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[@SriramKannan77](#)



Why do we light a lamp?

Close to every Indian home a lamp is ignited daily before the altar of the God. In some houses it is lit at dawn, in some, twice a day – at dawn and dusk – and in a few it is maintained endlessly - Akhanda Deepa.

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All auspicious functions begin with the lighting of the lamp, is often maintained right through the occasion.

Light symbolises knowledge, and darkness - ignorance. The God is the "Knowledge Principle" (Chaitanya) who is the source, the invigorator and the illuminator of all knowledge. Hence light is worshiped as the God himself.

Knowledge removes ignorance just as light removes darkness. Also, knowledge is a lasting inner wealth by which all outer achievement can be accomplished. Hence, we light the lamp to bow down to knowledge as the greatest of all forms of wealth.

Why not light a bulb or tube light? That too would remove darkness. But the traditional oil lamp has a further spiritual significance. The oil or ghee in the lamp symbolises our vaasanas or negative tendencies and the wick, the ego.

When lit by spiritual knowledge, the vaasanas get slowly exhausted and the ego too finally perishes. The flame of a lamp always burns upwards. Similarly, we should acquire such knowledge as to take us towards higher ideals.

Whilst lighting the lamp we thus pray:

Deepajyothi parabrahma Deepa sarva tamopahaha

Deepena saadhyate saram Sandhyaa deepo namostute

I prostrate to the dawn/dusk lamp; whose light is the Knowledge Principle (the Supreme God), which removes the darkness of ignorance and by which all can be achieved in life.