



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**

# **DIWALI AND BANDI CHHOR DIVAS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Inclusive Employer Guide

**EQUITY · DIVERSITY · INCLUSION**

# WHAT ARE DIWALI AND BANDI CHHOR DIVAS?

Diwali (also known as Deepavali or Dipavali) is celebrated by Hindus, Jains, Sikhs and Buddhists on the day of the New Moon in the month of Kartika, the holiest month in the Hindu lunar calendar. The date changes according to the lunar calendar but always falls between the middle of October and the middle of November and is typically observed on the third day of the multi-day festival. This is also an important day for Sikhs who celebrate Bandi Chhor Divas or the “Prisoner Release Day” on the same day. In 2020, Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas will be celebrated on November 14.

## **What do Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas mean, and what do the days commemorate?**

Diwali is a variation of the Sanskrit word Deepavali and refers to the rows of earthen lamps or diyas that families place around their homes. Hindus believe that the light from these lamps symbolizes the illumination within the individual. Diwali is also referred to as the festival of lights and celebrates the victory of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. The holiday also coincides with the Hindu New Year, celebrating hope and new beginnings, though each faith has its own reason to celebrate. Jains celebrate Diwali to mark the attainment of moksha or nirvana. It is believed that many gods were present on the night when Mahavira reached moksha and that their presence illuminated the darkness.

Bandi Chhor Divas directly translates to “Prisoner Release Day” and was first celebrated in the autumn of 1619. This holiday marks the release of the sixth guru, Guru Har Gobind, and 52 kings from Fort Gwalior prison and their arrival at the Golden Temple in Amritsar, India. The story of their release reminds Sikhs of freedom and human rights.

## How are Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas observed?

Today Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas are celebrated with family and friends, gathering to feast, exchange gifts, and pray, as they light up their homes with *diyas*, Mandirs (Hindu temples) and Gurdwaras (Sikh temples).

A common greeting to mark the occasion is “Happy Diwali” and “Happy Bandi Chhor Divas.”

## How can we create an inclusive environment?

- 1. Get Educated.** Ensure staff, who supervise colleagues that celebrate Diwali or Bandi Chhor Divas, are aware of the festivities and how they can be supportive.
- 2. Intentional Planning.** Avoid booking meetings and scheduling events on Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas if possible.
- 3. Be flexible.** Accommodate requests for time off for religious observances. If shift work is the norm, staff may want to switch shifts to observe Diwali and Bandi Chhor Divas. Look for solutions that suit all parties.
- 4. Don't make assumptions.** For personal reasons, not all Hindu, Jain, Sikh or Buddhist colleagues may take the time off, but they may still observe in various ways.