

The festival of **Dussera**, also known as Vijayadashmi, is one of the fascinating festivals of India and is celebrated with joy and enthusiasm for ten continuous days. The first nine nights are spent in the worship of goddess Durga and hence these nights are known as "Navaratri". This festival falls in the month of Ashwin (September / October). The tenth day of the Dussera day is in honour of Durga Devi. The tribal communities also worship Durga as the presiding deity of Navaratri. The farmers invoke her blessings because this festival coincides with the period of rest and leisure after their strenuous work in the fields. The farmers with her blessings wait with tremendous hopes for a bountiful harvest.

The story of the creation of this goddess is also very interesting. The gods in heaven decided to create an all-powerful being to kill the demon king Mahishasur who was ready to attack them. At that very moment a stream of lightning dazzled forth from the mouths of Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh and it turned into a beautiful, magnificent woman with ten hands. Then all the gods furnished her with their special weapons. Those weapons and armour are very artistically carved in the ancient sculptures of this goddess in Java. The image of Durga, the Eternal Mother destroying the demon, Mahishasur on Chamundi Hills near Mysore is symbolic of the final confrontation of the spiritual urge of man with his baser passions. This goddess Durga as Lord Shiva's Consort represents two forms of female energy - one mild and protective and the other fierce and destructive.

Dussera festival is also known as Durgotsav and during the ten days, the many splendoured goddess Durga is worshipped in one of her many forms differently in different regions. With religious rituals and chantings of mantras followed by "KATHA" or story-telling told by Pandits who by reading passages from religious texts awaken religious fervour in the minds of the listeners.

In Bengal and the neighbouring states of Assam and Orissa Durga devi is worshipped by name of Kali as a symbol of Shakti before whom animal sacrifices were made. Her dance of conquest is famous in our ancient texts. As per the orthodox Hindu conceptions, the personality of one deity cannot be entirely separated from that of another. As such in some regions all the three principal goddesses - Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati are worshipped during this festival, each for 3 days of the Navaratri.

As per our great epic Mahabharat, Pandavas after wandering in the forest for 12 years, hung their weapons on a Shami tree before entering the court of king Virat to spend the last one year in disguise. After the completion of that year on Vijayadashmi the day of Dussera they brought down the weapons from the Shami tree and declared their true identity. Since that day the exchange of Shami leaves on Dussera day became symbols of good, will and victory. The founder of the Hindu Swarajya Chatrapati Shivaji before any military expedition always invoked the blessings of Durga in the form of his goddess Bhawani. The Sikh guru Gobind Singh introduced the worship of Durga into his cult of the sword.

This festival has immense mythological significance. As per Ramayan, Ram did "chandi-puja" and invoked the blessings of Durga to kill Ravana, the ten-headed king of Lanka who had

abducted Seeta and had charmed life. Durga divulged the secret to Ram how he could kill Ravana. Then after vanquishing him, Ram with Seeta and Laxman returned victorious to his kingdom of Ayodhya on Dassera day. Therefore, the festival of Durgotsava and Dassera is celebrated more in honour of Prabhu Ramchandra than Durgadevi in many regions of India and recitations from Ramayan and dances and dramas depicting the exploits of Ram assume great importance. These Ramlila shows are very popular in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and to an extent in Maharashtra and effigies of king Ravana, his brother, Kumbhakarna and his son, Meghnath are burnt.

During the pre-British period, the powerful Hindu rulers used to celebrate Dassera in right royal fashion and start military expeditions on this Dassera day against their enemies or recalcitrant vassals. With the arrival of the British, Hindu rulers could not indulge in military activities yet Dassera was celebrated with the old pomp and pageant of full military parades of all arms in the capitals of Hindu states when the Rajas and Maharajas personally took the salute, Trumpets blared militant notes, war drums sounded their loudest and soldiers looked martial. The procession of Dassera taken out in Mysore is always remembered for its grandeur.

With independence and the disappearance of princely states these ancient pageants are dying out and Dassera is becoming more democratic than regal.

Dassera day is considered a most auspicious day. It is a time-honoured belief that if any new venture is started on this day, it is bound to be successful. Hence, all the undertakings be it laying-in of foundation of a new building, opening of a new commercial establishment or even initiating a child into the world of learning- are started on this day. Also on this day implements of agriculture, manufacturer's machines, the intellectuals pens, the household articles, the children's school books are placed before the idol of Durga and worshipped.

The revolutionaries who followed the "CULT OF THE BOMB" to free their motherland from the slavery of the British imperialism looked up to Durgadevi for success in their mission. Even to-day in free India, Durga's blessings are invoked and Dassera is celebrated all over the country. These celebrations involve inter-Asia visits to temples like Meenakshi at Madras, Kamakshi at Conjivaram, Annapurna at Benares, Mumbadevi and Mahalaxmi at Mumbai and signify the triumph of good, of piety and devotion over all the forces of evil.