

## MAHALAYA AND NAVRATRI: WHEN INDIA GOES FESTIVE

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(English Version)

For more than eight decades, Bengal begins its Durga Puja season with a very sombre rendition of Devi Mahatmya over All India Radio, just before dawn. Even the most argumentative Bengali would surely agree that Birendrakrishna Bhadra's Chandipath is one of the rare programmes that really links the people with India's ancient culture. It is amazing to see millions of late-rising Bengalis take special efforts on the day of Mahalaya to get up before dawn, just to listen to this soul-stirring invocation to the goddess which recounts the battle between good and evil through Durga's war with the powerful buffalo-demon, Mahishasura, in a radio programme.

When Nripendranath Majumdar, the Programme Director of Akashvani Kolkata started this recital in 1932 as an experiment to try to attract more radio listeners, little did he realise that this Mahishasura-mardini would become such a resounding success. The idea arose from serious adda at Akashvani and was the joint contribution of Bani Kumar, Pankaj Kumar Mallik, 'Galpa-dadu' Jogesh Basu, Raichand Boral and, of course, Birendra babu. Many prominent singers like Hemanta Mukhopadhyay and Arati Mukhopadhyay participated and it was a unique combination of sacred chants, prose recitation, songs, shanka-dhwani and background music. Birendrakrishna Bhadra's high-pitched, voice-cracking emotional rendition of the annihilation of Mahishasura was so stirring that it soon became branded with his name.

For the first few years, it was broadcast at dawn on Sashti but as many Bengalis leave the state during Pujas, Mahalaya was chosen. Some pundits grumbled that Devi Paksha was yet to arrive while others raised questions about whether a non-Brahman was entitled to chant these sacred incantations. The tradition was to broadcast fresh and live each year and no records exist of the first three decades. The present recorded version that we hear was edited only in 1966. TV tried its best to better this programme, but could not succeed even with Uttam Kumar, the state's unchallenged matinee idol. Later on, one saw experiments with film actresses, but they did appear somewhat unusual as they threatened Mahishasura and chased him all over the screen with a fearsome trishul. But this also did not work. Even after Akashvani sold its copyright to a private company several years ago for mysterious reasons, and there are several audio and video versions available on the net, there is still no real substitute to listening to it on Akashvani.

Mahalaya ends the Pitri Paksha, when the spirits of our ancestors come down from Pitri-lok and hover around the earth, along with numerous bhoots. Even the British knew this, for we find M.M. Underhill stating a century ago that “the Sun is in the rashi Kanya (Virgo) and ..... spirits leave the house of Yama and come down to occupy the homes of their descendants”. We find another report in 1917 by C.H. Buck that "of all Amavasyas, the chief is Mahalaya, the 15th or last day of the moonless fortnight of Ashwin or Kuar.” Millions of sons and grandsons, therefore, get into the water on Mahalaya for Pitri Tarpan, wherever possible: from the ghats on the Ganga and rivers, to the sea or even into local ponds.

The worship or respecting of one's ancestors is, however, not restricted only to Hindus. The ancient Romans celebrated their Parentalia which was a nine-day festival in honour of ancestors, while the Egyptians were obsessed with after-life and had special books dedicated to the dead. Catholics make it a point to visit the graves of their ancestors on All Saints Day on 2nd of November, while the

Irish and Scottish venerate their dead as Samhin on that day. Christians in Mexico commemorate their dead through very colourful processions where some dress up like skeletons and ghosts, while in the Philippines they observe Hallowmas. Thais make offerings to their ancestors through spirit-mediums and the Burmese have a long tradition of worshipping guardian spirits called Naats, which include their own ancestors.

The festivals and politics of different States can vary a lot but where this Navaratri is concerned, all agree that it is "Akal Bodhan" or the untimely invocation of the Devi that Shri Ramchandra performed just before setting off to battle. The original Navratri festival is in spring (Vasanta) and is celebrated in the month of Chaitra. But then, while Bengalis relish their fish and mutton, most Indians go on a strict vegetarian diet and many public places refuse to serve non-vegetarian food to anyone. Fasting forms an integral part of the 9-day celebration and many conservative families avoid regular cereals like rice, wheat, maida, suji and besan and stick to flour from buckwheat, millets, arrow-root and so on. Spices are also restricted to jeera, eliachi, dhania, pudina, ginger/adrak, aamchoor, green chilly and ajwain. The ban continues over vegetables and fruits as well, when even dal, onion, garlic, haldi and heeng are strictly avoided.

On the other hand, during the same Navratri, some Indians sacrifice animals to propitiate the Devi. In Rajasthan, the Rajputs slaughter buffalos or goats to their Kula-devis and many royal families and warrior clans in India do likewise. Along the Himalayan belt and in the East, buffalo slaughter is quite common. Brahmin priests recite the Gayatri Mantra into the ears of the animal that is to be slaughtered so that it is free from its cycle of re-births, which reminds us of Muslims doing the same before sacrificing animals on Id ul Zuha. Even within the holy precincts of Jagannath rams were killed during this festival in front of the image of Bimala.

Whether through blood or through rigorous vegetarianism, one of the basic objectives of the Navratri festival is to ensure better crops. In Maharashtra, it is celebrated as the Ghat-sthapana utsav by filling an earthen pot with water and supporting it on all sides with wet clay, on which food-grains are sown to sprout in these 9 days. The fact that the pitcher represents fertility is clear when Gujaratis call it "garbha" or womb and their famous Garba dance is around this pot into which a lighted lamp is placed. Much of Garba was re-fashioned, however, after it was merged with the Dandiyaa Raas. The same ghot is worshiped elsewhere also as well during this period, with yagnas or homas and special 'golden' leaves. In Goa, the pot is of copper and many other communities also start sowing pulses, cereals, barley and other seeds around this period.

During this festival, South Indians follow an interesting system of arranging little dolls on wooden planks called Bommai Kula and other similar names. These depict everyday scenes and images of Saraswati, Parvati and Laxmi which are also worshipped here, perhaps to overshadow Ram's victory with Durga's assistance. In Andhra and Mysore, it is the victory of the Pandava brothers that is celebrated, so worshippers have a larger choice.

But the more we study religious festivals it becomes clear that religion and culture could always succeed in uniting all of India, in spite of whatever differences that geography and distance could ever create, through language and customs.