

## ***Ordinary Spaces, Extraordinary Sacredness: The Hindu Festival Of Lights***

Sanjoy Mazumdar & Shampa Mazumdar

University of California, Irvine, CA 92697-7075, USA

[mazumdar@uci.edu](mailto:mazumdar@uci.edu), <http://socialecology.uci.edu/faculty/mazumdar>

### **Abstract**

In understanding the relationship between architecture and sacredness, much attention has been paid to the experience of the sacred in public, monumental architecture, in cathedrals, churches, mosques, temples, and synagogues. These, through their design and aesthetics, have been able to inspire devotion in the believer. They can transform and transport the individual to a different realm, and are often sites of intense religiosity. But the sacred can also be experienced in ordinary spaces, such as in homes and gardens, and can be layered into the practices of daily life, through sentience – designed or created by sights, sounds and smells. Domestic and everyday religion can occur at home altars, use various artifacts, and can be individual, collective, or congregational. Using the Hindu festival of Diwali as an example, we demonstrate how a sacred visual and aural ambiance is created in the home facilitating sacredness through ritual, multi-sensorial engagement, religiosity, and reflexion.

In Hinduism, home and religion are intricately intertwined. The divine is invoked and accessed not only through formal prayer and ritual, but also through art, artifacts, music, dance, and some of the ordinary experience of living, such as cooking, cleaning, and tending to plants. Prayer spaces whether elaborate or simple are incorporated into the home, gardens are carefully nurtured with ritually significant trees, plants, flowers, fruits, and herbs. Prayers are said and rituals performed daily at the family altar. The creation of an environment conducive to prayer, meditation, and contemplative introspection is facilitated through home aesthetics, art, and music. Festivals and holiday food, fasting and meditation punctuate the rhythm of life. Festivals are many and celebrated often with the waxing and waning of the moon. One such is Diwali, the festival of lights.

### **Sacred engagement through the visual symbolism of light**

Diwali usually occurs in the dark phase of the lunar cycle in the months of October-November. On such a night, the symbolism of light and dark creates a special ambiance. As the evening shadows lengthen and darkness descends, family and friends gather in the home to celebrate the festival of lights. Practices vary, but the night preceding Diwali is a night for introspection and teaching, focusing on the message of Diwali: the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness, knowledge over ignorance, peace over conflict. Using the symbolism of light family members light fourteen clay lamps/candles and place them in the darkest corners of the house where are believed to dwell the evils of ignorance, jealousy, anger, hate and so on. The light of the lamp is believed to

simultaneously purify and symbolically banish evil from homes, hearts, and relationships. The home is now prepared to receive the blessings of good fortune, good health, and prosperity that are anticipated to come during Diwali. On Diwali, little clay oil-and-wick lamps are decoratively placed all around the periphery of the house. Of particular significance are the lamps on the entryways. They light the way for Lakshmi, the Goddess of auspiciousness, good health, prosperity and well-being to enter the home. The juxtaposition of the warm glow of light from the clay lamps against the backdrop of the dark, moonless autumn night allows for a special experience of the holiday of Diwali.



### **Sacred engagement through sounds and smells**

Experiencing the sacred during Diwali is facilitated by sacred sounds. There is the ringing of bells at the home temple, the reading aloud from sacred texts, the chanting of prayers (*shlokas*), the blowing of conch shells (*shankha*), singing of devotional songs (*bhajans*), and the playing of religious music. The sacred sounds create a prayerful mood. To this is added the olfactory experience of sacred smells-- the fragrance of incense (*dhoop*), and the aroma of freshly made sandalwood paste (*chandana*), mingled with scent of fresh flowers from the garden—roses, marigolds, gardenias and jasmine-- all of which enable the believer to experience the ordinary space of home in a deeply spiritual way.

### **Sacred engagement through design, art, and artifacts**

Devotional artifacts play an important role in the experience of the sacred. The threshold of a home is transformed into an artist's canvas. Decorative patterns are created traditionally with rice flour but today with a variety of media (e.g. colored chalk) to welcome Goddess Lakshmi. Mango leaves are strung on door lintels. Hindu gods and goddesses represented in the family altar are the

recipients of sacred prayers, rituals, and offerings during Diwali. The representations of deities at the altar are elaborately decorated, they are anointed with sandalwood paste, floral garlands, and home cooked food is offered on special dedicated



silver or copper vessels to the deities and blessings sought for the health and well-being of the family. On this day gods and ancestors take priority and precedence over secular, and mundane routinized activities --such as cooking--take on sacred meaning.

### **Sacred engagement through ritual**

In the days leading up to Diwali, the home is made ready through cleaning and purification. Some families give the house a fresh coat of paint, but most engage in cleaning the house thoroughly. Carpeted areas of the house are vacuumed, non carpeted areas swept and mopped, the stove and kitchen cleaned, the garden tended to and trimmed, the driveway, garage, and front entrance hosed down. Special attention is given to the family altar, which is dusted and cleaned meticulously, brass and lamps polished, new wicks made, and utensils used for offerings washed and polished.

\*\*\*

The celebration of Diwali helps us understand the holistic engagement with the material and immaterial, the sensorial and the experiential.

Designers can be made aware of this sacred dimension so that designs of everyday spaces such as home environments enable transformation into sacred when needed, and occupants can create a sacred ambiance on an everyday basis. Provision of space for serenity, meditation, and prayer as well as spaces that can be easily transformed to accommodate a gathering of family and friends, a courtyard for planting and executing decorative patterns (*alpona*), the provision of visual and aural privacy to facilitate singing without disturbing neighbors, the use of flooring material that can be easily cleaned as required in ritual purification, the interplay of light and dark, can all help the experience of the sacred in ordinary space. Symbolism, representation, story telling, the ethics of care, maintenance, involvement and participation are important.

\*\*\*