

This festival comes in October, and this year it is on the 24th day of October.

**Dhanteras** falls on the thirteenth day of the month of Ashwin. The word "Dhan" means wealth. As such this day of the five-day Diwali festival has a great importance for the rich mercantile community of western India. Houses and business premises are renovated and decorated. Entrances are made colorful with lovely traditional motifs of rangoli designs to welcome the goddess of wealth and prosperity. To indicate her long-awaited arrival, small footprints are drawn with rice flour and vermilion powder all over the houses. Lamps are kept burning all through the nights. On this auspicious day women purchase some gold or silver or at least one or two new utensils. Pooja is performed in the evenings when tiny diyas of clay are lighted to drive away the shadows of evil spirits. "Bhajans"-devotional songs- are sung in praise of Goddess Lakshmi.

Dhanteras is also known as Dhantrayodashi, and takes place two days before Diwali, in honour of Dhanavantri, the physician of the gods and an incarnation of Vishnu.

The legend of Samudramanathan is at the heart of these celebrations. Lord Indra was cursed by sage Durvasa that "The pride of wealth has entered his head and let Lakshmi leave him." On account of Durvasa's curse, Lakshmi left Indra and went away. As Lakshmi is the goddess of power, bravery, enthusiasm and radiance left, Devendra's life became miserable. The demons that were waiting for such an opportunity invaded heaven, defeated Indra. He lost his kingdom and hid out of the sight of the demons.

A number of years passed. Indra's teacher Brihaspati thought of finding a way out for Indra's troubles. He went with the gods to Brahma, who went to Vishnu, A way was found out of it. The sea of milk was to be churned. It was a very difficult job. Therefore the friendship of the demons and get their assistance was required. Mandara Mountain was a churning rod and Vasuki, the king of the serpents, as a rope.

When the sea will be churned ambrosia will be produced. The gods must drink it and become immortal. It will then be possible for gods to defeat the demons. When the sea is churned, Lakshmi who has disappeared will appear again. Her grace will be bestowed. The clever Brihaspati managed to strike a friendship with the demons who agreed in the hope of getting ambrosia and wealth. After initial difficulties posed by the sinking of mount Mandara into the milky sea which was set right by Lord Vishnu who took the form of a tortoise and hoisted it on his back, the churning started.

First, Kalakuta, a dreadful poison was produced which Lord Shiva drank much to the relief of the gods and demons. Due to Vishnu's continued encouragement, gods and demons continued churning the sea. Then a horse by name Uchaishravas, Kalpavriksha had the power to grant what is wished, and Kamdhenu and other celestial articles took shape. When the sea continued to be churned the Apsara were born.

After that in the midst of the waves of the sea of milk, a goddess with heavenly looks came into view. She was standing on a fully blossomed lotus. Wearing a lotus garland in the neck, she was holding a lotus in her hand. She was attractive and was radiantly smiling, she was Lakshmi.

The sages began reciting hymns in praise of her. Gandharvas sang. Apsaras danced. The elephants on either side sprinkled sacred holy Ganga water on the goddess and bathed her. Because the elephants sprinkled holy water on her, she acquired the name of Gajalakshmi. Because she was born in the sea of milk, she was called Samudratanya. The king of the sea appeared in his natural form and comforted Lakshmi as a daughter. He presented her with attractive clothes and jewels. He handed to her a garland of lotus flowers. While everybody was looking in surprise, Lakshmi put the garland around the neck of Vishnu. Then she looked at Indra kindly, he acquired an extraordinary radiance.

The gods and demons continued to churn the ocean for Amrut or nectar, Finally Dhanavantri emerged carrying a jar of the elixir (ambrosia). Both the asuras and the devas wanted the ambrosia, but finally Vishnu managed to give the immortal nectar to the gods and the asuras where defeated. Thus the churning of the ocean resulted in the immortality of the devas and was the reason for Lakshmi's emergence.

Another interesting story about this day is of the sixteen year old son of King Hima. As per his horoscope he was doomed to die by a snake-bite on the fourth day of his marriage. On that particular fourth day of his marriage his young wife did not allow him to sleep. She laid all the ornaments and lots of gold and silver coins in a big heap at the entrance of her husband's boudoir and lighted innumerable lamps all over the place. And she went on telling stories and singing songs. When Yam, the god of death arrived there in the guise of a serpent his eyes got blinded by that dazzle of those brilliant lights and he could not enter the prince's chamber. So he climbed on top of the heap of the ornaments and coins and sat there whole night listening to the melodious songs. In the morning he quietly went away.

Thus the young wife saved her husband from the clutches of death. Since then this day of Dhanteras came to be known as the day of "YAMADEEPDAAN" and lamps are kept burning throughout the night in reverential adoration to Yam, the god of death.