

Chapter 7: Festivals Through the Year

Summary

South Asia's festivals follow three different kinds of calendar. Some follow the sun and land on almost the same date every year. Some follow the moon alone and slide about 11 days earlier each year. Many follow both, so they wobble by a few weeks but stay in the same season. This chapter explains those three calendars first. Then it goes through the year's major festivals across the eight countries: what each one marks, who celebrates it, and how celebrations differ from place to place. By the end you'll be able to predict, roughly, when a festival will fall next year and explain why.

Concepts Covered

1. Lunisolar Calendar
2. Islamic Lunar Calendar
3. Diwali
4. Holi
5. Navaratri and Durga Puja
6. Dashain and Tihar
7. Ramadan
8. Eid al-Fitr

9. Eid al-Adha
10. Ashura
11. Vaisakhi
12. Pohela Boishakh
13. Pongal and Makar Sankranti
14. Onam
15. Vesak
16. Losar
17. Nowruz
18. Christmas in South Asia

Prerequisites

- **Chapter 1: What Is South Asia?** for the eight countries and the monsoon seasons.
- **Chapter 5: Faiths of South Asia** for the basic ideas of Hinduism, Islam, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism and Christianity.
- **Chapter 6: Languages and Scripts** helps with the festival names, which come from many languages.

Festival season is every season



Hi, I'm Mora! If you've ever had to explain to a teacher why you'll miss a test for Eid, or why Diwali "moved" this year, this chapter is for you. Festivals are when families pass down food, stories and music, and knowing how their calendars work helps you plan for them and explain them to friends. Every tradition has a story. Let's find it!

7.1 Ben Builds a Calendar

It's a Thursday in late August, and Ben Lindqvist has volunteered for a job nobody else wanted: building the South Asian Student Association's calendar for the whole school year. Zara Hossain wants the club to mark every big festival its members celebrate, so nobody schedules a meeting on someone's Eid or Diwali. Ben figures it'll take ten minutes. He'll just copy last year's dates.

Twenty minutes later he's frowning at his laptop. "Zara, something's broken. Last year Diwali was on 20 October. This year it says 8 November. And Eid al-Fitr was 31 March in 2025, then 21 March in 2026, and next year it's around 10 March. Do people just pick new dates every year?" Zara laughs, then stops, because she realizes she doesn't know why. Her Nanu always says "Eid depends on the moon," but Diwali follows the moon too, and it moved *later*, not earlier. If both festivals follow the moon, why don't they move the same way?

7.2 Three Ways to Count a Year

Start with something Ben already knows. His birthday falls on the same date every year because the calendar on his wall follows the sun. The **Gregorian calendar**, the one used for school, sports schedules and taxes in the United States, is a **solar calendar**: its year is built to match one trip of the Earth around the sun, about 365.24 days. That's why the seasons stay put, and hockey season always starts when it's cold.

Now imagine a second calendar that ignores the sun and counts only the moon. The moon goes from new moon to full moon and back to new moon in about 29.53 days. That cycle is a **lunar month**. Twelve lunar months add up to about

$$12 \times 29.53 \approx 354.4 \text{ days,}$$

which is about 11 days shorter than a solar year. A calendar built only on the moon is a **lunar calendar**.

There's also a third option: count months by the moon, but every few years add an extra month so the calendar catches up with the sun. That's a **Lunisolar Calendar**, a calendar whose months follow the moon but whose years are kept in step with the sun and the seasons by adding a leap month from time to time. In many Hindu calendars of South Asia, this extra month is called *adhik maas*, "added month," and it is inserted about once every 32.5 months on average, roughly every two and a half to three years.

Calendar type	Months follow	Year length	What happens to festival dates on the Gregorian calendar	South Asian examples
Solar	The sun	About 365 days	Almost the same date every year	Vaisakhi, Pohela Boishakh in Bangladesh, Pongal, Nowruz, Christmas
Lunisolar	The moon, with a leap month	354 days in most years, about 384 in a leap year	Jumps back and forth by up to about a month, but stays in the same season	Diwali, Holi, Navaratri, Dashain, Vesak, Losar
Lunar	The moon only	354 or 355 days	About 11 days earlier every year, moving through all seasons	Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Ashura

The **Islamic Lunar Calendar** (also called the Hijri calendar) is a purely lunar calendar of 12 months, with a year of 354 or 355 days and no leap month. It is the calendar Muslims use for religious dates, from the start of Ramadan to

the two Eids. Because it never adds a month to catch up, its dates drift backward through the Gregorian year. A little arithmetic shows how fast:

$$365.24 - 354.37 \approx 10.9 \text{ days per year.}$$

To slide all the way around the Gregorian year, an Islamic date needs about

$$\frac{365.24}{10.9} \approx 33.5 \text{ Gregorian years.}$$

So someone who fasts during Ramadan for most of their life will fast through every season, more than once.

That answers Ben's puzzle. Eid al-Fitr follows a lunar calendar, so it moved about 11 days earlier from 2026 to 2027. Diwali follows a lunisolar calendar. In most years it also lands about 11 days earlier than the year before, but whenever a leap month is added, it jumps about 19 days later instead. Between 2025 and 2026, a leap month was added, so Diwali jumped from 20 October to 8 November.

Try the math yourself



If Eid al-Fitr is on 21 March in 2026 and moves about 11 days earlier each year, roughly when will it fall in 2028? In what year might it land near New Year's Day? Check your guesses with the Festival Wheel at the end of the chapter.

Why a festival can be "a day off"

Calendars that follow the moon raise one more question: who decides when a month starts? In Islamic practice, a new month traditionally begins when

people see the thin crescent moon just after sunset, and committees in many countries confirm the sighting. The crescent can be visible in one place and not another, so Eid can fall on different days in, say, Saudi Arabia and Bangladesh, or even in two cities of one country.

In July 2025, for example, the Government of India published its holiday list for 2026 and set the Eid al-Adha holiday (often called Bakrid in India) for 27 May 2026, "subject to change" depending on the moon. On 22 May 2026, after the moon was sighted, the government moved the holiday in Delhi to 28 May. Lunisolar calendars have their own version of this: many Hindu festivals are tied to a *tithi* (a lunar day), and regional calendars sometimes disagree about which sunrise or evening it falls on, so a festival can be marked on two neighboring days in different places.

7.3 Festivals of Light and Color: Diwali and Holi

Diwali

Diwali (दिवाली, *dee-VAH-lee*), from the Sanskrit *Deepavali*, "row of lamps," is the festival of lights, held on the new moon at the end of the lunar month of Ashvin (Kartika in some regional calendars), usually in October or November. Families clean and decorate their homes, light small clay oil lamps called *diyas*, draw colored designs at the doorway (you'll learn about rangoli and kolam in [Chapter 11](#)), wear new clothes, share sweets and set off fireworks.

What Diwali celebrates depends on who you ask.

- **Many Hindus** celebrate the victory of light over darkness and of good over evil. In much of North India, Diwali recalls the god Rama returning home after defeating Ravana. Many families worship Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth and good fortune, on the main night. In Bengal and

among Hindus in Bangladesh, the same new moon night is Kali Puja, honoring the goddess Kali.

- **Sikhs** celebrate Bandi Chhor Divas, "day of liberation," on the same day. In Sikh tradition, it marks the release of the sixth Guru, Guru Hargobind, from imprisonment in Gwalior Fort by the Mughal emperor Jahangir, along with 52 imprisoned kings.
- **Jains** mark Diwali as the anniversary of the *nirvana* (final liberation) of Mahavira, the last of the Jain Tirthankaras.
- **Newar Buddhists** of Nepal's Kathmandu Valley also celebrate the festival, which they call Swanti.

Diwali is a public holiday in India (8 November in 2026, according to the Government of India's holiday list), and Hindu communities in Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka celebrate it too. In Nepal, the five-day festival of the same season is called Tihar (Section 7.4). In 2025, a resolution introduced in the US House of Representatives recognized Diwali as a festival celebrated by "Hindus, Sikhs, Jains, and others" across the United States.

Holi

Holi (होली, *HOH-lee*) is the spring festival of colors, held on the full moon of the month of Phalguna and the day after it, usually in March. On the first evening, communities light a bonfire called Holika Dahan. On the main day, people of all ages chase each other through the streets throwing colored powder and water, and old arguments are supposed to be forgiven.

Holi carries several meanings at once. Many Hindus connect the bonfire to the story of the young devotee Prahlad, who survived when his aunt Holika tried to burn him. Holi also celebrates the love of Radha and Krishna, the end of winter and the coming spring harvest. In Bengal (West Bengal in India, and Bangladesh) it is often called Dol Jatra or Basanta Utsab, "spring festival." Nepal celebrates Holi as Fagu Purnima, and Hindu communities in Pakistan

and Bangladesh celebrate it too. In 2026, India's holiday list put Holi on 4 March.

Because Holi follows a lunisolar calendar, it can fall anywhere from late February to late March, but the leap month keeps it from ever leaving spring.

7.4 Nine Nights and the Tenth Day

Navaratri and Durga Puja

Navaratri and Durga Puja are two names for the great autumn festival of the goddess. *Navaratri* (नवरात्रि, *nuh-vuh-RAHT-ree*) means "nine nights." It begins the day after the new moon of the month of Ashvin, usually in September or October, and the tenth day is Vijayadashami, often called Dussehra, "the tenth day of victory." In 2026, India's central government listed Dussehra on 20 October.

The same nine nights look very different across the region.

- **In Gujarat**, people dance Garba, a circle dance around a lamp or an image of the goddess, night after night. UNESCO added the Garba of Gujarat to its list of intangible cultural heritage in 2023.
- **In Bengal, Assam and Odisha**, and among Hindus in Bangladesh, the festival is **Durga Puja**, the worship of the goddess Durga (दुर्गा, *DOOR-gah*), who in many Hindu traditions defeats the buffalo demon Mahishasura. Artisans spend months sculpting images of Durga and her children from clay. Communities build temporary decorated structures called *pandals* to house them, and on the last day the images are carried to a river and immersed. UNESCO inscribed "Durga Puja in Kolkata" on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2021.

- **In much of North India**, the tenth day recalls Rama's victory over Ravana. Plays called Ramlila retell the story, and towering effigies of Ravana are burned with fireworks.

Dashain and Tihar

Dashain and Tihar are Nepal's two biggest festivals, about three weeks apart in the autumn.

Dashain (दशैं, *duh-SHAIN*) is Nepal's version of the Navaratri season. It is the longest and most important festival in the country's calendar, lasting 15 days, usually in September or October. On the first day, families plant barley seeds indoors. By the tenth day the seeds have grown into pale yellow shoots called *jamara*. On that day, elders put a *tika* (a mark of red rice and yogurt) on the foreheads of younger relatives, tuck *jamara* behind their ears and give their blessing. Dashain is celebrated by Nepali families of many backgrounds, and also in Bhutan and in Nepali-speaking parts of India.

Tihar (तिहार, *tee-HAAR*) is Nepal's five-day festival of lights, in the same season as Diwali. Each day honors someone different: crows on the first day, dogs on the second (Kukur Tihar, when dogs get flower garlands and treats), cows and the goddess Lakshmi on the third, oxen on the fourth, and siblings on the last day, Bhai Tika, when sisters bless their brothers. Children go house to house singing songs called Deusi and Bhailo, a little like caroling. Among Newar communities of the Kathmandu Valley the festival is called Swanti.

Same night, different names



If a friend from Kolkata says "Durga Puja," a friend from Ahmedabad says "Navaratri," and a friend from Kathmandu says "Dashain," they're often talking about the very same days in the calendar. Ask how *their* family celebrates before you assume it's the same festival in every way.

7.5 The Islamic Year

Muslims make up most of the population of Afghanistan, Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Maldives, and large communities in India and Sri Lanka. For all of them, the year's most important religious dates follow the Islamic Lunar Calendar.

Ramadan

Ramadan (Arabic رمضان, *rah-mah-DAHN*; in Bangla রমজান, *rom-JAHN*) is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, a month of fasting, prayer and charity that lasts 29 or 30 days, from one sighting of the crescent moon to the next. Fasting during Ramadan is one of the Five Pillars of Islam. Adult Muslims go without food and drink from dawn until sunset. People who are ill, traveling, elderly, pregnant or breastfeeding are excused, and many can make up the days later.

Zara's family wakes up before dawn for *sehri* (the predawn meal; in Arabic it's called *suhur*) and gathers at sunset for *iftar*, the meal that breaks the fast, often starting with dates and water. In Minnesota, where summer days are long and winter days are short, the length of the fast changes a lot depending on which season Ramadan falls in. Over a lifetime, Zara will fast through Minnesota summers and winters alike.

Eid al-Fitr

Eid al-Fitr (Bangla ঐদুল ফিতর, *EED-ul FIT-er*), "the festival of breaking the fast," begins on the first day of the month of Shawwal, when the new crescent is sighted at the end of Ramadan. The night of the sighting is celebrated as *Chand Raat*, "night of the moon," with last-minute shopping and henna. On Eid morning, families put on new clothes and attend special prayers. Before the prayer, Muslims give a required charity called *zakat al-fitr* so that people in need can celebrate too. Children receive *Eidi* (gifts of money), and visits to relatives last all day, often with sweet vermicelli (*shemai* in Bangla, *sheer khurma* or *seviyan* in Urdu and Hindi). Eid al-Fitr is celebrated for one to three days depending on the country. In 2026, India's holiday list put it on 21 March.

Eid al-Adha

Eid al-Adha (Bangla ঐদুল আযহা, *EED-ul AD-ha*), "the festival of sacrifice," falls on the 10th day of Dhu al-Hijjah, the last month of the Islamic year, during the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. In Islamic tradition, it honors the prophet Ibrahim's (Abraham's) willingness to sacrifice his son at God's command. Families who can afford it sacrifice an animal (a goat, sheep, cow or camel) and share the meat with relatives, neighbors and people in need. In Pakistan and Bangladesh, busy animal markets appear in cities in the weeks before. In India it is often called Bakrid, and in 2026 it fell on 28 May in Delhi, one day after the date first printed on the holiday list.

Ashura

Ashura (Persian عاشورا, *aa-SHOO-rah*, "the tenth") is the 10th day of Muharram, the first month of the Islamic year. It means different things to different Muslims.

- For **Shia Muslims**, Ashura is the most solemn day of the year, a day of mourning for Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who

was killed with his companions at the Battle of Karbala, in present-day Iraq, on 10 Muharram in 680 CE. During the first ten days of Muharram, Shia communities hold gatherings called *majlis* where Husayn's story is retold, and on Ashura they hold processions. In Dhaka, the Hussaini Dalan, a Shia hall first built in the 17th century under Mughal rule, is the center of Muharram gatherings. Large Muharram processions also take place in cities across Pakistan and India.

- **Sunni Muslims** also regard Husayn's death as a tragedy and remember it in sermons. Many Sunnis also fast on Ashura, a practice linked in Islamic tradition to the day Moses and the Israelites were saved from Pharaoh.

Not every festival is a party



Wishing someone "Happy Ashura" can hurt, because for many Shia families it is a day of grief. If you're not sure how a friend's family observes a day, ask, and listen.

7.6 New Years and Harvests Set by the Sun

A surprising number of South Asia's new years land in mid-April. That's because many regional calendars start the year when the sun enters Mesha (the sign of Aries in the Indian zodiac), around 13 to 15 April. Since these festivals follow the sun, their dates barely move.

Vaisakhi

Vaisakhi (*VAI-saa-khee*), also spelled Baisakhi, falls on 13 or 14 April and is both a harvest festival and a new year in Punjab and in much of North India. For Sikhs, it is one of the most important days of the year. In Sikh tradition, on

Vaisakhi in 1699 the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, founded the Khalsa, the community of initiated Sikhs, at Anandpur. Sikhs mark the day with prayers at the gurdwara and *nagar kirtan*, processions with hymn singing through the streets. Because many of Sikhism's holiest sites are in present-day Pakistan, thousands of Sikh pilgrims from India cross the border each year for Vaisakhi, with the main gathering at Gurdwara Panja Sahib in Hasan Abdal, in Pakistan's Punjab province. Simran Kaur Gill, the club treasurer, tells Ben that her grandparents in Ludhiana start the day at the gurdwara and spend the afternoon at a fair.

The same mid-April date is also Vishu in Kerala, Puthandu (Tamil New Year) in Tamil Nadu, and Bohag Bihu in Assam. In Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil families celebrate the Sinhala and Tamil New Year on 13 or 14 April. Dilan Perera's family in Kandy waits for the exact auspicious time, set by astrologers, to light the hearth and cook *kiribath* (milk rice), and many neighbors do the same at the same minute.

Pohela Boishakh

Pohela Boishakh (পহেলা বৈশাখ, *po-HEH-la boy-SHAKH*), "the first of Boishakh," is the Bengali New Year. In Bangladesh it is a national holiday on 14 April every year. That date is fixed because Bangladesh revised its version of the Bengali calendar: a committee led by the scholar Muhammad Shahidullah proposed the reform in 1966, and Bangladesh officially adopted it in 1987. In West Bengal and other Indian states, which still use the traditional Bengali calendar, Pohela Boishakh falls on 14 or 15 April. India's 2026 holiday list put "Vaisakhadi (Bengal)" on 15 April.

In Dhaka, the day starts at dawn with songs by the cultural group Chhayanaut in Ramna Park. Students and teachers from the Faculty of Fine Art at the University of Dhaka lead a huge street procession with giant masks and floats. That tradition began in 1989, when students under military rule

wanted to bring people hope, and UNESCO added it to its intangible heritage list in 2016 as Mangal Shobhajatra. Its official name was changed in 2025 and debated again in 2026, so you may hear it called by different names.

Shopkeepers close the old year's accounts and open new account books, a custom called *haal khata*. In recent decades many families in Dhaka have also made *panta bhat* (cooked rice soaked overnight in water) part of the day's breakfast.

Whose Story?

Who invented the Bengali year? Many Bangladeshi textbooks and writers credit the Mughal emperor Akbar, who in the 1500s wanted a calendar that matched the harvest so taxes could be collected after the crops came in. Other historians point to older Bengali rulers, and to temple inscriptions that suggest a Bengali year was counted before Akbar's time. Some writers stress the festival's roots in Hindu solar new year traditions, while in Bangladesh it is also celebrated as a shared, secular Bengali holiday by Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Christians alike. Even the date is a border story: Dhaka celebrates on the 14th every year, while Kolkata sometimes celebrates on the 15th, because the two cities now use different versions of the same calendar.

Pongal and Makar Sankranti

Pongal and Makar Sankranti are winter harvest festivals that mark the sun's move into Makara (Capricorn in the Indian zodiac), usually on 14 or 15 January. India's 2026 holiday list put both on 14 January. Because they follow the sun, they're among the most predictable dates in the South Asian year.

Pongal (பொங்கல், *PONG-gul*), "boiling over," is the Tamil harvest festival, held over three or four days at the start of the Tamil month of Thai. On the main day, families cook rice with milk and jaggery (unrefined cane sugar) in a new pot outdoors until it boils over, and everyone shouts "Pongalo pongal!" On

Mattu Pongal, cattle are bathed, their horns painted and garlanded, to thank them for their work. Tamil communities in Sri Lanka celebrate Thai Pongal too.

Makar Sankranti (मकर संक्रांति) is the name used in much of India for the same solar moment. In Gujarat it's a kite festival called Uttarayan; in Assam it's Magh Bihu; in Nepal it is Maghe Sankranti. In Punjab, the bonfire festival Lohri falls the night before, usually on 13 January, and Hindus, Sikhs and some Muslims also mark it in rural Pakistani Punjab and in cities such as Lahore and Faisalabad.

Onam

Onam (ഓണം, *OH-num*) is the harvest festival of Kerala, celebrated by Malayali families of many faiths. It falls in the Malayalam month of Chingam (August to September), on the day of the star Thiruvonam. In 2026, India's holiday list put Thiru Onam on 26 August. In Kerala tradition, Onam is when the generous king Mahabali, who once ruled Kerala, returns each year to visit his people. Families make a *pookalam*, a round carpet of flower petals at the doorway, and share a *sadya*, a feast of many dishes served on a banana leaf. In some towns, long snake boats race on the backwaters. Onam's date depends on both a solar month and the moon's position among the stars, so it moves around within late August and September.

Nowruz

Nowruz (نوروز, *noh-ROOZ*), "new day," is the Persian New Year, which begins at the March equinox, on 20 or 21 March. In Afghanistan, where it's called Nawruz, it was long the start of the official calendar year. Families prepare *haft mewa*, a dish of seven dried fruits and nuts soaked in water, and the biggest celebrations took place at Mazar-i-Sharif, where a banner-raising ceremony drew crowds from across the country. After the Taliban took power in 2021, their government stopped observing Nowruz as an official holiday in

2022, while saying people could celebrate privately. In India, Parsi and Irani families, who trace their roots to Iran, also celebrate Navroz. UNESCO lists Nowruz as shared heritage of many countries; its 2024 listing includes Afghanistan, India and Pakistan.

7.7 Full Moons and Mountain New Years

Vesak

Vesak (Sinhala වෙසක්, *VAY-suck*), also called Buddha Purnima in India and Nepal, is the most important Buddhist festival in South Asia. It falls on the full moon of the month of Vesak (Vaisakha), usually in May, and Buddhists in South Asia remember the Buddha's birth, enlightenment and passing away all on this one day. In 1999 the United Nations General Assembly formally recognized the Day of Vesak.

In Sri Lanka, Vesak is a two-day national celebration. Streets glow with colored paper lanterns called *Vesak kudu*, and huge electrically lit panels called *pandols* (or *thoranas*) tell Jataka tales, stories of the Buddha's earlier lives. Many people set up free food stalls for anyone passing by, and the sale of alcohol and meat is usually stopped for the celebrations. In Sri Lanka every full-moon day, called Poya, is a public holiday, and Vesak Poya is the biggest of them. Dilan's family visits the temple in Kandy dressed in white. Nepal, where Lumbini (traditionally the Buddha's birthplace) lies, celebrates Buddha Jayanti, and Buddhists in Bangladesh, Bhutan and India also mark the day. In 2026, India's holiday list put Buddha Purnima on 1 May.

Losar

Losar (Tibetan ལོ་གསར་, *LOH-sar*), "new year," is the new year of the Tibetan lunisolar calendar, usually in February or March, celebrated for up to 15 days with the main celebrations in the first three. In Bhutan it is called Dawa

Dangpa Losar. It is also celebrated by Sherpa, Tibetan and other Himalayan communities in Nepal and by people in Ladakh and Sikkim in India. Families clean their homes thoroughly beforehand, make special foods, visit monasteries and hang new prayer flags.

Nepal is a good reminder that one festival name can cover several dates. Nima Sherpa's family in Solukhumbu celebrates Gyalpo Losar, the Tibetan-calendar new year, in February or March. The Tamang community's Sonam Lhosar usually comes about a month earlier (19 January in 2026), and the Gurung community's Tamu Lhosar falls in late December or early January. Tamu Lhosar is a public holiday in Nepal.

7.8 Christmas in South Asia

Christmas in South Asia is the celebration of the birth of Jesus on 25 December by the region's Christian communities. Christianity in South Asia goes back a long way. Christians in Kerala trace their church to the apostle Thomas, who in their tradition arrived on India's southwest coast in the first century. According to India's 2011 census, about 2.3% of Indians, roughly 28 million people, were Christian. Kerala has the largest Christian population of any Indian state, and Christians are the majority in the northeastern states of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya. Goa has a long Catholic history from the centuries of Portuguese rule, and many families there go to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve.

Christmas is a public holiday in India. In Bangladesh it is called Borodin (বড়দিন, *BOH-roh-din*), "the big day." In Pakistan, 25 December is a public holiday for two reasons: Christmas, and Quaid-e-Azam Day, the birthday of Muhammad Ali Jinnah, Pakistan's founder. Christians in Sri Lanka, both Sinhala- and Tamil-speaking, celebrate with church services and family

gatherings. Because Christmas follows the Gregorian calendar, which is solar, it's the easiest date on Ben's calendar.

You can read any calendar now



Notice the pattern: the sun-based festivals (Vaisakhi, Pohela Boishakh, Pongal, Nowruz, Christmas) are the ones you could predict years ahead. You now know more about calendars than most people who use them every day.

7.9 The Whole Year at a Glance

Here is the full list, sorted by calendar type. The 2026 dates come from the Government of India's holiday list for central government offices in Delhi (where it lists the festival); dates in other countries can differ by a day or more.

Festival	Calendar	Usual time of year	2026 date in India's holiday list	Celebrated in (examples)
Pongal and Makar Sankranti	Solar	14-15 January	14 January	India, Sri Lanka (Tamil communities), Nepal (Maghe Sankranti)
Losar	Lunisolar	February-March	Not listed	Bhutan, Nepal, India (Ladakh, Sikkim)

Festival	Calendar	Usual time of year	2026 date in India's holiday list	Celebrated in (examples)
Holi	Lunisolar	Late February–March	4 March	India, Nepal, Hindu communities in Pakistan and Bangladesh
Nowruz	Solar	20–21 March	Not listed in March (Parsi New Year listed 15 August)	Afghanistan, Parsi communities in India
Vaisakhi	Solar	13–14 April	14 April	India and Pakistan (Punjab), Sikh communities worldwide
Pohela Boishakh	Solar	14 April (Bangladesh); 14–15 April (India)	15 April	Bangladesh, West Bengal, Tripura and Assam
Vesak	Lunisolar	April–May full moon	1 May	Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, India

Festival	Calendar	Usual time of year	2026 date in India's holiday list	Celebrated in (examples)
Onam	Solar month, star day	Late August–September	26 August	Kerala and Malayali communities
Navaratri and Durga Puja	Lunisolar	September–October	Dussehra 20 October	India, Bangladesh
Dashain	Lunisolar	September–October	Not listed (Nepal)	Nepal, Bhutan, parts of India
Diwali and Tihar	Lunisolar	October–November	8 November	India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Bangladesh
Christmas	Solar	25 December	25 December	Christian communities across South Asia
Ramadan	Lunar	Moves through all seasons	Not listed (computed: about 19 February to 20 March)	Muslim communities across South Asia

Festival	Calendar	Usual time of year	2026 date in India's holiday list	Celebrated in (examples)
Eid al-Fitr	Lunar	Moves through all seasons	21 March	Muslim communities across South Asia
Eid al-Adha	Lunar	Moves through all seasons	28 May (moved from 27 May)	Muslim communities across South Asia
Ashura	Lunar	Moves through all seasons	26 June (listed as Muharram)	Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Afghanistan

One curious entry: India's holiday list puts "Parsi New Year's Day" in August, not March, because many Parsi families in India also follow a traditional Zoroastrian calendar whose new year now falls in late summer.

Diagram: Festival Wheel

Festival Wheel: Why Do Dates Move?

Drag the Year slider. Watch which festivals move, and how far. Click a dot.



Eid al-Fitr

■ Lunar: about 11 days earlier each year

In 2026: about 21 March

Next year: about 10 March, 11 days earlier.

Where: Muslim communities across South Asia. A public holiday in Pakistan, Bangladesh, India and elsewhere.

Why it moves: It begins when the new moon of Shawwal is seen, so the exact day can differ by country.

Key

● Solar: same date every year

● Lunisolar: moves within a season

● Lunar: about 11 days earlier each year

Computed dates are approximate. Local calendars and moon sighting set the real day.

Year: 2026

☒ Show Islamic dates from the past 4 years

[Back to Festival Wheel Lesson Plan](#)

Interactive simulation: <https://aaryavvatts-lab.github.io/south-asian-culture-textbook/sims/ch07-festival-wheel/main.html>

[Open the Festival Wheel fullscreen](#)

MicroSim specification: Festival Wheel

sim-id: ch07-festival-wheel

Library: p5.js

Status: Implemented

Bloom Level: Understand

Bloom Verb: explain

Learning Objective: The learner will explain why solar festivals keep the same Gregorian date, lunisolar festivals move within a season, and Islamic lunar festivals move about 11 days earlier each year.

Canvas: responsive width; 620 px drawing area plus 112 px control area.

Controls: Play years / Pause button, Year slider (1990 to 2060), "Color by" menu (calendar type or faith), festival menu, "Show Islamic dates from the past 4 years" checkbox; click or tap any festival dot or label.

Behavior: A 12-month wheel with 1 January at the top. Solar festivals sit at fixed dates. Diwali, Holi, Navaratri and Vesak are computed each year from new and full moons (Meeus's algorithm) and Hindu month rules; Onam and Losar show their usual windows. Ramadan, the two Eids and Ashura are computed from the Moon and a crescent-visibility rule, so they slide about 11 days earlier each year, with faint dots trailing behind for the past four years. The info panel shows the selected festival's computed date, where it is celebrated, and why it moves. Starts paused, set to 2026.

Start in 2026 and click a few dots to read about them. Then drag the **Year** slider forward one year at a time and watch the three colors. The gold dots (solar festivals) never move. The teal dots (lunisolar festivals) hop back and forth, but Holi always stays in spring and Diwali always stays in autumn. The orange dots (Islamic festivals) march steadily counterclockwise, and the faint trail behind them shows where they were in earlier years.

Now select Eid al-Fitr and press **Play years**. Pause when Eid reaches December. How many years did it take to get there from March? Try the year 2033, when Eid al-Fitr falls twice in one Gregorian year. And notice the small print in the panel: the sim's dates are calculated, so they can be a day off from the date your community actually uses. That isn't a bug. The Government of India had to move Eid al-Adha in 2026 for the same reason.

Ask Your Elders

Your interview for this chapter

Talk with a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, family friend or community elder about the festivals they grew up with and how they celebrate them now. If you don't have a South Asian elder to ask, interview a club advisor, a local temple, mosque, gurdwara or cultural center volunteer, or a classmate's family (with permission). Ten minutes is enough.

Before you start: Pick a quiet time that isn't the busy day of a festival itself, and ask if it's okay to take notes. If your family has a calendar (a printed panjika, a mosque timetable or a wall calendar from a community center), bring it along.

Questions to ask

1. What was your favorite festival when you were a child? What do you remember about the day?
2. What foods, clothes, sounds or smells do you connect with that festival?
3. How did your family find out the exact date each year? Did anyone check the moon, a printed almanac, a radio announcement or a phone?

4. Which festivals did your neighbors celebrate that your family didn't? Did you join in?
5. How is celebrating in Minnesota (or wherever you live now) different from celebrating back home?
6. What is one festival tradition you hope I keep, and why?

Listen for: whether their festivals follow the Islamic Lunar Calendar or a Lunisolar Calendar, which of this chapter's festivals they mention (Eid al-Fitr, Diwali, Pohela Boishakh, Vaisakhi or others), and stories about how dates were decided.

Save it: Write down one quote or story in their words, with their permission. If they agree, you can share it with the [Roots & Rivers Story Archive](#).

Your turn: compare two answers

Compare your elder's description of a festival with the description in this chapter. What did they mention that the chapter left out? If a friend interviewed someone who celebrates a different festival, compare the two: do both families describe new clothes, special food or visiting relatives?

"Every family does it a little differently, and there is no wrong answer here."

Common Misconceptions

Myth: Diwali is only a Hindu festival.

Reality: Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and some Buddhists all celebrate on the same night, each for their own reasons. For Sikhs it is Bandi Chhor Divas, and for Jains it marks Mahavira's nirvana.

Myth: Eid is "the Muslim Christmas."

Reality: There are two Eids, with different meanings: Eid al-Fitr ends the fasting month of Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha honors Ibrahim's willingness to sacrifice and falls during the Hajj. Neither celebrates anyone's birth, and both move through the year on the lunar calendar.

Myth: Holi is just about throwing colors.

Reality: Holi begins with the Holika Dahan bonfire and carries religious stories (Prahlad, and Radha and Krishna), the welcome of spring, and a tradition of forgiving old quarrels.

Myth: Festivals that follow the moon all move the same way.

Reality: Islamic festivals follow a purely lunar calendar and move about 11 days earlier every year. Lunisolar festivals like Diwali add a leap month every two to three years, so they jump back later and stay in the same season.

Myth: Every festival is celebrated the same way everywhere.

Reality: The same autumn nights are Garba in Gujarat, Durga Puja in Kolkata and Dhaka, Ramlila in North India, and Dashain in Nepal. Even the date of Pohela Boishakh differs between Bangladesh and West Bengal.

Check Yourself

? 1. What is the difference between a lunar calendar and a lunisolar calendar? ✓

Both count months by the moon. A lunar calendar, like the Islamic calendar, never adds extra months, so its year is about 354 days. A lunisolar calendar adds a leap month every two to three years to stay in step with the sun and the seasons.

? 2. Why does Eid al-Fitr come about 11 days earlier each year on the Gregorian calendar? ✓

Twelve lunar months add up to about 354 days, roughly 11 days less than a solar year of about 365 days. The Islamic calendar never adds a month to catch up, so each new Eid comes about 11 days earlier.

? 3. Name the three groups who celebrate on Diwali night and one thing each group remembers. ✓

Many Hindus celebrate light over darkness (Rama's return, Lakshmi puja); Sikhs celebrate Bandi Chhor Divas, Guru Hargobind's release from Gwalior Fort; Jains remember Mahavira's nirvana. Some Buddhists celebrate too.

? 4. Why is Pohela Boishakh always on 14 April in Bangladesh but sometimes on 15 April in West Bengal? ✓

Bangladesh adopted a revised Bengali calendar in 1987 (based on a 1966 proposal), which fixes the new year on 14 April. West Bengal still uses the traditional calendar, whose new year falls on 14 or 15 April.

? 5. What is Ashura, and how do Shia and many Sunni Muslims observe it? ✓

Ashura is the 10th of Muharram. For Shia Muslims it is a day of mourning for Husayn, killed at Karbala in 680 CE, with gatherings and processions. Many Sunni Muslims fast on Ashura.

Exercises

Remember

1. List two festivals that follow a solar calendar, two that follow a lunisolar calendar, and two that follow the Islamic Lunar Calendar.

Answer

Solar: any two of Vaisakhi, Pohela Boishakh (Bangladesh), Pongal and Makar Sankranti, Nowruz, Christmas. Lunisolar: any two of Diwali, Holi, Navaratri and Durga Puja, Dashain, Vesak, Losar. Lunar: any two of Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha, Ashura.

2. Which festival is celebrated with *jamara* and *tika*, and in which country is it the biggest festival of the year?

Answer

Dashain, the biggest and longest festival in Nepal.

Understand

1. Explain why Holi always falls in spring even though it follows the moon.

Answer

Holi follows a lunisolar calendar. Every two to three years, a leap month is added so that the lunar months stay lined up with the solar year. That keeps Holi between late February and late March.

2. Explain why many Indian holiday lists say Islamic holiday dates are "subject to change."

Answer

Islamic months traditionally begin when the new crescent moon is sighted. The government prints its list months in advance using an expected date, but the actual sighting can push the holiday a day later, as happened with Eid al-Adha in 2026.

Apply

1. Use the Festival Wheel to find the first year after 2026 when Ramadan begins in January. Then calculate how many years that is after 2026 and check whether it fits the "about 11 days a year" rule. *Hint: count how many days Ramadan's start has to move back from 19 February to reach January.*
2. Your club wants to hold a "festivals of spring" night in April. Using this chapter, list at least four festivals from at least three different countries that could be featured, with a one-line description of each. *Hint: look for festivals that follow the sun into mid-April.*

Analyze

1. Compare how Navaratri is celebrated in Gujarat, Kolkata and Nepal. What stays the same across all three, and what changes? *Hint: think about the dates, the goddess, and what people actually do.*
2. Ben's calendar shows Diwali moving from 20 October 2025 to 8 November 2026, but Eid al-Fitr moving from 31 March 2025 to 21 March 2026. Analyze why one moved later and the other moved earlier. *Hint: what happened in the lunisolar calendar between those two Diwalis?*

Evaluate

1. A school is deciding whether to give students a day off for Diwali, for Eid, or for neither. Evaluate the challenge of fixing those dates a year in advance, and suggest a fair policy. *Hint: consider moon sighting, different communities' dates, and how many students celebrate.*
2. Some people say a festival like Pohela Boishakh or Onam is "cultural, not religious." Others disagree. Using evidence from the chapter, evaluate this claim for one festival. *Hint: the Whose Story? box is a good place to start.*

Create

1. Design your club's festival calendar for the next school year. Include at least eight festivals from at least four countries, the expected date for each, its calendar type, and a note on any date that could shift. *Hint: use the Festival Wheel for computed dates, then check an official holiday list.*
2. Write a short guide (150 to 200 words) for a new club member explaining how to greet friends respectfully during three different festivals, including one that is a day of mourning. *Hint: include Ashura and explain why "happy" is the wrong word for it.*

Key Takeaways

- South Asian festivals follow three kinds of calendar: solar (fixed dates), lunisolar (moves within a season) and lunar (moves through every season).
- The Islamic Lunar Calendar has 12 months and about 354 days, so Ramadan, Eid al-Fitr, Eid al-Adha and Ashura come about 11 days earlier each Gregorian year and circle the whole year in about 33 years.

- Lunisolar calendars add a leap month about every 32.5 months, which keeps Diwali in autumn, Holi in spring and Vesak near May.
- Many festivals are shared across faiths and borders: Diwali by Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and some Buddhists; Pohela Boishakh by Bengalis of every faith; Vesak across five South Asian countries.
- The same season can carry different names and customs: Navaratri, Durga Puja, Dussehra and Dashain; Diwali and Tihar; Vaisakhi, Pohela Boishakh and the Sinhala and Tamil New Year.
- Exact dates depend on local calendars and, for Islamic months, on sighting the moon, so official holiday lists sometimes change, as India's did for Eid al-Adha in 2026.

Your calendar is ready!



You can now explain why Eid moves earlier, why Diwali jumps around, and why Pohela Boishakh stays put. Every festival comes with a feast, so in Chapter 8 we head to the table to see what South Asia eats and why.

Quiz: Festivals Through the Year

Test your understanding of Chapter 7. Choose the best answer, then click **Show Answer** to check.

Question 1

About how long is a year in the Islamic Lunar Calendar?

- A. 365 or 366 days
- B. 354 or 355 days
- C. 384 or 385 days
- D. 330 days

 **Show Answer**



The correct answer is **B**. The Islamic calendar has 12 lunar months of about 29.5 days each, which adds up to 354 or 355 days. 365 or 366 days is the length of the solar Gregorian year, and about 384 days is the length of a lunisolar year that includes a leap month.

Concept Tested: Islamic Lunar Calendar **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 2

For Sikhs, the day of Diwali is also celebrated as Bandi Chhor Divas. What does it remember?

- A. The founding of the Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh
- B. The birth of Guru Nanak
- C. The nirvana of Mahavira
- D. The release of Guru Hargobind from Gwalior Fort

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. In Sikh tradition, Bandi Chhor Divas marks Guru Hargobind's release from imprisonment in Gwalior Fort, along with 52 imprisoned kings. The founding of the Khalsa is remembered on Vaisakhi, and Mahavira's nirvana is what Jains remember on Diwali.

Concept Tested: Diwali **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 3

Which festival does UNESCO list as "Durga Puja in Kolkata," inscribed in 2021?

- A. The autumn worship of the goddess Durga, ending with immersion of clay images
- B. The spring festival of colors held on the full moon of Phalguna
- C. The new year procession held on 14 April in Dhaka
- D. The five-day festival of lights in Nepal that honors crows, dogs and cows

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **A**. Durga Puja is the autumn festival, part of the Navaratri season, in which communities worship Durga and then immerse the clay images. The spring festival of colors is Holi, the Dhaka procession is part of Pohela Boishakh, and the five-day festival in Nepal is Tihar.

Concept Tested: Navaratri and Durga Puja **Bloom's Level:** Remember

Question 4

Why does Diwali stay in October or November every year, even though it follows the moon?

- A. Because the Indian government fixes the date by law each year
- B. Because it is set by the sun entering Capricorn
- C. Because a lunisolar calendar adds a leap month every two to three years to keep in step with the sun
- D. Because the moon's cycle is exactly one-twelfth of a solar year

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Diwali follows a lunisolar calendar, which adds an extra month about every 32.5 months so the lunar months don't drift away from the seasons. The government publishes holiday lists but doesn't decide the festival's date, and the sun entering Capricorn is the moment for Makar Sankranti and Pongal, not Diwali.

Concept Tested: Lunisolar Calendar **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 5

Why do Shia Muslims and many Sunni Muslims observe Ashura differently?

- A. Shia Muslims celebrate it as a new year party, while Sunnis ignore it
- B. For Shia Muslims it is a day of mourning for Husayn, killed at Karbala, while many Sunnis observe it mainly by fasting
- C. Sunnis mourn Husayn, while Shia Muslims fast to remember Moses
- D. It falls on different months for the two groups

? Show Answer



The correct answer is **B**. Ashura, the 10th of Muharram, is the most solemn day of the year for Shia Muslims, who mourn Husayn and his companions killed at Karbala in 680 CE. Many Sunnis also regard his death as a tragedy but mark the day mainly by fasting. Ashura is not a celebration for either group, and both observe it on the same date, the 10th of Muharram.

Concept Tested: Ashura **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 6

Why is Pohela Boishakh fixed on 14 April in Bangladesh?

- A. Bangladesh officially adopted a revised Bengali calendar (adopted in 1987, based on a 1966 proposal) that fixes the new year on that date
- B. The date is set by the first sighting of the new moon in April
- C. It is the day the Mughal emperor Akbar was born
- D. It always falls on the full moon of Boishakh

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. A committee led by Muhammad Shahidullah proposed a revised calendar in 1966, and Bangladesh officially adopted it in 1987, fixing the new year on 14 April. West Bengal still uses the traditional calendar, so there it falls on 14 or 15 April. The date isn't based on the moon at all, because the Bengali calendar follows the sun.

Concept Tested: Pohela Boishakh **Bloom's Level:** Understand

Question 7

Eid al-Fitr fell on 21 March 2026 in India. About when would you expect it to fall in 2027?

- A. About 21 March 2027, the same date
- B. About 1 April 2027, 11 days later
- C. About 21 February 2027, one month earlier
- D. About 10 March 2027, 11 days earlier

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **D**. The Islamic year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year, so Islamic festivals arrive about 11 days earlier each Gregorian year. Staying on the same date is what a solar festival does, and the Islamic calendar never adds a leap month that could push Eid later.

Concept Tested: Eid al-Fitr **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 8

Your club is planning an event for the week of 13 to 15 April. Which group of festivals could you feature, all from that week?

- A. Diwali, Tihar and Kali Puja
- B. Pongal, Lohri and Makar Sankranti
- C. Vaisakhi, Pohela Boishakh and the Sinhala and Tamil New Year
- D. Holi, Losar and Onam

 Show Answer



The correct answer is **C**. Vaisakhi, Pohela Boishakh and the Sinhala and Tamil New Year are all solar new years that mark the sun entering Mesha (Aries) in mid-April. Pongal, Lohri and Makar Sankranti are in mid-January, and Diwali, Tihar and Kali Puja fall in October or November.

Concept Tested: Vaisakhi **Bloom's Level:** Apply

Question 9

Ben notices that Diwali moved from 20 October 2025 to 8 November 2026, while Eid al-Fitr moved from 31 March 2025 to 21 March 2026. What best explains the difference?

- A. Both follow the moon, but the Hindu calendar added a leap month in 2026, pushing Diwali later, while the Islamic calendar never adds one
- B. Diwali follows the sun and Eid follows the moon
- C. The Indian government moved Diwali to a weekend
- D. Eid is decided by moon sighting, but Diwali is chosen by a vote each year

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **A**. Both festivals follow lunar months. The Hindu lunisolar calendar inserted an extra month (Adhik Jyeshtha) in May and June 2026, so Diwali jumped about 19 days later. The purely lunar Islamic calendar never adds a month, so Eid kept sliding about 10 to 11 days earlier. Option B is wrong because Diwali does not follow the sun.

Concept Tested: Lunisolar Calendar **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

Question 10

A friend from Kathmandu talks about Dashain, a friend from Kolkata about Durga Puja, and a friend from Ahmedabad about Navaratri and Garba. What is the best conclusion?

- A. These are three unrelated festivals held in different seasons
- B. Only one of them is a "real" Hindu festival
- C. They fall in the same autumn season and honor the goddess, but local customs differ a lot
- D. They are identical in every way, just with different names

 Show Answer

The correct answer is **C**. All three belong to the autumn Navaratri season tied to the goddess and the tenth day, Vijayadashami. But the customs differ: jamara and tika from elders in Nepal, clay images and pandals in Bengal, and Garba dancing in Gujarat. No version is more "real" than the others, and they are not identical.

Concept Tested: Dashain and Tihar **Bloom's Level:** Analyze

