

Gold and glitter is out, togetherness is in. Tired of reckless revelry and rituals, many people now look at Diwali as a more meaningful and individualistic celebration.

# The CHANGING Mood

by Shefalee VASUDEV

**B**ORED AND FATIGUED with the big noise, the big expectations, the diminishing returns of big money and the stifling pollution that choke the festival of lights, people are looking beyond the big bang. Amidst the abundant festivity, the lights and the gifts, there is conscious and evident change in the way people are making efforts to quieten, simplify and individualise Diwali. Within tradition, there is conservation. Within

revelry, there is sobriety.

"On Diwali, I consciously divert my children's attention to the darkness in the lives of poor children," says Delhi-based Sushmita Mukherjee, 42, who rejects the self-gratification of Diwali celebrations. Mukherjee isn't alone in lighting up her children's consciences with social responsibilities. Others too have redefined the word "celebration". "I have never been into puja-paath and I celebrate Diwali quietly with family and dear friends by lighting diyas," adds one-time beauty queen Naina Balsaver, now a jewellery designer. And this one for Goddess Laxmi. "I don't think it is a festival to welcome wealth," says nutritionist Himanshu Kapoor. "It is about spirituality and being with the family."

Commercialisation and mindless revelry had made Diwali a festival of deafening noise and one-upmanship, an excuse for vulgar conspicuous consumption. Gifts became bigger than the people who exchanged them, pujas became occasions to announce bank balances, women wore their husband's material success in zaradozi saris and gold jewellery, and, as this private festival turned into an ostentatious public affair, "more" became the mantra in the aartis people chanted. More spending, more gambling, a time to buy and sell favours. Then this festival of gold had a free fall. Pollution, noise, respiratory illnesses, a nervous competitive edge in relationships because of expensive gifts and the rigours of ritualism. Parents keen to pass on the relevance of Diwali to children found that money was doing all the talking. Something had to give.

It did. Sure, there still are people who get 15 lavish outfits designed for 15 Diwali parties and others who blow more than a few lakhs in gambling orgies. But the silver lining in this cloud is the choice of those who now opt for a cheaper Diwali. Says Devinder Singh Kapur, 56, a Delhi businessman: "Excessive commercialisation brings chaos and takes away peace. Personally, I keep aside the money for better use."

As people make efforts to separate

## Family First

In tune with the austere mood, many prefer to make the festival of lights an occasion for family bonding. Says nutritionist **Himanshu Kapoor**: "We don't do lavish parties, crackers or card sessions any more. Diwali today is about spirituality and being with the family."

NARENDRA BISHT



## No to Crackers

The anti-cracker campaign that started a few years back brought a sobering effect. Schools like DPS, Noida still crusade against crackers and children make a pledge to help the poor.

spirituality from ritualism, home pujas have become simpler affairs and are seen as mediums to spread positive energy. Besides that, personal interpretations of the relevance of Diwali show reflective wisdom. Some celebrate the day by lighting up the lives of the poor through money and gifts and also make it a point to buy Diwali stuff from places where the proceeds will go to charity. Still others immerse themselves into introspective questioning to come up with "new responses for the new year" that Diwali heralds. "I treat it as thanksgiving and to light a lamp within," says Poonam Malhotra, owner of the Delhi-based bookshop Full Circle. This new script has many writers. "We change as people, so our interpretation of festivals also changes," says Sharmila Dalmia, founder member of Shiksha India, an NGO. "I used to think Diwali was a time

**"It's a thanksgiving, a time to light a lamp within."**

POONAM MALHOTRA, owner of bookshop Full Circle

NARENDRA BISHT



## THE PARTY SCENE



Digital illustration by NILANJAN DAS

# New Rules of the Game

Delhi, the home of *teen-patti* tales, is going slow on the gambling and toning down the extravagance

DELHI BECOMES A TRENDSETTER once a year: on Diwali. Whatever the innovations to brighten up the festival of lights—and lighten wallets—they happen here. But the city might be taking a reality check this Diwali. While Natasha Nanda of Escorts, who has moved to Mumbai, will be missed for her Diwali bonanzas (the hostess is known for converting her home into a mini casino complete with blackjack tables and roulette), there is evidence that across the metros the tradition of celebrating the blessings of Laxmi will be low key this year. If a snap poll of A list hosts is any indication, Mumbai has nothing big planned—the party types are either heading out of town for the long weekend (Diwali falls on a Monday) or playing it low key this year.

Delhi reflects the Diwali downsizing. Over the years, those who venture out on Diwali night—and the week preceding it—to combine mithai-exchange with frenzied air-kissing

have fallen into an established, if loosely defined, pattern. If the stately home of Dr Karan Singh sees a more understated turnout on Diwali night where political leaders cut across party lines and exchange greetings, lawyers gather at the home of Rajeev Nayyar (last year, the unease between legal eagles Ram Jethmalani and Arun Jaitley after the *Big Men Small Egos* controversy had spilled over onto the cards table) and the younger—flashier, if you will—fashion designer and model crowd is seen at the Greater Kailash home of Ashish Soni. Farmhouses that dot the Gurgaon-Mehrauli Road host extravagant theme parties, with special touches ranging from palm readers to music set to *chaupal* verses.

But the buzz this year is missing. “The preparation for a Diwali party is usually on the scale of a wedding,” says Marut Sikka, expert foodie about town, “but for the first time, it’s not as great.” Sikka has in the past organised ambitious Diwali affairs:

for Jitender Mehta of Hero Cycles. They got “street specialties” from across the country laid out at a farmhouse with chefs put on a train and brought to Delhi. For another client, he put up an international cuisine counter. Sikka says that Delhi, which has a tradition of “putting aside a substantial amount of money” for the festival, is strangely quiet this year.

Even enthusiastic *teen-patti* card players say they have noticed a dip in activity. Raminder Singh of Greenline Communications says he and his friends used to begin playing at least a month before Diwali, but are yet to start in earnest this year. Singh says that at a party organised at Karan Channa’s (the rice exporter who owns the new and fashionable 1, MG Road) last week, “only two tables played”. While the economic situation may have something to do with this, Singh

says it is also Delhi’s quickening party pace. “Earlier Delhi had no other source of entertainment, so the tradition of playing cards around Diwali was really looked forward to,” he says. “But now there are so many options for the young and the old that it no longer serves the purpose it once did.” Surprising, certainly, in a city rife with Diwali *teen-patti* tales—a prominent hotelier famously almost came to blows with an industrialist over money owed in a card game. And at least one socialite used the card table to settle personal scores—with a flick of a solitaire-studded hand she, apparently not so accidentally, spilled a glass of red wine on the dress of a socialite.

Otherwise frequent party-goer Suhel Seth says he has never attended a Diwali party in Delhi “on principle” and will make another point against the “obscene and vulgar display of wealth” this time by taking off for Martha’s Vineyard (though some can argue that a holiday at a location frequented by the rich and famous is no less a display of wealth) in the US. But it does seem Delhi is displaying signs of political correctness—installation man Naresh Kapuria says he will go to India Gate with 110 diyas to remember those who died fighting terrorism.

But there are many others who will, like other years, continue to add spark to Diwali celebrations. So even though Deven and Priya Narang of South African Breweries will not host a party this time, Sandeep Jijodia of Monnet is having his on October 30. The Bharat Rams and Charat Rams from one of the Delhi’s famed “old families” will continue their tradition. Charat Ram’s daughter Shobha Deepak Singh of Sri-ram Bhartiya Kala Kendra says the family has hosted the parties “as long as I can remember” and as a child she would wake up the morning after to find guests still playing cards. Kanti and Nirmal Jain—Kanti Jain and Rajan Nanda are card-table buddies—is another old-money family which will host their usual Diwali do on November 2.

Though some traditions continue, the frenzied gambling that is as much a part of the festival as firecrackers will be considerably diluted. That is as much a comment on the uncertain nature of the economy as it is on the city’s changing social scene.

—Kanika Gahlaut



NARENDRA BISHT

## Breaking with Traditions

Rituals don’t captivate anymore. “I can be a participant in a puja done by my family, but not the prime doer,” says gift shop owner **Vinita Nath**. Like many other urban women she too doesn’t wear heavy, traditional jewellery and zari outfits for Diwali. Simple is festive.

to have fun and celebrate but now I am able to find more meaning into it,” says Dalmia who looks at Diwali as a time for bonding with family and friends.

Changes in the combos of family structures and sizes is a cornerstone of this saga. Families are smaller, nuclear, thousands of people who live away from their homes consider friends as family. Says Kankana Das, a single girl who works as head of the USA desk at Delhi’s Confederation of Indian Industry (CII): “I feel strongly about the sanctity of the festival but I would use the time to meet friends.”

Besides this strong sense of individuality, other trends too are visible. One being celebrating Diwali away from

home, on holiday, a choice that suggests a polarity to ancient tradition, where homes were supposed to be cleaned, painted and all doors left open for Goddess Laxmi to take an indulgent walk inside. Across the country, hotels report a surge in occupancy during the festival including on Diwali day. Anirban Sengupta, head, sales and marketing of The Leela, Goa, says, “Over the years, our occupancy rates have grown during Diwali and this year we have 100 per cent occupancy on Diwali.”

Writer Shobhaa De fondly remembers the time when she would, along with her mother, painstakingly plan and prepare Diwali sweets. “Today I buy mine from Satish Ladoos,” she says,

## Corporate Gifts

### What’s In

**SWAROVSKI FIGURINES:** Top of the line but coveted. People have designs on designer crystal.

**PAINTINGS:** Originals by lesser known artists are popular.

**MMS PHONES:** Corporate talk now has a face and a figure. An ideal pick for corporate honchos.

### What’s Out

**WHITE GOLD:** Matte finish has taken over shiny objects; wrought iron is passe.

**SUIT LENGTHS:** Unsuitable for gifts in the handloom age.

**CROCKERY AND CUTLERY:** The tables have turned. It is no longer fashionable.



“The preparation for a Diwali party used to be on the scale of a wedding. Not anymore.”

MARUT SIKKA,  
food expert



# Gift Rapped

Diwali gifts are no longer measured on the rupee scale. It is the thought that counts.



**I**N THE PAST decade or so, "Diwali gifts" became a metaphor for the big, the exclusive, the pricey, denoting the power of "exchange". The most favoured corporate gifts to bureaucrats or



change back into motion. "Now, people seem to have tired of spending too much on gifts. They

want cheaper, simpler, less ornamental and organic tokens," says Vinita Nath, proprietor of Sondha, a Delhi-based gifts shop. This year, Nath has done miniature landscape gardens in flat pots,



small plants including cacti in handis or holders in the shape of frogs or hippo-campuses which are totally non-traditional



those in power were bottles of Blue Label whiskey, expensive suit lengths or imported wine and chocolates.

But since last year, a new trend in gifts seems to be putting the truth of cyclical

Gifts have undergone a tremendous change. While the jarringly repetitive word "different" is the selling line of many a gift shop, there truly is some perceivable difference. It is as if the market is determining the aesthetic quality of spending among Indians. Tranquillity sets, soft pillows filled with soothing herbs and oils, Feng Shui kits, varieties of teas, organic health foods, handmade paper items, floaters and bamboo lanterns have overtaken crockery and silverware. "The packaging is now

more important than the gift itself, revealing a reverse trend," comments Poonam Malhotra, proprietor of Full Circle bookshop. Nath feels that people are waking up to the idea of bringing smiles on the faces of their dear ones rather than show off their status by the price tags on the gift. "There is an emphasis on cheap,

happy innovations," she says. Looks like meaning is finding more buyers than money.



Photographs by YASBANT NEGI



adding: "I feel sad at the passing away of an era when I see the crass commercialisation of a beautiful festival." Theatre and film person Lillette Dubey has similar sentiments. "Diwali has lost its flavour. The fun has gone out of it."

Fun, say others, is what you make of it. Some families have turned festivals into assimilated experience where there is some tradition and a lot of freedom. "I don't remember the Laxmi puja by heart but I have a book of prayers which has all the Sanskrit shlokas along with an English translation. I often recite from that," says Himanshu Kapoor. Here is the catch but it is a revealing one. Check out the music market. Catering to the needs of the ritualistically challenged, music companies have recorded all the pujas, aartis and shlokas on tape and cds. These include Laxmi pujan, Navratri paths and even Karvachauth kathas. Thoughtfully accompanied by little red books in English that explain in detail the relevance of painting the house before Diwali, that of dipping Goddess Laxmi's idols in oil, how to

decorate a puja thali and how to worship which god. Some books also carry a comprehensive shopping guide on things needed for Diwali puja. Quick ways to usher the pandit out of life. "These sell a lot, because people have become conscious that they have forgotten the details of ritualism and want to refresh their memories and teach their children some," says Malhotra, whose shop also has New-Age gifts and music counters.

**A** little rewind. The first sign of behavioural shift in Diwali celebrations came when the anti-cracker campaign brought a sobering effect few years back. Many schools in big cities took up a crusade for health and safety issues that the bursting of crackers affected. "The sentiments of children changed the face of Diwali," says Renu Saxena, vice-principal of Delhi Public School, Noida. "It is the biggest success story of how festivals can be reinterpreted in society."

Similarly, many urban women have opted out of traditional wear and

heavy gold jewellery during Diwali. Says Das: "A pair of trousers is fine for me and if I were back in Kolkata, I would perhaps wear a salwar-kurta." The change in dressing styles is noticeable even when it comes to ostentatious spending. "Those who splurge on clothes during Diwali now choose subtle and trendy attires instead of those in loud colours and designs," says NIFT fashion expert and choreographer Harmeet Bajaj.

Down the centuries, Diwali culture took many walks. In Valmiki's Ramayana, sage Vashist, mentor to Ram, taught him the golden truth of austerity that resulted in courage, confidence and power. It is said that Lord Ram reminded the joyous citizens of Ayodhya when they revelled in his victory over Ravana and the triumph of good over evil to celebrate but with austerity. But down the ages as the festival of lights was lighted with lamps of money, austerity was what got the biggest knock. Now, Goddess Laxmi may want to rethink her portfolio of wealth.

—with Nidhi Taparia Rathi