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UCV2209 The Heterogenous Indians of Contemporary Singapore

Term Paper

DEEPAVALI AND DIWALI: EXAMINING THE NUANCES IN REFERRING TO THE FESTIVAL OF LIGHTS

The Festival of Lights is a prominent festival for the Hindu community around the world. In Singapore, this festival is officially referred to as “Deepavali”. Every year, a national holiday is dedicated to Deepavali to recognise the cultural practices of the Indian-Hindu community. However, in recent years, the term “Diwali” has become increasingly used in the public sphere.

In 2017, the Public Utilities Board (PUB), a statutory board of Singapore, published a Facebook post wishing everyone “Happy Diwali from Water Wally!”. In response, some users have noted: “Tamils don’t say Diwali.... So it’s Happy Deepavali”, “Especially in Singapore as Tamil is an Official Language”.



Lela Vathi Annamalai Tamils don't say Diwali.... So it's Happy Deepavali

Like · Reply · 1y



Jamunarani Manunethi Especially in Singapore as Tamil is an Official Language 😊

Like · Reply · 1y



In previous years, PUB used “Happy Deepavali” instead. What circumstances led to the new use of the term “Diwali”? More importantly, why were users making the correction on the new post, from “Diwali” to “Deepavali”?

The PUB incident is not isolated, and the obfuscation between “Deepavali” and “Diwali” has been brought to the spotlight many times. The first section uncovers the technical differences between “Deepavali” and “Diwali”. Then, we move on to examine how they have been used in Singapore’s public discourse. Using these notions, we will tease out the nuances between “Deepavali” and “Diwali”, as celebrated by the Indian-Hindu community in Singapore.

TECHNICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN “DEEPAVALI” AND “DIWALI”

Etymological Origins

Both “Deepavali” and “Diwali” have a common etymological origin from Sanskrit. “Dipa” refers to lamp and “vali” refers to a series. The compound Sanskrit word “dipavali” denotes rows of lights, which are ubiquitous during celebrations of the Festival of Lights. “Deepavali” is a Tamil term, whilst “Diwali” is a Hindi term. Correspondingly, “Deepavali” is more commonly used by South Indians who speak Tamil and “Diwali” is more commonly used by North Indians who are versed in Hindi.

The Dravidian Tamil language is largely spoken by the South Indian community that has been in Singapore since the pre-independence period. This community comprises 54.1% of the Indian community in Singapore. On the contrary, the Indo-Aryan Hindi language is largely spoken by the new wave of migrants from India since the 1990s. This migration stream was facilitated by India’s 1992 Look East Policy, which established stronger commercial, cultural and military ties between India and other Asian countries. The Hindi-speaking community makes up 3.8% of the Indian community in Singapore.

Mythological Variations

However, “Deepavali” and “Diwali” are not mere linguistic variants of the same festival. The myths they celebrate are divergent.

For South Indians, “Deepavali” is celebrated in remembrance of Lord Krishna’s victory over Narakasura, the demon of ignorance. For the North Indians, “Diwali” is a commemoration of Lord Rama’s triumphant return after vanquishing the forces of the demon Ravana. In fact, for North Indians, it is more common to omit the trailing “a” in “Rama” and “Ravana” due to the words’ representation in North Indian languages.

Despite idolising different protagonists, these two epics share many aspects in common. Firstly, Rama (from the Diwali story) is the seventh avatar of Vishnu, and Krishna (from the Deepavali story) is the eighth avatar of the same Hindu deity. More importantly, both myths are about the triumph of good over evil. This narrative of “good over evil” is the spirit of the Festival of Lights.

As a result of the differences in these legends, “Deepavali” is celebrated on the 14th day of the Tamil month of Aipasi, the day Narakasura was slain. “Diwali” is usually celebrated on the 15th day of the Hindu month of Kartik, commemorating the return of Lord Rama. The Tamil Aipasi month and Hindu Kartik month coincide, so “Deepavali” is effectively celebrated one day before “Diwali”, though these festivals usually last over five days.

The official site for public holidays in Singapore asserts that the South Indian epic of Lord Krishna is more common. This statement could be in reference to the dominance of South Indians in Singapore’s Indian community. However, around the world, the North Indian epic of Lord Rama is more prevalent.

PERCEPTION OF “DEEPAVALI” AND “DIWALI”

Interview Methodology and Results

To get a more comprehensive idea of what “Deepavali” and “Diwali” mean to the Indian-Hindu community in Singapore, I interviewed four families on their perception of these terms. The families were mainly represented by the younger generation’s voices, as they were more willing to participate in an interview. All the interviews were conducted in the week of 20th to 26th October 2019, a week before Singapore’s Deepavali public holiday.

A generic profile of the families is shown below.

A	Singaporean, South Indian family	Tamil-speaking	Maintains strong ties with relatives in India.
B	Singaporean, South Indian family	Tamil-speaking	Most of their relatives are in Singapore, have few ties in India.
C	North Indian family	Hindi-speaking	Have been in Singapore for more than a decade. Children attended international schools in Singapore.

D	North Indian family	Hindi-speaking	Child has been studying in Singapore for 8 years. Parents occasionally come to Singapore to visit. Live in India.
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Table 1: Profile of families interviewed (Refer to Appendix II)

The interviews were held in more casual contexts, and the guiding questions are in Appendix I. The responses have been attached in Appendix II.

As expected, Both South Indian families (A and B) referred to the festival as “Deepavali”, while both North Indian families (C and D) used “Diwali”. All four families were aware of the alternative term, and indicated that they did not use the alternative term when sharing about their own culture. Even though they preferentially used one of the two terms, families A and C saw no real difference between them.

On the other hand, family B was aware of the contention in the public discourse. They situated the disagreement within a wider anti-immigrant sentiment in Singapore. However, they acknowledged the dispute as trivial. Interestingly, family D mentioned their own confusion when they first came to Singapore. They thought that people in Singapore were using the wrong word and misspelled “Diwali” as “Deepavali”. In spite of knowing these differences, the younger generation of all four families concurred that the differences should not matter.

Myths and Celebration Rituals

The myths did not play an important role for all four families. Family A, while South Indian, related to the Rama myth. However, the son was unable to give a full account of the story. When asked about Krishna, he was confused why Krishna had any relation to Deepavali. Family D related the strongest to any myth, and they used the myth of Rama. Interestingly, the son shared that he knew South Indians used a different myth. He had learnt about it while preparing for the Deepavali celebrations during army. This incident demonstrates how partaking in different cultures broadens one’s perspectives. Rather unfortunately, families B and C do not associate with or could not recall any myths. Along the way, the myths were no longer passed on as important traditions and gradually forgotten.

The families were also asked about how they celebrated the Festival of Lights. Over the public holiday, family A was headed to India to catch up with relatives. On the other hand, families C and D had no strong familial ties in Singapore. For the Indian national families, visiting relatives is not as feasible due to the trans-Indian flights needed. Instead, they connect with friends they have made in Singapore who need not be Indian-Hindu. Whether North Indian or South Indian, all four families conveyed the importance of connecting to those that matter to them.

Whilst all four families spoke of Indian snacks and visiting family and friends, only family B talked about rituals they engaged in. Family B would perform the “oil-bathing” ritual early in the morning, which is meant to be a parallel to bathing in the sacred Ganges River. It is surprising for family B to engage in this ritual, even though they could not correctly identify the Deepavali myth. Perhaps, they have went along with the flow of rituals. Over the generations, the oil-bathing has morphed into a repeated tradition more than a religious rite. Indeed, modern life has eroded many traditional practices across different cultures in Singapore. The situation is no different for the Indian-Hindu community. Rituals have lost their prominence as a core tenet of celebrating festivals.

Despite not engaging in most of the Diwali rituals, family C felt that as non-residential Indians, they depend on Hinduism more than their relatives in India. In fact, they were careful to make a distinction between “hinduism” the religion and “Hinduism” the way of life. They identified with the Hinduism way of life, as a means to connect with their roots, though they do not engage in rituals associated with the religion. Family C displayed a sense of connection that is characteristic of diasporic communities. Religion and culture remain important tenets in expressing their Indian-Hindu identities.

Whether through rituals, through their way of life or through their beliefs, all four families showed different ways to do Indian-Hindu. The constraints of international and the hustle of modern life have prompted an evolution in the way hinduism is interpreted by the community. There is a diminished importance on rituals, and more on cherishing the essence of the festival – doing Indian-Hindu and connecting back to their cultural roots. While the celebration rituals are divergent, the intention is convergent.

CONFOUNDING “DEEPAVALI” AND “DIWALI”

While many similarities lie at the intersection of “Deepavali” and “Diwali”, these festivals do have many differences. What could have contributed to the confounding of the two terms?

In a sharing by media site YouthSG, a 19-year-old student Roshni Idnani shares about her experience as celebrating Diwali. She receives festive greetings a day in advance of when she actually celebrates the festival. Nevertheless, she quips that she does not expect her friends outside of the Hindu community to make the distinction.

In the PUB Facebook Page incident, the social media manager could have been unaware of the nuances between “Deepavali” and “Diwali”, hence the two words were used rather interchangeably. In an interview with The Straits Times, the local mainstream media, National University of Singapore sociologist Indira Arumugam posited that “Diwali” may be used due to convenience or a lack of awareness. More strikingly, the Indian community is a minority group in Singapore. While most within the community can correctly distinguish these two terms, people outside of the community are ignorant of the nuances in the terms. In fact, there have been references by prominent institutions like the American School of Bombay describing “Diwali” as a shortened version of “Deepavali”. Despite being located in India, the school has made an incorrect statement about the differences between “Deepavali” and “Diwali”. These fallacious claims reflect the general oblivion surrounding the terms.

In Singapore, the lack of awareness of the differences could be compounded by the reductive definitions of the CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian, Others) quadratomy. The blanket term “Indian” seeks to address the 7.4% Indian demographic in Singapore. Though a minority, the Indian ethnic group is largely heterogeneous. However, not many non-Indians are careful to make the conscious distinction between Tamil and Hindi, needless to say between “Deepavali” and “Diwali”.

Rise in the use of “Diwali”

“Deepavali” has been the de-facto term used in official public discourse in Singapore. However, there has been an evident rise in the use of “Diwali”. In the past decade, the ubiquity of “Diwali” in Indian pop culture has drawn more attention to “Diwali”. Premised on their ignorance, most people

outside the Indian community do not question the differences in the two terms. As a result, “Diwali” has been repeatedly used in place of “Deepavali” without real knowledge of either terms.

Along with the emerging use “Diwali” in the public sphere, unsettled locals have asserted the importance of keeping to the Tamil “Deepavali”. Not surprisingly, this group of disgruntled locals mostly stem from the Indian community itself. In fact, this debate taps into the broader disquiet that local culture and language may be displaced by that of immigrants. While Indians in Singapore have predominantly been Tamil-speaking, the Hindi-speaking population is increasing as more Indian immigrants come to Singapore. The unhappiness permeates other spheres of Singapore society, with the most recent case at the National University Hospital (NUH). Similar to the ire around the use of “Diwali” in official discourse, some members of the public were lamenting the use of Hindi in a sign for dirty towels at the public hospital.

DISCUSSION

Examining the Unhappiness with “Diwali”

Members of the public who feel that the use of the term “Diwali” in the public sphere is “incorrect” or “inappropriate” are predominantly from the (South) Indian community. They were making a stand amidst a broader unhappiness with an influx of predominantly North Indian immigrants. One gripe that surfaced was the erosion of the historically significant South Indian heritage in Singapore. This tension could be further exacerbated by the dominance of North Indian culture in India.

In India, there is a multitude of languages that can barely be intelligible from each other. Though there is no National Language, the National Capital Territory of Delhi uses Hindi as an official language. Furthermore, the celebrated Bollywood industry is a Hindi-cinema industry. Delhi and the Bollywood industry have articulated a large sphere of influence around India and globally, nudging Indian citizens towards Hindi as the premier language choice. As a result, 366 million or 43.63% of the Indian population spoke Hindi in 2011. In comparison, only 66 million or 5.91% of the Indian population spoke Tamil.

The table below shows the changes in the prevalence of both languages in India.

	1991	2001	2011
Hindi	39.29%	41.1%	43.63%
Tamil	6.32%	5.91%	5.70%

Table 2: Use of Hindi and Tamil in India,
Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India

The census figures reveal a declining proportion of Tamil speakers and a rising proportion of Hindi speakers. The Tamil-speaking Indian diaspora in Singapore could feel that their culture is being threatened by the rising popularity of the Hindi-speaking community globally. Singapore was a place for this community to have their language, Tamil, officially recognised. Yet, in this place where their culture is acknowledged over Hindi, it is also gradually being overwritten. Hence, the rising popularity of Hindi culture worldwide, coupled with the traditionally safe space in Singapore for the recognition of Tamil culture, has sparked tensions in the official use of “Deepavali” versus “Diwali”.

However, the perceived misuse of “Diwali” in official discourse has been a recurrent issue over the years. While the past incidents have been resolved and the perceived misuse of “Diwali” is often corrected to “Deepavali”, “Diwali” continues to re-surface as an inappropriately used term, raising another dispute. The repetition of these incidents suggests that they do not receive sufficient attention for the majority of non-Indians to have grown sensitive to the differences. For one, the culture of the minority Indian community remains relatively unknown. Secondly, the growing number of Hindi-speaking North Indians has also downplayed the proportion of Indians who value the hitherto standard “Deepavali”.

Lastly, it could be possible that many in the South Indian community do not pay much attention to these official discourses. This point was reiterated in my interviews. While some of the older generation expressed their gripe with the use of “Deepavali” or “Diwali” as incorrect, the younger generation reflected that each community can have their own way to identify the festival. Their reactions carried a neutral tone, conveying a lack of participation in the debate.

The debate in Public Policy

This understanding of how the debate plays out in the private sphere can better frame our discussion on public policy decisions.

The historical significance of Tamil as a national language underpins Singapore's commitment towards the South Indians who have been in Singapore for a longer period of time. From a policy position, Singapore's support for the Tamil language remains strong. An advisor to the Singapore Indian Development Association (SINDA), Minister S Iswaran expressed the state's desire to promote the culture of the Tamil community. In an interview for the book "The Tamil community and the making of modern Singapore", Minister Iswaran shared the ways in which the commitment is clear – Tamil is an official language used in parliament, offered in mainstream schools as a mother tongue language, and also printed on currency notes alongside English, Chinese and Malay.

The Public Utilities Board, bound by legal statutes, should have showed clear alignment with the state intentions. As discussed earlier, the mistaken post by PUB was a result of cultural ignorance. Nevertheless, it is challenging for a large government body to enforce this official discourse in all ministries and statutory boards. The minority status of the (South) Indian community makes it likely that unintended uses of "Diwali" are never picked out as being misaligned with the national public policy.

Singapore's language policy should reflect her commitment towards the various ethnic groups. As the Indian community becomes more diverse, Singapore has to evolve in how the public discourse addresses this heterogeneous community. In the past, Tamil was the only Indian language offered. Most non-Tamils would have to pick either Chinese, Malay and Tamil as their Mother Tongue Language. To cater to the increasing diversity of the Indian community and the increasing popularity of Hindi, the education system's Mother Tongue Language policy allows ethnic Indians to take various Indian languages like Hindi, Urdu and Punjabi at language centres island-wide.

In the long term, Singapore is unlikely to introduce Hindi a national language. Doing so without removing Tamil would strike racial imbalance with the other categories (Chinese, Malay, Others). However, replacing Tamil with Hindi as one of the four national languages would undermine the long years of history and heritage behind the Tamil language. Heritage is vital in building the national narrative of a small and young country like Singapore. Hindi does not yet possess the same

symbolism as Tamil, which narrates the struggles of early pioneers and their contribution to Singapore. Today, it is recognised that Singapore's economic expansion during the colonial period was in a large part facilitated by the financing methods and loans of the Chettiars from Tamil Nadu.

It is vital to maintain a balance between preserving history and adapting to new circumstances. Singapore's current policy position is to still keep Tamil as the only national Indian language, while offering flexible arrangements for non-Tamils. This position is likely to remain unchanged in the short term.

Does the “Deepavali” versus “Diwali” debate create Unity or Division?

The debate between “Deepavali” and “Diwali” unfolds in ways that unite and divide the Indian-Hindu community, and with the larger Singaporean society.

Bringing attention to the debate has prompted more non-Indian Hindus to venture into this culture and understand the richness of the Indian-Hindu community. Certainly, the PUB social media manager who mistakenly used “Diwali” would be careful to make the distinction the next time. An opinion article was also shared on this issue in The Straits Times in August 2019. The author was non-Indian, and was sharing about the importance of understanding the differences between “Deepavali” and “Diwali”. Through the differences can be technical and esoteric, these disputes have increased the participation of more non-Indians in understanding Indian culture.

While “Deepavali” has been the hitherto standard term in the public sphere, there is an ongoing debate that lies within a local versus immigrant unhappiness. Should the exclusive use of “Deepavali” should be mandated in the public sphere? Should there even be an official reference in the public sphere? The public policy debate has definitely created a rift between the Tamil-speaking and Hindi-speaking communities.

Yet, at the same time, the disputes have created more solidarity within the Tamil-speaking and Hindi-speaking communities respectively. For the Tamil-speaking community, the desire to protect their cultural rights and representation and keep Tamil as Singapore only national Indian language has brought them together. For the Hindi-speaking community, the more prevalent use of “Deepavali” instead of “Diwali” in Singapore has drawn them together to promote their culture. As shared by Roshni in the YouthSG Facebook Post, people have questioned why she celebrates the

festival a day later. During a festival that is supposed to celebrate their Indian-Hinduness, the community that celebrates Diwali is instead misunderstood. Their celebration rites are misinterpreted to coincide with Deepavali, though these two festivals have slight variants. Correspondingly, the Hindi-speaking people of the Indian-Hindu community share this common experience of being misunderstood, which brings them together.

In all, the “Deepavali” versus “Diwali” debate has left its mark on the Indian-Hindu community in Singapore. While it has sparked contention, the debate played a stronger role in expanding the appreciation of the Indian-Hindu community by the wider community. Furthermore, the debate has ignited the passion within the Tamil-speaking and Hindi-speaking communities to appreciate and find solidarity within their own culture. The Indian-Hindu identity in them is strengthened.

CONCLUSION

Earlier, we saw how the ignorance of the non-Indian population sidelines many nuances that underlie the Festival of Lights. However, the emergence of dissatisfaction has definitely brought more attention to the heterogeneity of the Indian community in Singapore. Having a grasp of these differences equips Singaporeans with the cultural sensitivity to engage the Indian community.

While a minority group, the Indian community is diverse – but not necessarily divided. As each group continues to cherish their own culture, they come together in their desire to celebrate and do Indian. We saw this in how the four families celebrated the Festival of Lights – the celebrations centered on connecting back to their cultural roots and with their friends and family. Even though the public discourse continues to spark debates, these debates have strengthened the Indian-Hindu identity in the face of adversity and controversy.

“From falsehood lead me to truth, from darkness lead me to the light, from death lead me to immortality”

The Pavamana Mantra, an ancient Sanskrit prayer often recited during the Festival of Lights, aptly encapsulates the essence of the festival, whether it manifests as “Deepavali” or “Diwali”. In spite of the multitude of ways people celebrate it, the festival is fundamentally about the triumph of good over evil, light over darkness and knowledge over ignorance. In the same way, the debate has shed more light on the cultural richness of the Indian-Hindu community. As this year’s celebration for the

Festival of Lights concludes and the discourse continues, may more people be cognisant of and appreciative of the cultural diversity of Indian-Hindu community.

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APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW GUIDING QUESTIONS

0. Two pictures of the PUB post and response were shown to the respondents. An overview of the issue is given. This was a primer for the interview. Families were asked how they felt after reading about the incident.

1. Do you use “Deepavali” or “Diwali”?

2. What are the differences between “Deepavali” and “Diwali”? [Points I looked out for: (a) Linguistic difference – Tamil vs Hindi (b) Who uses these terms – South vs North Indians]

3. Are you aware of any stories/ myths behind the festival?

4. How do you celebrate the festival?

5. Do you think the distinction between the festivals is important or necessary?

6. What about in the public sphere and in official discourses?

7. Is your family South/ North Indian?

8. Do you speak Tamil/ Hindi/ Others?

The identification questions 7 and 8 were given at the end so that the interviewer (me) would not anticipate the responses during the interview.

For each family, there was one main speaker doing the sharing so the age of the speaker was also recorded. This figure turned out to be insignificant because the trend was clear that younger people in their twenties were more willing to engage in an interview off the street.

Name: Vignesh

Email: vigneshshankar@gmail.com

Signature: Vignesh

Date

No.

① Dinahi vs. Deepavali: what's the difference?

- same
- different languages (he's aware).
know ~~that~~ ^{that} means who use this

② Stories & myths

- "Ravan one"
- does not know about Krishna. "what has Krishna got to do w/ it?"
family knows, but not certain

③ Celebration "rituals"?

- crackers, food
- no Little India
- no Indian usually this yr coincide w/ wedding.

④ Thoughts on national discourse.


- he thinks it's a pun
- can the pun be made w/ Deepavali?
- no strong rxn.

⑤

Are you North / South Indian?

Tamil / Hindi / others.

Age: 23

Name: ESHWAR s/o KANNAPPATHY EMUGU: 2014822562. ru. ch. Signature: 

Date

No.

① Diwali vs Deepavali: what's the difference?

- deepavali: South Indians (Tamil)
- diwali: north-indian style "hindi and all that"

② Stories / myths

- no stones, "story of triumph of good over evil"
- heard of both, "lots of stones"

"end of the day, it's a Hindu festival."

Should not distinguish your language, race, etc.

③ How do you celebrate?

- morning: wake early & put oil on head
(mix w/ a substance in henna)
Saffron?
put on hair and shower then go pray (at home)

celebration-wise similar

- celebratory meal (need not be vegetarian)

- visiting, Indian snacks

Light up too (on road every touristy).

④ Thoughts on national discourse.

Diwali:
simpler to
say, more
catchy,
more
north
Indians

- actually it's been a big issue

- in NUS, the Indian Cultural Society Diwali Night

↳ debate on this

- 2 groups of Indians to accommodate

- aware of the debate, under request for it to be in "Deepavali"

- Diwali is the "fake" way

- he thinks the fight is ridiculous,

does it matter what it's called.

- imp't to recognize contribution

- you know Tamil is to recognize South Indians who've been here a long time

⑤

Are you North (South) Indian?

(Tamil) Hindi / others

Age: 24

Name: Anan Gupta Email: e0171286@unpus^{edu} Signature: Anan

Date

No.

① Diwali vs. Deepavali: what's the difference?

the same thing

note: he identifies as Hindu (the culture), not really hindu (the religion).

family still uses diwali though.

② Stories/myths

no one really uses them,

does wish that they knew more about it

③ How do you celebrate?

drink with friends

stays with relatives

④ Thoughts on national discourse?

it's stupid, there's no difference

he knows some people can get unhappy

⑤

Are you North/South Indian?

Tamil/Hindi/Other

Age: 22

Name: Rishabh

Email: rishabh92@gmail.com

Signature: R

3/8

Date

No.

① Diwali vs. Deepavali : what's the difference?

↓
celebrates this,
North Indian

parents are annoyed... its "Deepavali"

② What stories / myths do you associate with the festivals?

Ram killed Ravana

↳ North Indians don't add the "a"

↳ he knows the South Indian narrative is different.

- Incharge of Deepavali celebrations in army.

③ What are some ways you celebrate the festival?

- family not in SG.

- dinner & friends

- Light up @ Little India: mostly parents,

he only buys clothes, decorations, anything in general.

④ Thoughts on the national discourse.

- feels it should'n matter

- not much difference.

- more people embracing "diwali" bc. North Indian population increasing

- Hindi more common in India

⑤

Are you North / South Indian?

Tamil / (Hindi) / others.

Age: 21