

Celebrating Mothers

by Sally Swope

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We share a day in May when we let our moms know how much we love them and appreciate all the times they made a huge difference in our lives. We send cards and maybe take her out for brunch. Some adult kids return for a family reunion. Countries around the world celebrate mothers in very different ways.

An extraordinary festival in October, called Navaratri, is dedicated to the worship of the Goddess Durga. Known as the Great Mother festival the entire country celebrates for nine nights and ten days. Throughout India and Nepal, people are out of work. When the festival ends in India, it begins in Kullu in the Himalayas. The festival of lights, Diwali, is celebrated twenty days after the last day.

Durga is both the Warrior Goddess and the Supreme Mother. She is benign and gentle, while in other forms she is dynamic and ferocious, but in all forms she is helpful to her devotees.

I discovered this fantastic festival unlike any holiday in the US through a friend in New York. When she explained Navaratri, I didn't want to miss it! As a travel writer, I contacted the India Tourism Office in LA and received an all-expenses paid trip and brought a photographer along. After returning to San Francisco, half the way around the world, I wrote a feature article about my experiences that Yoga magazine published. Let me tell you a just few experiences of my trip.

One way of praising mothers today

I wondered who was this Great Mother? *"The Great Goddess was many. 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."* Jean Bolen M.D. *Goddesses in Older Women.*

The Great Mother festival touches every aspect of a Hindu's life, their family life, the things that make their work possible, their spiritual life, even their community. It is entwined with the epic poem, the Ramayana, which recounts the story of Prince Rama and his lovely bride, Sita. These archetypical lovers reunited are an integral part of festival.

When they left the kingdom to see what the world was like outside, they encountered many obstacles. Sita was abducted by a ten-headed demon! Rama was so angry that he sent his army of monkeys and bears to her rescue. When they found her, they overwhelmed the demon long enough to get Sita and take her to Rama. Then they returned home happy to be together again; the force of good was supreme.

In Agra, the last night of the festival was fantastic! I saw a woman dressed up as Sita in a golden sari with dozens of orange, yellow and pink garlands draped around her neck. She was paraded around a large outdoor stadium on the back of a Ford convertible! People dressed as monkeys and bears followed the car as though they were protecting her from the huge crowd cheering 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. This finale symbolized the belief that the force of good reigns as the natural order of the universe.

After the festival is over in the rest of India, Kullu, in the Himachal Pradesh state in the Himalayas, is famous for its ten-day festival. Men carrying platforms on their shoulders brought images of the Goddess Durga from into the valley. The platforms were heavy and the air cold. They took them to tents with friends who had a fire going. They placed them in front of the tents while others blew long horns. It was a spectacular procession that continued long into the night.

The festival gave neighbors a chance to meet again before the winter snows separated them until spring. Many children in elaborate costumes performed folk dances on stage in the warm noon time sunlight. Some kids played in the streets and others at a carnival took rides on exotic animals like elephants.

What did the earliest goddesses look like?

After experiencing this wonderful festival, I wondered where the idea for this festival began. I discovered that the idea of honoring women as goddesses is as old as India! The people in the Indus Valley, India's oldest civilization, made images of goddesses who were powerful and helped the community. The images were traded with people far away along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is Iraq today. The people who made them were peaceful and no weapons of war have been found at any of the excavations of more than 1,500 cities in the Indus Valley.

Hundreds of small clay figures of women with large breasts, small waists and huge hips are the earliest images of goddesses. They are dated to 2,500 BCE and come from the Indus Valley. This was India's first civilization in what is now Northwest India and Eastern Pakistan. There are several goddess images on display in the collection of the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco.

Goddesses had powers that made women fertile, eased the pain of childbirth, healed the sick, and ensured a big harvest and successful hunt. Each clay image could be held in a woman's small hands as she danced shaking a rattle around a fire at night under the moonlight performing rituals with other goddesses. She might have taken a distressed young man to the communal bath for solace or prepared special foods for a full moon ritual. Were these women taken from their family at an early age to learn the ways of the goddesses? There are many unanswered questions.



**Goddess created in the Indus Valley Civilization
from West Bengal, made more than 4,000 years ago**

Photo taken from the web

According to the information on the label for the image above, she is called "figure of a woman" and "the fertility of nature and of humans is one of the earliest themes in Indian art." She is not given any indication of her value in the communities. She is beautiful with her large hips and breasts and a small waist. With heavy jewelry adorning her body, and an elaborate headdress, she seems to radiate energy. She was wearing a kind of sari and shook a rattle in her right hand close to her face as her feet turned when was dancing.

This symbolic feminine in all of us is part of our collective unconsciousness. She is the archetypical woman as a healer of our problems physical and psychological. This tiny sacred woman speaks to me although we are so far apart in time.

She was made 1,400 to 2,200 years ago of terra-cotta, clay that has been baked, that has lasted through the ages. This two-dimensional portrait of sacred women came from Northern or Eastern India.



Goddess from the Indus Valley Civilization

Photo taken from the Web

Like the previous “figure of a woman,” this is a goddess with big hips and breasts and a small waist. She barely emerges from the flat piece of clay she rests on. Adorned with heavy rich bracelets, earrings, jewelry and a diadem over her hips, her yoni is visible. From her reproductive center, she projects tremendous power. Her fantastic hair radiated her energy. The rattle in her right hand rests on her right thigh above another musical instrument used in a ritual.

This image of a sacred goddess is dated to approximately 1,400 to 2,200 years ago. Like the other goddess, she is made of terra-cotta and this plaque was excavated in northern or Eastern India.



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

Photo taken from the Web

The emphasis on women's power continued in Indian culture. One instance is a "yukshis" or female fertility figures in the first century BCE. This woman's beautiful body was carved in stone as part of the East gate of the Great Stupa at Sanchi. When she kicked the tree behind her with her right foot, she gave it life. She resembles the goddesses in the Indus Valley and shows a more realistic woman. Later, maithunas or couples in "sexual union" were carved on the outside of temples. The scriptures warn that unless this spiritual transformation occurs the union is carnal and sinful.

"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 their mother was and siblings were," explained Jean Bolen, M.D. in *Goddesses in Older Women*.

As a result of trade between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley, archeologists have found many goddess figurines in both places. Also they excavated hundreds of small

steatite seals about 1.5 inches square that were used in trade. Each seal is different with images of animals and fantastic people that were part animal. They even devised a kind of writing that is yet to be deciphered. We still have a lot to learn about their form of government, religious beliefs, and social structure.



Map of the trade routes to Mesopotamia from the Indus Valley

Map taken from the Web

Traders took tremendous risks traveling thousands of miles the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in what is Iraq today. Some traders became wealthy with luxuries such as rugs, jewels, minerals and metals. Mohen-Daro and Harappa, the largest cities in the Indus Valley, had more than 40,000 people. Their daily life revolved around the communal bath. It was the beginning of skills in trading, farming and brick-making that helped shape the culture of Northwest India and Eastern Pakistan today.

Praise for mothers

This great civilization reached its peak from about 2500 BCE to 1500 BCE and then started to fall apart. Trade with Mesopotamia stopped and the Great Bath at Mohenjo-Daro was built over. More than 1,500 cites vanished due to a disaster like a flood.

“When the invaders came,” Jean Bolen, M.D., explained, “they viewed themselves as superior because of their ability to conquer the more culturally developed people. Wherever they settled they subjugated the people of the goddess. The power and attributes of the goddess were diminished, taken over and appropriated by male gods. The once Great Goddess was fragmented into many lesser goddesses and incorporated into religion. They became subversive consorts or daughters of gods.

On my trip through India, I discovered goddesses are as old as the Indian culture! The fertility of nature and of humans is one of the enduring themes in Indian art. The Mother Goddess festival celebrated today is related to the fertility goddesses of long ago during the Indus Valley Civilization.

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