



Celebrating Diwali — with meat

New traditions

By Savita Iyer-Ahrestani
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Although my parents were strict vegetarians when I was **growing up in Switzerland**, there were only a few days when they required the same of my brother and myself.

The death anniversaries of our grandparents, for example, were always pure vegetarian days at home, per the Hindu Brahmin tradition. We were also vegetarian on certain important dates in the Hindu calendar, like the birthday of the God **Krishna**. And of course, we were always vegetarian on **Diwali**, the most important festival in the Hindu calendar, which falls today (October 26).

In my adult life, I've followed my parents and continued to respect these vegetarian dates.

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Farshid's Unorthodox
Diwali Beef Curry

Which is why it came as a little bit of a surprise to me when I learned that my husband — in charge of executing the meal for our annual Diwali dinner party last weekend — had planned a predominantly non-vegetarian menu.

Granted, my husband is not a Hindu, and he isn't vegetarian. Nor is he expected to follow my family's traditions or religious requirements. I have been married to him for 12 years now, we have lived all over the world together, and even though I am still at my core a vegetarian, I have tried all manner of meat with him.

Yet breaching tradition in such a way was huge even for me, not least because in addition to making a fish curry, he was also going to make his **famous pressure-cooker beef curry** — an item many people have relished. But even to someone as liberally minded as me, it seemed completely sacrilegious on Diwali.

I'm not an expert in Hinduism, so I'm not sure whether there's a requirement to be vegetarian on Diwali if one is Hindu. I checked around with some friends and learned that there are certain Hindu communities that actually do eat meat on Diwali. But even then, it kept going on in my head: "Beef on Diwali? Beef on Diwali?"

Was it possible to go any further away from where I had come?

"Oh, come on," my husband said.

And so in the end I did, leaving the cooking in his able and talented hands, choosing instead to focus on the rest, which included:



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Celebrating Diwali.

- Candles: Diwali is a festival of lights, and while there are many different stories from Hindu mythology involving various gods and goddesses that commemorate Diwali, it is, in essence, a celebration of the triumph of good over evil, of light over darkness. Tradition calls to turn off all the lights at night and light up homes with many small candles.
- New clothes: Tradition also calls for complete new outfits, from the inside out. And for Indians living abroad, Diwali is one of the rare occasions on which we can dust off our shimmering silks and satins, and kit ourselves out in our finest Indian clothes.
- Sweets: Diwali is synonymous with sweets. Alas, the only Indian sweet dish I know how to make is **kulfi**, so for our Diwali dinner, I, too, had to breach tradition just slightly by making my mom's brownies — a treat that children everywhere adore.

While I did mention the brownies, I just could not bring myself to tell my parents that beef was on the menu for my Diwali dinner, and sure enough, on the night of the party, even my more liberal Hindu friends, among them women who have married non-Indians, gave the dish one look and then steered clear away from it.

I did the same. But then at one point, when I looked around the room and saw everyone enjoying themselves, when I looked at kids I see every day in leggings and sweatshirts shining in bright colors like turquoise and fuchsia, it hit me that it didn't really matter that much if there was beef on my table. What counted was just being able to celebrate Diwali with good friends and to feel closer as a family.

When you live in places where you're a minority, it's often hard to "live up" to the fact that you are different. Beef or no beef, I thought, this is who we are, and celebrating Diwali in whatever way helps remind us that we have that little *je ne sais quoi* in us that sets us apart from the rest.

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