

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF NAVARATRI

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NAVARATRI, or to be more correct, Navaratra, is a festival of supreme sanctity to the Hindu community in every part of India. This festival, as its very name implies, lasts for nine days, commencing on the first day, Pratipada, in the bright half of the month of Asvina (September-October.)

This ceremonial is sacred to Durga, who, however, is worshipped not merely as the consort of Siva, but as Devi, the Divine Mother, in whom the three active principles of the Hindu Trinity, viz., creation, preservation and destruction, in her respective manifestations of Mahasarasvati, Mahalakshmi, and Mahakali, shine in harmonious combination.

How Observed

In several ancient Sanskrit works, the details of the ritual governing the worship of the Mother during the Navaratra festival have been exhaustively described. The main authorities are Devibhagavata, Devipurana, and Skandapurana. Hemadri, in the *Vratakhanda* of his encyclopaedic *Chaturvargaohintamani* has collected several previous references on the subject. The *Navaratrapradipa* of Nandapandita, who lived in Benares in the 17th Century A. C., is a useful compendium. Although naturally there are variations in the observances practised from place to place, the underlying conception that these nine days are to be spent in fasting and prayer, coupled with rejoicing and recreation, for the propitiation of the Divine Mother, is everywhere the same. It is firmly believed that Sarasvati confers learning, Lakshmi wealth, and Durga earthly happiness of

every kind. The Skandapurana distinctly states that Navaratra is a *Naktavrata*, i. e., a ritual to be observed at night. There are several authorities to show that day-time is auspicious for the worship of Gods, and night-time, of Goddesses, and that Kamyakarmas, or ceremonials observed in view to the attainment of desired objects, are more efficacious if performed at night.

What is known as Kumaripuja or the worship of virgin girls during Navaratra prevails in several parts of India. Nine saktis or forces of Durga are recognised for this purpose one for each day. Infants who have attained only one year of age should be excluded, while those from two onwards up to ten years should be selected—those who have attained two years on the first day, three years on the second day, and so on—and fed and feted as manifestations of (1) Kumari (2) Trimurti (3) Kalyani (4) Rohini (5) Kalika (6) Chandika (7) Sambhavi (8) Durga and (9) Subhadra, respectively. Various benefits are supposed to accrue from this practice, but it is observed only in isolated families in Kerala.

A Royal Festival

The episode of King Sudarsana, who first instituted this festival in Ayodhya on a grand scale, is narrated at the close of the third book of Devibhagavata. It is therein stated that many sages in olden times, like Visvamitra, Bhrgu, Vasishtha and Kasyapa, observed this ceremonial, and that Srirama was able to slay Ravana only after practising the same observance, as instructed by Narada. According to some authorities, Mahishasura was killed by

Durga on the 8th day of the festival, known in consequence as Durgashtami, and Bhandasura by Lalitambika on the 10th or the Vijayadasami day. It is also recorded that Bhadrakali, the destroyer of the sacrifice of Daksha, was born on Durgashtami. Although Navaratra, according to some texts, may be observed in the Vasanta (Spring) season also, it is the observance during the Sarat (autumn) season in the month of Asvina that has become widely prevalent. All authorities agree that it is obligatory on the part of Kings to celebrate this festival, both in their interest and in that of their subjects.

Inclusive of Vijayadasami, the festival lasts for ten days. The 10th day is popularly known as Dasara, which is said to be a corruption of the Sanskrit word Dasahara, meaning the remover of the ten sins. There is no actual worship on the 10th day, except the *Visarjanapuja* by which the deity is permitted to depart.

Significance of Vijayadasami

Besides the religious, there is also a secular significance attaching to this festival. During *Varshartu* or the rainy season, all military activities in ancient times had to come to a stand-still, owing to unfavourable weather conditions. When the autumnal season arrived, kings were in a position to start on a fresh career of conquest, and for this purpose, it was necessary to invoke the blessings of the Divine Mother, in her triple aspect of the giver of knowledge, wealth and prosperity. One of the synonyms of the Asvina month is Isha, which means 'suitable for military march.' Similarly, the succeeding month of Kartika, which forms the latter half of autumn, is known as *Urja*, giver of energy. Vijayadasami was naturally selected as the day on which the king, after receiving back his weapons of war and codices on military science from the feet of the Mother, might march in triumphant procession again. *Devipurana* points out that this march should be commenced on that day at

twilight which is called the hour of Vijaya or Victory, and that the rulers who did so would on no account suffer defeat. Tourists too begin their travel on that day, and children commence the study of the alphabet. Success, in fact, is supposed to attend on every undertaking begun on the Vijayadasami Day.

Celebration in Travancore

The celebration of the Navaratri festival as a State function in Travancore is co-eval with the advent of the reigning family, and goes back to pre-historic times. There is a small shrine consecrated to Sarasvati in the old Padmanabhapuram Palace in South Travancore in which the State archæological museum is now located. In front of that shrine stands the marvellous granite structure known as Navaratri-mandapa. According to tradition, the present image of Sarasvati was brought from Valliyur, and installed there in 1266 A. C. Valliyur, though now a part of the adjoining British District of Tirunelveli, was ruled over in those days by a branch of the Travancore Royal family, and the image of Sarasvati was taken over to Padmanabhapuram and installed there on the extinction of the Valliyur branch. Trivandrum became the permanent residence of Travancore rulers only about 1810 A. C., after which the Navaratra festival has been celebrated only there and not at Padmanabhapuram as before. On the day preceding the commencement of the festival, the image of Sarasvati is brought in procession from Padmanabhapuram to Trivandrum, escorted by an image of Kumaraswami, the Divine generalissimo, and one of Munnutti-nanka Amman, supposed to be one of her chief attendants. His Highness the Maharaja takes charge of that image at the eastern Fort gate, and sees that it is installed for the time being in the ancient shrine attached to his Fort Palace specially consecrated for that purpose. In front of the Goddess are placed several old palm leaf manuscripts of rare value preserved in the Palace library,

as also the time-honoured sword with which Maharaja Martanda Varma, the maker of modern Travancore, made his countless conquests, together with other ancient military implements.

Assemblies of Scholars & Musicians

It will be seen from this that the Maharajas of Travancore worship the Divine Mother during Navaratra mainly in her cultural aspect as Sarasvati. Two conclaves are held, one of musicians and the other of Sanskrit Pandits, and distinguished votaries of Sangita and Sahitya assemble from far and near to participate in the activities of these sabhas. They receive valuable presents from H. H. the Maharaja on the closing day of the festival. Maharaja Swati Tirunal, who ruled over Travancore from 1829 to 1846, and who was one of the greatest devotional poets, musicians and composers of South India, has written a series of nine soul-stirring hymnal songs, entitled Navatrakirtanas, one each to be sung on the nine nights of the festival. In the first six of these songs, the Maharaja invokes the blessings of Sarasvati, and in the remaining three, Durga of Vahinidata or Attingal, the tutelary deity of the female members of the royal house. This shows that the aspect of the Divine Mother as Durga assumes special importance during the last three days of the festival.

Even in these iconoclastic days, the hold that the Navaratra festival maintains on the Hindu masses is refreshingly unique. Prayer, indeed, as the popular American poetess, Ella Wheeler Wilcox, has sung, "has a sweet, refining grace", and "from our gross selves it helps us rise to something which we yet may be"; and for us, helpless children that we are groping in the dark, what can be more ennobling and invigorating than sending forth, in robust faith, and cheerful hope, for a period of nine continuous days every year, when the season helps us most to be in tune with the Infinite, fervent prayers to the Divine Mother to bless us with insight, resourcefulness, and victory? That, as I conceive it, is the true import of the Navaratra festival.

—Talk broadcast from the T. B. S.

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system, Catholic teachers themselves will teach Catholic children?" If it was meant thereby, said the Dewan, that in Catholic schools Catholic teachers alone should teach Catholic children, in the ultimate analysis it would amount to demanding that wherever there was one Catholic student in a school, there could be no teacher who was not a Catholic. Yet another passage quoted asked, "Even in cases where there are Catholic teachers who knows whether their children may get teachers' posts when their fathers retire on pension." So, for all time, said the Dewan there must be only Catholic teachers in Catholic institutions, according to this demand. He could understand the proposition that Catholics alone should teach the Catholic religion, but if it was claimed that to teach geography, you must have a Catholic, it was going too far.

Unbecoming Language

A final passage quoted by the Dewan from the same pastoral letter said, "The Law of Nature and our Father in Heaven will not tolerate for long the sins of such perfidy to God and perfidy to Mother. Danger to children and preceptors lies hidden in this socialisation of our schools." Those who spoke like that, declared the Dewan, had lost all sense of proportion and perspective, but Government did not propose to confer cheap martyrdom on them. They hoped that they would see that such vituperative language was unbecoming those who were the ministers of God and who considered that they were the agents of God for the evangelisation of the world.

Concluding the Dewan said: "A true Christian must believe in the underlying spirit of Christ. Christ's message was in the main a message of meekness and of charity. These objurgations and curses are unworthy of his ministers. I trust that in sober moments there will be time for reflection and ratiocination on the part of those, who on the basis of a misconception have uttered wild and whirling words ignoring their implications."