For a growing number of devotees, Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, is a chance to appeal to the goddess of wealth; laptops, accounting books to be blessed.
By ANUPY SINGLA

On Diwali, the annual Hindu festival of lights, Shweta Mundhra will cook food all morning, adorn her newest and brightest sari and arm herself with fresh flowers, fruit and dried nuts for the gods. The 30-year-old mother of two will then hop on a train and head -- not to a temple or a friend's home -- but to the office of JP Trades Inc., her family's wholesale gemstone business in downtown Chicago, to bless the books.

"We take out all of our office files, change them over to new files, and put tikkas [religious marks] on them," says Ms. Mundhra, who with her husband runs the company. She will then place flowers, fruit and nuts at the feet of various statues of gods as an offering for blessings on the business.

The five-day Diwali festival is as important to Hindus as Christmas is to Christians. Leading up to the festival, dozens of special dishes are prepared, houses are cleaned, candles lit, sweets are distributed and, in India, firecrackers are set off in huge celebrations. But for some followers, Diwali is as much about the "awareness of the inner light," its literal meaning, as it is the opportunity to ask the gods for a fortuitous balance sheet.

The financial aspect of Diwali was first started centuries ago in Western India, where many families owned businesses and the holiday was considered the official start of the new year. Handwritten ledger books were traditionally closed on the holiday, and new ones were opened and blessed by a priest. The practice soon became recognized and adopted by many throughout India and overseas.

This year, with the effects of the recession in full force, Hindu temples are bracing for an onslaught of Diwali devotees. Some are even preparing special ceremonies for those seeking financial blessings.

"The first few months of the year were really bad," says Ms. Mundhra, whose gemstone sales were down 40% in the first six months versus the same period a year ago. "When we pray this year, we will be saying, give more money and prosperity to this house."
Based on the Hindu calendar, the actual date of Diwali changes every year, but always occurs during the new moon in October or November. This year, it falls on Oct. 17.

Hindus believe Diwali is the day Lord Rama returned to the holy kingdom of Ayodhya after 14 years in exile. He was greeted with rows upon rows of lit diyas, or small clay lamps, celebrating the triumph of good over evil. It is said that homes that glow the brightest will be the ones to best attract the attention and blessings of Goddess Lakshmi, who symbolizes the earth, wealth, prosperity and abundance. A deity of near-cult status among Hindus, the goddess is often depicted with coins falling from her hands.

Most devotees will light up their homes with lamps and candles, distribute sweets and visit a temple -- they regard the holiday as a time to start new projects and relinquish grudges. But the growing group that recognizes the financial aspects of the holiday will go through a formal prayer ceremony called Sharada, or Chopda Puja (accounts prayer).

The Hindu Temple Society of North America in Flushing, N.Y., one of the first Hindu temples built in the U.S., began offering the accounts puja 10 years ago after some of its 14,000 members began asking for it. For the first time this year, the Hindu Temple Society offered a special financial prayer in February to boost members' spirits; many said they wanted the blessing to help relieve stress over lost jobs.

For the accounts puja, participants must first pray to Lord Ganesha, the elephant god, to clear their minds and hearts of any distractions that could interfere with prayers. A fistful of rice yellowed with turmeric powder and a bright silver coin of Goddess Lakshmi are placed in a stainless steel plate. A priest then blesses the offering along with the devotees' accounting books. At some temples, people bring their laptops, iPods, stethoscopes, power tools or any other business essentials to be blessed.

This year the Hindu Temple Society expects up to 6,000 worshippers -- it doubled its seating capacity earlier this year to accommodate its growing crowd for festivals. "It's quite possible this Diwali there will be even more people here [for the accounts puja]," says Dr. Uma Mysorekar, president and co-founder of the temple.

Computers, checkbooks and accounting records are already being dropped off at the BAPS Shri Swaminarayan Mandir in Bartlett, Ill., where over 500 prayer plates have been ordered. Last year as many as 400 people showed up for the accounts puja; this year, the temple expects up to 700. It's the same story at the Hindu Temple of Minnesota, in Maple Grove, where priests are preparing to tend to up to 12,000 expected visitors -- about a thousand of which organizers say will be there for the accounts puja.

"Why wouldn't someone do it?" says Harish Patel, spokesman for the Bartlett Swaminarayan temple. "People know that businesses are run by acumen, management and strategy. But more are starting to recognize that even in business, there's the involvement of the divine."

Mahendra Nath, once the fourth-largest franchise owner of Burger Kings in the U.S., has never missed a Diwali celebration since migrating from India in 1964. He and his wife plan to light candles and other lamps in their St. Paul, Minn., home to welcome Goddess Lakshmi, and will bow their heads for financial success in the year ahead. This year, they'll ask for just a little more.

"We will pray for the recession to end fast and have a better business going forward," says Mr. Nath, who also owns three hotels and several fine-dining restaurants through the Midwest. His business has suffered as corporate accounts have shrunk.

Komal Patel, a 22-year-old college graduate living with her parents in Westmont, Ill., is praying, too -- that she gets into medical school. She plans to take her laptop computer with her to the Bartlett Swaminarayan temple on Saturday.

"The computer is my life," says Ms. Patel. "I want it to be blessed so I can have a future that is blessed."

Dishes for Diwali

Diwali is as much about food as it is about prayers. Some temples cook thousands of different dishes during this festival. These three dishes below are commonly eaten around this time and signify the onset of the festival.

[Image: Getty Images]

Pakistani Hindu women light earthen lamps on Diwali.

[Image: Getty Images]
of the new year for many Hindus, especially those from northern India.

Saucy Punjabi-Style Potatoes (Rasee Wale Aloo)
Makes 4-6 cups
3–4 large russet, Yukon Gold or red potatoes, washed, peeled and chopped (submerge in cold water to prevent browning)
1 medium yellow or red onion
2 tablespoons of ginger, peeled and grated
2 large cloves garlic, chopped or minced
2 medium peeled tomatoes, roughly chopped
1-3 Thai, serrano or cayenne chilies
2 tablespoons canola or vegetable oil
1 tablespoon whole cumin
1 2-inch piece cinnamon stick
1 tablespoon turmeric
1 teaspoon red chili powder
3 cups water
½-1 tablespoon salt
Handful chopped, fresh cilantro
½ cup yogurt (optional)

Heat oil on medium-high in large, heavy saucepan. Add cumin and cook until it starts to sizzle, 1-2 minutes. Add onions and cook until slightly brown; stir a few times. Add ginger, garlic, cumin stick and turmeric. Allow to cook until fragrant, about 2-3 minutes, stirring constantly so it doesn't stick.

Add tomatoes and turn heat to medium-low. Cook until they soften and break down, about 3-4 minutes. To peel tomato, cut an "X" into the bottom and cut out the green woody stem. Place the tomato in boiling water for about a minute until the peel starts to curl away. Take out and once cooled, peel and roughly chop.

Add potatoes, green chilies, red chili powder, salt and water. Turn heat to medium-high and allow mixture to boil. Once it comes to a boil, lower heat. Put a lid on the pot, leaving a little opening for steam to escape, and simmer until potatoes soften and start to break down. This should take about 20-25 minutes. If it becomes too thick, add a little more water in increments of a ¼ cup. Discard cinnamon stick.

Add yogurt for tang and cilantro for garnish.

Fried Indian Bread (Puri)
Makes about a dozen puris
2 cups atta (Indian flour)
2 tablespoons canola or vegetable oil
¼ teaspoon salt (optional)
½ cup water
Canola or vegetable oil for deep-frying

Mix flour, oil, salt and water by hand in a deep bowl. Knead until firm. If the dough is too soft, add more flour. Cover and let sit for about an hour.

Divide the dough into about a dozen small, round balls. With a rolling pin, roll the dough thin and into a circle on a flat, slightly oiled surface to prevent sticking.

Fill a karahi or heavy saucepan about a third full with oil. Heat oil until a small piece of the dough pops back to the surface when dropped inside. Carefully take an uncooked puri and slide it into the hot oil. At first the puri will slide to the bottom, but will then puff to the top of the oil. With a spatula, turn the puri over until it's slightly browned on both sides. Cooking time should take about 20-25 seconds. If it becomes too thick, add a little more water in increments of a ¼ cup. Discard cinnamon stick.

Take out the puri and place on a large plate lined with paper towels to soak up excess oil. Continue the process until all the puris are cooked. Serve immediately, or once cooled stack and wrap in aluminum foil to heat later. They can be stored in the refrigerator for up to one week and in the freezer up to three months.

Note: Look for atta labeled 100% whole-wheat flour. This makes lighter and fluffier breads than the whole-wheat flour found in American grocery stores because it is produced from a softer variety of wheat. But regular all-purpose and whole-wheat flours can also be used.

Sweet Flour Halwa
Makes 2 cups
Go to most any Hindu temple and you'll find sweet halwa handed out towards the end of prayers. A priest distributes it as a blessing from the gods. It's also often served with a puri and helping of saucy potatoes, adding just the right amount of sweet to the salty, spicy mix.
½ cup whole wheat flour or atta
½ cup sugar
½ stick unsalted butter or ½ cup ghee
¼ cup ground or slivered almonds
1 teaspoon cardamom powder
1 tablespoon raisins
1½-2 cups water
Melt the butter or ghee on high in a heavy, deep saucepan. Once melted, lower the heat to medium.
Add flour. Stir constantly until the mixture browns and begins to change in color and aroma, about 10 minutes.
Add almonds and cardamom powder and keep stirring.
Boil the water in another pot. Add sugar and raisins in the boiling water and cook until the sugar dissolves and the raisins become plump.
Slowly and carefully add the sugar-water mixture to the butter-flour mixture. Keep stirring. The mixture will bubble and become doughy. When it pulls off the sides of the pan and thickens, the dish is ready. This will take about 10 minutes.
Take off the heat and cover for about 15 minutes before serving.

Anupy Singla writes the blog Indian as Apple Pie and will be publishing her first cookbook next year.

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