



Opinion

Navratri May Be Different, But The Soul Of India is One

By **Jawhar Sircar** October 23, 2023 0



A garba performance during Navratri

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As we head to the last day of Navratri it may be good to observe how Hinduism brought together dissimilar customs and rituals in harmony and mutual

A respect — with no single theme thrusting itself on any. All Hindus agree on the same nine days and ten nights in autumn, but after that, the observances in different regions contrast quite a lot — as the ‘local’ adjusts itself within the ‘universal’.

The important point to note, however, is that these are not really ‘variants’ of some ‘national-level standard’ as is often claimed — for no such central standard exists at all. In fact, many old regional traditions have actually taken several steps forward to ‘sanskritise’, copy and come closer together. Broadly, we can decipher three zonal themes in Navratri — (1) in the north and west; (2) in the east and parts of the north-east, and (3) in the south.

In the first major zone, ‘the goddess’ is worshipped through fasts and rigorous dietary restraint over nine days. Ultimately, it is more about Ram and his victory over the evil Ravan that is really the climax of Dussehra in the north and west. The east and north-east celebrate not Lord Ram but Durga, in her most belligerent form, and the tenth day, Vijaya Dashami, commemorates her triumph over evil — as personified by Mahishasura. In the south, Andhra and Mysore celebrate neither Ram nor Durga, but the victory of the Pandavas. In Tamil Nadu, different deities are worshipped during Navratri. The first three days are for worship of Lakshmi, the next three days for 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.. At the end of Navratri the southern states, Maharashtra and Odisha observe Aayudha or Astra Puja to worship instruments and tools — which, incidentally, is done in Bengal and the Ganga states during Vishwakarma Puja a month before. Then, while both the north and the south agree on worshipping nine forms of the goddess on each of the nine days, Bengal and neighbouring states focus their celebrations mainly on the last three days and on the tenth day.

When north and west observe strict dietary restrictions, the east feasts on fish and meat. We understand the real plurality of India when we see how the ‘same Navratri’ means different festivals for different Indians. In Maharashtra, for instance, Navratri 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 Dandiya 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.

Frankly, this spirit of accommodation of diversity is what brought millions together, not only through this Navratri festival but many others as well. Basically, regional customs prevail during most 'pan-Indian' festivals, but with centuries and millennia of coexistence, the seasonal rites and worships of different regions gradually inched closer towards each other — under Brahmanical persuasion, often aided by ruling groups.

What is striking, however, is the almost total absence of force or any pre-planned mission to homogenise belief and custom within Hinduism. It is clear, therefore, that any attempt to homogenise Hinduism is bound to be antithetical and counter-productive to the very soul of plural India.

It has also been posted on Jawhar Sircar's Facebook [page](#).

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