Navaratri
Category : October/November/December 2008
Published by dharmalingam on May. 31, 2009

Special Feature

# Navaratri

## In the festival of "Nine Nights," Hindus across the globe worship the feminine form of the Supreme

No other major religion of the world acknowledges God as part female, or is willing to fully depict Her as the Goddess. But for Hindus, the Goddess, called Shakti, is the emanating power, the essence and the creative manifestation of the Supreme Being, who is beyond opposites. This unique broadness of Hinduism makes Navaratri the world's greatest festival dedicated to the Goddess. This yearly festival is celebrated for nine or ten days in the lunar month of Ashvina (September-October). Hindus observe this festival in a wide variety of ways, depending on their region, local history and family influences.

Millions of Hindu women consider Navaratri each year's primary festival, the one they can most deeply connect to. Many see it as a way to commune with their own feminine divinity. A widespread practice honors the Goddess in every woman by inviting young girls to the family's home, feeding them and offering new clothes. Soumya Sitaraman, a specialist in Hindu festivals and author of Follow the Hindu Moon, teaches how this should be done. "To make Navaratri an affirmation of femininity, invite and honor girls between the ages of two and twelve. A respected married woman can be chosen, too. Begin by honoring the youngest one on the first day as if she was the Goddess. She is addressed only by the Goddess' name, eats prasadam first and is given an aromatic bath and a new dress. On the second day, the second youngest should be honored, and so on. Some families might alternatively choose to venerate all girls at the same time, on the last night."

During the festival, women are ready to exercise their share of restraint to get closer to the Divine by performing tapas and selfless acts. Author Madhur Jaffrey explains, "Navaratri is a time to present to the Goddess our silent requests. This is not done crudely, but properly. We pray morning and evening, the women fast, and the poor in our neighborhood are given food and cooking pots. We offer magnificent food to Goddess Parvati and only after She eats we discreetly whisper our requests."

Navaratri's common practices

Sprouting seeds: In a ritual performed throughout India, Hindus begin the observances with the sprouting of seeds. This is called pratipada in the South and ghatasthapana in the North. In this ceremony, an earthen or silver pitcher, or kumbha, is filled with water and barley seeds. The vessel is placed in the shrine room or some other honored place in the home, where the seeds will sprout over the next nine days. It is a green exuberance that displays the fertility power of the Goddess and brings blessings for a bountiful crop. A traditional Deity kumbha is also prepared. This is an ornate brass pot filled with water, herbs and metals, with mango leaves and a coconut on top. The kumbha is set up to invoke the Goddess and all the devas during the festival period. Pandit Ramesh Chandra Kaushik, chief priest of the Durga Temple in Moti Nagar, Delhi, explains, "The kumbha is established while invoking the blessings of all the 330 million devas (angels). This kumbha is supposed to symbolically have all of these devas in it." With these preparations in place, the celebration of Navarati then officially begins, with puja to Lord Ganesha and offerings to the kumbha.

Tool blessing: Another ceremony associated with the festival across most of India is the ayudha puja, the blessing of the tools of one's trade. At dawn on the ninth day (usually) of Navaratri, selected tools, instruments, utensils and devices used by a worker or artist are ceremoniously placed at the feet of the Goddess and quietly worshiped with prayers and flowers. The items remain at the Goddess' feet until a puja is performed. Until that happens and the items are returned with blessings, no studies, work or performances should happen.

The ayudha puja can be simple, an offering of cooked rice, fruits, flowers and an arati that is silent except for the ringing of a bell. A more elaborate form is to draw a kolam and place a Sarasvati murti in the center, with all the tools touching the kolam's lines.

No kind of instrument or tool is excluded from the blessings of the Goddess. A tailor will bless his sewing machine and a driver his vehicle. Shopkeepers usually decorate and bless their whole store, including the cash register.

Vaishnavites have also adopted the ayudha puja. On the same date, they ritually place tools and weapons at the feet of Lord Rama for His blessings. Author Madhur Jaffrey recounts in her book on the traditional stories of India, Seasons of Splendor, "At this festival, every family worships the 'weapons of its trade.' My mother would first set up a statue of the good King Ram in our prayer room, properly garlanded with a fresh marigold necklace. Under the statue, where some people arranged guns and swords, my mother arranged pens, pencils, ink and paper. Those were the weapons of our family. As far back as 1,500 years, my ancestors made their living writing, not fighting."

The Indian army takes the day, which they call shastra puja, to bless real weapons. Retired Lieutenant Colonial N. C. Guha of Delhi reported in an article in the Ramakrishna Mission magazine, Vedanta Kesari: "Within the Garhwal Rifles, Vijay Dashami or Dussehra is the religious event of the year. The 25,000 soldiers of Garhwal Rifles fully observe the festival for ten days, beginning with the ghatastahpana ceremony at the unit temple. On the ninth day is shastra puja, during which all the weapons of the unit armory are decorated with flowers and displayed in a square fashion in the center of the parade ground."

Beginning of learning: A key samskara, or rite of passage, for children ages three to five is performed on this day across India. It is the vidyarambha, literally "beginning of knowledge," which marks the start of a child's formal education. The worship begins with an elder or priest taking the child's index finger and writing "Om Sri Ganapataye Namah" in sand or uncooked rice. If the child is old enough, he or she writes the letter "A" on the rice as well. Then, using a gold ring dipped in honey, he gently touches the child's tongue with a motion in the shape of the letter "A". Beautiful marks of auspiciousness made with sacred substances are placed on the books, and usually a priest will perform the ceremony in the presence of the whole family. Preceptors, wise men and gurus are also revered on this day as embodiments of Sarasvati's knowledge. They receive many visitors and dakshina, monetary offerings.

It is a widely held belief, especially in South India, that a proper blessing on this day will ensure lifelong success in a child's study and career. Parents, therefore, make sure that the Goddess' goodwill is properly invoked. Some pilgrimage to distant temples with their sons and daughters to beseech Her grace.

Vijayadashami: On the tenth day, Vijayadashami ("tenth day victory") the festival

culminates in the triumph of the Goddesses over the demon Mahishasura. For this day, the place to be is Karnataka, specifically Mysore, for that is where the victory is said to have occurred. The city takes its very name after Mahishasura and has a temple dedicated to him. Recently a gigantic statue of the demon was built near the temple of Durga on the city's Chamundi Hill. Mysore is noted for its magnificent elephant processions during Navaratri.

There is a specific explanation of Vijayadashami associated with Karnataka. It is attributed to the story in the Mahabharata of the Pandavas' 14-year exile in disguise--which is also likely related to the military tradition of shastra puja. Discretion in exile was indispensable, so the Pandavas stored their many divine and distinctive weapons under a shami tree in Karnataka during the tenth day of Navaratri. They prayed to Durga, asking Her to protect their weapons, and returned at the end of one year to find them intact. On that same day, they went forth to defeat their enemies, adding their success to the celebrations of the Goddess' victory. Today people exchange shami (Mimosa suma) leaves and on this auspicious date to wish each other a victorious life.

Navaratri's regional flavors

The seed-sprouting ceremony, tool blessing, beginning of learning and Vijayadashami are observed over most of India. Regional variations abound, from South India to Nepal.

South India: Here the Goddess is worshipped in three forms. During the first three nights, Durga is revered, then Lakshmi on the fourth, fifth and sixth nights, and finally Sarasvati until the ninth night.

Durga (meaning "invincible" in Sanskrit) is the epitome of strength, courage and ferocity. Her devotees approach Her--sometimes with difficult penances--for those qualities and for the protection She bestows.

A more gentle worship is observed for Lakshmi. Also called also Annapurna, "Giver of food," Lakshmi is the Goddess of abundance, wealth and comfort. She is the

ever-giving mother, worshiped for well being and prosperity. A traditional way of invoking Her is chanting the Samputita Sri Suktam. In Her honor, food is prepared and offered to neighbors and all who visit, thus strengthening community ties. On the full-moon night following Navaratri, it is believed Lakshmi Herself visits each home and replenishes family wealth. In Saivite areas, Parvati is worshiped on these days instead of Lakshmi, with an emphasis on the motherly aspect of the Goddess. Otherwise, the devotional practices are similar.

The last three days of Navaratri exalt Sarasvati, the form of Shakti personifying wisdom, arts and beauty. Her name literally means "flowing one," a reference to thoughts, words, music and the Sarasvati River. The evenings of Her worship are marked with melodic bhajans. The musicians select challenging pieces and play their best in order to earn the Goddess' blessings for the coming year.

Mystically, Sarasvati is believed to be the keeper of the powerful Gayatri Mantra, which is chanted during the festival to invoke Her supreme blessings. Devotees meditate for days on this mantra alone, as it is considered the door to divine wisdom.

Kerala's Ma Amritanandamayi explains, "At one level, Navaratri signifies the progress of the spiritual aspirant. During this spiritual journey, the aspirant has to pass three stages personified by instinctive Durga, motherly Lakshmi and finally wise Sarasvati. Then, he or she enters into the realm of the infinite, wherein one realizes one's Self."

Families in Tamil Nadu traditionally prepare in their homes a kolu, an exhibition of small dolls and figurines on a stepped, decorated shelf (see photo on page 28). At least one murti of Shakti must be present, as well as wooden figurines of a boy and a girl together, called marapachi, to invoke auspicious marriages. Almost any small item may be included on the kolu, so almost all the small artifacts from around the house find their way there.

Author Soumya Sitaraman writes, "A kolu is a well-planned occasion. People will often print and send cards inviting family and friends to come see their kolu. This results in new friendships and stronger relationships. Navaratri evenings are a bustle of rustling silk, twinkling jewelry and laughter. Women are very particular

about their attire and go visiting, hopping in a logical sequence, every house they are invited to." Daughters of marrying age accompany their mothers on the visits, as this is an auspicious opportunity for match making. The kolu is also celebrated in Andhra Pradesh and the parts of Kerala bordering Tamil Nadu.

North India: In the North, Navaratri is commonly called Durga Puja. While the South celebrates three Goddesses as different aspects of the Supreme Mother, in the North, Durga is regarded as the Mother Herself, and all other Goddesses are Her manifestations.

The practices and the ways of worshiping are almost identical. However, the names and stories underlying the festival's rites differ, often incorporating strong Shakta influences or elements of the Ramayana. The worship of Durga is the year's largest Hindu festival in many northern states, as it is in Nepal and Bhutan.

Durga is worshiped as Navadurga, the one with nine manifestations, one for each day of the festival. They vary in attributes and appearance, but usually include: Shailputri, daughter of the mountain; Brahmacharini, the chaste one; Chandraghanteti, the fighter; Kushmanda, of many lights; Skanda Mata, mother to Lord Skanda; Katyayani, the divine daughter; Kalratri, the black one; young-looking Maha Gauri, who seems no older than eight years; and Siddhidatri Ardhanarishvara, the all-powerful Siva-Shakti. Each is invoked with a special mantra and, frequently, with complicated tantras.

During the nightime rites, the Goddess is invoked with precise repetitions of the Durga Sapta Shasti, followed by recitations of the Devi Bhagawat Purana and the Devi Mahatmya. The most dedicated chant a mantra or shloka thousands of times during the nine nights.

Asking for fertility and blessings, priests and women devotees intone Her words into the night, chanting, "When for hundreds of years there will be no rain and the Earth will be without water, the great contemplative rishis shall sing praises of Me, seeking Me. I will come down without human parentage; and with hundreds of eyes, I shall look kindly upon those profound sages. Then I shall cover the entire Earth with greens born of my own being. I shall nourish them all with these greens, sustaining the prana of all beings, and thereby I shall be known as Shakambhari,

'the Bearer of Greens'" (Durga Sapta Shasti xi 42-45).

In West Bengal, Durga Puja is everywhere. In playgrounds, traffic circles, ponds and wherever space is available, elaborate structures called pandals are set up, many with a year's planning behind them. Usually made of bamboo and cloth, they serve as temporary temples. Each houses a highly decorated murti of the Goddess worshiped throughout the festival. While some pandals are simple, others are extravagant works of art with themes that range from the traditional to the wildly modern, often based on current affairs, famous movies or pure imagination. Representing the Universal Mother's transcendence of cultural boundaries, in West Bengal one can find Her in an Inca or an Egyptian setting, or even aboard the famous Titanic.

Most people celebrate buying new clothes and jewelry, which are worn on the evenings when the family goes out to see the pandals. Ritual drummers, called dhakis, carrying large leather-strung instruments, enliven the surroundings with their performances during the many ritual dances that happen in every pandal. The festivities are so pervasive that it is common to see people from all backgrounds and religions participating.

At the end of the celebration, in all Her glory, the exquisitely crafted Durga murti, with countless adornments, is taken to a river, where it is immersed. The procession leading to the waters is accompanied by loud chants of "Bolo Durga mai-ki jai" ("Glory be to Mother Durga") and "Aashchhe bochhor abar hobe" ("It will happen again next year"). Intense drumbeats mark Her release into the waters. It is said that this final ritual returns the Goddess to Her eternal home in the Himalayas--until next year's Durga Puja.

In Bangladesh, which shares a common Hindu heritage with West Bengal, numerous pandals also crowd the cities. The Bangladesh Puja Udjapon Parishad, a Hindu organization, counted more than 20,000 pandals nationwide in 2007. Here, Durga Puja is an national holiday. The president of Bangladesh, Iajuddin Ahmed, recently stated, "Though it is a festival of the Hindu religion, Durga Puja is an indivisible part of our Bengali culture." Bangladeshi Rabindranath Trivedi, former press secretary to the government, puts it more poetically: "Devi Durga represents the eternal victory over ugliness and terror, and out of it the lotus of beauty arises." Unfortunately, attacks on these celebrations by Muslim radicals are not uncommon.

In Orissa, the celebrations have grown more similar to those in neighboring West Bengal, due to an influx of migrants from the neighboring state. Historically, the Goddess is profoundly revered by native Oriyas. The capital, Cuttack, has a very old temple in the heart of the city, the Ma Katak Chandi temple. Most devotees make a point of visiting this temple during the festival. Recently, Bengal-style pandals have become popular in Orissa, too, and in grand style. One, a silver-ornamented pandal known as chandi merha (silver home), has dazzled countless devotees. It has been improved and gold plated, changing its name to suna merha (golden home).

In Punjab, Navaratri's disciplines are strictly followed by most of the population. Although few Punjabis are vegetarian, alcohol, meat and some forms of entertainment are completely avoided at this time. Following the fast, on the last day, devotees feed beggars and follow the tradition of worshiping a young girl representing Shakti.

Hindus in Jammu and Kashmir used to celebrate in more pomp, but the region's insurgency has forced the festival indoors, where it has become quiet and focused on the family. Adult members of the household are expected to fast on water and take fruits in the evenings. As elsewhere, Kashmiris grow barley in an earthen pot and watch expectantly, as an augur for the coming year's crops. The most important ritual for those near Srinagar is to visit the temple of guardian Goddess Kheer Bhawani on all nine days.

In Gujarat, dance in adoration of the Goddess takes a whole different form. Temples have a constant stream of visitors into the night. But after leaving the temple, devotees will gather in public squares, open grounds and streets to dance garba, Gujarat's popular folk-dance, late into the nights. Garba dance takes a circular motion, the dancers' circles closing, opening and touching according to the rhythm. Dancers move around the center while clapping rhythmically. At every step they bend sideways and wave their arms, each movement ending in clap. A variation is the dandiya-ras, where sticks are used as part of the choreography.

Garba began as a dance around a suspended earthen pot with many holes, called the garbo. A lamp inside the garbo shines through the holes, creating an array of twinkling, swirling dots of light around the room. Garba may be one of the most ancient forms of dance: its special pots have been found in the 5,000-year-old

Harrapan excavation site.

Nepal: In the Himalayan nation of Nepal, Durga Puja is the grandest national festival. Over 21 million Hindus celebrate it here--not just for nine nights, but fifteen, reports Hinduism Today correspondent, Dr. Hari Bansh Jha. In addition to the various forms of the Goddess, Siva, Ganesha and Kartikkeya are worshiped. Even with the former Maoist rebels in charge of the government, now secular Nepal still declares national holidays from the seventh day of the Navaratri until the next full moon night.

As is the case with most of India, Dr. Jha reports, Navaratri in Nepal begins with the ghatasthapana--creating holy temporary vessels for the Deities and planting seeds. In Nepal, barley is planted on sand. Each day water is sprinkled on the sprouts, which begin to germinate from the fourth or fifth day and by the ninth day can be six inches tall.

The last days of celebration are the most intense. On these bustling national holidays, the whole country is engaged in Durga worship. On the sixth day, devotees rejoice in parading from Durga temples to a bilva tree, playing conches, bells and drums. The tree roots are washed with cow dung and the best fruits are adorned with red cloth. On the seventh day, the same fruits are wrapped in red and offered at the feet of the Goddess.

But in Nepal, a country where Shakta beliefs have a large following and vegetarians are rare, another form of red adorns the Goddess' feet. From the seventh until the last day of Navaratri, goats, cows, chickens and other animals are sacrificed in large numbers. In Kathmandu, at the Courtyard of the Hanumandhoka Palace, the military sacrifices 54 water buffaloes and 54 goats in honor of Shakti. Modernity and Maoists aside, the demand for sacrifices has noticeably increased in the last years. Reformers, such as Sita Karn from Janakpur, one of Nepal's most progressive cities, demand, "This tradition of violence and cruelty must come to an end. Killing animals is killing oneself." Some Durga temples have adopted the breaking of grain-filled clay pots or coconuts instead.

By the tenth and most auspicious day, the nation is completely taken up by the festival. On Vijayadashami, the sacred yellow grass called jayanti (meaning

"victory") is harvested. Sanskrit pandits recite mantras while placing jayanti on the head of the devotees for blessings. Elders also offer jayanti to the young. In reverence, devotees carry it on their heads and walk to the local temples or to a river, where they offer it to the Goddess. In temples the jayanti with rice and grass can be knotted up and tied to a devotee's arm. This amulet is called bali, and some keep it for one year as a protective amulet.

In Nepal's pahad region (the plains), the young go to the elders to receive tika, rice mixed with red vermilion, applied to their forehead. Until recently, it was a tradition for ministers, high-ranking officials and all citizens who could attend to line up in front of the royal palace and receive tika from the King of Nepal himself--a custom likely to be ended with the monarchy's abolishment.

Jai Ma!

Hinduism Today's Delhi correspondent, Rajiv Malik, paints a word picture of Navaratri: "With the coming of Navarartri, Delhi assumes a festive air. It signifies the coming of fall and departure of the sultry months of summer. Here in Delhi, we see the confluence of cultures within the Hindu community, as Bengalis, north Indians, Gujaratis and South Indians all celebrate according to their own customs. The overall enthusiasm for the Goddess is summed up by M. K. Sethi, an official of Delhi's Jhandewalan Temple, who told me during an interview, 'Ma Durga is the incarnation of power. All evil is destroyed by Her. Whatever I have asked of Her, I have received.'"  PIpi

with Rajiv Malik, New Delhi; Harish Bansh Jha, Nepal; Lakshmi Sridharan, Chennai

## Ram Vanquishes a Demon

Joining the festive season, Vaishnavites hold Ram Lila during the same days Navaratri is observed. Ram Lila is a dramatic re-enactment of the battle between Lord Rama and the demon Ravana, as told in the Ramayana. The play, which is often staged over ten or more successive nights, culminates in Dusshera, Rama's defeat of Ravana in faraway Sri Lanka.

In most of India and especially in the North, Ram Lila and Navaratri celebrations are not entirely separate. Many homes will find it difficult to explain the differences, and some will describe Navaratri as an event honoring Rama alone. In the Ramayana, Rama invokes the help of Durga in his battle against Ravana, so many understand that the Goddess is being honored in gratitude during this celebration of the incarnation of Vishnu. It is not uncommon for home shrines to honor the Goddess along with Rama or even Krishna during Navaratri. Where the lines of theology get blurred, regional tradition or the family ways prevail.

During Dusshera, giant effigies of nine-headed Ravana and his fellow demons are stuffed with firecrackers and set alight. The fireworks are often spectacular. The festival, described as a celebration of the victory of good over evil, is considered auspicious for spiritual practices. In Gujarat, a common saying goes, "If your horse (representing dharma) cannot stand on the other days of the year, at least today it should."

## From the Puranas

The story behind Navaratri is one extolling the power of the Goddess. According to the most common version, from the Markandeya Purana, a vastly powerful demon called Mahishasura had the cunning to be dedicated and patient in his tapas. He performed austerities for countless years, excelling in self-control and cold astuteness. Eventually, he gained a boon from God Siva, that no man or God would ever defeat him.

Satisfied at last, the presumptuous demon saw no more reason for moderation. Greedy, devilish, insatiable, he began to wreak havoc in all three worlds. Mahishasura had always been a formidable opponent, but that boon made him unstoppable.

Alarmed by the disturbance in the cosmos, the Mahadevas convened. Siva's word was that no God could stop Mahishasura. But the edict said nothing about Goddesses; and the three greatest, Lakshimi, Sarasvati and Parvati, held hands and meditated together, balanced on a space no bigger than the head of a needle. They combined their strength in one fierce aspect of Shakti, and terrible Durga came into existence. Durga received the best weapons from the celestial lords, and flaming with rightful might, She set out to protect Her children in all planes of the universe.

For nine nights, Durga and Mahishasura battled. Their struggle ripped the skies apart, and there was no place that did not tremble with the power of Shakti. Feeling he had met his match, the demon tried to trick Durga by changing into a lion, then a man, then a buffalo. But the Goddess senses were keen, and on the tenth day, She pierced the holy trishul though Mahishasura, vanquishing his dangerous ignorance into nonexistence.

In the Skanda Purana, another story is told. Mahishasura, roaming about Earth, one day arrived at Arunachala. Parvati, piously sitting in lotus and doing japa, caught the demon's lustful eyes. Insidious, sly, he spoke to the Goddess with a melodious voice until he caught Her attention. "Why are you performing tapas, O beauty?" He asked. With her eyes half-open, absorbed in the bliss of Her meditations, She answered, "To please the Supreme God and to achieve Him." The demon lost all manners and returned to his arrogant, frightful self. "Nonsense! I am more powerful than Him. Come and marry me," he boasted in a harsh, demonic voice. The Goddess replied calmly. "I myself am more than you, wretched creature. And I will show you your place." In this less common version of the festival's origins, She became a fierce warrior, and for nine nights battled ignorance and evil until fully vanquishing it on the tenth day.