

Navaratri and the federal character of Hinduism

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Many have often wondered how the ancient Indic religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism (Sikhism is not that ancient), 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. With a little introspection, we come to realise that it is actually this absence of a central command and non-uniform format that accounts for this. In fact, it is the intrinsically tolerant and federal structure of these faiths, especially Hinduism, that historically brought together, without force, “nationalities” scattered across widely-varying geographies of this subcontinent — with quite distinct foods, diets, languages, and customs. To appreciate this phenomenon, we may need to understand how major pan-Indian festivals offered different meanings to Hindus in different regions. The overarching common theme served mainly as an umbrella under which unique local traditions and cultural expressions found universal acceptance and legitimacy within the Hindu belief system. Since Navaratri is on our minds, let us traverse its terrain and observe how dissimilar customs and rituals came together in harmony and mutual respect — with no single theme thrusting itself on any.



Patna, Oct 3 (ANI): Children play dandiya to celebrate Navratri festival, in Patna on Thursday. (ANI Photo) (Alam Siddiqui)

All Hindus agree on the same nine days and 10 nights in autumn, but after that, the observances in different regions contrast quite a lot — as the parochial adjusts itself within the universal. 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, if one may use this term for want of an exact expression, and operate within the framework.

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Broadly, we can decipher three zonal themes in Navaratri — in the North and West; the second in the East and parts of the Northeast; 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 of Dussehra. The East and Northeast 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. We see how plural the Hindu mode actually is when we note that Andhra Pradesh and Mysuru celebrate neither Ram nor Durga, but the victory of the Pandavas.

In the South, different *devis* 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. At the end of Navaratri, the southern states, 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. Bengal and neighbouring states celebrate only the last three days and the tenth one. They observe 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 some more interesting modes of celebration of the same Navaratri in different corners of India — to understand that regional customs actually prevail during most pan-Indian festivals. In Maharashtra, for instance, Navaratri is celebrated as the *Ghatasthapana 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 started 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 banana plant and other leaves are then draped in a *sari* and worshipped along with the goddess as *Kola Bou* (a green bride) — 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 festival but all others as well. Anthropologists can note and mark the individual rites and observances which signify how sundry seasonal rites and festivals of disparate regions gradually inched closer towards each other — under Brahmanical persuasion, often aided by ruling groups. Proselytisation is theoretically not a component of Hinduism, but acculturation of entire fringe communities into the Hindu way of life has been a recurrent feature throughout history. 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 may prove to be antithetical and counter-productive.

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