



One of the most important festivals of India is Durga Puja, which is celebrated in the autumn during the month of Aswin. The festival takes place over a period of nine days and is often called the Navaratra festival. From Kashmir in the north to Kanyakumari in the south, from Assam in the east to Punjab in the west, the entire land zealously celebrates this festival irrespective of caste, creed, the entire Hindu populace takes to it religiously. The Saktas, the Saivas, the



in the minds of one and all. The differences between the rich and poor, the high and the low, get lost in the surge of devotion.

An eleventh or twelfth century Jain text, the Yasatilaka of Somadeva, mentions the worship of Aparajita, who is also called Ambika. She is said to give victory in war and to be present in the king's weapons. "The text also says that she is worshipped on Mahanavami, which is the last day of Durga Puja. Some

Durga Puja : A Bird's Eye View

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Vaishnavas, the Souras, the Ganapatyas, the Koumaras- all have their various modes of worship on this great occasion. Paying homage to Sakti-the cosmic force is the purpose common to all. This adoration is termed differently in different provinces. The Divine Power is addressed as Amba in Kashmir and Bhavani in Rajasthan. While Gujarat calls her Kalyani, Mithila invokes her as Uma, Meenakshi, Kamalakshi, Chamundi, Saraswati, Durga, Bhagavati-are the other common nomenclatures attributed to the cosmic mother. No other festival in this holy land is as universal as the Sakti Puja. The country awakens to revere the Eternal source of Existence. The occasion rouses a new enthusiasm

Puranas, furthermore, say that nirajan, the worship of weapons, is held on Mahanavami. In the Prakrit drama Gaudavaho, King Yosavarman undertook a military campaign in the autumn. Shortly after beginning his march he reached the Vindhya Mountains and there undertook the worship of the Goddess Vindhyavasini, an epithet of Durga.

The worship of Durga also came to be associated with the military success of both the Pandav brothers in the Mahabharata and Rama in the Ramayana. Although her worship by the heroes was not part of either epic tradition initially a tradition has developed that insists that the worship of Durga was necessary to the success



of the heroes in both epics. Durga is worshipped twice in the Mahabharata; in Virata Parva by Yudhisthir and in Bhishma Parva by Arjun. In the latter case the occasion of Durga's praise is clear. The setting is just before the great battle that is the high point of the entire epic. The Goddess appears to Arjuna and promises him victory, after which the text says that anyone who hears or recites the hymn will be victorious in battle.

The association of Durga with Rama's success in battle over Ravana in the Ramayana tradition although not part of Valmiki's Ramayana, has become a well-known part of the Rama story throughout India. In the Kalika Purana we also find a reference to Durga.

In the Devi-Bhagabata-Purana Rama is despondent at the problems of reaching Lanka, defeating Ravana, and getting back his beloved Sita. The sage Narada, however, advises him to call on Durga for help. Rama asks how She should be worshipped, and Narada instructs him concerning the performance of Durga Puja or Navaratra. The festival, which Narada assured Rama will result in military success, is said to have been performed in previous ages by Indra for killing Vrtra, by Siva for killing the demons of the three cities, and by Vishnu for killing Madhu and Kaitabha (3.30.25-26). Rama duly performs Durga's worship, and She appears to him mounted on Her lion, She asks what he wishes, and when he requests victory over Ravana She promises him success (3.30). The tradition of Rama's inaugurating Durga Puja for the purpose of defeating Ravana is also found in the Brhaddharma Purana (1.21-22) and the Bengali version of the Ramayana by Krttivasa (fifteenth century) Bengali villagers tell of a tradition in which it was customary to worship Durga during the spring. Rama, however needed the goddess's help in the autumn when he was about to invade

Lanka. So it was that he worshipped her in the month of Asvin and inaugurated autumnal worship, which has become Her most popular festival.

Durga's association with military prowess and Her worship for military success undoubtedly led to Her being associated with the military success of both sets of epic heroes sometime in the medieval period. Her association with these great heroes in turn probably tended to further promote Her worship by kings for success and prosperity.

Durga's association with military might is probably a part of the tradition, most evident in recent centuries, in which goddesses give swords to certain rulers and in which swords are named for goddesses. In the Devi-Purana, it is said that the goddess may be worshipped in the form of a sword. Sivaji, the seventeenth century Marathi military leader, is said to have received his sword from his family deity, the goddess Bhavani.

The autumnal worship of Durga, in which She is shown in full military array slaying the demon Mahisa in order to restore order to the cosmos, thus seems to have been part of a widespread cult that centered around obtaining military success. The central festival of this cult took place on Dasara day, immediately following the Navaratra festival, and included the worship of weapons by rulers and soldiers. The worship of a goddess for military success, though not always a part of the Dasara festival, was associated with the festivals. Indeed the two festivals, Navaratra and Dasara, probably were often understood to be one continuous festival in which the worship of Durga and the hope of military success were inseparably linked.

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