Navaratri and Kojagari Purnima

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Navaratri is the much-awaited festival that celebrates the Goddess with much fanfare and grandeur. The Maghi Navaratri (in February), the Chaitra Navaratri (in March/April), the Ashadha Navaratri (in August) and the Sharadiya Navaratri (in October/November) are the four main Navaratri-s. Yet, it is the one happening in the Ashwija Masa - the Sharadiya Navaratri - that is most significant and popular. Every Hindu month has an Adhishthana Devata. The Universal Mother is the Adhishthatri Devi of the Ashwija Masa. Thus, during the Shukla Paksha of this month, the Devi is specially welcomed all over the world.

Sharadiya Navaratri starts on the first day of the Ashwija Masa - the Shukla Pratipada and culminates on the tenth day which is celebrated as Vijayadashami or Dussehra. Every day of those 9 days finds the Devi Shakti celebrated in a different form, recognised by a different name.

On the first day, She comes as Shailaputri, the beautiful daughter of Himavana, the king of the mountains. The second day finds Her as Brahmacharini, a form that is steeped in tapasya in Her bid to woo the Ascetic Shiva. On the third day, She appears with a bell-shaped crown bearing the crescent moon and is thus called Chandraghanta. On the fourth day Her form is Kushmanda, where She is depicted as the Creator of the entire Universe. The fifth day (Lalita Panchami) is sacred indeed, and She is shown as the mother of Subrahmanya or Kartikeya in the form of the attractive Skandamata. The sixth day is dedicated to Devi Saraswati and the Goddess is worshipped as Katyayani, the daughter of Sage Katyayana. On the seventh day, Her fearsome form of Kalaratri is worshipped where Her serene form changes into this Dark Goddess to destroy evil. Ashtami, the eighth day is called Durgashtami and the Goddess returns to being the gentle and compassionate Mahagauri. The ninth and the penultimate day of the Navaratri celebration sees Her as Siddhidatri, the wish-fulfilling Goddess.

After being worshipped for nava-ratri - nine nights by devotees all over the world, the tenth special day is called Vijayadashami. It is also celebrated as Dussehra - the day when Bhagawan Shri Ram killed Ravana and began His Digvijaya Yatra back to Ayodhya.

In our own Shri Chitrapur Math in Shirali, the Navaratri festival carries a unique flavour. Quite a few Chitrapur Saraswat families have their deities in the Math and they congregate to celebrate the festival of the Divine Mother. The larger vigraha-s are brought out into a small pandal called the Devi Mantapa that makes it possible for the devotees to offer their worship. Draped in sarees of different colours, wearing traditional jewellery and bedecked with fragrant flowers, the array of Goddesses adds to the Divinity of our Math during Navaratri.

The Navaratri Utsava begins at our Math with a Samuhika Prarthana to Lord Bhavanishankar and the Ghata Sthapana. Dhanya is ceremoniously planted, that becomes ankurita over the next ten days, and is then distributed as prasada. Nitya Puja at the Devi Mantapa, Durganamaskara, and Devi Pujana performed by H.H. Swamiji every night are regular features of the Utsava. The Chandika Homa, an elaborate yajna to propitiate the Devi is a special seva.

Another lovable feature of Navaratri is the Kumarika Puja. Girls from the age of 3 to 7 are invited for the ceremony as Kumarika-s. Mothers dress up their daughters lovingly for it is believed that the Devi Herself manifests in each of them during the Pujana. Married women worship the little girls, washing their feet, doing an arati and showering them with gifts. In our Math, H.H. Swamiji begins this much-loved ritual to the sheer joy of th Kumarika-s.

The tenth day is the culmination of the Navaratri Utsava and is rightly called Vijayadashami, and commemorates Her victory over Bhandasura, the demon who tormented the Deva-s. This is also the Ordination Day of our 10th Mathadhipati, H.H. Shrimat Parijnanashram Swamiji III. On Vijayadashami pujana is offered to the Shami Vrksha. It is considered an extremely auspicious day by all Chitrapur Saraswat-s. The Ghata Visarjana marks the end of Navaratri.

The Shukla Chaturdashi is an extension of the upasana of the Goddess as we worship Devi Lakshmi as Ma Bhumi. As Dhanya Lakshmi, a Puja is offered in the paddy fields to the Devi. Nava Dhanya (9 types of grain) are brought into the Math as an offering.

On the Purnima, we perform Dhanalakshmi Pujana. This very special full moon day has a special and significant name - Kojagari Purnima! It is believed that staying awake through the night brings rich dividends spiritually. Devi Lakshmi is believed to descend from Her Heavenly Abode and walks along the path created by the radiant moonbeams as She asks -" Ko jagarti” meaning "Who is awake?" The one who is awake, is specially blessed! The Devi Pujana offered on behalf of the Samaja by our Revered Swamiji carries on late into the night. Badam Milk that has been exposed to the moon rays is served as Prasada.

The festivities conclude with all age groups participating in a vigorous and joyous garba dance to lively bhajana-s. The garba concludes with the bhajana-s sung by H.H. Swamiji. Soon after, the entire gathering enters into divine silence as His Holiness guides them into meditation.

Thus, the fortnight-long celebration of the Devi draws to a close. The Navaratri Utsava truly represents an UT- sava: an upliftment in the spiritual energy of every one who worships HER.