

Mothers and Goddesses

By Sally Swope

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Every May, we let our mothers know they're special on Mother's Day. Often we send her a card or take her out for brunch, and for some it's a chance to have a family gathering. In different ways, mothers are celebrated in most countries of the world.

An extraordinary way to honor mothers takes place in India each October called Navaratri, a festival dedicated to the worship of the Goddess Durga, a fierce warrior goddess. She was created from all the male gods because they couldn't kill a terrible demon. Durga the Goddess killed the buffalo demon Mahisha with her twelve arms.

In Hinduism, the Supreme manifests itself in both male and female forms. Every major male has a female counterpart, and many worship the Great Goddess exclusively. The word for goddess means power and energy.

I heard about this festival from a good friend who was leading tours to Greece. After she explained some of the highlights of Navaratri, I didn't want to miss it! I'm grateful to the Indian Tourism Office for helping me visit India during the festival. Looking back, this festival has had a huge impact on my life.

The Great Mother Festival throughout India

The Great Goddess was many. She was worshiped as the feminine life force, Devi: all life came from her. She was an embodiment of nature, as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of life.

The Great Mother festival touches most every aspect of a Hindu's life, their family, work, spiritual beliefs and community. It is related to the epic poem, the Ramayana, a classic of Indian literature that most children know. It tells a simple story of Prince Rama and his lovely bride, Sita.

They leave their kingdom together but Sita was abducted by a ten-headed demon. Rama was so angry that he sent his army of monkeys and bears to her rescue and later she was reunited. Symbolically, this reinforces that the all is good, and each year they reaffirm this intuitive belief.

In Agra, the last night of the festival was fantastic! I saw a woman dressed up as Sita with dozens of orange, yellow and pink garlands draped around her neck as she rode

around a large outdoor stadium on the back of a white convertible waving to the crowd. People dressed as monkeys and bears followed the car. The crowd of several thousand cheered loudly as she passed by. Then colorful 20-foot high papier-mâché effigies of the demon and his two brothers were set ablaze and triggered a fusillade of firecrackers.

After the festival is over in India, it begins in Kullu, a village in the Himalayas. It's famous for a procession of four men carrying heavy platforms on their shoulders running into the valley at night. Each platform had an image of the Goddess Durga on top of the platforms. The men placed them in front of tents with fires to warm them. During this dramatic scene, other men at the tents blew horns about five feet long pointing toward the stars. About a hundred thousand people lined the narrow streets.

The festival gave neighbors a chance to meet before the winter snows separated them until spring. Many children dressed in costumes as Sita and Rama were dancing on a stage in the center of the village in the warm mid-day sunlight. Throughout the village small groups of swamis looked lost and dazed.

People from over the world come to this festival. I met three French filmmakers, who took me to a hot curry dinner and in the tent across the table from me was a good friend from San Francisco then living in Hanoi. What a coincidence!

The earliest goddesses

I wondered where the idea for this festival began and what the earliest goddesses looked like. I discovered that the idea of honoring women as goddesses was as old as India. It is widely accepted that civilization in India began and evolved in the valley of the Indus River in the period 3300-2600 BCE.

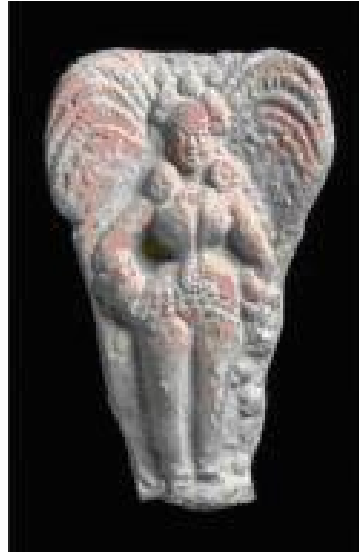
The people of the Indus Valley cities worshiped a Mother Goddess. The importance accorded to these roles and also to the feminine, can be drawn from the number of figurines excavated. The important poses include a Dancing Girl and terracotta figurines of what can be identified as fertility goddesses.

The image of the goddess on the left below was excavated in the Indus Valley. She is heavily ornamented with an elaborate choker and two other necklaces between her breasts. This elaborate ornamentation is one reason that female figurines have often been interpreted as deities, most commonly as "Mother Goddesses."

Each clay image could be held in a woman's hands as she was shaking a rattle dancing around a fire at night under the moonlight performing rituals with other women. The women, as goddesses, had powers and energies that helped women become fertile, eased the pain of childbirth, and healed the sick. The goddess ensured large harvests and successful hunts. Symbolically she represents the feminine in each of us.



**Goddess, Indus River period,
3300-2600 BCE**



Goddess, Approx. 100 BCE-100 CE

The image on the right resembles the goddess on the left although it was created 3,000 years later. She has wide hips, voluptuous breasts and a small waist. The image barely emerges from the flat clay plaque she rests on. Adorned with heavy bracelets, and earrings, she has a beaded-necklace that hung between her breasts. Although she has a diadem over her hips, her yoni is visible. With both hands on her hips, she seemed strong and her fantastic hair seemed to radiate her energy.

This goddess figurine is dated to approximately 100 BCE to 100 CE, is made of terracotta and is from Northern or Eastern India. This is on display the Asian Art Museum in San Francisco.



Fertility goddess on the East Gates at Sanchi, 1st century BCE

As Indian cultural beliefs evolved, the emphasis was on the fertility of nature and goddesses. One instance of this is “yukshis” or fertility figures. In the figure above, the woman’s voluptuous body, carved in stone, is part of the East gate of the Great Stupa at Sanchi made in the first century BCE. She is holding on to a tree and when she kicked its trunk with her right foot, she made the tree come alive.

She resembles the shape of the goddesses in the Indus Valley but this is a more realistic image of a woman. Later, maithunas or couples in sexual union were carved on the outside of temple walls. The scriptures warn that unless this spiritual transformation occurs the union is carnal and sinful.

“The fertile earth and women were valued. Sexuality was a natural instinct and a pleasure. Society was matrifocal and matrilineal because everyone knew who their mother was.”

Jean Bolen, *Goddesses in Older Women*

Goddess figurines in the Indus Valley and Mesopotamia

The clay images from the Indus Valley were traded with people as far away as Mesopotamia in what is Iraq today. They have been found in both civilizations. The people who made them in the Indus Valley were peaceful and no weapons of war have been found in excavations of more than 1,500 cities.

Traders took these goddess images with them for protection in their travels. Many wealthy people brought back luxuries such as rugs, jewels, minerals and metals. They traded in the largest cities, Harappa and Mohen-daro, with about 40,000 people. It was the beginning of skills in trading, farming, and brick-making that helped shape the culture of Northwest India and Eastern Pakistan today.



Map of routes to Mesopotamia from the Indus Valley, Map from the Web

Hundreds of small steatite seals about 1.5 inches square used in trade had writing on one side. The script hasn't been deciphered but it indicates there were scribes and literate people in the Indus Valley. When we understand their language, we'll know more about the goddesses as well as their religious beliefs, form of government, and social structure.

Goddesses and mothers

The Indus Valley civilization reached its peak from about 2500 BCE to 1500 BCE during the Harappa period. Then it started to fall apart and trade with Mesopotamia stopped. The Great Bath at Mohenjo-daro was built over and the Indus Valley Civilization vanished — possibly due to a flood.

Hindus embraced the goddess culture that began in India's first civilization. Now the Great Mother festival is supported by the church and Indian government. It's a time annually when Hindus embrace the goddess culture beginning in India's first civilization. It's interesting to see the relationship of the earliest known goddesses to the Goddess Durga and the Mother Goddess festival.

My curiosity about the festival led me to India and its origin led me to the exciting discovery that Indians have embraced the goddess culture for 5,000 years. The goddess figurines were small enough to hold like the replica of one that I sometimes hold. What a huge improvement to our culture if we honored women in this way.



Goddess figurine from India, 100 BCE – 100 CE
Asian Art Museum of San Francisco