



Hindu priest Acharya Padmanabha presents a tiered offering plate to the icon of the Goddess Mahalakshmi - the source of all wealth, during the Diwali Mela celebration at the Hindu Temple of the Woodlands on Saturday

Last fall, as the days grew shorter and the weather cooled, Sheetal Parwal began preparing her home for Diwali.

The house was thoroughly cleaned, clutter discarded and colorful rangoli sand art laid out to welcome friends and neighbors into her home to celebrate the annual Hindu Festival of Lights with sweets, extravagant dinners and prayers to the goddess of wealth, Lakshmi.

This year, Parwal and her family will celebrate a holiday meant to bring good fortune and prosperity in a rented apartment - their Katy house sitting gutted miles away after taking on 2 feet of water during Hurricane Harvey.

"We came back to see a week later," Parwal said. "But home is not home."

Diwali celebrates the triumph of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance and hope over despair. Thousands of years ago, the legend goes, a Good King vanquished a Bad Demon. The tale and characters differ - in northern India, Lord Rama of Ayodya defeated his wife's kidnapper, Ravana; southern Indians believe it was Lord Krishna who killed Narakashura the day before the new moon - but, always, light conquers darkness.

Thursday marks the climax of the weeklong holiday, and the night sky, with its new moon, will be illuminated with firecrackers and fireworks by almost 1.5 billion revelers worldwide.

For many of the 120,000 Hindus in Houston, however, this year's celebration will be different, more solemn.

The two essential elements of Diwali, Parwal said, are home and family. Without a home, a true home of their own, it's difficult to celebrate.

"The very meaning of the celebration, we're unable to find that," Parwal said. "We are blessed that we have our family together, but you have an attachment to your home, that's where you know you'll spend Diwali every year."

Asian residents hit

Harvey's destruction was especially pervasive in areas where the South Asian population has historically settled - Bellaire, Sugar Land and Katy took on massive damage.

Parwal, 37, moved to Houston from central India in 2008 - one day before Hurricane Ike's winds left millions without power. Weathering that storm, she thought she had seen the worst. Her family lived with friends for a few weeks before buying a home in the Canyon Gate subdivision.

Nine years later, all 721 homes in the neighborhood, including Parwal's, would be inundated by Harvey.

"We could see it on that Sunday, it was coming up the front yard, and it was moving up inch by inch," Parwal said. "But we still had that hope that it'll come to the front door and go away."

Sitting upstream from the reservoirs, the controversial release of the Addicks and Barker dams by the Army Corps of Engineers was a relief, Parwal said.

When the spillways were opened, water flowed away from Canyon Gate, allowing the nine people huddled in her home a way to escape, but not enough time to take the three-day food supply Parwal had prepared or their emergency bags.

"Everyone was saying, 'We're leaving, life is more precious than anything else,'" Parwal said.

Parwal's 6-year-old son, Ram, has never known another home beside the one in Canyon Gate. At such a young age, she said, his memories are few, but the holidays are especially sensitive.

"He relates all the firecrackers and the celebrations with our home," Parwal said. "Whatever he remembers, he remembers there."

Her son is resilient, but after almost two months in temporary housing, he's ready to go home.

"He keeps asking when we'll go and be happy again," Parwal said. "But home is not the same."

While Parwal's family was praying for the dams to open, Manohar Venuturupalli, 44, his wife, Subhadra, and their daughter, Neeharika, waited downstream as the waters made their way up the driveway, then the yard and over the stoop into their west Houston home.

Venuturupalli's home sits squarely in the flood plain of both the Addicks and Barker reservoirs. When the beleaguered dams were opened that Monday, his house near Briar Forest and Dairy Ashford was submerged under 8 feet of water.

"I stayed up all night Sunday, watching the water rising," Venuturupalli said. By Monday morning, the water was waist-high.

Venuturupalli and his family are living in temporary housing, working little by little to be able to return to their home; he estimates repairs should be complete in six weeks.

In a parallel to the first day of Diwali, when homes are scrubbed clean to welcome Lakshmi and her gifts, Parwal and her husband, Umesh, are at their Katy home every evening ripping up sheetrock and cutting down moldy beams, deciding what relics and memories to keep - and which to throw away.

"It's endless," she said. "But the help has been endless too."

Vijay Pallod, a leader in the local Hindu community, said there are more than 500 Hindu families still displaced from the storm. Some are still in hotels, he said, some are with friends or family.

Venuturupalli and his family were rescued from their flooded home by a friend of a friend with an airboat.

"I don't know the people who evacuated me," Venuturupalli said of the man who ferried residents of his neighborhood out of their waterlogged homes to safety. "I don't think I'll ever see him again."

Slow to celebrate

For families that are still displaced, getting in the spirit of Diwali may come slowly, Arun Kankani said.

Kankani is executive vice president of Sewa International, a global nonprofit rescue organization with a chapter in Houston. He said the organization prepared hundreds of care packages with Diwali essentials - carrot sweets, dried fruit, bangles and the all-important lamps to light the way to a new year of recovery.

"Diwali is something you do with your family at home," Kankani said. "So, without that, it takes a lot."

Prosperity comes in the home, Parwal said. To welcome wealth and success for the coming year, Hindus will often leave their doors and windows open on Diwali night.

"This Diwali we're not at our home, which we have decorated and put together," Parwal said. "But we are together, so let's celebrate it where we are and hopefully next year it'll be better."