



ARTS & CULTURE

Indians Celebrate Festival of Lights amid COVID Fears

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Indians began celebrating Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights, on Thursday. The celebration comes as the country is still dealing with the coronavirus pandemic as well as rising air pollution.

Diwali is usually celebrated by socializing and exchanging gifts with family and friends. Many light oil **lamps** or **candles** as a sign of the victory of light over darkness. They also set off **fireworks** as part of the celebrations.

Last year, the celebrations were limited following a sharp increase of COVID-19 infections. The celebrations seem to be returning this year even though the government has asked people to avoid large gatherings.

In the northern city of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh state, people lit over 900,000 lamps and kept them burning for 45 minutes on Wednesday. Last year, the city lit about 600,000 lamps.

Along the Saryu River, thousands of visitors ignored coronavirus social distancing restrictions to watch the lights. People lit up their houses and temples as lasers and fireworks brightened the city's streets.

The festival is being celebrated at a time when India's pandemic crisis has largely decreased.

On Thursday, the country recorded over 12,000 new coronavirus cases and 461 deaths. Earlier this year, India recorded a few hundred thousand new infections every day. The Health Ministry reported more than 35 million infections and over 459,000 deaths in the country so far.

Last month, India injected its one billionth COVID-19 vaccine, giving hope that life is returning to normal. More good news came Wednesday when the World Health Organization approved India's home-grown Covaxin vaccine for emergency use.

Still, experts have warned that the festival season could bring a sharp increase in infections if COVID-19 health measures are not enforced.

There are also worries over air pollution, which covers northern India under a dark **smog** as temperatures drop and winter settles in. On Diwali night, people also lit up the sky with fireworks adding to the pollution that could take days to clear.

I'm Ashley Thompson.

The Associated Press reported this story. Hai Do adapted it for Learning English. Susan Shand was the editor.

Words in this Story

lamp – *n.* a device that produces light

candle – *n.* wax that has been formed into a stick or another shape and has a string in the middle that can be burned

fireworks – *n.* small devices that explodes to make a display of light and noise

smog – *n.* a cloud of dirty air from cars, factories, etc., that is usually found in cities