

**Impressum**

Ashutosh Vardhana:

The Battle of the Devi: The story of Navaratri  
(Inspired by the Devi Mahatmyam)

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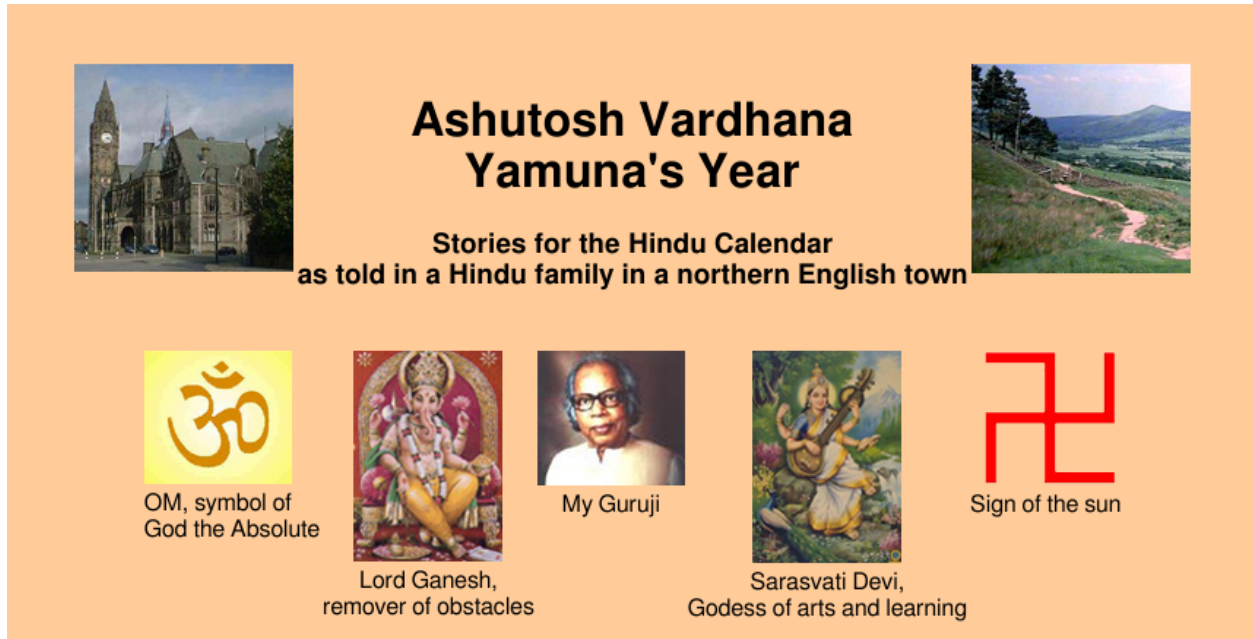
**TECHNICAL NOTE**

This file contains two texts related to the story of Navaratri:

- Text 1: The story of Navaratri as told to a Hindu family in a Northern English town
- Text 2 discusses the implications of this festival for the status of Hindu women.


In Text 1, two fonts are being used:


- Plain pica (like this: Plain Pica) for the passages in which the narrator interacts with Yamuna's family and explains the traditional plot
- A serif font (similar to Times New Roman) for the traditional story of Holi





**Ashutosh Vardhana  
Yamuna's Year**


Stories for the Hindu Calendar  
as told in a Hindu family in a northern English town

 OM, symbol of  
God the Absolute

 Lord Ganesh,  
remover of obstacles

 My Guruji

 Sarasvati Devi,  
Godess of arts and learning

 Sign of the sun

## Ashutosh Vardhana:

### The Battle of the Devi: The Story of Navaratri

A Hindu story as told in a Hindu family  
in a northern English town.

(Inspired by the Devi Mahatmyam)

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**Note:**

The story is intended to be read in nine daily instalments.  
Each day is dedicated to one of the nine names of the Devi.

**DAY 1: SHAILAPÚTRI, DAUGHTER OF THE MOUNTAIN:****INTRODUCTION**

On the first day of Navaratri, when the Pandit approached his brother's house, he was greeted by such a row that he did not bother to ring the bell but let himself in. Sobbing Yamuna threw herself into her uncle's arms.

"Go to your room instantly, Dinésh," commanded Father, "and stop bullying your little sister! Grow up, become a man, pass a few exams, get a respectable job and chuck those moronic mates of yours with whom you are hanging around wasting your time, before you think you are something better only because you are a boy! You aren't."

"I was only teasing her," argued Dinésh.

"No, you were bullying her: you keep doing it. Once in a while is a tease, but to keep at it is bullying, and you are grating on all our nerves. You ask her to make you tea and coffee. She isn't your servant. There is nothing special about you because you are a boy, and Yamuna is no less clever than you. Privileges for boys, those were the olden days, but today things are different. Whatever you can do Yamuna can do, and probably better if you continue being useless and lazy as you are now. She dedicates herself to what she does and tries to learn. Do something valuable and become a man. Then we will respect you for what you have done. You have to earn our respect; it is not your birthright. Now go to your room and study, till dinner is ready!"

Dinésh stomped away and banged the door shut. The Pandit released Yamuna and embraced his brother: "What was all that about?"

"Oh, the usual thing with boys, especially the eldest. His mother has spoilt him. He thinks he is something better even though he has achieved nothing. By contrast, Yamuna is ambitious and thinks she will be capable of anything. She has been talking of wanting to become a brain surgeon or a geneticist and create entirely new kinds of plants and animals. She has such a vivid imagination. Whenever Yamuna talks of her dreams and ambitions, Dinésh makes fun of her and tries to destroy her self-confidence. In our modern world, we no longer need women who are subservient to men; both men and women have to be strong and equal, as our goddesses are. The boy has to understand that. Only personal achievement gives him a right to be proud. To achieve something we have to work, not to hang around and waste time with those goons he calls his mates. That's it. Last year we went to the Farnborough International Air Show ..."

"Yes, and when I am big I will be a fighter pilot, but Dinésh keeps laughing at me, and today I got angry and I beat him, and he pulled my hair, and ..."

"Enough now," interrupted Father, "would you like some chai, Brother?"

"I will make it," offered Mother.

---

After dinner, the family went into the sitting-room where they had put up a shrine in honour of the Devi, whose great deeds and battles they would be celebrating for nine days. The pictures showed her many manifestations -- as Durga and Káli, as Parvati, Lakshmi, Saráswati and many others, one goddess in many forms, with many stories, many lives and many names.

As every year, over the next nine days the Pandit was going to tell the story that had given rise to the festival, to make sure it would not be forgotten, the children could learn it and pass it on to their friends and to future generations.

"I do not want to listen to this nonsense. It's not true anyway, it's nothing but fairy tales. Only women and old people believe such rubbish," said Dinésh, "my mates are waiting for me."

"You sit down and listen, especially today after your disgraceful behaviour. You can talk to your mates tomorrow. I think there is something this festival can teach you. First try to understand our religion properly. Then you can decide whether it is as useless as you clever youngsters say," Father said.

"Do you like science-fiction, and violence and war films?" asked the Pandit, "Today's story will come pretty close to it, I am sure you will enjoy it. You do not have to believe it, just imagine it like a film, enjoy it, and try to understand what it teaches. Perhaps it will make more sense when you grow older. But if you do not know it at all, it can never make any sense and cannot help you when perhaps you need it."

"Okay," grudged Dinésh and sat down in his sulking corner.

Yamuna sat down at the feet of her uncle and the Pandit began.

#### THE CREATION OF THE DEVI

"A long, long time ago, the asúra (demon) Mahísh made war on the dévatas (gods) for a hundred years. The gods lost and Mahísh became king of heaven.

He sacked all the gods from their posts, took over their ministries and gave them to his brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles, to his sons, daughters and nephews -- and even to his barber. This kind of government is called "nepotism", favouring one's relatives and one's barber, and Mahísh had invented it. His family grew rich, and everybody else was made poor.

The gods had lost all their power and wandered all over the earth like beggars, tramps or refugees. Some of them even came to England, but the Minister of Immigration called them 'economic

migrants', 'bogus asylum seekers' and 'scroungers' and would not let them in. That's why some people say that England is a godless country; but I don't think that's true. It's just a bit difficult to find God, wherever you live, even in America, God's own country. We have to search for him. Sometimes he hides in a refugee or in a beggar and sometimes even in a government minister or an atheist, especially in an atheist if truth be told because he feels quite safe there and no half-hearted devotees will bother him there with silly requests. That's why atheists are God's favourites. They give him shelter.

The defeated gods went with Bráhma to the palace of Shiva and Vishnu and asked for help. They described their miserable existence in heaven which was now ruled by this evil tyrant.

Vishnu, Shiva and Bráhma and hundreds of smaller gods stood in a circle, facing each other and discussed their predicament. They were furious. What indignity! How terrible for the world to be ruled by demons! It is bad enough with the politicians we have, none of whom are saints. But to have rulers who are positively demons, wicked demons? It doesn't bear thinking of. And yet, it had actually happened.

They were gods with the bodies and minds of men, 'male gods' as we say. They had terrifying powers but none of them was strong enough to defeat the demons. Not even great Vishnu, who normally comes to the rescue when evil gains the upper hand, could match these demons. Not even Shiva with his trident, who had won so many battles, could help, nor could his son Kartikéya, the great hero.

"We must create a being," said the gods, "which has the combined strength of all of us and can make it grow by her own power.

The gods frowned. When great gods frown, each of them emits more energy than a laser gun in space wars. The shafts of radiation emanating from the foreheads of the gods intersected in the centre of the circle, and the energy concentrated in that spot was truly terrible. It was like a mountain blazing. It was worse than a nuclear explosion or the big bang. It was brighter than a thousand suns.

That terrible blaze assumed a female form.



Lord Shiva's light created her face, Lord Vishnu's light created her arms, Lord Bráhma's light created her feet, Agni's light created her three eyes, the light of Cándra, the moon, created her breasts, the light of the earth created her hips. Yáma's light created her hair. All the gods contributed to her body, to her beauty and to her power.

The gods were full of joy when they saw her: they knew that she would liberate them and restore order and happiness to the world.

One by one they stepped forward and gave her copies of their own weapons and attributes. Shiva gave her a trishul (trident), Vishnu a discus, Agni (god of fire) a spear, Indra (king of the gods) a thunderbolt, Yama the "staff of death", Surya (sun god) gave her laser guns pointing out of every pore of her skin. Kala (time) gave her a shining sword and shield. Kubera (god of wealth) gave her a drinking cup which was always full of sweet juice. Shesha (god of serpents), gave her necklace of serpents covered with jewels. Himavat (king of mountains), gave her the lion on which she rides.

The Devi was conscious of her power and beauty. She was the mother of the universe, she **was** the universe all compacted into one person. There was nothing but her. She was all the gods in one, she was all the creation in one, she was gods and creation at the same time, she was you and me, she was all there is, uncreated and eternal, she was God the Absolute, she was Brahman -- but if Brahman is the Absolute at rest, then she was Brahman radiating energy and in action. She was more conscious than any of us can ever be. That consciousness radiated from her. If we feel consciousness, it is her consciousness radiating through us, for she lives within us. She is our self, our soul, **the Self**.

The Devi raised her thousand arms and shook her innumerable weapons, she roared triumphantly and sent out a defiant unending laughter. It filled the skies, it filled the universe, it echoed among the galaxies, the mountains shook and trembled, and the stars jumped out of their trajectories. The world was terrified at that unearthly sound.

The gods and the rishis (sages) prayed to her and praised her greatness.

The demons understood that her roar and her defiant laughter was a declaration of war and mobilised their armies. Mahish with his armies flew towards that provocative noise and saw the Devi filling the three worlds, that is the world of the gods, the world of human beings and the world of the demons, the underworld.

Where she walked, the earth bent under the weight of her body, her crown scraped the skies, and her arms reached into all corners of the universe."

"That's enough for today," said the Pandit, "tomorrow I will tell you about the Devi's great battle. It will be rather gory. I hope you won't be frightened, Yamuna."

Yamuna shook her head.

"Will you be with us tomorrow night, Dinés?"

"I'll think about it. It could be worse, I suppose,"

**DAY 2: BRAHMACARĪNI, VIRGIN:****THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

On the second day of Navaratri, after dinner, the family returned to the sitting-room. Dinésh was no longer sulking. The doorbell rang. Dinésh's friend Ashók entered: "May I join you, Panditji? Dinésh has told me about this story you are telling. Sounds rather good. I'd like to hear what happens. Couldn't do any harm to know the story, could it? At least I'll know what this festival is all about. If you don't mind."

"You are welcome, sit down," said Panditji with a smile and continued his story:

"The Devi was waiting when Mahísh, the asúra, arrived.

A terrible battle began. Mahísh sent his generals into battle with their armies, one by one, and all were defeated. These were huge armies, much bigger than those we employ today even in the biggest of wars. Much was at stake in this war. It was not only a battle of some good people against some bad people, it was a battle of good against evil.

The first army had 60,000 tanks: it was defeated. The next army had 10 million tanks: it was defeated. An army of 15 million tanks arrived: it too was defeated. The Devi could not be beaten.

Unlike Mahísh, the Devi did not send her generals into battle, but leading her armies she fought personally, from the beginning. The demons tried to kill her by hurling their weapons at her, showering her with lances, arrows, missiles, but effortlessly she intercepted or destroyed their weapons or hurled them back at those who had attacked her.



The lion on which she rode during the battle was shaking his mane and strode over the battlefield like a forest fire.

The slaughter on that battlefield was greater than anything we can imagine today: it was covered with cut off heads, arms, legs, crushed bodies, bodies sliced into two, bodies with broken necks. Heads were rolling down mountains like avalanches. There was blood gushing out of wounds, there were intestines hanging out of slashed bellies, soldiers were vomiting blood and screaming for mercy.

The soldiers fought with such passion that some of them, even after their heads had been cut off, stood up again and continued to fight. At that time, the terrible Dance Music which teenagers today use to torture their parents, that music, whose merciless beat hits your eardrums and your stomach like a sledgehammer, was invented to soften up the enemy."

The boys smiled. Panditji pulled a little book out of his pocket, the Devi Mahātmyam.

"Here is what the Scripture says: 'Others, though rendered headless, fell and rose again. Headless trunks fought with the Devi with powerful weapons in their hands. Some of these headless trunks danced there in the battle to the rhythm of the musical instruments. The trunks of some other great demons, with their swords, spears and lances still in the hands, shouted at the Devi with their freshly severed heads, 'Stop, Stop'" (Devi Mahātmyam., p. 38, 62-65)

So many demon soldiers, battle elephants and horses were killed that rivers of blood flowed across the battlefield, so deep that the armies needed boats and had to build bridges to cross them.

The gods were sitting in the clouds, which in those days were as comfortable as settees or armchairs are today, and watched the battle from above, like children watching a horror film on television or like fans watching their team in a football stadium. They were supporters of the Devi to a man. They waved their scarves and banners, applauded their champion and her armies and showered them with flowers to express their joy and admiration."

Dinés was sitting bolt-upright and looked at his uncle with blazing eyes as if he were in the midst of battle himself or, to say the least, watching his favourite horror film.

"The story is turning out better than you thought, isn't it?" asked Panditji. "Do you want to go to your mates now, or first hear it to the end?"

"It's not too bad, let's see what happens. My mates will wait. I'll shock them with the story afterwards. They don't know religion is like this. Perhaps we can turn it into a computer game."

"Fine, then I'll continue."

### **SINGLE COMBAT WITH CIKSHÚRA, CÁMARA AND MAHÍSH**

"Now Cikshúra, one of the greatest demon generals, almost as great as Saddam Hussein, advanced with fresh armies. The Devi destroyed his army within seconds. It was as if they had been burnt up in an instant by the inconceivable heat of a nuclear explosion. So Cikshúra advanced alone against her. She killed his horses and his charioteer and broke his bow and arrows with one of her missiles.

But Cikshúra was a very brave demon. He grabbed a fresh sword and rushed against the Devi on foot. He hit the lion on the head and the Devi on her arm, but his sword broke into splinters as if it had been made of glass. The Devi intercepted the lance which he then threw at her and killed the great man.

Next General Cámara, riding a battle elephant, went on the attack. First the Devi destroyed his weapons, then her lion jumped on the elephant's head and wrestled with the general until both fell on the ground. There they continued to fight each other with the most terrible blows until the lion jumped into the sky and came back down again at such a speed that he tore off Cámara's head with a single blow from its paw.

The Devi killed several more generals in single combat, in furious fighting in which no holds were barred. She killed the first by hurling rocks and trees at him, the second by biting him, hitting him with her fists and slapping him so hard that he died. She ground the third one to powder with blows of her club, killed the next one with a dart and another two with her arrows. Mahísh was fast running out of generals.

Being an asúra, Mahísh could assume any form he liked, man, woman, old, young, bird, bee, priest, beggar. His natural form however was that of a buffalo, and that was the form in which he chose to participate in the great battle.

He was, of course, not only like an ordinary bull in rage, even though that can be terrifying enough, he was a super-dimensional bull. My grandfather says he knew someone who witnessed the battle and Mahísh was bigger than King Kong or the Tower of London."

"Why did Mahísh fight as a bull?" asked Yamuna. "The Devi rode a lion, and lions can kill all other animals, including bulls. So why did he not turn himself into a super-lion? As a bull he did not stand a chance."

"He was stupid and thought because he was strong he was better than anybody else", (the Pandit looked at his nephew). "He underestimated the Devi and her lion. It did not even occur to

him that his natural body, that of a bull, could be inferior to that of a woman or a lion. That's why he thought it best to fight in his natural body.

This part of the story does not only deal with strong animals and strong men, but also with people, big companies, organisations and countries which are rich and powerful because they have money, weapons, or big armies. Often they bully small people, sometimes they win, but usually not forever (even Hitler's and Stalin's empires eventually came to an end, and all of us have to die one day, even if we are great dictators). Small people have to use their brains to resist them. Mahísh presents the power and behaviour of brute physical force: determination to win and crush all opposition, great strength but little brain. Of course, against the Devi he did not stand a chance, because she was both clever **and** strong. I suppose that's a good combination."

"I wonder what I could do to become strong. Could I go to karate classes?" asked Yamuna.

"Well, that would certainly keep you fit, but do you think you are clever enough already?" said Father.

"Yes," beamed Yamuna.

"What a cheek!" muttered Dinésh.

"What about learning hátha yóga?" said the Pandit, "that will strengthen your body and your mind and even help you to concentrate and meditate. I will lend you a book about it and if you like the idea, you could go to classes. But now let's get back to Mahísh, the monstrous bull."

"This huge monster, then, charged about the battlefield and terrified the Devi's army. He knocked his enemies down and killed them by hitting them with his muzzle, by stamping on them with his hooves, by hitting them with his tail, and by spearing them with his horns, by charging at them, by turning around himself like a spinning top, and even by knocking them over with the force of his furious breath. He managed single-handedly to exterminate the whole of the Devi's army. He then made for the Devi herself, wanting, for a start, to kill her lion. He was, of course, in a fury and therefore did not behave quite rationally.

Until the day of this great battle, the earth had always been quiet and motherly. There had never ever been an earthquake. But when Mahísh pounded the earth with his hooves, he started a violent earthquake. The earthquakes which we feel today, even the strongest and most terrible ones, are only mild aftershocks of that first earthquake of all earthquakes which happened so many millions of years ago. You can imagine how terrible it must have been then, if we can still feel it today.

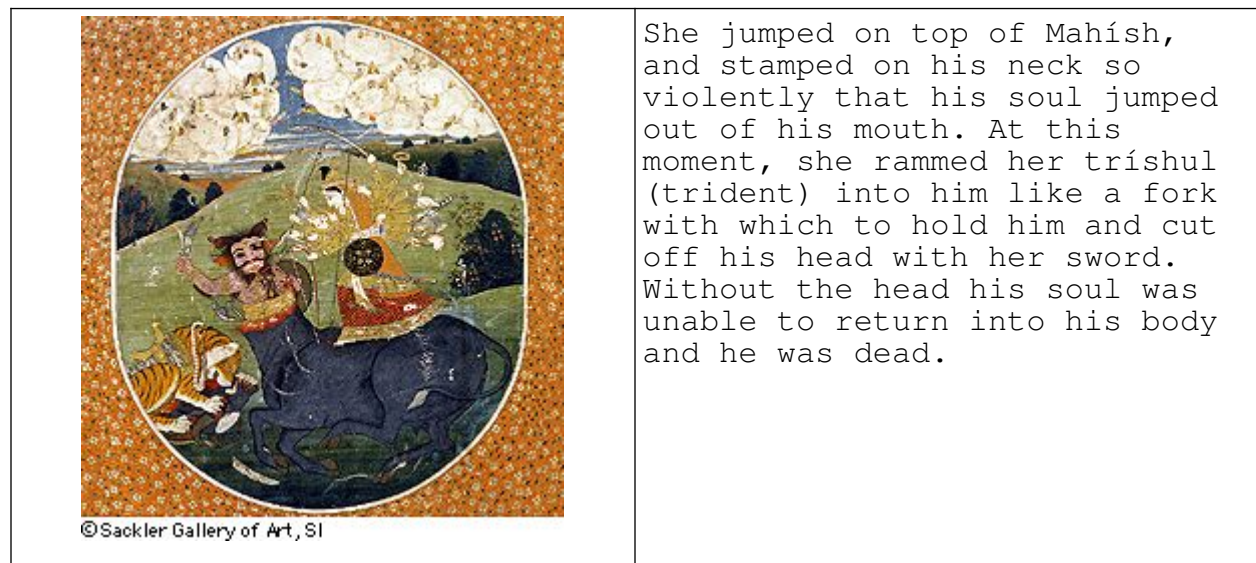
In his rage Mahísh picked up mountains with his horns and tossed them into the sky, some of them so high that they took hundreds of thousands of years to fall down again. Their remnants can be found all over the earth, and, since our scientists believe that they originally come from outer space, they are called meteorites.

He lashed the oceans with his tail so that they overflowed and flooded all cities at the coast. He cut the clouds with his horns, and his angry breath was so powerful that he blew mountains into the air as if they were particles of dust.

The Devi threw a lasso at Mahísh and tied him. He changed himself into a lion. She cut off his lion's head (in memory of this great deed, some English pubs to this day are called 'The Lion's Head'). He changed into a man holding a sword. She shot him with arrows. He became a big elephant, grabbed the tail of her lion with his trunk, tried to drag him away and toss him into the air. The Devi cut off the trunk with her sword. Mahísh resumed his bull shape.

Now, at last, the Devi became angry, she drank a cup of mádhu (mead, fermented honey), her eyes became red and she let out a furious laughter. The asúra hurled mountains against her and she turned them into dust with her arrows.

'Just let me drink another cup of this mádhu', she scorned, 'and then I will finish you off.'



Since Mahísh and his fellow asúras had been noble demons, who hated God with all their hearts, hated him as intensively as saints love him, their death was a blessing for them, for they obtained múkti (liberation) instantly and became one with Bráhmán, the ultimate reality."

"That's strange," said Yamuna, "these demons were rewarded for hating God and fighting against him?"

"It may seem strange in comparison with other religions, but we know that God does not think like human beings, she is infinitely generous and easy to please.

Our scriptures mention many different ways of worshipping God; for example as a man or as a woman, as a lover, as a mother/father, as a child (Bala Krishna), as a friend and as an enemy. The asúras worshipped him/her as an enemy.

You can worship in any form you like, and God, She or He, will accept you.

The asúras were obsessed with her. The Devi likes that.

What she does not like are people who just do not care, who are indifferent to her. They have to remain on earth for life after life, until they begin to care, one way or another.

For the asúras, being on earth was the same as being in prison or in hell.

Being united with God is like being in paradise, being infinitely happy. By fighting the asúras on the battlefield, the Devi purified them, and by killing them, she allowed them to escape from the bodies in which they were imprisoned."

#### **END OF BATTLE SCENE 2: PRAISING THE DEVI**

"The gods thanked the Devi and praised her: 'You bring good fortune to the houses of good people, bad fortune to the houses of the wicked, intelligence to the hearts of the learned, faith to the hearts of the good. May you protect the world!'

The goddess said: 'I allowed these asúras to fight me in battle. I purified them with my missiles. By killing them, I allowed them to escape from this earth and enter heaven. I have done this because they worshipped me as bitter enemies. Now this earth is a happier place, and the asúras are happier people. They have attained moksha. When anyone is in trouble, he should think of me, and I will free him from fear. I will help him to escape from poverty and pain.'

That's where I'll end for today, and tomorrow I'll tell you about the Devi's second great battle."

"I'll be back," said Ashók.

In fact, the following evening, his friends Sárvada and beautiful Haimávati joined the family.

**DAY 3: CHANDRAGHÁNTA, USES THE MOON AS A BELL:****THE SECOND WORLD WAR:  
THE DEMONS ARE TRAPPED BY THE DEVI'S BEAUTY**

The Pandit began:

"For a while, perhaps some thousands or millions of years, people could live in peace, ruled by the gods and fairly unmolested by the demons. But then two new demons, Shúbha and Ni-Shúbha, became powerful and gradually conquered both the world of man and the world of the gods. The gods remembered the promise of the Devi: 'When you are in trouble, think of me, and I will help you.' They went to Himávat, the King of Mountains, and there they prayed to the Devi who, as Lakshmi, is the wife (or active power) of Lord Vishnu."

"So the Devi and Lakshmi are the same goddess?" asked Yamuna.

"Yes, the Devi appears in many different forms, has different names and different tasks."

The Pandit pointed at each of the pictures in the shrine erected in honour of the Devi:

- "As Lakshmi she is the goddess of wealth and the wife of Vishnu.
- As Durga, Sati, Uma, Parvati and Káli she is the wife of Lord Shiva.
- As Saráswati, the goddess of arts and of learning, she is the wife of Bráhma.
- As Sita she is the wife of Lord Rama and the model of all Hindu wives.
- As Rádha she is the girlfriend of Lord Kríshna, and the model of all lovers.

Every God has her as his wife, his Shákti, his creative force, and without her he is powerless.

The Devi is Jagadámba, the mother of the universe, she is Bhúmi, the earth. She is manifested in the cow whom we treat as our mother because she gives us her milk to drink. She is manifested in our mothers, our wives, our sisters, our girlfriends and in all women.

All the male gods are really the same, just different manifestations (forms) of the one Bráhman. In the same way all goddesses are manifestations of the supreme Devi. Ultimately the Devi and Bráhman are one absolute reality, identical with each other and identical with everything that exists."

And Panditji continued the story:

"As the gods were praying, Parvati, daughter of the Mountain King and wife of Lord Shiva, arrived to take a bath in the river Ganga. When she saw the gods praying, she asked: 'Who are you praying to?'

'We are praying to the Devi that she may help us against the asúras Shúbha and Ni-Shúbha.'

At that moment a most beautiful goddess, none other than the Devi, came out of Parvati's body. Parvati became dark blue: the Devi, Parvati, Durga, Lakshmi, Saráswati and Káli in reality are one.

She decided to trick the two demons into battle. First she took a solemn vow: 'I will not marry any man unless he has first vanquished me in battle.' Then she went to a remote part of the Himalayas in order to meditate and gain power.

Soon the news spread that a woman of unearthly beauty was living in the Himalayas. The paparazzi came from all over the world and published the Devi's picture in the glossy society magazines. The television crews arrived in order to film her and tourists descended in great hordes in this lonely region. King Himávat had to create an infrastructure for them, build a high altitude airport and many high-rise hotels to accommodate them all.

Soon the two top-demons Shúbha and Ni-Shúbha heard about this beautiful woman. They were the most powerful men on earth and already owned the greatest specimens of everything else the earth had to offer, the most beautiful jewels, the largest diamonds, the most expensive paintings, the largest palaces, the best football players, the most powerful computers, and the most exciting Nintendo games. They therefore felt that their honour and their reputation required that they should also own this most beautiful of all women.

They already had many wives, but that didn't matter because kings in those days were allowed to have as many wives as they could conquer, feed and keep happy. They were also convinced that any woman, however beautiful, would be greatly flattered to be wanted by two such important people as them. What, after all, is the worth of a beautiful and learned woman compared to that of a rich man or a great dictator! Or so they thought.

They therefore dispatched a helicopter with a messenger to the Devi.

The messenger said: 'My lord and master, Shúbha, King of the Asúras, has sent me to give you the following message: "I am the most powerful man in the universe. Even the gods obey me. I own the most expensive jewels in the world. I own the rarest of elephants and the rarest of horses, both of which used to belong to the gods. You are the most beautiful of women. Therefore we must have you too. You can marry either me or my younger brother Ni-Shúbha, who isn't a bad match either. If you marry me, you will be the most wealthy woman on earth. Think it over, but make it snappy, I haven't got all day."'

This was the charming way in which powerful Shúbha proposed to the beautiful Devi.

The Devi smiled inwardly because she saw that her plan was working; she had trapped a powerful man through her beauty.

'Tell your master this: "Everything he said is true. He is the most powerful and the richest man on earth, even richer than Bill Gates. I would love to marry him. But unfortunately I am not allowed to. I have taken a vow that I will marry only a man who is as strong as myself and who will conquer

me in battle." Therefore your master must come personally and fight with me. Once he has vanquished me, I will marry him. And don't forget to tell him that I am a fighter pilot. So he won't have an easy time.'

The messenger said: 'You overestimate your strength. There is no man in this world and not even a god who is stronger than my master. Therefore you, a woman, do not stand a cat's chance in hell. You had better go to Shúbha and Ni-Shúbha voluntarily so that you can go with dignity; because, if you don't, you will be dragged there by your hair.'

The Devi replied meekly: 'Yes, that would be terrible. Shúbha is so strong, and Ni-Shúbha is such a hero, isn't he. I really shouldn't have taken that vow. But now that I have taken it I have no choice.'

"I think that's enough for today", said the Pandit, "let's continue the story tomorrow. What do you think?"

Dinés had been pondering something for a long time and asked: "You said the great demons were rewarded for hating God; they were given instant moksha the moment they died. Does that mean that I will be rewarded if I am really bad, run wild, torment my sister and disobey my parents, take drugs, steal cars, break into houses, torture animals, join a gang of terrorists, shoot policemen, plant bombs in supermarkets, and make a great nuisance of myself?".

The Pandit responded: "Do you think that will make you happy? Why don't you try and see if you are up to it. Then see what will happen. To start with, you will feel sorry for your parents and your sister; for you aren't really nasty and cruel. Then your sister and your parents will stop loving you. You will be unhappy, you will go to prison, you will be in the company of unpleasant people, you will get sick and you may die. And you won't go to paradise, because all the bad things you did, you did out of laziness, stupidity, indifference, selfishness and greed, not because you were obsessed with God. Then karma will make sure that you are punished not only in this life but in the next life as well. It is not easy to hate God with all your heart.

Mahish obtained moksha and was not reborn. But you will be reborn as an animal or a person with a very unhappy life, perhaps poor, or handicapped, or with other misfortunes, until you have paid for what you did in this life.

Worshipping God as an enemy is a very difficult thing to do. Very few people are so strong. People who are strong enough become either saints or demons. Most of us are not fit to be either. We are in the middle. We must take the easy route to God, the path of bhákti, of love, devotion, service and sacrifice, being kind and helpful to everyone around us, doing our duty, be it at school or at work or as parents, and doing that as a sacrifice to God without expectation of reward. The Gita and the Shrímad Bhágavatam explain to us how to follow that path. That is the easy path to God."

**DAY 4: KUSHMÁNDA, PUMPKIN:****THE WAR STARTS**

On the fourth day of Navaratri, the Pandit's instalment of the story was very short:

"The Devi had taken a vow that she would not marry any man who could not defeat her in battle. The demon Shúbba had proposed to her through a messenger and had expected that she would immediately agree to marry him and be grateful for the chance. The messenger returned to Shúbba and told him that the beautiful woman wanted him to come personally, yes personally, and do battle with her.

When Shúbba heard that reply, he grew very furious and said some words which a gentleman should never use: 'What a bitch! Who the \*\*\*\*\* hell does she think she is! This shrew has to be taught a lesson. We will soon tame her. Send my general Dhumralocána with his army and kill anyone who tries to stop us.'

Dhumralocána set off with 60,000 asúras. The Devi refused to follow him unless forced. So Dhumralocána walked up to her in order to grab her hair. She just uttered a contemptuous 'Hm!', and instantly Dhumralocána was reduced to ashes. This is how instant coffee was invented.

Now the asúra army attacked the goddess but, within a few minutes, it was destroyed by the Devi's lion.

When Shúbba heard that his army had been exterminated, he tore out his hair and sent an even bigger army commanded by Cándá and Múnda, two even better and more powerful generals."

**DAY 5: SKANDAMATA, MOTHER OF KARTTIKEYA:****THE BATTLE OF THE GENERALS**

On the fifth day of Navaratri, there were seven eager youngsters in Yamuna's sitting-room, thinking that their religion wasn't so boring after all and worth finding out about.

Panditji continued his tale:

"When the new armies arrived, they saw the Devi, smiling gently, seated upon the lion on a huge golden peak of a great mountain.

When the army started attacking her, the Devi became terribly angry and her face became as dark as ink, as you can see on this picture here. She frowned, and out of her forehead Káli suddenly emerged, with a most terrifying face and armed with a sword and a noose.

She had a staff with a skull in place of its knob, a garland of skulls, her dress was a tiger's skin, she was emaciated, her mouth was wide open, her tongue lolling out. She had deep-sunk red eyes. She filled the sky with her furious roars and slaughtered and devoured the army of asúras. She picked up whole elephants and flung them into her mouth. She devoured the horses and their riders, and even the chariots, and crushed them with her teeth. She crushed the enemies with the weight of her foot or the weight of her body. She caught their weapons with her mouth and crushed the steel with her teeth as if it were sugar.

The army was destroyed, and brave Cándá and Múnda attacked Káli personally hurling thousands of discuses at her. Káli simply caught them all in her mouth and ground them to dust with her teeth. Káli was enjoying herself, she gave out a loud roar, and as she laughed, her white teeth were gleaming in her dark face.

Káli chopped off the heads of Cándá and Múnda, held them in her hands and, with loud laughter, brought them to the Devi: 'I have killed these two lowly generals on your behalf, but you yourself can kill the kings.' "

**DAY 6: KATYAYANI, DAUGHTER OF KÁTYAYANA****SHÚMBA HIMSELF ARRIVES ON THE BATTLE FIELD**

On the sixth day of Navaratri, the Pandit continued:

"Now Shúmbha himself set off with all the powers he and his allies could muster. Huge armies approached. The Devi twanged her bow-string, the lion roared, the Devi clanged her bell, but Káli roared even louder than all of them together. The armies surrounded the Devi, Káli and the lion.

Then sháktis issued from the bodies of all the gods to join in the battle."

"What are sháktis?" asked Yamuna.

"Sháktis are the female companions, or wives, of the male gods. They represent the creative energies of the gods. They are female copies. So out they all came to do battle."

"They had the same weapons, the same attributes, the same powers and similar names as the gods from which they had issued. From Bráhma came Brahmáni in a chariot drawn by swans, from Mahéshvara (Shiva) came Mahéshvari riding on a bull. Vishnu's shákti came in the form of a boar. Even Vishnu's incarnations sent out their own sháktis: from Narasímha, the man-lion, came Narasímhi, the woman-lion, shaking her mane in fury. From Índra came Aíndri armed with a thunderbolt.

The Devi sent Shiva as her ambassador to Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha to make a last peace offer before the final showdown: 'Let Índra and the gods rule the world. You can go and live in the underworld in which there is plenty of space and where there are no heating bills to pay. If you do not accept this offer you will have to fight, but you will lose and be annihilated.'

The greatness and power of the Devi became obvious by the fact that she could use the great Shiva (whose very name 'Máha-Déva' means 'the great god') himself as her ambassador, i.e. as her servant, and he would go at her command. Therefore she became known as Shiva-Dúti, the one who employs Shiva as her ambassador (dúti)."

**DAY 7: KÁLARATRI, TERRIBLE NIGHT****KÁLI VANQUISHES RÁKTA-BÍJA**

"The asúras did not accept the Devi's ultimatum and the battle recommenced. The Devi and all the Sháktis were fighting, each with a particular weapon. The laughter of Shiva-Duti was so terrifying that whole battalions of asúras fell down dead just by hearing it, and she devoured those asúras who had fallen. The asúra armies were largely destroyed and took to flight. But, like in a football match, when one great player has to leave because of an injury and is replaced by a substitute, so in this battle the asúras had generals and heroes with special talents in reserve. Therefore the great asúra Rákta-Bíja decided to make his entrance.

There was no asúra as dangerous as he for he was not only strong and valiant himself but his body was constructed to guarantee the survival of his family.

He was the first virus in human history, except that he was not microscopic but gigantic in size. Miniaturisation came much later in the course of evolution.

Each drop of his blood that fell on the ground immediately produced a clone of Rákta-Bíja identical in size and in valour. The blood of each of these clones was capable of producing further clones in exactly the same way. Fighting and wounding Rákta-Bíja and his 'brood' was therefore as pointless as trying to put out a fire by pouring petrol into it. Every wound inflicted on a Rákta-Bíja only made his side stronger. Antibiotics and anti-virus programs had not been invented yet. Within a few minutes there were hundreds of thousands of Rákta-Bíjas fighting on the battlefield and the number increased exponentially every minute.

The asúras fought valiantly, but really they did not have to do any fighting at all. If they had just stood still and allowed their blood to flow, soon the whole earth would have been filled by them and left no space for a single god (and how boring that would be!) or a single human.

Therefore Káli opened her mouth wide and out came a huge tongue. She drank up Rákta-Bíja's blood and that of his clones before it could hit the ground. That is the reason why pictures of Káli always show her with a bloody tongue lolling out of her mouth. She and the Devi raced over the battlefield and devoured the great heroes. None of them was a match for the Devi and Káli. While the Devi continued to inflict innumerable wounds on Rákta-Bíja, Káli went on lapping up his blood. Eventually all blood had drained out of Rákta-Bíja and he fell lifelessly to the ground. The mátris (mothers, sháktis), who had won the battle, were intoxicated with blood and danced with joy."

## DAY 8: MAHAGÁURI, GREAT GÁURI

### THE DEATH OF NI-SHÚMBA

"Shúmbha and Ni-Shúmbha were blind with rage when they saw that their great armies had been destroyed as if theirs were tin soldiers. They now went into battle personally, the mightiest of the mighty, to attack the Devi. A wonderful 'duel' ensued, with a woman on one side and two men on the other. Both had mastered a large array of different weapons and used them one by one. But the Devi destroyed them all. When young Ni-Shúmbha had spent all his weapons, the Devi flattened him with her battle axe so that he lay unconscious on the ground.

As Shúmbha approached, the Devi blew her conch, twanged her bow-string and clanged her bell, the lion roared, and together they produced such a terrifying noise that the whole universe trembled with fear. Káli jumped into the sky, came down to earth with a thud, like a wrestler, and hit the earth with both hands so violently that their noise drowned all the other sounds.

The Devi shouted to Shúmbha: "Brave hero, surrender!" But Shúmbha said something very rude and did not give up. He was no weakling and a good match for the Devi. While she intercepted and destroyed with her arrows the missiles he threw at her, he did the same with hers. Now the Devi angrily struck Shúmbha with her trishul (trident), and he fell unconscious to the ground.

Just then, his brother Ni-Shúmbha regained consciousness and shot his arrows at the Devi, Káli and the lion. She intercepted his arrows. Ten thousand arms then grew out of his body and from each he hurled a discus at her. It was like in a snow storm, except that instead of snow flakes deadly discuses were whirling in the air. The Devi destroyed them all with her arrows.

Ni-Shúmbha, in extreme frustration, rushed at the Devi with a dart. Before he could reach her, the Devi flung her dart at him, and it pierced his heart.

Out of the hole in his heart issued another person, as big and brave as him, and, trying a last bluff, shouted 'Surrender!' at the Devi. She just laughed at his smartness and persistence even in death. He would not and would not give up until truly all was lost and there was no breath left in his body. She cut off his head with her sword, and at last Ni-Shúmbha, the great demon, was dead.

The lion devoured the demons he had killed, and Káli and the Devi devoured the others."

"This is an example to you youngsters that you should always tidy up after you have finished a job. Tidying up is as important as the job itself. The Devi, Káli and the lion left the battlefield spick and span. If you are ever on a battlefield, you must do the same: you can never know when you may need it again."

The youngsters looked at one another and tried not to smile. Was the Pandit serious with this advice? They hoped that they would never have to tidy up a battlefield, especially not in this way.

### THE DEATH OF SHÚMBA

Shúmbha was desolate to see his beloved baby brother slain and cried: 'Foul!'

'What do you mean "foul"?', asked the the Devi.

Shúmbha said: 'You only win because you let all the other goddesses (sháktis) do your fighting for you. A thousand against one, what's fair in that!'

The Devi answered: 'I am all alone in the world. All these gods and goddesses are only my own powers, see how they return into me.' And all the gods and goddesses and all the other fighters on the battlefield were sucked back into her body. Suddenly the battlefield was empty: only the Devi and Shúmbha remained.

The Devi raised a hand above her head and pointed it to the sky. She moved her index finger and lo, there was a grandstand for the gods, thousands of them, tilted downwards and equipped with safety belts so that they could watch the battle comfortably without falling down.

She pointed her left hand forward, flicked her index finger, and instantly there was a grandstand for the asúras, extending in depth and length as far as the eye could see.

She stretched out her right hand, flicked her index finger, and instantly there was a grandstand for human beings, men and women, because women were tough those days and not afraid at the sight of blood."

"Couldn't she have done all this at the same time?" asked Yamuna, "she had enough arms for it."

"I'm sure she could, and probably she did, but it is more fun to tell it one after another so you can enjoy this bit of the story three times and imagine it better.

'Are you sitting comfortably?' asked the Devi with a disarming smile.

'Bhavatú' (Amen), murmured the gods with folded hands.

'Yes,' cheered the humans like one man.

'Yeah', roared the asúras and beat their hairy chests.

'Then I'll begin', said the Devi ... and turned towards Shúmbha: 'Here I am alone, now show what you can do!'

One by one Shúmbha hurled his weapons at the Devi: arrows, darts, spears, axes, boomerangs, harpoons, discuses, and high-tech missiles of all descriptions: V-2, Trident, Polaris, Poseidon, Tomahawk, Pershing, Harpoon, Exocet missiles (Shúmbha had the prototypes of all of them), and many magic ones, which our generals today can only dream of. But none of Shúmbha's missiles reached the Devi: she was able to intercept and destroy them all with her weapons or sometimes just with the sound of her voice. Shúmbha was no woman's fool either. None of the Devi's weapons touched him: he was able to destroy them all with his.

In the end Shúbha had no missile weapons left, his bow was broken, his chariot destroyed. He grabbed his mace and rushed at the Devi. She split the mace with her arrows. Shúbha had only his body and his fists left. He launched his fist against her heart with all his might so that her body shook. She hit him on his chest with the palm of her hand and he fell down, but he jumped up in an instant, grabbed the Devi and jumped high into the sky. There they wrestled furiously without rules and without constraint, no holds were barred, the gods were flabbergasted, never had they seen such a sight. Thus they wrestled for long time until the Devi managed to grab hold of him, lifted him up even higher and hurled him down to earth. Any airplane coming down with such a speed would have been crushed to atoms.

But Shúbha was built of sterner stuff. He ignored the earthquake that his fall had caused, got up and immediately rushed at the Devi again. She decided to put an end to the spectacle and gave him the coup de grace. She pierced his chest with a dart, he fell down and was dead."

"Enough for today, tomorrow I'll continue", said the Pandit, and the family went off to the mándir (mandir).

**DAY 9: SIDDHIDÁTRI, GIVER OF PERFECTION:****GENERAL REJOICING**

"Today is Durgáshtami," said the Pandit, "the eighth day of the lunar month, on which we worship Durga, the Devi. You have now heard how she was created by combining the powers of all the gods, that all goddesses with their many different forms and names are one, and that deep down all gods and goddesses are merely, like the whole universe, like all of us, manifestations of the same Bráhman, who is neither male nor female but who simply IS."

"I thought his name was Bráhma, the creator," asked Yamuna.

"Many people get that wrong. 'Bráhma' and 'Bráhman' are two different words. 'Bráhma' is an individual god, like Vishnu and Shiva. But Bráhman is God the Absolute, and nothing exists beside him. Bráhman comprises everything, all personal gods, and even you and me. You need not believe in Bráhman, nor disbelieve, because Bráhman simply exists, whether you believe in him or not. If you do not believe in Bráhman, you do not believe in yourself, and you are welcome to that attitude. But this is not easy to understand and you have to study our religion for a few more years to get what it really means. It has taken the rishis (our saintly sages) a few thousand years to sort it all out.

Now let's return to the Devi. She had destroyed all her enemies, and celebrations could begin, just as we celebrate today."

"The world was happy again. There was perfect peace (for a while anyway). The clouds disappeared and the sun shone gently, the rivers returned to their beds and the sea became calm and retreated to its proper shores.

There was no more violence on television.

Husbands treated their wives with the greatest respect realising that they were manifestations of the Devi. Wives treated their husbands with equal respect because they knew that the Devi and all the male gods are nothing but manifestations of the same Bráhman, God the Absolute, who is neither male nor female but who simply IS.

All remembered the ancient Hindu saying, more ancient even than the laws of Manu: 'Husband and wife must treat each other like God', and this auspicious saying was painted above every front door. Marriages became happy, and there was no more domestic violence. No more, that is to say, until this truth was forgotten and people thought that the letter of an ancient law was more important than its spirit."

"I thought," interjected Mother with a twinkle in her eye, "the Laws of Mánu said that women must obey their fathers, brothers or husbands, but not the other way round. Otherwise why is it wrong for Dinésh to expect his sister to serve him?"

"That is a good question, Sister," said the Pandit, "but the ancient Scriptures were written to serve the needs of society as it was then. Just as Lord Vishnu comes to earth in different ages and different bodies when he is needed, so the Scriptures have to be interpreted in a different way when society has radically changed.

Today women are equal to men and work not only in the family. They have the same brains, the same desires and must be allowed to pursue their ambitions and develop their potential.

We, of the older generation, feel less need for that and do not feel it as strongly as the youngsters. But the future is in the hand of the youngsters, and they must have their way if our culture and religion is to be preserved: it must live in a new way. Our religion changes along with society, even though, like all religions, it always lags behind by a century or so.

We used to believe that Harijans were untouchable. Today we know that they are of equal value to all other castes.

Dharma keeps changing, so much so that a seven-volume history of dharma has been written. I am not alone in saying that our Scriptures have to be reinterpreted.

Look at this book I have been reading for the last couple of months. It is a commentary by Swámi Tyágisanánda on the 'Nárada (Narada) Bhákti Sútras'. He writes:

'Scriptures of mankind are nothing but the records of the spiritual realisations of Ríshis (sages); we see many of the Scriptures woefully neglected not only by the masses, but even by the educated and so-called religious people. They have practically become dead.

The reason for this is that the experiences recorded therein have become meaningless to the later generations. The truths preached by the ancient sages **must be felt to be useful to us at the present time also** ...

the truths of the Scriptures must be re-lived before our own eyes, and **their usefulness demonstrated publicly**, before the ordinary man adopts them for guidance in his live. ...

Again, every old text is not a Shástra. **What may have been useful in the past may cease to be so in course of time under other circumstances and surroundings**. Progress in culture and civilisation also necessitates many re-adjustments in the Scriptures. ...

Only such rules and texts deserve to live as can stand those repeated tests.' (Commentary on Sutra 12, page 104-105)

There is no question therefore that today men and women have to treat each other with respect.

My own Guruji once said: 'Hinduism is not **what it is or was**, but **what WE make it**; that includes women and men, young and old.'

And now I'll continue the story.

The gods invited the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra to come and perform together with the Gandhárvas (celestial musicians). Leonard Bernstein conducted the European Anthem: "Freude, schöner Götterfunken" (Joy, wonderful spark from the gods), and the choir sang: "alle Menschen werden Brüder" (all human beings become like brothers and sisters). The Germans have always been great friends of Indian culture.

The asúras packed their bags, agreed to return to their old kingdom in the underworld, live there peacefully, introduce democracy and the rule of law. They received big loans from the Intercelestial Monetary Fund to rebuild their ruined economy, repair the war damage, modernise their industry, buy state-of-the-art computers from America, and they applied to join the European Union and to become human at last.

Delegates of the humans, the asúras and the gods held a summit conference and said:

'These great battles and their lessons must never be forgotten. We will therefore institute a great festival. On the eighth (ashtami) day of the month of Ashwin (about October) we will worship Durga (the Devi) and call her day Durgáshtami.

On the eight preceding days we will prepare ourselves for this great day by commemorating the great battles the Devi has fought (and still secretly fights) to rid the world from evil -- well, until it returns again. Together with Durgáshtami that makes nine (náva) days and nights (rátri). We will therefore call this festival **Náva-Rátri**, the **Nine-day-Festival** or rather the **Festival of the Nine Nights**.

During this festival we will attend the mándir (mandir), have darshan of the Devi in all her manifestations: Durga, Káli, Parvati, Saráswati, Lakshmi, Sita, Rádha, Bahúchari, Khódíar and many more. We will worship her through her pictures and múrtis, bring her fruit and flowers. In her praise, we will chant the "Devi Mahátmyam" which describes her birth and her glorious deeds. Especially in Bengal she will be worshipped with great fervour.

Since the GujaRatis are so irrepressibly vigorous, they will re-enact the Devi's great battles by dancing in her honour for nine days and evenings. When they play gárba (dance) and ras (stick-dance), the clacking and beating of the sticks will remind them like a faint echo of the clanging of arms during those terrible fights, but to them it will simply be an occasion of great joy when men and women, young people and old, even toddlers, come together to enjoy themselves and to worship the Devi in dance with their bodies as well as their minds.'

Thus the humans, the gods and the asúras decided, and so it has been done ever since."

"And what would you say are the lessons of this festival?" asked Father.

"God dwells in equal measure in men and women. Women are as intelligent and talented as men. They must develop their talents. Husbands must respect their wives and brothers their sisters because the Devi is manifested in them, just as God is manifested

in all beings and in all creation. Never stop a sister from wanting to become a fighter pilot: the Devi is on her side. Never beat a woman, for the Devi will see you and revenge her. Love and respect every woman as you would love and respect the Devi. If you do, the woman will make you happy. In God, men and women are one, just as Bráhmaṇ and the Devi are one."

So spoke the Pandit, and they all set out to go to the mandir and celebrate Durgáshtami.

When they returned from the mándir (mandir), Yamuna went to bed and sent one last thought to the Devi, who was intelligent, beautiful and strong. "I'll show'em!" she said and fell asleep.

\* \* \*

## Text 2

### Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:  
Celebrating the Divinity in Woman  
(The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)

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(The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ashutosh Vardhana is a Hindu. He grew up in Europe and, when he is at home, lives in Yorkshire, England. He studied at London University. He is a keen student of comparative religion and now writes fiction, poetry and essays. He has produced many academic publications. His 'creative' work has been published in Dipika (London), Writers' Forum (Bournemouth, UK), Scavenger (Osage City, Kansas, USA), The World of English (Peking), Asian Image Lancashire (Blackburn, UK), Gujarat-Samachar (London), Asian Leader (Rochdale, UK), Vremya Po and The Globe, Almaty (Kazakhstan), and Pphoo Magazine (Calcutta) and on various websites. He travels extensively and is best contacted by e-mail.

### EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 14 October this year (2002), Hindus celebrate the festival of Durgashtami, the worship of Goddess Durga. From 7 to 15 October they celebrate Navaratri, the Nine-Day-Festival, during which the great battles of the Goddess against the forces of evil are commemorated. Ashutosh Vardhana, a Hindu writer who lives in England, explains what the festival means to Hindus.

**Ashutosh Vardhana:**  
**Celebrating the Divinity in Woman**  
**(The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)**

**Version 1**

Whenever evil becomes too powerful on earth, God appears in order to 'tidy up' by punishing bad people and by teaching us how to lead good and happier lives. That is the basic meaning of those of our festivals where God goes into battle with demons, for example the festivals of Lord Rama (Ram Navami, and Diwali), of Lord Krishna (Janmashtami) and of Durga Devi (Durgashtami).

The ancient stories speak of battles with chariots, lances, arrows and magic weapons, of good kings and bad demons, but what is really meant is the battle between good and evil in our hearts. The stories are meant to encourage us to live better lives. The battle fields are within us.

There was once a demon king so powerful that none of the gods (all male), not even Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva, could oust him. Therefore all the gods came together to create a 'supergod' with the combined power of all of them. That supergod was a woman, the Devi.



The Devi went into battle against the demon armies. They despised her because she was a woman, a weak woman, as they thought. But she, who was in fact identical with Brahman, the Absolute, defeated all of them.

Navaratri, the Nine-day-Festival (nava = nine, ratri = night), commemorates the battle. During this period we worship the Devi (God in its manifestation as a woman) and invoke the nine names she has as the Devi. We also worship her in her different manifestations, e.g. as Kali and Durga (especially in Bengal), as Parvati, the wife of Lord Shiva, generally as Shakti, and under any of the innumerable names used by her devotees.

Durga Devi riding into battle with the weapons of all the gods

As Shakti, the Devi is the creative power, the active power, of the male Gods. Without her they cannot do anything. Therefore every male god has his Shakti, his consort, his creative power: Brahma has Sarasvati, Vishnu has Lakshmi, Shiva has Parvati, Rama has Sita. Just as all male gods are ultimately the same, so are all the goddesses.

Navaratri is celebrated differently in different parts of India. In Bengal it is the greatest festival of the year.



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Stick dance (Ras) of Gujarati children at Navaratri

Gujaratis in Blackburn (UK) dancing ras, the stick dance

We Gujaratis dance for nine evenings round a shrine of the Devi. The noise of ras, the stick dance, where the dancers hit each other's batons, is an echo of the noise of the great battle.

On the ninth day of Navaratri we celebrate Durgashtami (ashtami = eighth day of the month), the climax of the worship of Durga. On the eve of Durgashtami, an unmarried girl under ten is worshipped as a personification of the Devi. This ceremony is called Kumari Puja: the worship of the young girl.

Apart from the personal lesson to fight evil within us, the festival also teaches us something about relations between men and women.

They gradually change over the centuries in society and in our religion, which reflects and informs that society, so much so that a great Indian scholar (P V Kane) had to write an eight volume book about the history of dharma (right and wrong), i.e. about the way in which notions of right and wrong in Hinduism have changed over the centuries.

They continue to change. That is good. Our religion grows organically (like a tree) and adjusts itself to the needs of our society.

That is the reason why for us there is not only one incarnation of God, and why for us there is no last prophet for all times, but that God appears again and again on this earth, as she is needed.

It saves us from the dangers of fundamentalism (of which we too must be wary), of sticking rigidly to the letters of ancient scriptures which were written under different circumstances. It is meant to make sure that we do not kill people, commit acts of terrorism or vandalism (Ayodhya 1992) for the sake of such dead letters.

Our highest commandment is 'ahimsa': avoidance of violence. It tells us to practise our religion with moderation and common sense.

Our youngsters do not have to turn away from our religion and our culture in order to enjoy a modern life-style. The two are not incompatible. They can do so within the context of their ancient religion and culture, and they must fight for the right of doing so rather than walk away.

Such fights are part of organic growth in a religion. For us there is no clear dividing line between the sacred and the profane.

The story of the Devi shows woman far superior to man. That is a useful message, especially in view of the fact that many other ancient texts suggest that woman is inferior. This festival helps to restore the balance.

Our ancestors had good reasons for demanding that women be obedient to their husbands, fathers and brothers, and we have good reasons, today, for renouncing that notion. The lesson we must learn from this festival is that woman is equal to man.

Therefore when an ancient Hindu scripture said, 'Treat your parents as God, treat your husband as God, treat your teacher as God, treat your guest as God,' today we have to add, with equal vigour and authority, 'treat your wife as God', which is another way of saying: 'Treat every woman as God.'

An ancient Sanskrit verse puts it quite plainly:

yatra naryastu pujoyante  
ramante tatra devata

Wherever women are treated with respect  
the gods rejoice and bless that place.

^eof