

DASAIN FESTIVAL

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To children with love and blessings, Tilak B. Shrestha, Ph.D. <tilakbs@hotmail.com>

We Nepalese have many festivals to enjoy. Among them 'Dasain' is the biggest and the most important festival. It is also called 'Dashahara' and 'Mohani.' The festival is about honoring and worshipping Mother Goddess of Protection, known with many names like: Durga, Bhavani or Bhagawati. She is shown riding a tiger, a symbol of fearlessness and strength. Children get new clothes, good food, blessings and gifts from seniors. Houses and weapons are cleaned. People travel back to their homes and villages, swing in the bamboo 'pings' and fly kites. There is festivity all around for two weeks.

The festival begins on the 1st moon day of the Ashwin (around October) month, by planting barley seeds to grow 'Jamara.' On the 8th day the worship of Mother Goddess Durga begins. On the 10th day, also called Vijaya Dashami (Victory day), the seniors bless the juniors with Tika, Jamara and gifts. For a few more days every body is busy going to the seniors to be blessed. The festival ends on the 15th or full moon day, to continue in the next year. Of course, on the following 1st moon day, we have another very important festival 'Lakshmi Puja', honoring and worshipping Mother Goddess of Prosperity, Laxmi or 'Deepavali \ Deewali', festival of lights.

The legend goes that long time ago there was a terrible demon called Mahishashur 'Buffalo demon.' He terrorized all the people. Many went to fight him but no body could defeat him. Finally, Mother Goddess of Protection, Durga herself manifested. She collected all the tribes. She is depicted with many hands holding many weapons. Many hands and weapons symbolize the many tribes united under her leadership. There was a long and terrible battle. Finally, she defeated and killed the bad demon. It was the 'Victory of Good over Evil' and restoration of Peace.

There is one more legend associated with the festival. God incarnate Rama defeated the evil Ravana on this day. Again the theme repeats – 'Victory of Good over Evil.'

We philosophize that to protect weak and young is a universal phenomenon, inherent in the very nature. Even a mother cat will protect her kitten. The sense of protection is very potent in the motherly instinct. A weak female will turn into a fiery warrior just to protect her children. We may imagine a boulder protecting a pebble. Similar other universal phenomena may be recognized like seniors teaching 'knowledge' and providing 'prosperity' for juniors. We honor and worship Mother Sharaswati as Goddess of knowledge and Mother Lakshmi as Goddess of prosperity. Mother Bhagawati is the Goddess of protection. Here in this world, mother is the first to teach, feed and protect her baby.

The divinity (Ishwar) does not have any attributes for us to relate with. However, divinity manifests in different forms (Gods \ Devatas, Goddesses \ Devis) as per human needs and cultures, for us to relate. We may approach divinity through love (Bhakti) and love of whole humanity and nature.

Many people also sacrifice goats in this festival. However, we must remember that none of our Dharmas prescribe animal sacrifices. On the contrary, Shree Bhavani is the mother and protector of all the life, including animals. The tradition of animal sacrifices in Nepal does not come from Dharmic disciplines but from following two sources: a. tribal customs and b. martial cultures. Tribes practicing hunting and foraging as a source of food consider it natural and offer meat,

which they enjoy, to divinity also. The 'Tika' made of vermillion, rice and yogurt comes from the tribal culture. Martial cultures use shedding animal blood as a psychological inoculation against the horror of bloodshed in the battles.

Some times the meaning of sacrifice is misunderstood. Spiritual practices need sacrifices of passion 'kam', anger 'krodh', greed 'Lova', infatuation 'moha and pride 'mada', not five animals (panchbali).

The most important feature of the festival is for the juniors to go to the seniors for blessings. It confirms our family, tribal and social ties. Such family \ social ties are the source of our security. It simply means '**Unity is the Strength.**'

Mother Goddess Durga \ Bhavani \ Bhagawati

