

NAVARATRI.....

Jawhar Sircar : (Member : Rajya Sabha.) 7th. October, 2021. I am in Delhi where Navaratri has just begun and people are either fasting or undergoing severe restrictions on food and indulgences for the next nine days. Most are surprised that Bengal does not go through such severities and are amazed to hear of our feasting on the chief days, from Maha-Saptami to Maha-Navami.

This brings us to the wider question of how the ancient Indic religions, Hinduism survived and prospered for millennia — without a designated holy book like the Bible or the Koran and with no Mecca, Vatican or Jerusalem to guide. In fact, it is this absence of a ‘central command’ and a non-uniform format that actually accounted for the intrinsically tolerant and federal structure of Hinduism, that historically brought together, without any force, different people scattered across this widely-varying subcontinent. We continue to have quite distinct foods-diets, languages and customs, but there is a general agreement on festivals, timings and deities but observances are quite different.

Let us look at Navratri to observe how dissimilar customs and rituals came together in harmony and mutual respect — with no single theme thrusting itself on any. The important point to note, however, is that these are not really ‘local variants’ of some ‘national-level standard’ as is often claimed — for no standard exists at all. Many old regional traditions have actually taken several steps forward to ‘sanskritise’ and operate within the framework.

Broadly, we can decipher three zonal themes in Navaratri — in the north and west; the second in the east and parts of the north-east, and the third in the south. In the first zone, the goddess is worshipped through fasts and rigorous dietary restraint over nine days, but it is ultimately Ram’s victory over the evil Ravan that is really the climax on Dussehra.



Bengal, the east and north-east celebrate not Ram but Durga, in her most belligerent form, and the tenth day, Vijaya Dashami, commemorates her triumph over evil — as personified by Mahishasura. In Andhra and Mysore celebrate neither Ram nor Durga, but the victory of the Pandavas. In the rest of the south, different rupas of the devi are worshipped during Navaratri, and Tamils dedicate the first three days to Lakshmi, the next three days to Parvati or Durga, and the last three days to Saraswati. We come across fascinating displays of many dolls placed on wooden planks, called Bommai Kolu and other similar names..

Maharashtra and Odisha observe Aayudha or Astra Puja to worship instruments and tools, which, incidentally, is done in the Gangetic plains, Bengal and the east during Vishwakarma Puja a month before.

Then, while both the north and the south agree on worshipping nine forms of the goddess on nine days, the east remains ambivalent and celebrates only the last three days. As said, the east observes no dietary restrictions, but feast on fish and meat. Some Rajput families of Rajasthan also shatter Navaratri's vegetarian tradition by slaughtering goats and buffaloes.

Let us view examples of regional customs actually prevail during most 'pan-Indian' festivals. In Maharashtra, for instance, Navaratri is celebrated as the Ghat-sthapana utsav, when an earthen pot is filled with water and sits on a base of wet clay, in which seven types of food-grains are sown, which sprout in these nine days.

Gujaratis are clear that the pitcher represents fertility and call it garbha or womb. Their famous Garba dance is around this pot, into which they place a lighted lamp. Much of Garba was however re-fashioned after it was merged with the Dandiyaa Raas.

In Goa, the pot is of copper and many other communities also start sowing pulses, cereals, barley and other seeds around during this period.

Even in far-off Bengal, Nava-Patrikas or leaves of nine plants like banana, turmeric, wood-apple, pomegranate and paddy are consecrated in knee-deep water on the first day (Saptami) of Durga puja. The banyan plant and other leaves are then draped in a sari and worshipped along with the goddess as Kola Bou — obviously, as a carry-over from a fertility cult.

This is the spirit of accommodation of diversity that brought millions together, not only through

this festival but all others as well.



