

Theme 4C Religious practices that shape religious identity: Durga Puja

Key concepts

- There are many stories which influence the celebration of Durga Puja and this is one of the main reasons why this festival is celebrated in different ways in different regions. One story which forms the background to this festival is the Ramayana. The creation of Durga herself is also celebrated during the festival. The Mahabharata is another series of Hindu stories that play a role in the festival. One other story that has an influence on the festival and its practices is the story of Kautsa.
- Durga Puja or Navaratri starts on the first and ends on the tenth day of the bright half of Aswin (September-October). In Bengal, her image is worshipped for nine days and then cast into water. The tenth day is called Vijaya Dasami or Dussera.
- The main feature of the festival is the dancing around the shrine to Durga. Many Hindus also fast, eating only one meal of fruit and sweet foods made from milk each day. Prayers are also offered for the protection of health and property. Durga Puja is also considered to be a good time for the starting of a new venture. Durga Puja concludes with the Kanya Puja (or Kanjak) where nine young girls representing the nine forms of Goddess Durga are worshipped.
- It celebrates the victory of Durga over the evil buffalo demon Mahishasura and Rama's defeat of Ravana and therefore the festival epitomises the victory of good over evil.
- During the period of the British Raj in India, Durga Puja took on further importance and significance. Durga became a symbol of Hindu and Indian identity and became an icon for the Indian independence movement. It was during this time that Durga Puja as a form of community puja became popular as people wished to express their identity.
- One feature of Durga Puja that is particularly significant is the worship of Durga as the mother goddess. Durga represents the Divine Mother and the power of Shakti or cosmic energy. She is the energy aspect of Shiva.
- The complete image of Durga represents the belief that to become divine, material desires must be kept under control. This is seen in the image of Durga standing on the demon. Hindus believe that by worshipping Durga it is possible to rid themselves of all desires and unfold divinity.

Key quotes

- "Durga Puja is the greatest Hindu festival in which God is adored as Mother."* (Madhuri Guin)
- "Durga Puja is celebrated in various parts of India in different styles. But the one basic aim of this celebration is to propitiate Shakti, the Goddess in her aspect as power, to bestow upon man all wealth, auspiciousness, prosperity, knowledge (both sacred and secular), and all other potent powers. Whatever be the particular or special request that everyone may put before the Goddess, whatever boon may be asked of her, the one thing behind all these is propitiation, worship and linking oneself with her. There is no other aim. This is being affected consciously or unconsciously. Everyone is blessed with her loving mercy and is protected by her."* (Swami Sivananda)
- "I am the Father of this Universe. I am the Mother of this universe, and the Creator of all. I am the Highest to be known, the Purifier, the holy Om, and the three Vedas."* (Bhagavad Gita 9.17)

Key words

Durga Puja	icon	Kautsa	Navaratri	Shakti
Dussera	Mahabharata	identity	Divine-mother	community
Mahishasura	spiritual	Shiva	Kanya Puja	
Ramayana	Bengal	good	evil	

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key arguments/debates

- Some would argue that Durga is the most important deity in Hinduism as she is the energy aspect of Shiva.
- Others would argue that Durga's importance is shown through the major festival associated with her.
- Some would argue that other gods and goddesses are more important.

Key questions

- Can Durga Puja be regarded as the most important Hindu festival?
- What is the value of festivals as community occasions?
- Is Durga the most important deity in Hinduism?