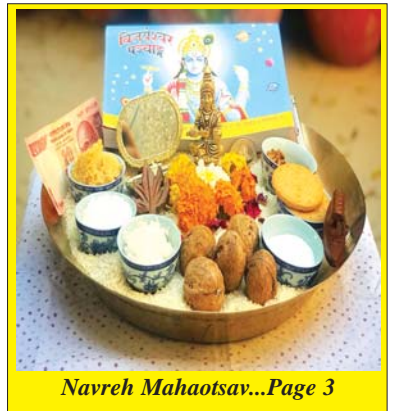


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Navratris and Women Empowerment

Understanding the symbolism of the nine forms of Durga

Rahul Dogra

Navratris is an important Hindu festival that celebrates the divine feminine energy and is a time of immense reverence for women. It honors the nine forms of Durga, the goddess of strength and power, who symbolizes female empowerment and courage. The spiritual and religious significance of Navratris runs deep, with each of its nine days representing an aspect of the Goddess Durga that has been associated with women's empowerment for centuries.

The festival is a reminder of the inherent strength and potential of women, and how they can overcome obstacles and challenges through determination and perseverance. It is a nine-day festival celebrated with much fervour and enthusiasm by Hindus across the country. During these nine days of Navratris, a different form of Goddess Durga is worshipped each day. Each day of the nine-day long Navratris festival has its own significance.

According to several Sakta scriptures, a year which is 365 days annual cycle is divided approximately into 40 nine-night periods (40 x 9 = 360 Days), known as Navratras/ navratris. Of these, four Navratras which are placed equidistantly around the calendar are prominent for the worship of Devis (Goddesses). However only two - Chaitra Navratris and Sharad Navratris are celebrated widely. Chaitra Navratris falls in late March or early April according to the Gregorian calendar. The festival is celebrated with great enthusiasm and devotion by the Hindu community all over India and other parts of the world. Navratras signify new beginnings and are considered auspicious for starting new ventures.

The supreme form of divinity is regarded as feminine. The Great Goddess is regarded as Maa Durga; the Cosmic Mother, Protector and the Destroyer of the Evil. It is believed that the Great Goddess manifested herself in three major forms namely, Maha-Saraswati, Maha-Lakshmi and Maha-Kali who are the shaktis of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva respectively.

These three forms of Durga further manifested in three more forms each, and thus emerged the nine forms of Durga, which are collectively called Navadurga or Nau Devis:

Maa Shailputri - The Navratris commences with the 1st night devoted to the puja of Maa "Shailputri". "Shail" means mountains; "Parvati", the daughter of king of Mountains Himavan, is known as "Shailputri". She is also the consort of Lord Shiva and mother of Ganesha and Kartikeya (Murugan). Her two hands display a trident and a lotus. She rides on Nandi, the sacred bull of Lord Shiva.

Maa Brahmacharini - Maa Brahmacharini is the second manifestation of Maa Durga who is worshipped on the second day of Navratris. Here word "Brahm" refers to "Tapa". So Brahmacharini means Tapa Charini - The one who performs Tapa or penance. It is said that the "Vedas", "Tatva" & "Tapa" are synonyms of word "Brahm". The form of Brahmacharini is tremendously majestic. She holds a rosary in her right hand and



Kumbha (water pot) in her left. She personifies love and loyalty. Mata Brahmacharini is a store-house of knowledge and wisdom.

Maa Chandraghanta - Maa Chandraghanta is worshipped on the third day of Navratris Pooja. Those who worship Devi Chandraghanta get eternal strength and be blessed by Devi Maa to be happy throughout one's life. Maa Chandraghanta is the one who establishes justice and wears crescent moon on her forehead which is why she is known as Chandraghanta.

The colour of her body is golden, she rides on a lion which personifies "dharma", she possesses ten hands and three eyes. Eight of her hands display weapons while the remaining two are respectively in the mudras of gestures of boon-giving and stopping harm.

Maa Kushmanda - The 4th night begins the worship of Maa "Kushmanda", possessed of eight arms, holding weapons and a mala or rosary.

Maa Kushmanda is worshipped on fourth day during Durga Pooja in Navratris. She rides a tiger, possesses eight arms holding weapons, a lotus, a rosary and Kumbha and she emanates a divine aura. Mother Goddess created the whole universe in a shape of an egg known as "Anda" with her little & light divine smile, so that Maa Durga is named Kushmanda. The word Kushmanda is made of three other words that are "Ku + Ushma + Anda = Kushmanda".

Here "Ku" is "Little", "Ushma" is "Warmth or Energy" & "Anda" is "Egg", meaning the one who creat-

ed the universe as Little Cosmic Egg with the energy of her divine smile is called Kushmanda. Maa Kushmanda is known as the creator of the whole universe and hence also named as "Adi Shakti".

Maa Skandamata - Maa Skandamata is fifth among Nava Durgas. She is the mother of Kumara Skanda or Kumara Kartikeya also called Lord Murugan in south India which is why she is known as Skandmata. Using a lion as a vehicle She holds her son, "Skand" in her lap while displaying 3 eyes and 4 hands; two hands hold lotuses while the other 2 hands respectively display defending and granting gestures. Kumar Skanda was chosen by Gods as their commander in "Deva-Sura Sangram" (the war of gods & demons) against the demons.

Maa Katyayani - Katyayani Mata is worshipped on the sixth day of Navratris. Goddess Parvati took this form to kill the demon Mahishasura. Katyayani Maa rides a majestic lion. She is depicted with four arms, where the left two arms carry lotus & a sword, and right two arms stay in Varada & Abhaya Mudras.

The Goddess got this name Katyayani because she was born to the Katyayana Rishi. Some texts also described that she is an Avatar of Goddess Shakti and got this name because Rishi Katyayana was the first one to worship her.

Maa Kalaratri - The seventh day of Navratris pooja is dedicated to Durga Kalaratri. This is the most violent form of Goddess Durga. Kalaratri is the one of the

fiercest forms of Durga. Kalaratri means the one who is "the Death of Kaal". Here Kaal is depicted as time & death.

Kalaratri is the one who destroys ignorance and removes darkness. She possesses dark skin with bountiful hair and four hands, two clutching a cleaver and a torch, while the remaining two are in the mudras of "giving" and "protecting". She is mounted upon a Donkey.

This form primarily depicts that life also has dark side - the violent Mother Nature and creates havoc and removes all dirt when needed.

Maa Mahagauri - The Eighth day is dedicated to Mahagauri. This is the form of Goddess Parvati when she did penance to get Lord Shiva as her husband. It is believed that due to intense Tapas performed by her without moving caused soil and dust to collect on her body.

Lord Shiva cleaned her with water from Ganga which made her shine as white as a pearl and she got the name as Maha Gauri. She has got four arms and the fairest complexion of all the Durga Shaktis. She holds a drum and a trident and is often depicted riding a bull.

Maa Siddhidatri - The last among the nine forms of Maa Shakti is Goddess Siddhidatri who is worshipped on the ninth day of Navratris. 'Siddhi' is a Sanskrit term which means 'perfection'. Goddess Siddhidatri sits on Lotus and rides on the lion. She is depicted with four hands. She has Gada (mace) in the one right hand, Chakra in the other right hand, lotus flower in the one left hand and Shankh in the other left hand.

She is the Goddess who possesses and bestows all type of Siddhis to her devotees. Even Lord Shiva got all Siddhis by grace of Goddess Siddhidatri. She is worshipped by not only humans but also by Deva, Gandharva, Asura, Yaksha and Siddha. Lord Shiva got the title of Ardhha-Narishwar when Goddess Siddhidatri appeared from his left half.

Kanjak Pujan is also an important ritual that is performed during the eighth day (Ashtami) and ninth day (Navami). It is also known as Kanya Pujan, where young girls are worshipped as the embodiment of the divine feminine power. During the Kanjak Pujan, young girls are invited to the house, and their feet are washed as a sign of respect. They are then offered food, sweets, and gifts, which are considered as a form of offering to the goddess. The girls are worshipped and blessed with holy water, vermillion, and flowers, and their foreheads are marked with a tilak. This ritual is performed to seek the blessings of the goddess and to show reverence towards young girls who are believed to represent the purity and innocence of the goddess and are seen as a symbol of hope and potential for the future, and their blessings are believed to bring prosperity and happiness to the household.

These nine manifestations of Maa Durga which are worshipped during Navratris, are believed to infuse divine spirit in us. During Navratris, devotees crowd into virtually every goddess temple for darshan; profound perceptual interaction with the Divine. Navratris is a celebration of the power and potential of women, and a reminder that women can achieve anything they set their minds to. By understanding the symbolism of the nine forms of Durga, we can better appreciate the role of women in society and their contributions to the world.

Mela Ramkund Temple

K.D Maini

Ramkund is the symbol of our ancient culture, art and traditions. This is the oldest temple in Poonch region. As per the archaeological report, this beautiful temple was built by Raja Lalitaditya (i.e. between 724 AD and 761 AD) because the style, architecture and the age of the temple is the same as of those temples built by Raja Lalitaditya in Kashmir. This temple having very attractive look and history is embedded in the past from the religious point of view, but remained out of sight due to locational disadvantages. Now this old shrine is regaining its erstwhile status.

Ramkund temple is located at a sleepy village Narol of Mendhar tehsil 62 kilometers from Poonch township. This important religious place is located in a deep gorge at the foothill of Shah Star Range of mountains from all sides. At present there are three sacred ponds apart from the ancient temple. They are known as Ram Kund, Lachman Kund and Sitakund. Ramkund is bigger in size (25' X 25'), then Lachmankund and Sita Kund and a bit elevated from the other two. A spring water emerges exactly on the northern side of Ramkund. The water of this spring pours into Ramkund which overflows to Lachman Kund and at last Sitakund. The latter is the smallest in size. These kunds have been excavated in such a way that the water of spring after filling all the kunds flows out in nallah. On the eastern side of Ramkund, there is a historical temple of 8th century. Stone structure stair case begins from the eastern side of Ramkund upto the entrance of the temple. At present, there is an idol of Hanuman which was installed in the temple in the recent past. On the northern side a small structure houses the residence of Pujari and a cowshed. A 'Kutiya' has also been constructed near the temple for 'Sadhus' and pilgrims. The western side of this Holy place is surrounded by banana trees and small garden of plums which gives this place look of an 'Ashraam'.

As per Rajtrngani of Kalhan there is a very interesting story behind the construction of this temple. Kalhan narrates that Raja Lalitaditya who was a great warrior and had converted Poonch town into Chawani (cantonnement) of his forces and named this place as Purn-Utsva (with the passage of time, this name became Poonch from Purn-Utsva). Kalhan writes that once Raja Lalitaditya left for hunting in the jungle and reached this place, in the evening. At this very solitary place he saw in the nearby a girl singing a devotional song while a beautiful girl was dancing. When the song was over, both the girls bowed their heads at this place and left. The next day also the same happening was repeated by the same girls. Then Raja Lalitaditya came before these girls and enquired from them why they were dancing and singing their devotional song at this lonely place in the jungle. The girls replied that they were Devdassies and doing so on the direction of their mothers and grand mothers. "This is our traditional job but we do not know the reason of our



(19TH AND 20TH MARCH 2023)

dancing at this place". Raja thought that there may have been some sacred place in the past at that spot. Next day he ordered for the excavation of that particular place where the DevDassies were offering prayer in the evening. After some excavation, two old temples came out on the surface from the earth whose doors were shut. When Raja opened the door, he saw that two idols of Keshav were installed there. On the back of these idols, it was engraved that these idols were installed by Ramchander Ji during his visit to Kashmir. Raja Lalitaditya took out these idols to Kashmir along with him and he installed the idol of Ram Chander Ji in the temple of Vishnu Parihas in Parhbaarspur, while the second idol was taken by the Queen and she installed it in Chakrshveri temple.

It appears that while taking the original idols from Ramkund temple, Raja

Lalitaditya got renovated or reconstructed the original excavated monument with some additions and converted this place into the important religious shrine. No doubt that Raja Lalitaditya had built Poonch city but at present, there is no such building existing on the ground of Lalitaditya's time except Ramkund temple Mendhar. This is the only temple in this region which indicates the construction undertaken by Lalitaditya in Poonch district.

Stein visited Poonch in 1892 AD and identified a number of places like Loharkote (Loran), Attalika (Atoli), Saramber (Chamber Kanari) Sawvernink (Surankote) mentioned in the Rajtrngani. But he could not identify the Ramkund Temple of Raja Lalitaditya's time because this temple was located in a very unknown place which was far away from the main route leading towards Kashmir in those days. All the inhabitants of this area were non-Hindus. Even most of the Hindus were knowing very little about this shrine in the past. Therefore, they could not talk about this temple to Stein but guessed that this temple can be located in the Southern side of Kashmir.

The other proof is the Devdassies information to Raja Lalitaditya that they belong to a nearby village known as Sover Dehmana at that time. This village is still existing near Narol (where temple exists) and known as Dharana instead of Dehmana. Therefore, on the facts given above, it is clear that Ramkund is the same temple which was excavated and reconstructed by Raja Lalitaditya in 8th Century.

Before 1947 the local Dogra Rajas of Poonch had annexed a Jagir with temple, however presently all the agriculture land of temple has been occupied by the land tillers. Therefore there is no source of income except donation from Yattris. This is the only ancient temple in Poonch area but due to locational disadvantages very few people visit the shrine in routine. The condition of road from Chajla Bridge to Ramkund is not satisfactory. No doubt that this road was metalled by the department recently, however the work was so substandard that presently it becomes difficult for the vehicles to ply on the road. There is also the need of preservation and rehabilitation of this heritage monument, publicity from tourism department through pamphlet and recovery of temple land illegally occupied so that the past glory and glamour of this centuries old religious place could be restored.

A big Mela known as Mela Chatar Chodus will be organized on the occasion of Navratras. The devotees from Poonch, Rajouri, Jammu and abroad usually take part in this Mela, have a dip in the holy water of Ramkund, Lachman Kund and Sita Kund, then participate in Havan, Yag and Arti of Ramkund. This year Mela shall commence on 19th March 2023 with the collaboration of Vishav Hindu Prishad, Bajrang Dal and Sanatan Dharam Sabha. The procession shall lead towards Ramkund in between chanting of Slogans, Bajans and Kirtan and would reach Ramkund at about 11:00 am where Chaddi Mubarak shall be received by local Administration, Police and Army authorities and Mahant Ramkund Temple. Immediately after that Ramayan Path shall start which will continue upto 20th March. After the Bogh of Ramayan Path, Havan and Yag the devotees will start Bajjan, Kirtan and bathing in holy Kunds and participate in Langar. After that the devotees shall start dispersing. The full security arrangements and safety of devotees have been made by local authorities and Police in collaboration with the 37 RR Jawans.