

Impressum

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

Length: Version 1: 951 words = 5,369 characters
Length: Version 2: 485 words = 2,744 characters

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Date: 2002-10-14, Mk2.2

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(The Hindu Festival of Navaratri)
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TECHNICAL NOTE

This file contains two versions of this article:
Version 1, length 951 words
Version 2, length 485 words

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 pujanya
ramante tatra devata

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

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Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana: Why we Celebrate Navaratri
Version 2

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**Ashutosh Vardhana:
Why we celebrate Navaratri**

Version 2

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.

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) 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.



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On the ninth day of Navaratri we celebrate Durgashtami, the high-point of the worship of Durga.

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

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. Today we must renounce that notion. Navaratri teaches us that woman is equal to man.

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.'

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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 therefore is best contacted by e-mail.

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