

Two Hindu Holidays

Durga Puja

The Story of Durga Puja
The worship of Divine Mother Durga
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Durga Puja is the biggest festival of Hindu communities of the Bengali tradition. It may be compared with Christmas celebrations of the Christian communities. The festival is performed in the fall.



Traditionally it is a four-day festivity with worship services, cultural programs, feasting, family gatherings, greeting exchanges, and making new friends.

Though it is primarily a religious service, its social and cultural aspects are also significant.

Locally every year for the last nine years mostly Bengali ethnic immigrant families from India residing in the Kansas City (and surrounding areas in Missouri and Kansas, and even in parts of Iowa, Nebraska, and Oklahoma) join this weekend festival with great gusto and merriment.

This year the festival is October 8 and 9 in the Pleasant Valley Civic Center, Pleasant Valley, MO. The main worship service will be on Oct 8 Sat 9a-1p. The evening service is 6:30-7:30p.

Significance of Durga Puja: Hindus worship Durga as the Divine Mother Goddess, believed to be the highest manifestation of the Universal Power of God. The image most commonly worshipped during Durga Puja is that depicting Durga having ten arms, surrounded by her children, slaying a demon coming out of a buffalo. The story describing her triumph over ‘Demon King’ who represents a great evil, has been narrated in the Holy Scripture of ‘Chandi’. Thus, by this service, Hindus celebrate the God’s overpowering victory over evil.

The Story: Many years ago there was a great war between the gods and the demons. The demons defeated the gods, captured heaven and forced the gods out of heaven. In their effort to defeat the powerful demon king and to retake the heaven, the gods concentrated their energy and created Durga — a beautiful ten-armed goddess. Each god gave her a weapon. The great god, Vishnu gave his wheel (*chakra*). Another great god, Shiva gave his trident (*trisul*). Other gods gave their various weapons. Even Himalaya, the king of mountains gave a lion that carried Durga. Armed with these divine weapons Durga fought a fierce battle with the demon army led by the demon king who changed forms several times to deceive the goddess. Finally, Durga slew him, as he came out of the body

of a buffalo. The demon army was destroyed. The gods regained their heaven. The universe rejoiced and sang the glory of Divine Mother Durga. Thus, Durga Puja (the worship of Durga) is a celebration of triumph of good over evil and the return of universal order peace and harmony.

There is another myth particularly popular with Hindus of Bengali heritage. According to this myth, at this time of the year Durga returns to her parents’ home with her children. Durga is the wife of Shiva who cares little about worldly affairs and spends most of his time in yoga and meditation. Thus, Durga’s welfare is a constant source of worry for her parents, Himalaya and Menika. So, once every year Durga comes down from heaven to visit her parents on earth. Thus Durga Puja is also a celebration of the yearly return of the daughter to her parents’ home.

Diwali

Sometimes called the most important pan-Hindu festival, Diwali, the Festival of Lights, is celebrated according to the moon in late October or early November. Diwali (also called Diwali and Deepavali) is a contraction (*dipa*, lamp; *vali*, row) and is marked with flames from oil or ghee lamps. Often lasting five days, Diwali is associated with, and explained by, a number of stories, each with innumerable versions and variations, two of which are sketched below.

Diwali is also observed by Sikhs, so the holiday is enjoyed by about one billion people. It is especially important to merchants and other business people because the festival honors the Lakshmi, goddess of wealth. It is the end of the financial year, so accounting books are closed and new books opened. One day of the cycle is devoted to brothers visiting sisters. Another custom is putting a fresh coat of paint on your house.

Sort of a combination of Christmas gift-giving, Easter new clothes, and Independence Day firecrackers and fireworks, Diwali includes ceremonial bathing with heads and bodies massaged with perfumed oil. Rangoli, patterns (often of a lotus) are drawn near the entrance of the home with chalk or created with colored rice, sand, or powder.

Not to mention the feasting!

Narakasura did many good things by conventional standards, but he also did evil. He would not allow his people to burn lights in the darkness. When he abducted his 16,000th maiden, the evil overwhelmed his spiritual merit

Since he misused women, it seemed appropriate for a woman to punish Narakasura. Thus the god Krishna took his wife Sathyabhama with him to pursue and destroy Narakasura.

But even as he prepared for his punishment he put up an argument: “I have done a

great deal of good.” All agreed. “Therefore I deserve one request before I die. Vishnu agreed to grant one wish. Narakasura requested the institution of a Festival of Lights to recall his wickedness.

This is irony. And one interpretation is that the Festival of Light is also the Festival of Darkness, for without one the other could not be noticed.

Good and evil are not easily separated as some politicians and religious leaders make out. Thus the difference between Western and Hindu views of history: the West says that we must improve the world; a traditional Hindu view is that such efforts are futile — and in fact distract us from celebrating the wonder of existence itself. Whether we ultimately agree or not, it behooves us to consider the testimony of a culture that has remained vibrant for so long a history.

Rama is the hero of one of the two great Hindu epics, the *Ramayana*. He was a very popular and devout guy, self-controlled, eloquent, endlessly helpful. He won his bride Sita as a prize for stringing a bow no one else could string as part of a contest arranged by King Janaka, who wanted a suitable husband for his beautiful daughter.

Rama’s father, the king, was tricked into ordering Rama into the forest for 14 years of exile by one of his wives who wished her own son, Bharata, to become king. Although his father disliked this, he had given his word; and Rama, who had no desire to be king, was happy to obey. His devoted younger brother Lakshman went with him.

When Bharata learned of the plot, he put Rama’s sandals on the throne and ruled wisely until Rama could return.

Rama lived in the forest with his beloved wife Sita. Sita came to desire a pet, and the evil king Ravana took the form of an enchanting deer and kidnapped Sita.

In searching for Sita, Rama met Hanuman, the king of monkeys, sometimes regarded as an incarnation of the god Shiva. In many ordeals Hanuman and his monkey army provided devoted service.

As Rama finally won back his faithful wife and they were joyously reunited, his days of banishment were ending.

The people of Rama’s beloved home Ayodya prepared for his return by lighting the way with dipas.

In Valmiki’s version of the story, Rama is a human prince, but later devotees considered him to be an incarnation of the god Vishnu. —VB



Hanuman,
Lakshman,
Rama, Sita