm sun, feeling the warm sun on a cold morning, preparing for the 'special day' by cleaning the house, making sweets and 'chakli', having a tailor come to the house to take measurements and getting new cloths stitched.

It is also during this time of the year that winter pickles like lime/carrot/cauliflower pickles which need only warm sun are made - this is also woven into the morning play. In the second week the 'morning play' is built further by including the sequence of events that happen on the festival day - waking up early in the morning, taking an oil bath, washing hair with the shekakai plant, taking a bath with hot water on a cold morning, wearing new cloths, mother giving arthi, later taking a platter of delicious methai thali to the neighbours house and getting another methi thali in return from the neighbour. The morning circle gives us an opportunity to work on children's sense impressions through truthful gestures which is soul food for the children.

At story time potter's story is told, in which the entire process of making 'diyas' (oil lamps) is included - getting clay, preparing it, shaping it into diya, putting the clay diyas into kiln, letting them cool down. First the clay, following week the clay 'diya' and finally the baked diya found their way on the season's table. A week before Diwali the whole process was done in the kindergarten and the baked diyas were given to the children to take home. Simple knotted puppets were made in front of the children during 'free play' and the puppet play of the same story was done. Wicks were also made from the silky inner part of the cotton pod. Children joined in the process of taking the cotton out from the pod, separating seeds from the cotton and finally making wicks. The seeds went into the doll house kitchen in a small basket and in the days that followed the seeds became a part of laddus (round sweets), chakli (spiral cookies, juice and coffee as well!



One day before Diwali mango leaf 'thorans' (garlands) were tied to the doors. The children joined in the process of making and tying the 'thorans'. Malas were made with marigolds which are in plenty around this time of the year. Children actively took part in filling colours in the rangoli colored sand pattern that was made in the class. The festival was already in the air.

On the day of 'Diwali' all the parents were invited in the evening and the kindergarten teachers did the puppet play of the Diwali story for them.

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