

Navaratri

In the autumn of every year, all over India, people celebrate a festival called Navaratri (“nine nights”), culminating in the prayers of Vijayadasami (“the day of victory”). Interestingly, this holy season usually coincides with the nine-day Jewish observance of Rosh Hashanna which ends with the prayers of Yom Kippur (“the day of atonement.”)

In most of India, Navaratri is a celebration of God as “Shakti,” the energy that sustains creation. While Hindus believe that there is only one God and that God is beyond all classification, such as large or small, Christian or Hindu, or male or female, this aspect of God as energy is usually pictured in Hindu religious art and literature as feminine – perhaps because Sanskrit nouns (as in French, German, etc.) are assigned a gender and “Shakti,” the word for kinetic energy or the active Grace of God, is a feminine noun.

The Story of Navaratri

Once upon a time, a demon lived upon the Earth whose name was Maheesha. His form was that of a water buffalo and he lived a slothful, ruminative life, absorbing the energy of the sun, the land, the plants, and all living things. As he absorbed this energy, giving nothing back, everything else became drained, losing its ability to move, to create, and to grow. At first, no one noticed what was happening, but slowly they realized they were losing even the will to live. In utter despair, as the sun darkened to a pinpoint in the sky, all the creatures of the Earth and the Earth herself gasped out a last cry to the Lord for rescue from this demon.

Parvati, the aspect of God who represents strength and vigor, came first and did battle with Maheesha for three days. But by the end of those days, even her splendid vigor was sapped and she could not defeat Maheesha. Lakshmi, the aspect of God who represents well-being, came next and continued the battle for three more days. Still Maheesha was unconquered and Lakshmi retired from the battlefield. Then came Saraswati, the Word of God herself. Armed with all knowledge, she fought Maheesha with all the force of wisdom and spiritual power. Yet, Saraswati could not vanquish Maheesha either. Finally, all three of these “Shaktis,” Parvati, Lakshmi, and Saraswati, joined together in one resplendent, glowing form, the valiant many-armed Durga Devi, riding triumphantly upon a lion, and endowed with many weapons. Thus, on the tenth day, Maheesha was defeated by Durga and the energy of life and growth surged back through the universe.



Durga Devi emerges from the combined energy of Parvati, Lakshmi, and Saraswati;



A “kolu” of dolls and crafts. Each succeeding step is meant to indicate another step in a person’s spiritual evolution.



Creating a rangoli pattern; the patterns are usually made of organic materials such as rice, rice flour or lentils. Outdoor rangolis are a way of sharing nature’s bounty with the birds and insects.

Why We Celebrate Navaratri

Don’t we all do battle with our own personal Maheeshas as we struggle to get out of bed in the morning and try to do our duties to the best of our abilities? Don’t we all occasionally wallow in self-indulgence, self-pity, and self-interest? Don’t we all feel sometimes so discouraged with our lack of power to make a difference in the world that we stop trying? Maheesha is our self-absorption, laziness, complacency, and refusal to grow and transform into the powerful, God-created beings we really are.

What do we need to vanquish our personal Maheeshas? We need our health and strength (Parvati), we need a sense of blessedness and balance, a well-rounded life with loving and supportive connections to our family and community (Lakshmi), and wisdom – not simply the earthly knowledge of how to do things, but the sense of purpose that comes from spiritual seeking (Saraswati). When these powers are joined together, we are creative, purposeful, joyous, and constantly growing toward the knowledge of our true nature as human beings.

In Tamil Nadu, Navaratri is observed with prayer and a celebration of all the arts. On the new moon day before Navaratri begins, families set up a series of steps representing our spiritual evolution. The displays (called “kolu”) are decorated with dolls (most often made of clay, a material which can be molded into many forms, just like the human mind and character) and tableaux, often handmade by family members. The first steps represent the vital energy of the earth, with plants, animals, and often, tableaux of farms and village life. Then come dolls and artifacts representing all the varieties of art, nationality and education: these represent the energy of community and culture, which contribute to our sense of identity and well-being. Then come the tableaux of God’s incarnations upon Earth, reminding us that as we evolve, seeking God, God is also reaching out to us, showing us the path to enlightenment. Thus, we are drawn further to see visions of God in heavenly majesty. And at the very top, we see the Shaktis that have impelled us through this evolution to see the divine nature of the Universe -- and ourselves.

On each night of Navaratri, families, especially women and children, gather to sing, dance and pray together. Every day, beautiful rangolis (patterns made with rice or rice flour) are drawn. And every day, a special dish of “sundal,” (made of beans/seeds representing growth) is offered to the Divine Mother and shared among families

and guests. Thus for nine nights, the discipline and creativity of all the arts, music, dance, visual arts, crafts, and even cooking, are celebrated as a way to invoke the Shakti within each of us. On the ninth night, we pray to God as Saraswati, and seek blessings on all the books, instruments and tools we use in our own battles with sloth. On the tenth day, the day of victory, we pray together again to Durga Devi, that we might find Her courage and multifaceted strength victorious in ourselves.

In the north, Navaratri is observed with prayers, fasting and a dance called “garbha”: the dance is performed around a glowing lamp, representing the light from which the glowing goddess Durga emerged. In the eastern state of Bengal, Navaratri is Durga Puja. On the tenth day, the image of Durga that has been worshipped is ceremoniously taken out of the Temple and immersed in the sea – just as the Shakti that lives in each of us leads us through the stages of spiritual evolution to the final stage of surrender to the Lord. As the clay image dissolves in the water, so our perception of ourselves as different and distinct from one another and from God is dissolved into oneness. By the Grace of God, we yearn to know ourselves and by the Grace of God, we come to know that we are part of God.

A Meditation on Durga

In a manner of speaking, the images of divinities that you see in Hindu temples are simply reflections of you -- who you really are! It is said that there are three perceptions of ‘you’: what others think you are, what you think you are and what you really are. The mirror tells you what your body looks like. An X-ray may show what you are under the skin. A cat scan shows more of you. A psychoanalyst may describe who you are as a person. But who you are is beyond all these. No mechanical or intellectual device can help you see that. You need a different way of looking at yourself. The images in the temples are aids to that process. That process of knowing your self is the goal of meditation. The ideal of worship of the images is to gain, through meditation, an intuitive vision of who you really are. This intuitive vision is called darshan.

Suppose one day you look at yourself, and you feel discouraged, weak, afraid, you come and take darshana of the form Shakti, Durga, the Goddess of Power. You see her sitting on a lion unafraid, and even smiling! You take another look at her. You notice that she has eight arms, each holding a weapon--she is well-armed. You may say, no wonder she is not frightened!

Now meditate.

“If I were eight-armed, and holding all sorts of weapons like her, I might also be able to ride fearlessly on a lion. But I don’t have eight arms, nor do I have weapons. What does armed mean? I

have two hands. The usefulness of these hands is the extent I can use them with strength and skill. Don’t I refer to some one who is skillful as a handyman? So being armed is not how many limbs I have, but to know what strengths and skills that I have.

- I have a fairly strong body. That is one strength.
- I have the power of speech--I am trained to exercise my vocal chords to express myself in a manner others are able to understand. That is a second strength that I have.
- I have a mind that can understand, think, remember, recall and such. That is a third strength.
- This mind of mine is served by the five sense organs, body, tongue, eyes, nose and ears. These sense organs constitute my fourth strength.
- But the sense organs by themselves are not enough, unless the corresponding senses of touch, taste, vision, smell and hearing are there. Fortunately, I have these senses. That is my fifth strength.
- I have the mind, the sense organs, and the senses. But I also need a processor to analyze and make sense of all the inputs that I receive. The faculty of intellect that does this task is my sixth strength.
- What is the power that runs all these? This is the life force, the soul that is the inner me. This life force is my seventh strength.
- But yet there are miraculous powers that function inside me that take care of my body and life without my volition--the heart that pumps blood around my body every moment

I live, the power of digestion, the immune system. These powers that come automatically as soon as I am born are my eighth strength.

Thus, I am not a weakling. I am not without power. I am indeed eight armed. I am what I see in front of me--this form shakti, Durga. If so, why am I afraid? Why do I feel incapable, feeble, and ineffective? Perhaps I am not using my strengths to the optimum level. May be I have not trained myself to use them to their full potential and balance.

What is stopping me? What is the greatest drawback that I have? All our sages have pointed out that the greatest drawback of human beings is selfishness. Selfishness clouds my intelligence, and causes us to forget our innate strengths. This is why

I feel fear. Let me train myself to do all my actions unselfishly, and for the welfare of all -- as actions dedicated to God. Let me empower myself with the prayer:

*Kaayena vaachaa manasendryair vaa / Buddhyaatmanaavaa
prakritis-svabhaavas / Karomi yadyat sakalam parasmai /
Naaraayaneti samarpayaami*

Whatever I do, with my body, speech, mind, sense organs, senses, intelligence, life-force and the inborn powers of life preservation, O Lord, may I dedicate all of them to You.”

