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## The Festival of Nine Nights celebrates Hindu goddesses

BY THAYUMANASAMY SOMASUNDARAM • SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT • OCTOBER 2, 2010

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Hindus probably celebrate the largest number of religious festivals compared to other faiths. Diwali, Holi and Pongal are the well-known ones.

There is, however, another important Hindu festival that falls in the months of September/October and it is called Navarathri (in Sanskrit *nava* means nine and *rathri* means nights), or Festival of Nine Nights.

Navarathri and Dasara (the 10th day Festival) are celebrated throughout India. However, each region of India adds unique elements to the festival that is representative of that region.

During Navarathri, Hindus worship the primordial energy as goddess Shakthi (Sanskrit meaning energy). Worship of female forms of god-head is very common in Hindu tradition.

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Goddess Durga/Kail (representing strength) is worshipped the first three nights of the Festival of Nine Nights, goddess Lakshmi (representing wealth) the second three nights and goddess Saraswathi (representing knowledge) the final three nights.

On the 10th day — called Dasara or Vijayadasami — the victory of good over evil is celebrated ending the Navarathri festivities.

Even though there is more than one festival named Navarathri, it is the one that falls in the autumn season that is celebrated more widely and elaborately in every region of India.

In Western regions of India (state of Gujarat) beautifully dressed women perform *garba*, a dance with circular movement, while singing songs at night. They also perform the *dandi* dance with small dance-sticks in hand.

In Eastern regions of India (state of West Bengal) worship of goddess Durga takes greater significance during Navarathri. An elaborately decorated goddess is worshipped with great reverence during this time.

In Northern parts of India the festival is associated with the killing of the 10-headed demon called Ravana by Lord Rama. Dasara celebration in the state of Karnataka and in the city of Mysore has been known for its pomp and pageantry since the time of the Vijayanagara kings.

In Southern India, especially in the state of Tamil Nadu, the festival is dedicated to all three forms of shakthi with special nights called Saraswathi Puja and Ayudha Puja.

During Navarathri, Tamil households follow another tradition called Golu. Golu is arrangement of dolls and clay figurines on a staircase-like display consisting of odd number of steps (seven or nine steps are common). The lower steps will feature animals, plants and toys. The higher steps will feature dolls of humans with the top most reserved for figures of gods and goddesses.

Visitors come to the house every evening to appreciate the arrangements and mingle with members of the host family and then everyone worships together. Snacks (spicy lentils called sundal) and sweets are distributed to the visitors.

In all, Navarathri brings people together and gives importance to the women of the family. This year Navarathri will be celebrated between Friday and Oct 17. In Tallahassee Gujarathi Samaj, the Hindu temple, will feature special programs during these dates.



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Tamil households celebrate Navarathri with a tradition called Golu, which involves arranging items on display. (Special to the Democrat)

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