

Navratri, the festival of nights, lasts for 9 days with three days each devoted to worship of Ma Durga, the Goddess of Valor, Ma Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth and Ma Saraswati, the Goddess of Knowledge. During the nine days of Navratri, feasting and fasting take precedence over all normal daily activities amongst the Hindus. Evenings give rise to the religious dances in order to worship Goddess Durga Maa.

1st 3rd day of Navratri

On the first day of the Navratri, a small bed of mud is prepared in the puja room of the house and barley seeds are sown on it. On the tenth day, the shoots are about 3 5 inches in length. After the puja, these seedlings are pulled out and given to devotees as a blessing from god. These initial days are dedicated to Durga Maa, the Goddess of power and energy. Her various manifestations, Kumari, Parvati and Kali are all worshipped during these days. They represent the three different classes of womanhood that include the child, the young girl and the mature woman.

4th 6th day of Navratri

During these days, Lakshmi Maa, the Goddess of peace and prosperity is worshipped. On the fifth day which is known as Lalita Panchami, it is traditional, to gather and display all literature available in the house, light a lamp or diya to invoke Saraswati Maa, the Goddess of knowledge and art.

7th 8th day of Navratri

These final days belong to Saraswati Maa who is worshipped to acquire the spiritual knowledge. This in turn will free us from all earthly bondage. But on the 8th day of this colorful festival, yagna (holy fire) is performed. Ghee (clarified butter), kheer (rice pudding) and sesame seeds form the holy offering to Goddess Durga Maa.

Mahanavami

The festival of Navratri culminates in Mahanavami. On this day Kanya Puja is performed. Nine young girls representing the nine forms of Goddess Durga are worshiped. Their feet are washed as a mark of respect for the Goddess and then they are offered new clothes as gifts by the worshiper. This ritual is performed in most parts of the country.

Navratri Celebrations

Navratri Festival coincides with the end of the rainy season. This season is considered to be an auspicious one as it is generally associated with the sowing of seeds, and watching new seeds sprout a sign of prosperity and abundance. Most people consider it the best time of the year to undertake or start new ventures.



☒ Durga- The Holy Deity

The Navratri festival is dedicated to the Mother Goddess. Known by other names such as Durga, Devi, she occupies a special place in the Hindu pantheon. She represents Shakti, the cosmic energy that animates all beings, and is also considered to be prakriti (nature), the counterpart of purusha. Together, they are responsible for the creation of the world according to the Puranas and Vedas (ancient Hindu Scriptures).

☒ Worshipping of Diverse Goddess

This nine-day festival is celebrated in a unique manner. A different form of the Mother Goddess is worshipped on each different day. On the first three days, the Goddess Durga (Goddess of Valour) is venerated. The next three days are spent in the worship of the Goddess Lakshmi (Goddess of Wealth), and the last three days are a celebration of the Goddess Saraswati (Goddess of Learning and Arts). Together, the three goddesses are worshipped as the feminine equivalent of the Hindu Holy Trinity.

☒ The Rituals Performed

This festival symbolises health and prosperity, and is celebrated in a very traditional way. People perform yagna (sacrifice offered in order to procure purification through fire) or havana (symbolic ceremony involving the purifying aspects of fire). During both the ceremonies, ghee (clarified butter), paayas or kheer (rice cooked in condensed milk) and sesame seeds are poured into the holy flames to the chanting of mantras (holy verses). Each cycle of oblation culminates with the priest summoning Swaha, the consort of Agni, or fire. Some believers fast (vrat) throughout the nine days, whilst others settle for a daylong fast. Fasting is considered to be one of the most popular means of self-discipline and spiritual development. On the fifth day, known

as Lalitha Panchami, it is customary to gather the books in the house and place them before a sacred lamp in order to seek the Goddess Saraswati's blessings. Artisans also lay their tools at the feet of the Goddess for a more prosperous trade.

☒ Navratri Celebrations in Different Parts of India

Navratri is celebrated in different regions of the country with a lot of vim and brio.

In West Bengal, it takes the form of Durga Puja, an occasion to celebrate the Triumph of Good over Evil. According to legend, a vicious buffalo-demon, Mahishasura, had raised hell at the gates of heaven, causing widespread terror. The Goddess Durga was actualised by the combined efforts of all the deities to slay him. Thus, Durga astride a lion, with an assortment of weapons in her 10 hands, slayed Mahishasura. Durga is also worshipped as Shakti, and beautiful idols of the Mother Goddess adorn elaborate pandals (marquees) for five days (starting from the fifth day of Navratri). Believers (and non-believers) flock to these pandals with gay abandon. On the tenth day of the celebrations, the idols are carried out in colourful processions to be immersed (visarjan) in a river or a pond.

In the state of Punjab, people usually fast during this period, for seven days, and on Ashtami, the eighth day, devotees break their fast by worshipping young girls who are supposed to be representatives of the Goddess herself by offering them the traditional puris (sort of deep-fried Indian bread), halwa (a dessert primarily made of flour and sugar), chanas (Bengal gram) and red chunnis (long scarves). In this region, the festival is predominantly linked with harvest. This is the time of the khetri, (wheat grown in pots in the urban context) that is worshipped in homes, and whose seedlings are given to devotees as blessings from God.

☒ Dussehra or (Vijaya Dashmi)

The festival of Navratri also coincides with the festival of Dussehra or Vijaya Dashmi. Vijaya Dashmi (literally meaning The Day marking the Triumph of Good over Evil) falls on the day after Navratri, and is associated with another legend where Lord Rama killed the demon-king Ravana. In the northern parts of India, Ram Lila draws from the epic, the Ramayana, to bring the life and times of Lord Rama back to the common folk through dramatic representations.

☒ Celebrations in South India

In the South Indian states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, the festival of Navratri is celebrated in a different manner. Women adorn their houses with dolls (Bomma Kolu), draw traditional designs or rangolis (patterns made on the floor by using various coloured powders and flowers), and light lamps. During this festival (also known as Kolu in the state of Tamil Nadu), families proudly display traditional wooden dolls and gather to sing songs and depict scenes from the various epics, for a period of ten days. Another runaway hit is the sundal, a special sweet made from lentil and brown sugar. Families and friends exchange the traditional gifts of coconuts, clothes and sweets on this occasion.

✧ Garbha and Dandiya-Rasa The Highlights of Navratri



the region of Gujarat, and in some parts of Rajasthan and . The highlights of the festival are the extremely colourful dances of Garbha and Dandiya-Rasa during which, both men and women dressed in the traditional attires of dhoti-kurta (traditional Indian attire worn by menfolk, comprising a long shirt and a long flowing garment worn over the lower part of the body), and chania-choli (mirror-work skirts and blouses), put up stunning performances to the vibrant rhythm of music. These dances are performed around the traditionally decorated terracotta pot called the garbi that has a small diya (lamp) burning inside signifying knowledge, or light meant to dissipate the ignorance, or darkness, within. Dholak players (drummers) accompany the dancers, and groups of singers sing songs handed down generations.

Today the commercialisation of these dances seems evident, with the traditional and delicate rhythms being replaced by alternate forms that are quite far-removed from the original versions. As a dance form, the Garbha is mainly performed by women. The leader starts with the first line of the song. Other dancers who sway gracefully, with their arms describing movements in perfect synchrony to the rhythmic clapping, or beating of sticks then pick this up.

Yet another variation of the Garbha is the Goph Guntan, or the string dance. As the dancers execute the movements, they hold on to one end of a rope in strands, while the other end of the rope is tied either to the ceiling or a wooden pole. Gradually, as the dancers weave in and around each other, a braid is formed. It is quite an interesting sight as it takes a certain degree of skill and accuracy to intertwine and untangle the braid without falling out of pace.

Another dance form that is popular during the Navratri celebrations is the Dandiya-Rasa, performed mostly by menfolk forming complex circular patterns to represent the lotus and other floral designs. These dancers hold the dandiya (small wooden sticks with tiny bells attached at the ends) and dance in complex concentric circles. The dancers rhythmically beat the sticks even during a series of complicated moves that they must execute while sitting, standing or lying down. Different communities have different variations of these dances. and the heady mix of jubilation and enthusiasm is all-pervasive.