

1. UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List- History

Deepavali has been inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity during the 20th Session of the Intergovernmental Committee, held in New Delhi

Deepavali (Diwali)- Festival of Lights

Temporal and Astronomical Basis- Deepavali is celebrated on Kartik Amavasya, the new moon day of the Hindu lunar calendar. It usually falls in October or November, marking the transition from the monsoon to the winter season. Symbolically, the darkest night of the lunar month is chosen to emphasise the triumph of light over darkness.

Core Ritual Practices- Homes, streets, public spaces, and temples are illuminated using oil lamps (diyas), candles, and electric lights. Rangoli designs are drawn at entrances to welcome prosperity and positive energies. Exchange of sweets, wearing new clothes, bursting firecrackers (now regulated), and community feasts are common social practices.

Five-Day Festival Structure

Dhanteras

1. Marks the beginning of Deepavali celebrations.
2. Purchasing gold, silver, utensils, or essential goods is considered auspicious.
3. Associated with wealth, health, and well-being.

Naraka Chaturdashi (Choti Deepavali)

1. Commemorates the defeat of demon Narakasura by Lord Krishna.
2. Symbolises the destruction of ego, cruelty, and injustice.

Lakshmi-Ganesha Puja (Main Deepavali Day)

1. Central day of the festival.
2. Goddess Lakshmi is worshipped for wealth and prosperity, and Lord Ganesha for wisdom and auspicious beginnings.
3. Business communities perform Chopda Pujan, opening new account books.

Govardhan Puja / Annakut

1. Linked to Lord Krishna lifting Mount Govardhan.
2. Celebrated through community feasts and offerings.

Bhai Dooj

1. Celebrates the bond between brothers and sisters.
2. Reinforces familial and social ties.

Popular Legends Associated with Deepavali

Ramayana Tradition- Marks the return of Lord Rama, Sita, and Lakshmana to Ayodhya after 14 years of exile and Rama's victory over Ravana. Citizens lit lamps to guide them home, giving rise to the "festival of lights" symbolism.

Mahabharata Tradition- Signifies the return of the Pandavas after completing their exile. Represents restoration of dharma and rightful rule.

Narakasura Legend- Naraka Chaturdashi recalls Lord Krishna's victory over Narakasura. Symbolises the annihilation of evil forces and moral corruption.

Jain Tradition- Lord Mahavira, the 24th Tirthankara, attained Nirvana at Pavapuri on Deepavali. Jain communities observe Deepavali as Nirvana Day, lighting lamps to symbolise liberation and enlightenment.

King Bali Tradition (Western India)- In Maharashtra and parts of South India, Deepavali marks the symbolic return of King Bali. Represents ideals of justice, generosity, and good governance.

Kali Puja Tradition (Eastern India)- In West Bengal, Odisha, and Assam, Deepavali coincides with Kali Puja. Goddess Kali is worshipped as the embodiment of power, protection, and inner strength.

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH)- Conceptual Framework

Definition- Intangible Cultural Heritage includes practices, expressions, knowledge systems, rituals,

performing arts, social customs, festivals, and traditional craftsmanship. It also encompasses associated objects, artefacts, and cultural spaces recognised by communities as part of their identity. **Key Characteristics**– Living heritage, continuously recreated and adapted over time. Transmitted intergenerationally, primarily through oral traditions and practice. Strengthens social cohesion, cultural continuity, and respect for diversity.

UNESCO Framework on Intangible Cultural Heritage

Historical Background– The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003) was adopted by UNESCO during its 32nd General Conference in Paris. The Convention aims to ensure–

1. Safeguarding of ICH
2. Respect for cultural diversity
3. Community participation
4. International cooperation

India and the Convention– India ratified the Convention in 2005, committing to the identification, documentation, and safeguarding of its living cultural traditions. The country actively participates in ICH nomination processes and safeguarding programmes.

India's Intangible Cultural Heritage on the UNESCO List– India currently has 16 elements inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. These include traditions related to

1. Performing arts
2. Rituals and festivals
3. Traditional knowledge systems
4. Social practices and craftsmanship

India has also served on the UNESCO Intergovernmental Committee for Intangible Cultural Heritage for three terms, reflecting its active role in global cultural governance.

Significance of Recognising Deepavali as Intangible Cultural Heritage

Highlights Deepavali as a pan-Indian, pluralistic, and inclusive festival with regional diversity. Emphasises values of peace, harmony, ethical living, and social bonding. Enhances global awareness of India's living cultural traditions, beyond monuments and tangible heritage. Supports cultural diplomacy and people-to-people connections.

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