

Navratri is a festival of Hindus celebrated with great devotion, enthusiasm and fervor all over India. In this festival God is adored as a Mother. This year it starts on 28th September.

Navratri specifically means "Nine nights" (Nav = Nine, Ratri = Nights) devoted to the Goddess Maa Durga who exists in many forms and is the symbol of the absolute energy that prevails in the universe.

During this nine day celebration it is the time to put all routine chores aside and prepare for the gala nine day of festivity, popularly known as Navratri.

Navratri is celebrated twice a year. First in the month of Chaitra (March-April) and the second in the month of Ashwani (September-October). The nine days are devoted to the Mother Goddess worshipped in a female form known as Maa Durga or Mata Sherawali. During these nine days of Navratri is the time of worship, dance, singing prayers (Bhajans) and offering your sincere prayers to the Goddess Durga. The first three days of Navratri are devoted to the Goddess Durga (Goddess of Power) ; the next three days to the Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of Prosperity) and the last three days to the Goddess Saraswati (Goddess of Knowledge) . On the first day of the Navratri, a small bed of mud is prepared in the puja room and barley seeds are sown in it.

The rituals of this festival are that the nine days and nine nights of Navratri are totally dedicated to the Mother Goddess and includes observing a fast, japa (chanting of holy mantras in the honor of the Goddess), chanting religious hymes (Bhajans), prayers, meditating and reciting the sacred texts relevant to Maa Durga. During this period most of the Hindus visit different Mata temples and offer their sincere prayers to the Mother Goddess. The main ritual of this festival is placing images of the Goddess in homes and temples and worshipping them. There is a very grand event of offering flowers to the Goddess and singing religious hymes (bhajans) in the honor of the Goddess to please Maa Durga. For eight days the idols of Mata Sherawali are worshipped and then on the ninth day they are immersed in the sea with great fanfare.

On the eighth and ninth day, Yagna (offerings to the holy fire) is performed to honor the divine Mother Goddess Durga and bid her farewell and request her to bless us always. Navratri is thus, a festival of pure happiness and one of the most auspicious occasions for all Hindus

The beginning of spring and the beginning of autumn are two very important junctions of climatic and solar influence. These two periods are taken as sacred opportunities for the worship of the Divine Mother. The dates of the festival are determined according to the lunar calendar.

Navaratri represents celebration of Goddess Durga, the manifestation of Deity in form of Shakti [Energy or Power]. Dasahara, meaning 'ten days', becomes dussehra in popular parlance. The Navaratri festival or 'Nine Nights festival' becomes 'ten days festival' with the addition of the last day, Vijayadashami which is its culmination. On all these ten days, the various forms of Mother

Mahisasura-mardini (Durga) are worshipped with fervour and devotion.

The Story of Vasanta Navaratri

In days long gone by, King Dhruvasindhu was killed by a lion when he went out hunting. Preparations were made to crown the prince Sudarsana. But, King Yudhajit of Ujjain, the father of Queen Lilavati, and King Virasena of Kalinga, the father of Queen Manorama, were each desirous of securing the Kosala throne for their respective grandsons. They fought with each other. King Virasena was killed in the battle. Manorama fled to the forest with Prince Sudarsana and a eunuch. They took refuge in the hermitage of Rishi Bharadwaja.

The victor, King Yudhajit, thereupon crowned his grandson, Satrujit, at Ayodhya, the capital of Kosala. He then went out in search of Manorama and her son. The Rishi said that he would not give up those who had sought protection under him. Yudhajit became furious. He wanted to attack the Rishi. But, his minister told him about the truth of the Rishi's statement. Yudhajit returned to his capital.

Fortune smiled on Prince Sudarsana. A hermit's son came one day and called the eunuch by his Sanskrit name Kleeba. The prince caught the first syllable Kli and began to pronounce it as Kleem. This syllable happened to be a powerful, sacred Mantra. It is the Bija Akshara (root syllable) of the Divine Mother. The Prince obtained peace of mind and the Grace of the Divine Mother by the repeated utterance of this syllable. Devi appeared to him, blessed him and granted him divine weapons and an inexhaustible quiver.

The emissaries of the king of Benares passed through the Ashram of the Rishi and, when they saw the noble prince Sudarsana, they recommended him to Princess Sashikala, the daughter of the king of Benares.

The ceremony at which the princess was to choose her spouse was arranged. Sashikala at once chose Sudarsana. They were duly wedded. King Yudhajit, who had been present at the function, began to fight with the king of Benares. Devi helped Sudarsana and his father-in-law. Yudhajit mocked Her, upon which Devi promptly reduced Yudhajit and his army to ashes.

Thus Sudarsana, with his wife and his father-in-law, praised Devi. She was highly pleased and ordered them to worship her with havan and other means during the Vasanta Navaratri. Then she disappeared.

Prince Sudarsana and Sashikala returned to the Ashram of Rishi Bharadwaja. The great Rishi blessed them and crowned Sudarsana as the king of Kosala. Sudarsana and Sashikala and the king of Benares implicitly carried out the commands of the Divine Mother and performed worship in a splendid manner during the Vasanta Navaratri.

Sudarsana's descendants, namely, Sri Rama and Lakshmana, also performed worship of Devi during the Sharana Navaratri and were blessed with Her assistance in the recovery of Sita.

Rituals

Display of the Navratri Golu depicting various forms of Durga in Tamil Nadu

Garba dance in Ahmedabad during navratri festivities

Display of the Navratri Golu in seven steps Tamil Nadu

Display of the Navratri Golu depicting ten avadhar of Lord Vishnu in Tamil Nadu

The Navratri commences on the first day (pratipada) of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of Ashvin. The festival is celebrated for nine nights once every year during the beginning of October, although as the dates of the festival are determined according to the lunar calendar, the festival may be held for a day more or a day less.

Navaratri is celebrated in different ways throughout India. In North India, all three Navratris are celebrated with much fervor by fasting on all nine days and worshipping the Mother Goddess in her different forms. The Chaitra Navratri culminates in Ram Navami and the Sharad Navratri culminates in Durga Puja and Dussehra. The Dussehra of Kulu in Himachal Pradesh is particularly famous in the North. Navratri festival in Gujarat is one of the main festivals. Garaba is dance which people use to dance after the Durga Pooja with the groups and live orchestra or devotional Garaba songs.

The last four days of Sharad Navratri take on a particularly dramatic form in the state of West Bengal in East India where they are celebrated as Durga Puja. This is the biggest festival of the year in this state. Exquisitely crafted and decorated life-size clay idols of the Goddess Durga depicting her slaying the demon Mahisasura are set up in temples and other places. These idols are then worshipped for five days and immersed in the river on the fifth day.

In Western India, particularly in the state of Gujarat, Navratri is celebrated with the famous Garba and Dandiya-Raas dance. Since the past few years, the Government Of Gujarat has been organising the "Navratri Festival Celebrations" on a regular basis for the nine days of Navratri Festival, in Gujarat. People from all over Gujarat and even abroad come to participate in the nine days celebrations. It is also popular throughout India and among Indian communities around the world including UK and USA.

In Goa, zatra begins during Navratri, entire Antruz (Ponda) is highly ornated. The Saraswat Brahmin temples are beautifully decorated and the idols are taken out for worship. The idols are dressed and adorned with flowers, sandalwood paste, turmeric and kumkum. Devotees come during Navaratri to get the special darshan and what mostly a devotee awaits is the Kaul Prasad, which is as something given from the Gods and Goddess itself. The Deities are emblazoned with flowers and devotees or priests continue to worship the deity without even changing the flowers on them. At the end of the festive night the flowers are distributed as Prasad for the devotees. The Dasha Maitrikas (the 10 sisters of Goa) of the Saraswat Brahmins are taken out to worship - namely, Shantadurga, Aryadurga, Mahalasa, Katyayani, Mahamaya, Kamakshi, Vijayadurga, Bhumika, Mahalakshmi and Navadurga.

In South India, people set up steps and place idols on them. This is known as golu. Photos of typical Golu displayed in Tamil Nadu style at a home in Nerul, Navi Mumbai, Maharashtra, India is shown by the side.

In Kerala, three days: Ashtami, Navami, and Vijaya Dashami of Sharad Navaratri are celebrated as Sarasvati Puja in which books are worshipped. The books are placed for Puja on the Ashtami day in own houses, traditional nursery schools, or in temples. On Vijaya Dashami day, the books are ceremoniously taken out for reading and writing after worshipping Sarasvati. Vijaya Dashami day is considered auspicious for initiating the children into writing and reading, which is called Vidyarambham. Tens of thousands of children are initiated into the world of letters on this day in Kerala.

In Telangana region of Andhra Pradesh, people celebrate Bathukamma festival over a period of nine days. It is a kind of navratri celebration.

Navratri is divided into sets of three days to adore three different aspects of the supreme goddess or goddesses.

[edit] First three days

The goddess is separated as a spiritual force called Durga also known as Kali in order to destroy all our impurities.

[edit] Second three days

The Mother is adored as a giver of spiritual wealth, Lakshmi, who is considered to have the power of bestowing on her devotees inexhaustible wealth, as she is the goddess of wealth.

[edit] Final three days

The final set of three days is spent in worshipping the goddess of wisdom, Saraswati. In order to have all-round success in life, believers seek the blessings of all three aspects of the divine femininity, hence the nine nights of worship.

Eighth day is traditionally Durgashtami which is big in Bengal.

In some parts of South India, Saraswati puja is performed on the 9th day. Ayudha Puja is conducted in many parts of South India on the Mahanavami (Ninth) day with much fanfare. Weapons, agricultural implements, all kinds of tools, equipments, machinery and automobiles are decorated and worshipped on this day along with the worship of Goddess. The work starts afresh from the next day, i.e. the 10th day which is celebrated as 'Vijaya Dashami'. Many teachers/Schools in south India start teaching Kindergarten children from that day onwards.

In North India, as the culmination of the Ramlila which is enacted ceremoniously during Dussehra, the effigies of Ravana, Kumbhakarna, and Meghanada are burnt to celebrate the victory of good (Rama) over evil forces on the 'Vijaya Dashami' day.

During Navratri, some devotees of Durga observe a fast and prayers are offered for the protection of health and prosperity. A period of introspection and purification, Navratri is

traditionally an auspicious and religious time for starting new ventures.

During this vowed religious observance, a pot is installed (ghatasthapana) at a sanctified place at home. A lamp is kept lit in the pot for nine days. The pot symbolizes the universe. The uninterrupted lit lamp is the medium through which we worship the effulgent Adishakti, i.e. Sree Durgadevi. During Navratri, the principle of Sree Durgadevi is more active in the atmosphere.

Navratri is celebrated in a large number of Indian communities. The mother goddess is said to appear in 9 forms, and each one is worshipped for a day. These nine forms signify various traits that the goddess influences us with. The Devi Mahatmya and other texts invoking the Goddess who vanquished demons are cited.

During the eight or ninth day, Kanya Poojan, pre-pubescent girls are ceremonially worshiped.