

Diwali: Barack Obama celebrates Hindu festival of light

US President Barack Obama lit a traditional Indian lamp at the White House to celebrate the Hindu festival Diwali.

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Barack Obama lights a traditional oil lamp to celebrate DiwaliPhoto: GETTY

Mr Obama became the first US president to personally take part in a White House ceremony for the festival of lights, lighting *adiya* (oil lamp) inside the executive mansion and bowing respectfully before a Hindu priest.

The festival will be officially marked in India and around the world on Saturday but celebrations are already underway.

"While this is a time of rejoicing, it's also a time for reflection, when we remember those who are less fortunate and renew our commitment to reach out to those in need," Mr Obama said.

The president also used the occasion to sign an executive order setting up a commission, comprising 20 members from a wide range of government agencies, to conduct a two-year study of how to assist Asian Americans.

The executive order saluted the success of many Asian Americans but pointed out that some communities - Americans of Hmong, Cambodian and Malaysian descent - suffer high rates of poverty.

One in five Asian Americans lacks health insurance, in part because more than one million of them are sole proprietors of businesses, the order said.

Indians are gearing up for Diwali by stocking up on sweets and firecrackers. It is also considered an auspicious time to buy jewellery.

Muslim schoolgirls lit up *diyas* to mark the festival at a school in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad while several big-budget Bollywood films, including the Kylie Minogue-starrer *Blue* are scheduled for release this Friday.