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# Hindu Holidays: Fact Sheet

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## Introduction

Hinduism (or Sanatana Dharma) is the third-largest religion in the world behind Christianity and Islam, with nearly 1 billion adherents.<sup>1</sup> According to the Pew Research Center, about 0.7% of Americans self-identify as Hindu.<sup>2</sup> Originating on the Indian subcontinent, it is often described as a combination of many religious beliefs and philosophical schools. “Hindu” originated as the term used by ancient Persians to describe the people who lived beyond the Indus River Valley (in Sanskrit, “Sindhu”). The term “Hinduism” began to be more widely used by devotees on the Indian subcontinent and throughout the world by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>3</sup>

This fact sheet is designed to assist congressional offices with work related to Hindu holidays. It contains sample speeches and remarks from the *Congressional Record*, presidential proclamations and remarks, and selected historical and cultural resources.

This is part of a series of Congressional Research Service fact sheets on religious holidays in the United States.

## Major Holidays and Observances

Hindu holidays are historically observed following the lunar calendar, which is based on the waxing and waning of the moon. In India, observance dates are typically determined using both the solar calendar and the traditional lunar calendar.<sup>4</sup> The following are selected major holidays that may be observed throughout the United States.

### Holi

Holi is a spring festival, also known as the festival of colors. It falls in late February or early March. On the eve of Holi, some practitioners burn an effigy of the demoness Holika, to commemorate her defeat by a young prince named Prahlada, who was steadfastly devoted to Lord Vishnu. Among many observers, Holi is tied to the devotion of Lord Krishna and commemorates his love for his beloved consort Radha. Holi is most known for the practice of playfully throwing colored powder and colored water balloons at family, friends, and strangers.

### Diwali

Diwali, or Deepavali, is the Hindu festival of lights. It often falls between mid-October and mid-November, and for some observers coincides with the beginning of the New Year. Although the specific celebrations vary by region and group, Diwali is a celebration of the “victory of light over darkness, good over evil, knowledge over ignorance, and hope over despair.”<sup>5</sup> It is often

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<sup>1</sup> Stephanie Kramer, *Key findings about the religious composition of India*, Pew Research Center, September 21, 2021, p. 5, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/09/21/key-findings-about-the-religious-composition-of-india/>.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Smith et al., *America’s Changing Religious Landscape*, Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, p. 5, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

<sup>3</sup> J. Brodd et al., *Invitation to World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 83-143.

<sup>4</sup> R. Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2004), pp. 123-153.

<sup>5</sup> D. Heiligman and V. Narayanan, *Celebrate Diwali: With Sweets, Lights and Fireworks* (Washington, DC: National Geographic, 2008).

observed by wearing new clothes, participating in pujas (prayer or worship), exchanging gifts, cleaning the home, lighting oil lamps, participating in festivals, and setting off fireworks.<sup>6</sup>

## Other Significant Holidays

### Dussehra

Dussehra, or Dasera, the 10<sup>th</sup> and final day of the festival of Navaratri, is often observed as a celebration to commemorate Lord Rama's victory over the evil Ravana, as told in the epic text, the *Ramayana*.<sup>7</sup> Dussehra typically falls between late September and early October.

### Raksha Bandhan

Raksha Bandhan is a festival that celebrates and honors the bond between a brother and a sister. Ceremonies often include a sister tying a ceremonial thread or amulet called a *rakhi* around a brother's wrist, as a symbol of her love. The brother provides a gift in return, as a symbol of his promise to protect her. Raksha Bandhan typically falls in August.

### Krishna Janmashtami

Krishna Janmashtami celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna on the 8<sup>th</sup> day of the dark fortnight.<sup>8</sup> Fasting starts the preceding day until midnight. Prayers occur at midnight and temples are decorated with leaves and flowers. Krishna Janmashtami typically falls between August and September.<sup>9</sup>

## U.S. Congressional Recognition

Members of Congress often make floor statements, issue press releases, introduce resolutions, or enter Extensions of Remarks into the *Congressional Record* to recognize federal holidays and observances. The following are some recent examples that may be of assistance in preparing such statements:

Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, "CAPAC Members Celebrate Diwali," press release, October 24, 2022.

Congressman Raja Krishnamoorthi, "Congressman Krishnamoorthi Joins President Biden At White House Celebration Of Diwali," press release, October 24, 2022.

Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, "Rep. Maloney Announces Legislation to Make Diwali a Federal Holiday," press release, November 3, 2021.

H.Res. 764, Recognizing the religious and historical significance of the festival of Diwali, introduced on November 2, 2021.

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<sup>6</sup> R. Rinehart, *Contemporary Hinduism: Ritual, Culture, and Practice* (Santa Barbara, Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2004), pp. 149-150.

<sup>7</sup> The *Ramayana* is one of many Hindu sacred texts. Others include, but are not limited to, the *Mahabharata*, which contains the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Puranas*, the *Upanishads*, and the *Vedas*. (J. Brodd et al., *Invitation to World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 99-103).

<sup>8</sup> *Britannica Academic*, n.d., "Janmashtami," <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Janmashtami/43341>.

<sup>9</sup> *Britannica Academic*, n.d., "Janmashtami," <https://academic.eb.com/levels/collegiate/article/Janmashtami/43341>.

Representative Buddy Carter, “Hindu Heritage Month,” *Congressional Record*, daily edition, vol. 167 (October 27, 2021), p. H5955.

Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus, “CAPAC Members Celebrate Holi,” press release, March 18, 2022.

Senator Ted Cruz, “Sen. Cruz Commemorates Diwali,” press release, October 30, 2016.

## **U.S. Presidential Recognition**

One of the many uses of a presidential proclamation is to ceremoniously honor a group or call attention to certain issues or events. Some recent proclamations and remarks commemorating Hindu holidays, from the *Compilation of Presidential Documents*, include

Presidential Statements—Joseph R. Biden, Jr. (2021-)

Presidential Statements—Donald J. Trump (2017-2021)

Presidential Statements—Barack H. Obama (2009-2017)

Presidential proclamations and remarks from 1993 to the present are available through the govinfo service on the Government Publishing Office website. Earlier remarks (including selected audio and video clips) are available through The American Presidency Project, established by the University of California, Santa Barbara.

## **Historical and Cultural Resources**

Numerous resources provide information on the history and culture of Hinduism. Some of these include the following:

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) identifies as a nonprofit advocacy organization for the Hindu American community. HAF’s website includes information about Hinduism and common Hindu holidays. It also includes a toolkit on Holi and other Hindu holidays.

ShareAmerica, a resource maintained by the U.S. Department of State, includes several entries regarding the celebration of Hindu holidays in the United States; examples include “Americans celebrate the Hindu festival of Diwali,” and “Diwali is becoming a big deal in America.”

The National Geographic Society provides resources for educators and learners on Hindu holidays, including Diwali and Holi.

## **Related CRS Reports**

CRS Report R41990, *Federal Holidays: Evolution and Current Practices*, by Jacob R. Straus.

CRS Report R 43539, *Commemorations in Congress: Options for Honoring Individuals, Groups, and Events*, by Jacob Straus.

## **Author Information**

Maya V. Thomas  
Reference and Digital Services Librarian

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Sundeep Mahendra originally authored this report. Ben Leubsdorf contributed to subsequent updates.

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