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Navaratri – An Ode to Our Goddesses

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*"Sarva mangala maangalye Shive sarvaartha
saadhike
Sharanye Tryambake Gauri Naaraayani
namostute"*

*You are the all-auspicious Shiva, the Shakti
aspect. You grant all my wishes. O
Triyambake, the Three-eyed one, you are also
Gauri, the fair One and Naraayani, Vishnu's
Sister. I humbly bow at your Lotus Feet.*



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CELEBRATIONS OF A HINDU FESTIVAL

India is a land of many religions, cultures, and hence, many festivals too. Among these, the Hindu culture is probably the most diverse, encompassing several crores of Gods and Goddesses, their legends, epic tales and folklore. Along with that come many festivals associated with these deities. Notable among Hindu festivals is Navratri, a major, very colourful, ten-day festival.

Navratri is a unique festival which includes ritual worship, dance and music. The word "Navratri" comes from the terms "Nava", meaning, "Nine" and "Ratri", meaning "Nights". The festival, which goes on for a period of nine nights and ten days, ends with the Dusshera or the Vijayadashami, on the tenth day. The nine forms of the Mother Goddess, Shakti/Devi, are worshipped during these ten days.

Yet another aspect unique to Navratri is that it differs in significance in the different provinces of India and is celebrated in different ways all across the length and breadth of India. Let us now go into the details of the significance of this wonderful festival.

Significance of Navratri

Both the start of spring and the start of autumn are considered very auspicious and important intersections of solar and climatic influences. Hindus worship the Divine Mother Goddess during these periods in time. The dates of these festivals are decided as per the Hindu almanac. The tenth day of the Navratri festival, which is also referred to as the Vijayadashami, signifies the culmination of the colourful festival. The various aspects of Sri Mahishasura Mardhini (Devi Durga) are worshipped throughout all these ten days.

Various Navratri traditions

There are actually five different Navratris dedicated to the worship of Goddess Shakti in all her aspects. Out of these, only three traditions of Navratri are most popularly upheld today.

1. Sharad Navratri

The Sharad Navratri, which is considered the prime Navratri, is also simply referred to as Navratri and sometimes, Maha Navratri (the Great Navratri). As the name suggests, the Sharad Navratri is celebrated during the Sharad Ritu, or the commencement of the winter season. This festival usually comes during September-October period. This year (2009), the Navratri festival commences on September 19 and concludes with the Vijayadashami on the 28th of September.

This Navratri commences on the first day and ends on the tenth day of the bright half of the lunar month of Aswayuja/Ashwin. According to the Dhaumya-vachana, 'The Navaratri festival has to be celebrated during the bright fortnight of the month of Asvina, in the order of pratipada, etc, until the navami ends.' This festival is celebrated with great fervour and devotion, commemorating the slaying of the mighty Mahishasura by Goddess Durga. This festival is celebrated in most parts of India, in fact, in almost all parts of the country.

2. Vasant Navratri

This type of Navratri is celebrated during the Vasant Ritu, or during the start of spring/summer, in the month of March/April. This festival, also known as Chaitra Navratri, falls during the lunar month of Chitra and is mostly celebrated in North India. The famous Vaishno Devi temple in Jammu celebrates Navratri during this time.

3. Ashaada Navratri

This variety of Navratri is most auspicious for all Varahi Upasakas (devotees of Devi Varahi, yet another aspect of the Goddess, who took an avatar to slay the powerful demon, Pandasura). Varahi, a rather dark deity, is also one among the seven mighty Matrikas of Hindu Tantra Shastra. This Navratri is observed in July-August. This Navratri is also known as Guhya Navratri in Himachal Pradesh.

The Navadurga - the nine forms of Devi Shakti



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NAVA DURGA

Hindus worship nine forms of Shakti during the Navratri festival. The Puja Vidhis (types of prayers and offerings) largely depend on the tradition and culture of that particular province. The Navadurgas include the following Sacred Feminine Energies:

Durga

Maa Durga, the inaccessible one or the invincible one, is believed to be the "one who can redeem in situations of utmost distress". The supremely radiant Mother Goddess is portrayed as having ten arms, riding a lion or tiger, holding several weapons like Shiva's Trident, Rama's bow, Vishnu's Conch and Discus, Indra's Vajra (lightning bolt) and Kubera's mace. She additionally holds a Kamandalu (water pot) given to her by Brahma and a lotus flower. She wears a meditative smile and practices Mudras or symbolic hand gestures.

A complete embodiment of the Sacred Feminine, Durga is forever in a state of *svatantrya* (self sufficient; independent of all other things in the Universe). Hindu philosophy considers the Warrior Goddess Durga as an aspect of Kali. She undertakes a severe *Vrata* (penance) for nine days and on the tenth, she faces the terrible Mahishasura, the demon who could turn himself into a man or buffalo at will.



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TEN HANDED DURGA

When the Devas realized that they would be no match for the Asura's strength, they approach the Devi, who then manifests as Durga, taking her strength from the combined energies of all the Gods mentioned above. Durga slayed Mahisha and hence, is known as Mahishasura Mardhini.

Bhadrakali



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KALI

Devi Bhadrakali (or the "Beautiful Kali") is worshipped in Kerala and is one aspect of Goddess Kali. This consort of Virabhadra, it is believed, was born out of the Devi Sati's anger when her husband, Shiva, was insulted by her father, Daksha, during the Ashwamedha Yagna.

Kali is a terrible aspect of Devi and is shown having blue-colored skin, with three eyes and four, twelve or eighteen hands. Flames emanate from her head and she has deep fangs protruding from her mouth. She is often portrayed with a garland of skulls around her neck, holding a severed human head in her hands, with her tongue hanging out. Kodavas and Nairs mainly worship the deity.

Amba or Jagadamba

Amba or Jagadamba, yet another of the Devi's aspects, is venerated as the Mother of the Universe, who immediately protects those who come to her for succor.

Annapurna

Devi Annapurna, the literal meaning of which is "Full of Food", is also considered to be the Goddess of Harvests, fertility and agriculture. This Goddess of Kashi (now, Varanasi) is symbolic of One who grants complete nourishment. Legend has it that she once even gave bhiksha (alms) to her own consort, Lord Shiva.



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GODDESS ANNAPURNA

Sarvamangala

Sarvamangala literally means "the One who gives all auspiciousness and joy". This aspect of the Devi is venerated as the Bestower of all good, all prosperity and all happiness.

Bhairavi

Bhairavi is the terrible consort of the Wrathful Bhairava, an aspect of Shiva. Almost indistinguishable from Kali, Bhairavi is associated with Kaal Ratri (literally, "black night of destruction"), a dark force, often identified with Kali. Bhairavi is also associated with the Mahapralaya, the great dissolution of the universe at the conclusion of each cosmic cycle.

Bhairavi is also called Shubamkari, the Mother to the Good People and the Terrible One to the bad ones. In the battlefield, she kills the terrible asuras (demons), Chanda and Munda, and drinks their blood. Hence, she is also referred to as Chamundeshwari. Though associated with destruction, Bhairavi is portrayed as a young, beautiful Goddess.

Chandi or Chandika

Chandi or Chandika, is also known as Durga Saptashati. Chandi is believed to be a combination of Mahakali, Maha Lakshmi and Maha Saraswati. The Murti Rahasya hails her as Ashtadasa Bhujas Maha Lakshmi (the Lakshmi with eighteen arms), bearing weapons. While the Devi Mahatmya (a Hindu text, which describes the true power of the Mother Goddess, Durga) gives the origin of the Goddess in the second chapter, some other scriptures portray her as an "assistant" to Kali; helping her in her battle with the demon, Raktabija. He was an asura who had a boon of generating a duplicate of himself from each drop of blood he shed in the battlefield. When Kali was busy drinking his blood, Chandi destroyed the many several demons created from his blood, before finally killing Raktabija himself.

Lalita

Lalita (the 'She' Who Plays), who is also called Tripura Sundari, Rajarajeshwari and Shodashi, is one of the group of ten Goddesses in Hindu tradition, which is collectively known as the Mahavidyas. The other nine Mahavidyas are Tara, Bhuvaneshwari, Kali, Bhairavi, Dhumavati, Chhinnamasta, Bagalamukhi, Kamalatmika and Matangi.

Sri Vidya fiercely guards the panchadashakshari mantra vidya. As the Lalita Sahasranama says, "*Na shathaya na dushtaya na vishwasaya karhichith sri mathra bhakti yuktaya sri vidya raja vediney*", which means, that the vidya or divine knowledge should be bestowed only on someone truly deserving, as this is the king of all vidyas. It should not be given away arbitrarily to the wicked or sinful. Lalita holds in her hands five flower arrows, bow, goad and noose. Lalita is described as being very attractive, sensuous and also erotically inclined.

Bhawani



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BHAWANI

Bhawani is again a powerful aspect of the Devi. Her name literally means, "The Giver of life", and so, she is considered to be the very source of all creative energy. This aspect of Parvati is vastly worshipped in Maharashtra. She was said to be the guiding force behind Shivaji Maharaj, the Maratha leader, to whom she even presented a sword.

Mookambika

Mookambika prominently features in the states of Kerala and Karnataka. It is said that Adi Shankara himself installed her idol at the temple in Kollur, about 12 centuries ago. The Mookambika Devi is revered as one of the most powerful goddesses. The Temple of Mookambika is considered to be one of the "Seven Mukthisthala" sites. Devi Mookambika is also worshipped for developing better learning abilities and to beget knowledge.

Navratri rituals

Each day of the Navratri is dedicated to the Puja one particular aspect of the Devi, as mentioned below:

1. The first day is the day of Kalash Puja or the Ghatasthapan. This is also the day of the Shailaputri Puja.
2. The second day is the Preeti Dwitiya, which includes the Brahmacharini Puja
3. The third day is the day for Chandrakanta Puja or Chandraghanta Puja
4. The fourth day is for the Kushmanda Puja
5. On the fifth day, the Lalita Panchami, the Skandamata Puja is performed
6. Katyayani Puja is performed on the sixth day, the Maha Shashti or the Durga Shashti
7. The seventh day of the Navratri is known as the Durga Saptami or Maha Saptami and includes the Kaalratri Puja
8. On the eighth day or the Maha Ashtami, the Mahagauri Puja is performed. It is also called Durgashtami Puja or Veerashtami Puja
9. The ninth day is the Mahanavami or the Maharnavami and includes the Siddhidatri Puja, also called the Durga Navami Puja
10. The tenth and final day of Navratri is the Vijaya Dashami or the Dusshera. On this day the Shami Puja or Aparajitha Puja is performed

The festival of Navratri is split into three sets of three days each, each set being assigned to the worship of different aspects of the Supreme Mother Goddess.

The first three days

The power of Goddess Durga is worshipped on the first three days of Navratri. This is done in order to attain spiritual power, which would destroy the devotee's impurities and dissolve all his sins.

On the very first day of Navratri, a tiny bed of mud is prepared in the puja room and some barley seeds are sown therein. By the tenth day, the seeds sprout to about 3-5 inches long shoots. These little sprouts are then pulled out and given to all devotees as a blessing from the Goddess.

The forms of Durga, including Kumari, Parvati and Kali are prayed to during this time. They represent the three stages of womanhood respectively, namely, childhood, youth and womanhood.



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PARVATI WITH HER SON GANESHA

The second set of three days



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LAKSHMI

Goddess Lakshmi is paid obeisance on the fourth, fifth and sixth days of Navratri. Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth, is considered to be the giver of both spiritual and material wealth, peace, prosperity and ultimately, bliss. Lakshmi is also said to bestow fame and all types of good fortune on all her devotees. Hence, the Lakshmi Puja is one of the most auspicious rituals performed during Navratri.

Many people also conduct elaborate homas (fire rituals) to please and appease the Goddess of Wealth. This is also followed by offering food to all the devotees attending the homa. This ritual is particularly auspicious during the Navratri period.

The fifth day, commonly referred to as Lalita Panchami is yet another very auspicious day. On this day, children place their books and study materials in front of Goddess Saraswati's idol, light the holy lamp and prostrate before the Goddess. This day is also considered vishsha (important) for artisans

and artists, who plays all their tools and beseech the Deity, seeking her benediction.

The final three days of Navratri

The last three days of the festival are spent in the worship of Goddess Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge and Learning. It is believed that Ma Saraswati's wisdom would free devotees from their material bondage and lead them on a path towards spirituality.

On the eighth and ninth days of this festival, various yagnas (sacrificial rituals) are performed so as to give a fitting farewell to the Mother Goddesses. Ghee or clarified butter, kheer or paayas (rice and sugar cooked in condensed milk) and sesame seeds are offered in the yagna's agni (holy fire), along with mantras (chants).

The ninth day - the Saraswati Puja and the Mahanavami

The ninth day is the Saraswati Puja. It is believed that Goddess Saraswati rests on this day, and so, all students, artisans and artists lay down their books and tools in front of the Goddess. In spiritual terms, this ritual is carried out in order to remain in complete contemplation of the Sacred Feminine Energy called Saraswati and gain spiritual wealth from her.

The ninth day also marks the Mahanavami, when the Kanya Puja is performed. Nine young girls, who have still not attained puberty, are invited to attend the function. These girls represent the nine forms of Goddess Durga. Women wash and wipe the girls' feet and offer them various gifts and new clothes. This ritual is performed almost throughout India.



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SARASWATI

Ayudha Puja

The ninth day of Navratri is also the day of the Ayudha Puja. This ritual is especially vital to Maharashtrians. Like the traditional Saraswati Puja, the Ayudha Puja too involves worshipping all implements one uses for one's livelihood. This is done so that the seeker learns to see the Divine in all his tools as well, so as to motivate him to do better in his work and surrender his work at the feet of the Goddess, treating it as an offer to the Mother.

In Indian culture, it is common practice to prostrate before one's tools each day, as a mark of respect to those very tools that help the seeker earn his daily bread. No other work or study is normally undertaken on the day of the Ayudha Puja.

The tenth day, Vijayadashami or the Dusshera

The tenth day is the Vijayadashami or the Dusshera. This day marks the culmination of the Navratri festival. While artists and artisans bow down before the Goddess and take to their work yet again. Artists and artisans prostrate in front of their tools and take up regular practice yet again, while students respectfully put their books to their eyes and then start studying as usual.

Students also visit their teachers on this day and pay their respects to them. This is done as a mark of gratitude to the teacher, for having taken the trouble to teach them their subject.

What makes Vijayadashami unique

As the name, 'Vijayadashami', suggests, this is an auspicious day for beginning anything new, be it academics, art, skill or work. This is the reason why Vijayadashami is also termed as Vidyarambham. "Vidyarambham" is a combination of "vidya" (knowledge) and "arambham" (commencement), thereby literally meaning, "starting the process of acquiring knowledge".

The unique thing about Vijayadashami is that every minute of this day is a 'Shubha Muhurat', meaning, the day is entirely auspicious. One does not have to be limited by Rahu Kaalam. The Rahu Kaalam occurs for a period of one and half hours every day, the timing varying each day of the week. This is considered an inauspicious time to start anything new, so people generally avoid undertaking auspicious activities during this time.

On Vijayadashami day, one is not bound by the limitations of Rahu Kalam and such other influences. One can freely commence whatever they wish to do on this day. This day is also invaluable to the business communities, which start off new businesses and open their annual books of account.

Other Navratri rituals



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KALASH

Some people undergo rigorous fasts during the Navratras. Some others, who regularly consume non-vegetarian food, give it up completely during the Navratras. Seekers offer prayers for their protection, good health and happiness. The Navratras is a time for introspection and purification of the seeker.

Another ritual performed during this festival is that of the Ghatasthapana or the Kalashsthapana, which literally means, "installing a pot". The Ghata or the Kalash is usually embossed with the image of the Goddess Durga and symbolizes the Universe. This pot, filled with holy water, is also called the Purnakumbha and is covered with mango leaves, placed on top of which is a coconut.

Sometimes, an uninterrupted lamp is lit inside the pot. This symbolizes the effulgent form of the Supreme Adi Parashakti.

Legends surrounding Navratri and how it is celebrated around India

As mentioned earlier, Navratri is celebrated in different ways all over the country. All three Navratris are celebrated with great fervour and devotion in North India. Many people here undertake fasts on all nine days and spend their entire day in the worship of the Mother Goddess. The Chaitra Navratri concludes with the Ram Navami and the Sharad Navratri ends with the fabulous Durga Puja and Dusshera.

There are many and varied legends surrounding Navratri. They are almost as diverse as India herself. Here are some interesting stories about how the Navratri festival came to be:

North India

Mahisha, the buffalo demon, was blessed with a boon from the Divine Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) that no man would ever be able to win against him and kill him. Empowered by the boon, the egoistic demon proceeded to attack the heavens and laid siege on the Devas (Gods). Indra, the King of Devas, approached the Trinity for help. They jointly created Durga, through their own Shakti (power). Durga turned out to be a formidable opponent for Mahisha. She relentlessly fought him for nine days and, on the tenth day, she finally managed to behead him. Here, the Vijayadashami marks the ultimate victory of good over evil.



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MAHISHASURAMARDINI DURGA

In places like Delhi and Punjab, people observe the Navratras, when they undertake fasts for a period of seven days. The devotees break their fast on the eighth day and invite young girls home, treating the girls as manifestations of Durga Mata herself. These girls, called "Kanjak Devis", are offered the traditional food of "Puri", "Halwa" and "Chana". They are then offered red bangles and chunnis (veils) to wear, along with some money, known as "Shagun".

Rama's victory against Ravana



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LORD RAMA BATTLES RAVANA

Many North Indians also celebrate Vijayadashami as the day Rama fought and won against the terrible demon king, Ravana. It was on this very 10th day after Ashwina, during the Satyuga, that Dusshera is celebrated with great fervour in the North. The name, "Dusshera" is indicative of the ten-headed demon being vanquished by Lord Rama ("Dus" in Hindi means "ten" and "Haran" means "defeat"). Ravana had abducted Rama's wife, Sita Devi and the latter, along with his Vanara Sena (army of monkeys), fought a great ten-day battle against the demon king. He finally won and brought home his beloved Sita.

In order to commemorate this day, huge effigies of Ravana are erected in open lawns and other public places. These giant Ravana dummies are stuffed with fireworks and are shot with arrows, until they blow up in the presence of a large, applauding audience.

The Ramlila

Ramlilas are an integral part of Dusshera celebrations in many parts of North India. The Ramlila is an enactment of Rama's story and, indeed, the entire Ramayana epic. Huge pandals and stages are erected and Ramlila artists are invited to perform at the event. The Ramlila starts on the first day of Navratri and is designed to end exactly on the eve of the Dusshera. The enactment of the Rama-Ravana battle takes place on the tenth day, after which, the effigies of Ravana and those of his brother, Kumbhakarna and son, Meghanath, are burnt to ashes. There is also an abhishek (bathing ritual) of Rama's idol taking place at Ayodhya at the same time.



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RAM DURBAR

Most of the Ramlilas in North India are based on 16th Century Avadhi versions of the Ramayana, including Ramacharitamans given to us by Gosvami Tulsidas. The entire 10-day function is financed by local Ramlila committees, as also the local community itself. The Ramlila here is very similar to the other folk theatre form, the Raas Lila, which depicts the life and times of Lord Krishna.

The Ramlila, which encompasses the Avadh, Braj, Madhubani and Ayodhya traditions, is popular globally for its diversity and colourful presentation. Some Ramlilas staged in Lucknow even include Muslim youths playing the lead roles in the epic. This proves that this festival goes beyond religious and communal boundaries.

In the times of yore, Dusshera was regarded as the start of the war season. According to legend, Arjuna, one of the Pandavas princes, had gone back to fetch his hidden weapons after the Pandavas' one-year Agyaat Vaas (living in anonymity). This is how the custom of worshipping weapons started.

Eastern India



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SHIVA WITH SATI'S CORPSE

Those living in Eastern India believe in Ma Shakti as the Ultimate Supreme Being. According to legend, Daksha (the king of the Himalayas) and his wife, Menaka, have a lovely daughter by the name of Uma. The girl adores and worships Shiva right from her childhood and mentally treats him like her husband. Pleased with her one-pointed devotion, Shiva comes to her and wishes to marry her. But Daksha takes one look at Shiva's ash-smeared, tiger-skin-clad appearance and is unhappy at his daughter's choice of groom. Uma gets married to Shiva anyway.

Daksha then conducts a yagna, where he invites everyone but Shiva. Uma desires to visit her father and leaves for his abode in spite of Shiva's obvious displeasure. When she reaches Daksha's palace, though, her father insults both her and Shiva. Unable to bear the insult and hurt, Uma commits Sati by jumping into a burning pyre.

Shiva is furious when he comes to know Sati died. He visits the site, takes Uma on his shoulder and dances madly. This angry Tandava (cosmic dance) created an imbalance in nature, which resulted in the world being on the verge of destruction. Narayana then came forward as the saviour and used his Chakra (discus) to cut Uma's body into pieces. Those pieces slipped off Shiva's shoulders and fell in different parts of the world. Narayana then revived Uma and granted her a new life. The places where the pieces fell are known today as the "Shakti Piths".

Ever since then, Uma is said to visit her parents' home during the Sharad Ritu, when the Durga Puja is celebrated.

Navratri celebrations in West Bengal

In West Bengal, the last four days of Sharad Navratri take on a dramatic form. Devotees conduct the Durga Puja during this time - a festival that is famous all over the world for its sheer grandeur. Beautifully crafted larger-than-life clay idols of Goddess Durga, killing the demon Mahisha, are set up in equally huge public pandals, temples and so on.

Various pujas and cultural programmes, including dance and music shows, are performed during this period. These Durga idols are worshipped for five days and then immersed in the river on the fifth day.

The Durga Puja is one of the biggest festivals in West Bengal; in fact, it is a festival that brings crowds of devotees and tourists from many parts of India and abroad. Huge idols of the Devi are worshipped through the ten days and different manifestations of the Devi are worshipped each night. The Durga pandals are decorated brightly and the Devi herself is adorned with the finest silks and jewellery. Prayers, bhajans (singing of hymns) and homas (fire rituals) are conducted, after which there is also the Annadaan (mass feeding).

Western India

In Western India, the festival of Navratri is celebrated in a unique way, that sets it apart from all the other regions of the country. The most important feature of the Navratri here is the Dandiya Raas, also known as Garba. Garba is the traditional folk dance of Gujarat, but it has now become popular all over the country, with many Raas Pandals being set up in many parts of the country, during Navratri.

An ornamented pot is placed in the centre, with a bright diya (lamp) kept inside it. Womenfolk dance around it in a circle, singing traditional garba songs. Mother Durga, who is referred to "Ambe Maa", is worshipped for joy, prosperity and happiness. Certain schools of thought believe that the word, "Garba" might have come from "Garbha", which means the womb of a woman. In this sense, the lamp inside the pot represents life within the womb.



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**DANDIYA RAAS DEPICTION ON
JUTE BAG**

The Dandiya Raas is a vibrant, joyous dance that is played with dandiyas or wooden sticks. The dancers, both male and female, dress up in colourful traditional costumes and spin around forming patterns, while also dancing to the rhythm of the music. While the men wear churidar-kurtas or the traditional Gujarati apparel, the women wear colourfully embroidered, mirror-work ghagra-cholis (flare-skirt-and-blouse sets). The Dandiya Raas is now popular in almost all Indian cities, especially in Ahmedabad, Vadodra, Surat and Mumbai.

South India

South India too has its own unique way of celebrating Navratri. In Tamil Nadu, women traditionally display a Kolu, also called Bommai Kolu and Golu. They erect a series of "padis" or steps in tiers, usually of an odd number (like 3, 5, 7, 9 and so on) and placed various dolls on them. The women coming to visit the Golu are asked to sing a song or two, after which they are handed the Prasad, kumkum (vermilion) and haldi (turmeric) sachets, coconut, betel leaves, flowers and, many times, a small packet of gifts. This is largely a ladies' festival.

In the evenings, a Kuthuvilakku (lamp) and is placed in the centre of a kolam (rangoli) drawn before the Golu. Devotional hymns and bhajans are then sung in praise of the Goddess. After performing the puja that day, Naivedyam (or food) is offered to the Goddess.

Navratri is celebrated with great pomp and show in Mysore. The whole of the Mysore Palace is lit up brilliantly during this time. Women exchange haldi-kumkum, coconuts and sweets here as well.



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BUSINESSMAN'S WIFE CLAY DOLL

The arrangement of the Golu dolls

Though there is no hard and fast rules as to the placing of the dolls in a Golu, idols of Gods and Goddesses and scenes from mythology are predominantly exhibited in a Golu. Usually, the topmost steps include all the major Devatas, the Dasavatars of Vishnu and so on. The next steps are dedicated to saints and Gurus from all religions. The lower steps depict various social functions such as weddings and so on; business activities; families and so on.

Some women use new dolls each year, while others add just a couple of new ones. Some follow theme Golus, such as portraying just a single story from mythology.

It is necessary to have a pair of wooden dolls in any Golu. They include one male and one female doll and are called "Marapaachis". Additionally, dolls of a Chettiyar (businessman) and his wife have to be placed together too. Fruits, vegetables and pulses are also played in front of the Golu. This is symbolic of the devotee praying for prosperity.

The Golu dolls are then finally "put to sleep" on the tenth day, after a final aarati and thanksgiving to the Goddess for having successfully completed the Golu. The Golu is dismantled the very next day and the dolls are neatly packed back into their respective boxes.

The spiritual significance of Navratri



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DURGA, LAKSHMI AND SARASWATI

ultimate triumph of the Satvik (good) forces within, finally leading the true seeker towards moksha or liberation.

Today, the Navratri festival has lost much of its spiritual significance and exists merely as a social festival - a reason for people to get together and spend quality time in a busy, unrelenting world. What most people do not realize is that the Navratri festival has a deep spiritual connotation as well.

The festival celebrates Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati, the Goddesses of Power, Wealth and Knowledge respectively. Praying to them gives the seeker all material good and also the inner strength to triumph against all odds of life and fight against social evils that plague our society today.

Mahishasura symbolically represents the vast darkness or Tamas of ego and arrogance within a human being. So do the other demons like Chanda, Munda, Shumbha and Nishumbha. These Tamasic forces come in the way of higher spiritual development, thereby creating a veritable tussle of good and evil within the mind of the seeker. The victory of the Devi over these demons represents the

Navratri - The common factor that binds Hindus of the world together

No matter how Hindus all over the world celebrate Navratri, there are some common ties that bind them together. Firstly, Navratri is closely associated with fertility. The Mother Goddess is likened to Mother Earth, who always feeds and nourishes all her children.

Secondly and more importantly, Navratri is considered to be symbolic of the victory of good over evil. Sri Rama killed Ravana on this very day. Durga slayed the terrible Mahishasura. Both these stories reflect the final triumph of the good forces over the evil ones.

That is the most vital implication of the wonderful festival of Navratri. It teaches the seeker that no matter how tough the going gets, he always stands to win if he sticks on to the path of good.

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