

The Great Mother Festival

by Sally Swope 2,000 words and 4 photos March 1, 2016

An extraordinary festival takes place in India every October that renews the Indians' belief that the force of good prevails over the evil. This celebration known as *Navratri* or the *Great Mother* festival involves *the entire country*. There are many traditions during this ten-day celebration unlike any holiday in the U.S.

It is dedicated to the Hindu goddess *Durga*, who is both a fierce warrior and the mother of the universe! Durga is benign, gentle, gets things done and at the same time she can be ferocious. In all forms she helps her devotees. She represents the Hindu belief that the world revolves around creation, preservation and destruction. These forces are represented by Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.



The goddess Durga is both a fierce warrior and the Great Mother

I discovered this fantastic festival through friends in New York who introduced me to a friend of theirs who was writing a book about Indian festivals. When she explained the Great Mother festival I was interested since I was involved with many goddess-related events in the Bay Area. India was a place I'd dreamed about visiting for many years and I wanted to experience this amazing festival.

For several years I visited many Asian countries as a travel writer. For this adventure I sent a proposal to the Indian Tourism Office in LA. In about a week the director of the Tourism Department called to say the trip was on! Then we designed my itinerary so I saw more than the Mother Goddess festival in Kullu. She insisted I see the Taj Mahal. I even was able to bring a friend who was a professional photographer. This was so exciting -- I was finally going to India!

I discovered Navratri was a little like Christmas with giving gifts and putting ornaments on a tree. In place of Santa Clause and the busy elves at the North Pole, the Hindus parents told their kids about the Ramayana that reinforced that the force of goodness endures. It was written between 800 BCE to 200 BCE.

The Ramayana has been told for more than a thousand years. It is the story of Prince Rama and his beautiful bride, Sita, who decided to see the world outside of their palace after their marriage. They encountered many difficulties: a demon with seven heads and ten arms abducted Sita. To find her, Rama sent his army of monkeys and bears and eventually they did. Then they brought her back to Rama. The army demon was killed and they returned home where they were embraced as heroes.

In Agra, where the Taj Mahal is located, I saw a woman who represented Sita dressed in a golden sari with dozens of orange, yellow and pink garlands draped around her neck. She was paraded around an outdoor stadium on the back of a convertible waving to the crowd. People dressed as monkeys and bears followed the car and the huge crowd in the stadium that night was cheering loudly as she passed by.

At the park, there was a colorful 20-foot high papier-mâché effigy of the demon and his two brothers. They were set ablaze which triggered a fusillade of firecrackers. The loud sounds and sparks in the sky were a great finale to the Mother Goddess festival. Killing the demon was a way the Indians affirmed their belief in the force of goodness.

The Mother Goddess rituals were even part of work. Many people in private and government positions got a week's vacation. In Bangalore that is India's Silicon Valley, I visited the famous Tata Computer Company. After an interview, the vice president asked me if I wanted to join their celebration of Navratri. Fortunately I arrived on the right day at the right time!

I saw a swami bless the things that made the techies' work possible by putting a marigold on each keyboard and monitor. What a surprise when he sprinkled holy water on all of the workers and me! A few young men told me this ritual renewed their sense of commitment to their work. Then we ate some small cakes and they returned to work. I caught a flight back to Chennai where my guide was and my adventures continued.

Before the trip, I had discovered Kullu's ten-day festival that began after the one in India and Nepal ended. At last I was in the Himalayas at the festival I couldn't wait to see! Kullu's festival is like no other. Many foreigners were there and my friend and I found the last beds available in the small village. We didn't know if we'd find a place to stay. Unfortunately, my friend got sick and spent most of the week in bed.

The festival began when many men carried images of Durga on platforms into the valley at night. The statues rested on a platform held on the shoulders of four men. The men ran down the mountain paths into the village as other men blew long horns. These men stood close to small fires before their tents since it was cold at night.

The scene was more exciting than I had anticipated. I met two filmmakers from Paris and we met several times to explore the village. We passed many stoned swamis sitting doing nothing! Marijuana grew like weeds on the side of roads and they were blitzed. One night, the filmmakers took me to a tent that served a delicious Tibetan dinner. By chance I met a good friend from home who at that time was living in Hanoi! On my last day in Kullu, we went to the village Vashisht for a delightful dip in a sulfur hot springs that revitalized me

In many ways this festival seemed like a carnival. Many hundreds of villagers were there visiting booths that sold things like yarn in neon colors to knit into gloves women made. Popcorn and orange drinks were for sale. Many visited a huge booth with photos of Nehru, India's first prime minister, on his 100th birthday.

Some teens played with a red computer in a shop while other kids lined up to take rides on exotic animals like elephants. Parents and friends watched kids in costumes dancing on an open-air stage in the bright warm sunlight. This was the last chance to meet with friends before the snows separating them until spring.

Goddesses are as Old as India

I wondered where the idea for the Great Mother festival began. I discovered the Indus Valley, was India's *first civilization* and it reached its peak around 2500 BCE to 2000 BCE. Located in what is now Pakistan and northwest India, this area was where archeologists found many small clay figures of special women. Most were about five inches tall with large breasts, small waists and huge hips. Also these special women wore heavy jewelry around their neck, wrists and ankles and an elaborate headdress that looked like no other. Today we would call them goddesses.

"The Great Goddess was many," according to Jean Bolen M.D, in the Goddesses of Older Women. "She was worshiped as the feminine life force: all life came from her. She was an embodiment of nature, as her creator, sustainer and destroyer of life."

The clay goddess image could be held in a woman's small hand as she danced around a fire at night under the moonlight. These goddesses lived together and prepared special foods for the rituals. They went to the large communal baths found in Mohenjaro and Harappa, that once had a combined population of 40,000. There is a lot to learn about these goddesses. Many of the delicate ancient goddess images are in museums around the world since they are so precious. In the collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, there are several goddess images on display.



Goddess from West Bengal, made more than 1,500 ears ago

Photo taken from the web

According to the information on the label next to the case where this special woman is kept, this is a "figure of a woman" rather than a goddess. Why not recognize her special powers? "The fertility of nature and of humans is one of the earliest themes in Indian art," the label said but didn't mention that she was goddesses. She was one of the earliest goddesses found in the world. The image above is shaking a rattle in her right hand and her foot was turned since she was dancing. This delicate goddess made in clay was found in West Bengal and made at approximately 100 BCE to 100 CE.



Goddess from Northern or Eastern India, 100 BCE to 100 CE

Photo taken from the web

This image of a goddess at the Asian Museum has a label that indicated she was a “figure of a woman,” without any reference to her as a goddess. She radiated her energy with her long bushy hair and headdress and is adorned with heavy jewelry. It was very hot and she was able to make women fertile, ease the pain of childbirth, nurture the sick and create a good way of life. She is holding a bird in her right hand that she used in a ritual. The plaque was excavated in Northern or Eastern India around 100 BCE and was made of terra-cotta.



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

Photo taken from the Web

The emphasis on goddesses continued as the Indian's earth-based beliefs developed into the Hindu pantheon of goddesses such as Durga. The fertility goddess above was called a "Yakshi" and was so powerful that when she kicked the tree behind her with her right foot, the tree came alive! Her voluptuous body was carved in stone on the east gate of the Great Stupa at Sanchi. By the 1st century BCE, some craftsmen made three-dimensional forms.

Jean Bolen, M.D. explained in the Goddesses in Older Women, *"The fertile earth and fertility of women were valued. Sexuality was a natural instinct and a pleasure. Society was multifocal and matrilineal because everyone knew who was their mother and who their siblings were."*

The people I met on my three-week trip were helpful and generous with their time. After my guide in Chennai took me to a famous Hindu temple, she took me to her home so I could see how she celebrated the festival. She said her family got together for a dinner with special foods that she had prepared for the last day of the festival. I met her neighbor who had decorated a wooden tree with small ornaments that symbolized the strength of family.

I discovered goddesses are as old as the Indian culture that began in the Indus Valley. It is interesting that no weapons of war were found in any excavations in the Indus Valley. The people who lived there were peaceful and believed in goddesses' powers to affect their lives. Even today, Indians feel they are empowered to make changes in their lives during this festival.

Hundred of the little images of goddesses were excavated in Harappa and Mohenjaro. They also were found in Mesopotamia thousands of miles away from the Indus Valley. Traders took the clay goddess images with them for protection on the long trek and traded them as they engaged in the earliest international trade.

The Mother Goddess Festival celebrated today is fascinating. You have to experience it to imagine something so different from our holidays. The festival is rooted in Hindu beliefs. During Navratri, the Great Mother has the respect of ninety-five percent of the Indian population who are Hindus. The festival also honors Durga, who is so powerful she can create, preserve and destroy the world in an endless cycle of life. From this amazing journey to India, I took home the belief that good prevails over evil.