

Tradition with



Bollywood dancers at the Diwali ball at the Holiday Inn Golden Mile hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui

Hong Kong's South Asian communities keep heritage alive with their own spin on Diwali celebrations, writes Ben Sin

In a large ballroom in the basement of the Holiday Inn Golden Mile hotel in Tsim Sha Tsui, a “who’s who” of the local Indian community is gathered. In one corner, Simran Bhojwani, one of the leading sourcers and exporters of Indian silverware, is posing for photos and sipping champagne. At the other end of the room is tycoon Hari Harilela, whose family owns the hotel, shaking a throng of hands. In the middle of the room is Mira Mahtani, president of The India Association Hong Kong, making sure the night’s festivities – including a dinner and dance show by Bollywood artists flown in from Mumbai – go according to plan.

It’s the annual ball to celebrate Diwali, or the Indian New Year: the most important festival in the Indian calendar. This ball, organised by the India Association and the India Club, is one of many in a month-long celebration for the local community. There are luncheons, street festivals,

barbecues and parties, culminating in a visit to the temple.

This is not how every Indian celebrates, however. Over at the Khalsa Diwan Sikh Temple in Wan Chai, the mood is solemn as dozens of men, women and children kneel in prayer. There will be no singing, dancing and drinking for them over Diwali.

Different religions celebrate the New Year in their own way. While Diwali, meaning the festival of lights, is a lively five-day celebration of new beginnings for Hindus (the predominant and indigenous religion in India, which worships multiple gods, or “gurus”), it is a sober celebration of freedom for the Sikhs (a monotheistic religion from the Punjab region of India).

Diwali’s mythology (the Hindus celebrate the homecoming of Lord Rama while the Sikhs celebrate the release from imprisonment of Guru Hargobind), and even spelling, differs between religion and race (it’s also celebrated in Nepal,



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SIMRAN BHOJWANI, EXPORTER

Malaysia and other South Asian nations), but most agree Hong Kong provides ample opportunities to stick to tradition, while adding a distinct twist.

“I think, for anyone, the biggest difference between life in Hong Kong and life elsewhere is that we go out, and eat out, a lot more here,” Bhojwani, 37, says. “And that’s the biggest difference between celebrations of Diwali in India and Hong Kong – instead of going to each other’s homes, we go out to restaurants or ballrooms.”

Venues aside, Bhojwani says everything else about celebrating Diwali in Hong Kong is the same as it was in Mumbai when she was a child.

“It’s about spending time with family, celebrating a new start,” she says. “Diwali is to us what Lunar New Year is to most of Hong Kong.”

Diwali officially spans five days in late October or early November, depending on the Hindu calendar (it falls on October 24 to 28 this year).