

Nine Nights of Power

Durgā, Dolls, and Darbārs—An Introduction

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The autumnal Navarātri festival—also called Durgā Pūjā, Dasarā, or Dasā—is an important event celebrated all over South Asia and wherever Hindus settle. This nine-day-long festival, often understood as a celebration in honor of the goddess Durgā, ends with the “victorious tenth” (*vijayadaśamī*), the tenth day. Traveling through Hindu homes, temples, and neighborhood community halls in South Asia and all over the world during this festival is a journey through Hindu traditions and practices that have originated at different times and different places. Local and pan-Hindu stories and performances found in different parts of the subcontinent and in many parts of the world are layered, interconnected, and sometimes blended together into a diachronic assemblage of practices, ideas, and material culture. Many of these traditions have been amplified while others have been marginalized, jettisoned, or recycled over the centuries. Indeed, as the diversified materials in the chapters in this volume show, the festival of Navarātri, the nine nights and ten days of rituals, performances, and celebrations of Durgā, Rāma, or other Hindu deities, can well function as a hologram of the history and practices of the Hindu traditions.

No wonder, then, that the stories of Navarātri are legion. Simmons and Sen (2018, 3–8) discuss some of the multiple textual narratives attested to in the epics and Purāṇas, also including modern inversions, especially as concerns the character and role of the goddess’s antagonist Mahiṣāsura, the buffalo demon, who becomes an identificatory character for marginal-

ized groups. In textual traditions, too, Mahiṣāsura is not just the villain that any good story needs. In the *Kālikā Purāṇa*, for example, he is also seen as a form of Śiva and as the foremost devotee of the goddess; he would rather die by her hands than forgo union with her (Stietencron 2005, 129–30). In her newly released study of Durgā, Bihani Sarkar (2017, 221–71) traces the early history of the festival back to an amalgamation of traditions. Clearly, the constant making and remaking for ever-new and specific contexts has been at the core of the festival right from its beginning. Brahmanical texts cover elite versions, which typically take place at royal courts, but even these texts attest to the presence of popular traditions.

Yet Navarātri is not just an expression of specific local traditions. In this volume, it is also viewed through the lens of individual participation and experience: the individual participant in the festival oscillates between their ordinary life and the special festival time. Religious and quotidian realities intermingle, and, simultaneously, the private becomes public, and the other way around (Simmons and Sen 2018, 8–13). People live from festival to festival through both memory and anticipation, as the festival is not only enacted but also takes place during the act of remembering and in imaginative anticipation. In this volume, scholars have written from multiple perspectives about how celebrants shape and reconstruct Navarātri through their material, mental, physical, ritual, emotional, and, as many describe it, spiritual participations and remembrances, in multiple realms of sovereignty and of domestic, communal, and professional well-being and order. And the festival, in turn, shapes and reconstructs the celebrants.

All the contributors to this volume look at one festival, albeit from different perspectives and in different settings, highlighting similarities and differences. When different sets of values confront one another, it creates an occasion to appreciate and celebrate together but also to disapprove and resist. Both individually and taken together, the chapters address questions of meaning (re)making and efficacy, probing into the values underlying the festival; exploring criticism, conflict, and resistance; and paying attention to questions of ritual agency and competence.

The present volume is an outcome of the international working group Navarātri, Navarātra, and Durgāpūjā in South Asia and Beyond and a direct continuation of the group's first volume, *Nine Nights of the Goddess* (Simmons, Sen, and Rodrigues 2018). In this first volume, spatial aspects—the different spaces and spheres of Navarātri—were a special focus, establishing that the festival is constantly moving between spaces and therefore transcending them. This “‘everywhere’-ness” (Simmons and Sen 2018, 12) is also highlighted by Hillary Rodrigues (2018) in his conclusion to the same volume, which stresses the goddess's presence in

multiple material forms and in female humans. The necessity to negotiate diverse agendas is another red thread of the first volume: Navarātri, as a festival for all people, is increasingly democratized, so that the number of actors and interest groups that have a say in shaping the festival multiplies. This development is in line with what has been seen as an important feature of the festival ever since Burton Stein's (1983) and Nicholas Dirks's (1993) analyses of Navarātra practices in the Vijayanagara empire and Madeleine Biardeau's (1981, 2004) groundbreaking studies of Navarātri in village contexts in South India: the festival brings together all strata of society and becomes a stage where roles, status, and hierarchies are displayed, negotiated, and reconfirmed. Navarātri may have historically been domestic or royal, but regal pomp and splendor came to overshadow domestic worship by the sixteenth century. Recent democratizations, however, differ from more traditional examples in their authority structures and have opened up new, hybrid spaces for performance and display. Regarding display, the ludic aspect and conspicuous consumption continue to play major roles but also assume modern forms (Rodrigues 2018, 322–25). Such newer spaces keep pace with social organization, social hierarchies, nationalism, and local ethnic-pride movements. *Garbā* dancing, for instance, moved from the home and the village center to community halls in India and in the diaspora, and the dances are now mega spectacles involving tens of thousands of participants at commercially sponsored sites in Gujarat (see Shukla-Bhatt's contribution to this volume). The United Way of Baroda's *garbā*, for instance, has about forty thousand "players" every night, and the circular dance moves like a universe expanding from the goddess in the center.¹ These mega displays are now held in club grounds, or "playgrounds," of large social clubs, where, in some cases, women who enter wearing traditional Gujarati attire are exempt from the hefty registration fees. In metropolises, large areas of the city are transformed into dancing sites. The space is ethnically marked, and as such the Navarātri here becomes distinguished from other Navarātri spaces in other parts of India because of the insistence on local attire. As in many other cultures, women's bodies become the sites that are the carriers and markers of ethnic pride.

These insights are the starting points for the present book project, which delves deeply into the performative, material, and visual aspects of the festival as it manifests itself in specific local and temporal contexts. We explore the ways that Navarātri becomes the ground on which social integration and separation are negotiated in South Asia in four clusters. We attend to this constructing, enacting, assessing, and revising through Navarātri by studying the festival at both the back and front of the stage. The festival is understood here as contact zone between individuals,

groups, and spheres and as a mediator between past, present, and future. Through the prism of diverse perspectives on the annual Navarātri, the volume addresses the work this festival does. Navarātri as we conceive it here is not just as an expression or staging of the social, or of religious beliefs, but an agent that accomplishes important tasks. We employ a concept developed in ritual theory that sees ritual agency not as confined to individuals asking how they use rituals for “political” or “strategical” purposes but more broadly conceived as “the ability to transform the world” (Sax 2006, 473–74).² Navarātri has the transformative power, the agency, to render a king victorious, to rejuvenate the world (Rodrigues), to transform women into goddesses (Ilkama; Sen), to initiate men into manhood (Saul; Zotter), or to create girls’ class belonging (Ortegren). It is not an individual actor or clearly defined group of actors who brings about this transformation. Agency is complex and diffuse and arises from an interplay of different constituents of a ritual, such as actors, texts, and material in specific settings. Even more so, the abandonment of the “‘intentional sovereignty’ of the individual agent” (Sax 2006, 478) seems to be a precondition, as shown in the example discussed by Sen, where actors vehemently deny their intention to render a politician into a goddess. So, we set out to explore how the agency of and in the festival comes about, how it materializes, but also how it is challenged or denied.

Looking at different aspects of the festival as it is celebrated in diverse regions of South Asia and other locations where South Asian traditions have taken new roots, the individual contributions to this volume address common questions: What does this festival do? What does it achieve, and how? What are the various criteria for evaluating Navarātri? What contexts and conditions determine whether these aspects thrive or fail? How does the festival reflect cultural conditions, and how does it produce new cultural realities? How is this festival one festival and many different festivals at the same time?

In responding to these questions, strong emphasis is laid on images, since we look at the festival as a practice and as a performance rather than as a text. Not only are material religion and its enactment and efficacies often better represented in visual form, but we also conceptualize the images as a potential way of knowing. Sometimes, in pragmatic terms, a picture is a shorthand for a lot of description. Even more importantly, the intermediality produced by the close interlocking of the images and the texts brings the field alive; allows a more nuanced, multilayered storytelling; and gives the reader more resources than the author might initially have intended. One might miss an object in a ritual scene while analyzing it, but a reader can reuse this source and analyze it differently. The images included in the contributions are thus not simply illustrations

but a way of conveying arguments, enabling the reader to grasp how the festival's work is accomplished through interaction, material culture, and performances, along with texts and narratives.

The present volume tells the festival's stories through understanding (1) Navarātri as agent of renewal and transformation, through the juxtaposition of (2) propriety and creativity in Navarātri, through looking at (3) gendered identities in Navarātri, and through acknowledging the role of (4) Navarātri as instrument of power.

Navarātri as Agent of Renewal and Transformation

While festivals are important vehicles for maintaining cultural continuity and passing on tradition, they are also valuable instruments employed in situations of cultural and religious renewal. In his chapter "Ritual of Revitalization: The Transformative Power of the Durgā Pūjā," Hillary Rodrigues discusses the potential of Durgā Pūjā and of several of its rites, concluding that they stand for and are performed at a time of annual and cosmic revitalization and that they also accompany or even accomplish transformations in the performers, on both personal and transpersonal levels. While the charter myth of the festival celebrates a death—in this case, the death of the demon Mahiṣa—the rituals are concerned with birth, fertility, and renewal. Specifically, the festival's Tantric underpinnings show that it serves not only as an expression of devotional reverence but as a rite of transformative empowerment.

Especially when Navarātri is adopted by new sets of performers, or when it is transferred to new cultural, geographical, historical, or virtual contexts, the festival itself can be fundamentally transformed and gain an entirely new character, even though key elements may remain recognizable. Neelima Shukla-Bhatt demonstrates this with the example of the *garbo* dance performed by women in Gujarat in her chapter "Straddling the Sacred and the Secular: Presence and Absence of the Goddess in Contemporary *Garbo*, the Navarātri Dance of Gujarat." When it is transposed from what was a neighborhood context into new public and commercial arenas, this dance is fundamentally transformed. Some participants are not at ease with the fact that the *garbo* now seems to be taken over by larger agencies and corporate entities, whereas others view these new forms of *garbo* "as valid components of *Navarātri* celebrations" (Shukla-Bhatt 42, this volume). Similarly, in South India, the festival has become more popular with corporate power moving the traditional *kolu* doll displays into public spaces. Has the festival been transformed into an ethnic or folkloristic show rather than being a religious celebration? Issues of power,

prestige, and financial prowess connected with cultural productions are all intricately blended with notions of piety and national pride in such moves. These threads blend into the next section of the volume, which focuses on propriety and captures voices that criticize commercialization and the disentanglement from what is conceived as the more traditional performance.

Propriety versus Creativity in Navarātri

Clearly, Navarātri, like other festivals, has a pronounced ludic dimension (Rodrigues 2018, 322–25), providing creative space that leaves room for individual expressions. Just as many Hindu traditions think of the creation of this universe as the play, or *līlā*, of the deity, so, too, is Navarātri an act of play and creation. Importantly, it is this creative space that allows for competition, subversion, and critique. It seems that Navarātri gives occasion to simultaneously adapt to and resist political, social, and cultural changes. Different subjective realities with their attendant values, practices, and histories meet or confront one another, forcing celebrants to cope with diversity. This is no recent phenomenon, as can be seen from the many texts on dharma as well as the Purāṇas composed in the first millennium CE and their hugely diverging prescriptions for festival performance, such as the many ways of waking up or bringing the goddess to life and of propitiating and appeasing her (Einoo 1999; Sarkar 2017, 210–71; Kane 1958, 158–59). These texts also place significant stress on allowing people of all castes—and even those “beyond the pale of the caste system” (Kane 1958, 157)—to celebrate this festival with sacrifices. Here, the texts are not shy about specifying the animals most suitable as offerings for specific days during this festival. Above all buffaloes but also birds, turtles, antelopes, deer, rhinoceros, crocodiles, bulls, goats, and even human beings are all considered suitable sacrificial victims. Yet the same texts also allow for the substitution of these animals with offerings of fruits and cooked food (Kane 1958, 164–65). Thus, what is and what is not considered appropriate are ultimately negotiated by the celebrating communities.

The two contributions in this section investigate the slippery dynamics of the competing agendas of the stakeholders in Navarātri, providing a window into such processes of ritual creativity and interpretations of propriety. Here we see how aspects of the Navarātri festival are deployed as instruments of social critique and how they are agents of change as well as how this critique and change meets resistance and how the participants are reined in. These processes of contestation, acceptance, and

rejection are key to understanding what matters most to the celebrating communities and individuals in Navarātri. In “Can Didi Truly Become Durgā? The Riddle of the Two Goddesses,” Moumita Sen discusses the rapid process of both politicization and secularization of the Durgā Pūjā of Kolkata and the sometimes-contradictory demands of ritual propriety and of spectacle or novelty through looking at 2016 *paṇḍals* in Kolkata, which take the chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee, as their theme. Sen shows that there exist parallel discourses over images and their worship, which, however, do not interfere much with each other. Sen’s interest is with the agents behind these processes of reinvention and the negotiations they involve. In “Limits of Creativity: *Kolu* in Brahmin Vaiṣṇava Households in Kāñcipuram,” Ute Hüsken discusses a creative and intentionally innovative form of *kolu*, a display of dolls on stages typical for Navarātri in South Indian homes, which has received mixed responses. While the themes of this *kolu* are very traditional, replicating the festivals and scenery of the temple next door in every minute detail, its material (waste material) evokes the *kolu*’s rejection. We can see here how, even when conscious reinvention explicitly reaches back to what is perceived as traditional and authentic, this appropriation and reinterpretation of the past becomes culturally productive and controversial at the same time. Cultural creativity is risky, so there is always a certain uncertainty in festivals like Navarātri. However, this risk is part of a festival’s attraction. While changes in the place of manufacture of the dolls of *kolu* from little towns like Panrutti in Tamil Nadu to China (resulting in cheaper dolls but with better finish) have been accepted, Mr. Sundarajan’s *kolu* made with recyclable materials is rejected by Kāñcipuram’s Brahmin Vaiṣṇava community.

Gendered Identities in Navarātri

Agency in festivals is complex and diffuse. Participants in Navarātri are celebrants as well as witnesses, actors as well as spectators. The focus in the three contributions to this section is on gendered identities and agencies in private and public domains, oscillating between urban and rural settings, and between caste and class identities. Often, Navarātri is said to be a women’s festival, especially as the goddess plays a crucial role: many texts reiterate the importance of the story of Mahiṣāsuramardinī—the goddess Durgā, the personification of female energy who slays the buffalo demon. This story is the best-known charter myth for Navarātri in many parts of India. However, sometimes the goddess also takes the back seat. Despite the overwhelming popularity of the narrative of Durgā’s victory,

Rāma's battle with Rāvaṇa is also commemorated with considerable gusto in many villages and towns of North India. Known as Rām Līlā (the sports of Rāma or the play of Rāma, an incarnation of Viṣṇu), it can last anywhere from a day to a month. The best-known performance is in Ramnagar, near Varanasi (Schechner and Hess 1977, Sax 1990, Kapur 2006). The Rām Līlā includes participants from many sectors of the local communities and culminates during the days of Dasara. At that time, the ritual victory of Rāma over Rāvaṇa is enacted, and the effigies of Rāvaṇa and other demons are burned or blown up with fireworks. In 2008, UNESCO recognized the Rām Līlā in its "Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity." Less widely known, yet celebrated locally with no less fervor, is the worship of Hanumān, the faithful facilitator of Rāma's victory, as Jeremy Saul illustrates in his chapter "Navarātri as a Festival of Hanumān and Male Asceticism." Focusing devotion on the helper of the goddess's devotee rather than on the goddess herself, young men adopt Hanumān as a role model in practices of embodiment. Centering an athletic, chaste, and youthful male body advances a concept of masculinity that distances itself from prevalent stereotypes, such as the Indian *babu* or the rapist. Saul shows how individual participation is an empowerment strategy and even has an initiatory potential for men within their peer groups and within the whole social fabric—similar to the masculinity displayed by the actors in blood sacrifices in Nepal (see Zotter's contribution to this volume). The Hanumān-style self-constructed ascetic in Saul's case study, however, is a very different character than the Nepalese worshipper of Durgā who sheds blood in heroic devotion.

Jennifer D. Ortegren focuses on the implications of the urban/rural divide for middle-class women. In "Going Home for Navarātri: Negotiating Caste, Class, and Gender between Rural and Urban Rajasthan," she analyzes the ways in which middle-class and religious identities are mutually constructed in relationship to localized communities by examining differences in Navarātri celebrations among upwardly mobile Hindu women whose lives move between urban and rural Rajasthan. In the city, Navarātri plays an important role in fostering cross-caste bonds between diverse urban neighbors whose relationships are rooted in shared class identities. Yet Navarātri is also a time when many urbanized families return to their ancestral homes to reinforce their identities with their family and clan (as in Bengal) or to rural homes to worship local goddesses within caste-homogeneous communities. Here, women feel more comfortable precisely because of shared caste identities but still perform their urban middle-classness vis à vis their caste fellows. In this way, Navarātri also serves to reinforce family, clan, and caste identification as

well as to introduce class distinctions. Ortegren's focus is on perceived appropriateness of behavior and on how participants perform gendered class identities.

Unlike the prominence of public spaces in the celebration of Navarātri in northern India, until recently, it is in domestic spaces that the festival came to life in southern India. Here, the *kolus* were not just domestic but largely a festival celebrated with women's agency (Sivakumar 2018; Narayanan 2018; Wilson 2018). Ina Marie Ilkama, in "Female Agency during Tamil Navarātri," compares these settings with the Navarātri celebrations in the temples. Navarātri is celebrated in most goddess temples and in homes across the South Indian temple town Kāñcipuram. Here, women not only perform the domestic rituals for the *kolu*, but their role is also prominent in the temples, seen, for example, in *pūjās* directed to or performed by women. However, women's roles are expressed very differently in the temples and in the homes, and they also differ significantly among the diverse temples. Ilkama's contribution looks closely at these differences, exploring important details of Navarātri's alleged nature as a women's festival.

Navarātri as Instrument of Power

The last cluster of contributions explores how changing political realities affect Navarātri and how Navarātri provides an occasion to claim, solidify, or reorder political power. The focus here is on space, spatial practices, negotiations between communities, and negotiations between state authority and practices on the ground, as manifested during the annual festival celebrations. How did kings and those traditionally charged with the protection of the land and its people propitiate the goddesses for victory and prosperity? The performative commentaries and the multiple rituals include those connected with the royal courts. They display, in addition to valor and conquest, a sense of the lingering nostalgia of imagined victories and, literally, the boast of heraldry and the pomp of power presented in frames of frayed splendor (Simmons 2018; Skoda 2018; Zotter 2018).

Dealing with one material aspect of state practices in Nepal, the buffalo sacrifices, Astrid Zotter, in "Who Kills the Buffalo? Authority and Agency in the Ritual Logistics of the Nepalese Dasaī Festival," explores the logistics and agency that become obvious from official paperwork on the provision, killing, and further use of buffaloes. These attest to a huge mobilization of resources and a tremendous administrative effort. The largesse staged by the state on this occasion underpins the splendor of the goddess and the king as her prime worshipper. The ruling class

celebrated themselves as masters over life and death, thereby enacting a strong parallelism of sacrifice and war. By enshrining buff consumption as a touchstone for state-sanctioned caste grading, with consumers of buffalo meat ranking below nonconsumers, schemes for the partition and redistribution of sacrificed buffaloes reflected and reinforced social hierarchies. Official directives, channeled and performed through agents of the state from above, were, however, also mediated, enacted, and challenged by actors on the ground.

Elsewhere, it was instead a democratic impulse to level caste distinctions and have larger numbers of the population participate in the festival that led to recasting it in secular frames: in some states, like Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, this has become a folk-craft or Tamil festival without religious overtones. Yet here, too, its reframing has made it, like commercial athletics, into a celebration of statehood that is performed in public spaces.

While the Nepalese case deals with a phase in history when Hindu kingship was still in place, the next two contributions look at royal Navarātri traditions without ruling kings. In the chapter “Domains of Dasara: Reflections on the Struggle for Significance in Contemporary Mysore,” Caleb Simmons explores Mysore’s Dasara as a site through which various kinds of social power are negotiated, drawing from ethnographic work conducted during Mysore’s 2013 celebration of Dasara. Looking at the movements of the festival and the image (*mūrti*) of the goddess from the palace to the temple and back to the palace, from the beginning of the festival to its close on Vijayadaśamī, Simmons carefully considers the parallelism between the traditional rituals performed in the temple and the palace and between the temple priests and the mahārāja’s staff. Clearly, contemporary Dasara reflects early modern forms of subversion against the British government, but these continue vis-à-vis contemporary Indian political structures. Through this case study, Simmons reflects on Navarātri as a time in which various powerful institutions continue to carve out socially significant domains of power and authority.

Uwe Skoda, in “The Ups and Downs of Competing Power Rituals: Dasarā and Durgā Pūjā in a Former Princely State of Odisha,” deals with the dynamics of Durgā worship in a former princely state in north-western Odisha. Skoda contrasts two different types of *pūjā* performed largely simultaneously: inside the raja’s fort, the older rituals commonly referred to as Dasarā are conducted, whereas in the market area a relatively recent tradition of Durgā Pūjā has been established. In the former, Goddess Durgā appears primarily in the form of iron swords and with a permanent seat. Though the royal sacrificial polity involving various communities including Adibasis is disintegrating, some elements such as

the worship of the Goddess Kant Debī, associated with Durgā as well as the Adibasis, are very or even more popular than during state time. In contrast to the fort-centered rituals, Durgā Pūjā that is closer to the Bengali tradition with a temporary idol has until recently seen a considerable rise in popularity due to donations specifically from sponge-iron factory and mine owners, who are the *nouveau riche* of the area. While they have offered new spectacles to the local audience, at times challenging or even overshadowing the older tradition, the ongoing slowdown of extractive industries has recently led to a downsizing of Durgā Pūjā celebrations. With the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh, a third player has recently entered the stage, reappropriating formerly royal ritual space with its own overtly political agendas. Skoda's case study shows how different actors launch different rituals at different places and create new spaces competing with older spaces, whereas in Simmons's and Zotter's case studies different actors contest over the same ritual or its interpretations and implications. Clearly, the decline and rise of worship traditions are not linear processes.

Conclusion

Navarātri's different elements speak to one another. The stories of Navarātri laid out in this volume show that the different layers and performance genres of the festival are purposefully used by several sets of agents but also dynamically interact with one another. Importantly, religion and religious practice do not take place in a neatly carved-out sphere or institution in society but are entangled, built into and inseparably bound to other social institutions, including economics, politics, and consumerism. We might ask, then, what precisely is religious about these festival practices? Does it make sense at all to delineate religion as a separate sphere? It might be more appropriate to deal with festivals as "special events" (Taves 2011) that are in many ways distinct from everyday practices. This distinctness unfolds differently for different participants—the specific creative powers activated during Navarātri, for example, also encompass the possibility or even necessity of violence. Materiality and abundance are further important features of the festival: from extensive bloodshed to dolls overpopulating the living room, abundance signals social bigness and thus corresponds to social capital, which in turn increases access to and mobilization of resources. Navarātri is a peak time of overexpenditure and conspicuous consumption, amounting to a display and performance of status and power, which, however, is also critiqued as commercialization or politicization. These critiques point to the ways competition can unfold within the

frame of the festival. Abundance often also implies messiness, working against attempts to script and dictate proper order and meaning. Similar to other festivals that are celebrated transregionally, by appropriating and reinterpreting the past and the Other, Navarātri is culturally productive and transformative, on the individual as well as the collective level. The festival is more than the sum of its parts, developing its own dynamics and creating new and unexpected forms, thereby retaining its importance for the lives of the celebrants.

Notes

1. See “Top Gujarati Garba Events to Celebrate Navaratri” by Sharell Cook, *TripSavvy*, <https://www.tripsavvy.com/gujarati-garba-venues-for-navaratri-4136013>; and “Garba Mahotsav,” *United Way of Baroda*, <https://unitedwaybaroda.org/3-our-work/events/annual-fund-raiser/>; both accessed April 30, 2020.
2. Based especially on a performative approach to ritual (Kapferer 1983; Schechner 1977; Tambiah 1979). For agency in rituals and the difference between actors and agents, see also Sax (2013).

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