

Navarātri in Kashmir

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Navaratri, the festival of “nine-nights” marks the cosmic transitions that take place every year, especially the nine days at the Spring and Fall equinox, but celebrated during the lunar Chaitra (Caitra) and Aśvin months. At the equinox, night and day are of equal duration but this balance with its beginning, middle, and end, must give way. The nine nights symbolize the entire cosmic drama, together with its mapping at the level of the individual’s own regeneration, and this is done by invoking Sarasvatī, Lakshmi (Lakṣmī), and Durgā, each for three nights. The three goddesses are the consorts of Brahmā, Vishnu (Viṣṇu), and Shiva (Śiva), and, therefore, are associated with creation, sustenance, and destruction.

In the Tantric perspective, there are three knots in the nervous system: Brahma-granthi is at the base of the spine, Viṣṇu-granthi is in front of the heart, and Rudra-granthi is just above the eye-brows. In the inner world, the structure emerges out of the physical body and the information pulled in by the senses (personified by Sarasvatī, the goddess of knowledge), the balance between the inner and the outer – body and mind, or heart and head – is maintained in the breath and the beatings of the heart (Lakṣmī, the goddess of prosperity), and the illusions that we create in our lives are destroyed by Durgā, who thus removes obstacles, and gives us boons.

Navarātri is thus a celebration of freedom. The bondage that it is hardest to free oneself from is the bondage of self-deception. The conclusion, the finale, is with the celebration of Durgā destroying Mahiṣā, who is the falsity of life symbolized as the buffalo-demon. With the death of illusion, a new golden age can begin. The parallel celebration is therefore in the return to Ayodhya of King Rāma who slays the demon-king Rāvaṇa.

Kashmir culture is a smārta, non-sectarian, culture where various Vedic deities are worshiped and both Shivaratri (celebrated as Hararātri, Herath) and Janmāṣṭamī (Krishna’s birthday) are vigorously celebrated. The Pāñcarātra’s four vyūhas Vāsudeva, Saṅkarṣaṇa, Aniruddha and Pradyumna, the epic heroes Rāma, Lakṣmaṇa and Yudhiṣṭhira all appear in the Nāga list of old deities in the Nīlamata,

indicating that Vaishnavism had a long history in the region. The great Kashmiri Śaivite sage and scholar, Abhinavagupta (11th century), not only wrote the great Tantric encyclopedia Tantrāloka, he also wrote a commentary of the Bhagavad Gītā.

Goddess worship in Kashmir

Goddess worship has long been central to Kashmiri life. To see its antecedents, the Goddess proclaims in the Devī Sūkta, Ṛgveda 10.125: “*I am the sovereign queen of all existence ...I bend the bow for Rudra; I pervade the heaven and earth.*” Goddess Durgā is also called Ambikā, or in short just Ambā (Mother), or Devi Ambā.

The Śrī Sūkta gives several other names of the Goddess including Ārdrā (“of the waters” in ŚS 13), and she is compared to the moon illumined by the sun. Indeed, it is the light (the illuminating self behind the observation) that makes her auspicious (ŚS 8). The image of the goddess with the lion represents both the free-wheeling Nature, which evolves by natural law (*rta*), as well as the control of it by higher agency.

Nanā is another name for mother and goddess (as in Ṛgveda 9.112.3), speech (Vāc), and daughter in Sanskrit. Nanā is attested by name on a coin of Sapadbizes, a first-century BCE king of Bactria, and she also appears on the coins and seals of the Kushans. The Rabatak inscription of Kanishka invokes her in claiming that the kingship was obtained from Nanā and from all the gods. The Sogdians called her Nanā Devi Ambā.

Devi Ambā has many names that emerge from the different facets of the mind. She is Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī, and Pārvatī seen through the lenses of learning and knowledge, fortune and prosperity, and strength and devotion. Durgā is the name of Pārvatī when she fights the demons of ignorance and materiality. As Goddess Lalitā she opens the doorway to the deepest understanding of the world and she is also called Śārikā or Rāgnyā (Rājñī, the Queen).

According to the Nīlamata Purāṇa, the name Kashmir is derived from Kaśyapamar (the lake, Saṭīsar, which covered much of the valley before it was drained; *mar* in Kashmiri means a body of water), and this seems to be confirmed by Kasperia, the Greek name for the region. But it was eventually identified with the Goddess Kaśmīrā, a form of Umā or Pārvatī.

The rivers of Kashmir are also personified as goddesses. Umā is the Vitastā (Jhelum), Aditi the Trikoṭī, Śaci is the Harṣapathā (Ārapath), Diti the Candrāvati, and Lakshmi is the river Viśokā.



Tengpora Durgā with 18 arms (8th Century) in stone, Sri Pratap Museum, Srinagar

In Śāradā Māhātmya, Śāradā is the synonym of Sarasvatī, and she is visualized in three colors: white, red, and black, which represent the three guṇas of Sāṅkhya. She is Time (Śravaṇī) and also Rudrāṇī (the energy of consciousness). Her name is derived from *śāri*, multi-hued in the form of Sarasvatī that inheres Lakshmi and Durgā. Indeed, the name Śārikā, the presiding deity of Srinagar, may also be derived from this root and not necessarily from the common folk etymology of the Goddess in the form of the mynah bird.

The eighteen-armed Durgā from a temple in Tengpora in Pulwama in Kashmir is a masterpiece in stone that stresses her sovereignty in eighteen different physical and psychological planes. This representation became the standard in Kashmir after the eighth century. The choice of eighteen arms may be connected with the 36-tattva system of Kashmir Shaivism. This system views Shiva as Prakāśa (light)

and the Devi as Vimarśa, or reflection. When light and reflection become one, the individual finds freedom.

The *jīvanamukta* (the liberated person) experiences the freedom of Shiva in a blissful and unitary vision of the all-pervasiveness of the Absolute. Two very interesting ideas in Kashmir Shaivism are that of recognition and of vibration. In the philosophy of Recognition, it is proposed that the ultimate experience of enlightenment consists of a profound and irreversible recognition that one's own true identity is Shiva. By this recognition the individual transcends the paśu (animal) condition by shaking off the fetters (pāśa) that bind to instincts and the causal chain and becomes the master (pati).

The doctrine of Vibration speaks of the importance of experiencing *spanda*, the vibration or pulse of consciousness. Every activity in the universe, as well as sensations, cognitions, emotions ebbs and flows as part of the universal rhythm of the one reality, Shiva. This rhythm is in space, in which consciousness rests in its being, and the vibrations spread into the multiplicity of becoming. In the unfolding of time, both being and becoming come together. This also opens up many subtle practices and rituals for obtaining understanding of self of which Śrī Vidyā is the most famous.

Goddess worship in Kashmir also provides clues to connections with Western lands. For example, Ṛgveda 8.21.3 calls Indra as urvarāpati, “lord of the field”. Thus urvan — urvarā are a pair just like puruṣa — prakṛti, and urvan is the knower of urvarā. Urvan appears in the Avesta and from there it went into the Persian lexicon as *ruh* (soul).

Navarātri in the Nīlamata Purāṇa

The Nīlamata Purāṇa (c 6th or 7th Century) is the source of traditional religious practices of Kashmir. It gives a list of over fifty rituals and festivals that are still popular in Kashmir. Of these the ones relating to first Navarātri is the Navasaṃvatsara (Navreh) which is celebrated over 9 nights in Chaitra, and to the second Navarātri is the celebration over first eight days of Aśvin. It also informs us that the fourth of Aśvin and the 4th of Jyeṣṭha and Māgha are also for the propitiation of Goddess Durgā, indicating that the seasons of summer (Grīṣma) and winter (Śīśira) were associated with lesser Navarātri celebrations.

Chaitra Navarātri. The narrative begins with how the observance should

begin with a mahāsānti. The first day is the beginning of the Year and it is called Navasamvatsara or Navreh in Kashmiri. On the fifth day, called Śrī Pañcamī, Śrī should be worshiped. It is stressed that the worship of Lakshmi on the fifth day brings many boons; the worship of Skanda is also prescribed. On the ninth day, Bhadrakālī (Durgā) is worshiped with flowers, incense and grains. It is repeated that in addition to the named deities, Bhadrakālī should be worshiped on all 9 days, and in particular on the ninth day. The Gṛhadevatā is worshiped on the eleventh day and Vāsudeva on the twelfth. Kāmadeva, painted on a cloth and decorated with garlands, is worshiped on the thirteenth.

The Chaitra Navarātri coincided with almond blossoms in full bloom, and part of the celebration was going to the almond orchards around the Hari Parbat for picnic.

Āśvayujī Navarātri. On the fourth day, married women and girls are honored, and Indra's steed Uccaiṣravas is worshiped. A fire ritual is performed with mantras offered to Vāyu, Varuṇa, Sūrya, Śakra, Viṣṇu, Viśvedevas, and Agni. On the eighth, the artisans should worship Bhadrakālī with incense, clothes, jewels, lamps, food, and drinks. A vigil is kept at night and there is dancing and singing. Books should be worshiped in the temple of Durgā and the artisans should also worship their tools.

On the Āśvayujī days houses were whitewashed and the full-moon night was observed in the name of Nikumbha, a piśāca deity, indicating that the observance included acknowledgement of the forces of the lower realm. Men and women fasted (that is, ate only the sacred feast) but the children and the sick were expected to eat regular meals. The worship place was decorated with leaves and fruit. Having kindled the fire and the moonrise Rudra, Moon, Umā, Skanda, the two Nāsatyas, and Nandi were worshiped. Nikumbha was worshiped with kṛsara (khichri). Only vegetarian food was served at the sacred feast, and the night included dramatic performances and singing and dancing.

Khichri made of rice, barley, milk, curd, ghee, honey, grapes, meat, fish, bread, and lentils formed part of celebrations. Men and women of all jātis including servants participated in these celebrations. One was enjoined to worship Gaṇeśa (Vināyaka) on the fourth day of the fortnight, Kumāra (Skanda) on the sixth, Sūrya

on the seventh, Śrī (Lakshmi) on the fifth, and Durgā on the ninth.

The celebrations described in the Nīlamata offer a pleasant picture of Kashmiri women. The girls were trained in the fine arts and moved freely in the society. The people were fond of music, dancing, drama and other entertainment. Different types of musical instruments were used. The importance of drama as vehicle of worship is clear from the mention in the Nīlamata of *prekṣadāna*, literally meaning “the gift of a dramatic performance”. Religious observances were *yathāvidhi prekṣadāna*, sacred theatre.

The Nīlamata refers to images made of stone, clay, gold, silver, copper, brass, wood, sand, straw and ghee. Paintings were made on board, paper, cloth, walls and the ground. The *bhumisodhan* was done to prepare the ground with figures and colors to purify it for the ceremony.

A late 9th century image of four-armed Śāradā, the Kashmiri synonym for Sarasvatī, the goddess of learning, has distinctive Kashmiri features. Her two lower hands rest on two diminutive male figures, each holding a manuscript, who embody the complementary elements of knowledge (vidyā) and wisdom (jñāna).

In her Māhātmya, it is said that Śāradā is the same as Durgā, and also the same as Sarasvatī since her rajas (red) and tamas (black) aspects are hidden. As in the Devi Sūkta, she is described as Mahāmāyā who has a seat above that of Brahmā, Vishnu, and Shiva. She controls all attachments and projects intense illusion.

The Thali at Navasamvatsara

According to the custom, a plate (thali) is prepared on the eve of Navreh (Navasamvatsara). The following articles, with some substitutions, are placed on the thali: (i) heaped rice grains, (ii) yogurt, (iii) flowers, (iv) walnuts, (v) pen, (vi) ink pot, (vii) coin or a currency note, (viii) a new Panchāng, (ix) boiled rice, (x) sugar, (xi) salt, (xii) ghee, (xiii) baked rice flour bread, (xiv) *Wye*, a bitter herb (Sweet Flag, *Acorus calamus*), (xv) a small mirror, and (xvi) a picture of Vishnu-Lakshmi or Shiva-Pārvatī. Early in the morning of Navreh, the grandmother or the mother brings this thali for darshan by every member of the family for auspiciousness. Tahar of the rice is cooked and served after Puja.

The uncooked rice grains and coins represent daily bread and wealth, the pen and paper the quest for learning, the mirror represents introspection; the calendar

signals the march of time and deity the Universal Spirit; the bitter herb is a reminder of life's bitter aspects. After the darshan, each person takes a walnut to be thrown into a stream or a river. The rice is cooked to make *tahar* (rice with turmeric) and eaten as prasāda. The bitter herb is eaten with walnuts to make it palatable.

On the third day after Navreh is Zanga Trayī when women visit their parents' home, if it is close by, and return in the evening with packet of salt, bread, and token of money (*athagat*).

Chaitra Navamī. On the ninth bright day of Chaitra, Goddess Bhadrakālī is worshipped. A famous temple to Bhadrakālī is located about eight kilometers to the west of Handwara (Dist. Kupwara) on a hilltop in a thick forest of Devdars. Goddess Durgā is worshipped at Tulumula, Hari Parbat, Durgā Nag and Akingam. On the day of Rāma Navamī, havans are performed at Rāma temples.

Traditionally, Kashmiris recited Bhavānī Sahasranāma instead of Durgā Saptasatī. Lalitā Sahasranāma has about 100 names common with the Bhavānī Sahasranāma.

Some plant barley grains in a pot on the first day of Navarātri and water it daily and offer prayers. On the ninth day, the barley sprouts are seen as symbol of Goddess Durgā. These plants are later immersed in the river. Not all Kashmiris observe all nine days of the Navarātri. Some celebrate it from the fifth to the eighth day and some only on the eighth day, that is Ashtami.

Gāḍabatta (fish with rice) is offered to the house-deity (gṛha-devatā) after performing puja on the eleventh day.

In addition to the chanting of the Śrī Durgā Saptaslokī Stotram which is popular all across India, Kashmiris also chant the Bhavānī Aṣṭakam during the Navarātri days. The first three verses of the Aṣṭakam are given below.

न तातो न माता न बन्धुर्न दाता
न पुत्रो न पुत्री न भृत्यो न भर्ता ।
न जाया न विद्या न वृत्तिर्ममैव
गतिस्त्वं गतिस्त्वं त्वमेका भवानि ॥१॥

Neither father, nor mother, nor relative, nor benefactor,
Nor son, nor daughter, nor servant, nor husband,
Nor wife, nor knowledge, nor profession belong to me.
You are my refuge, you alone are my refuge, Oh Mother Bhavānī.

भवाब्धावपारे महादुःखभीरु
पपात प्रकामी प्रलोभी प्रमत्तः ।
कुसंसारपाशप्रबद्धः सदाहं
गतिस्त्वं गतिस्त्वं त्वमेका भवानि ॥२॥

In this endless ocean of existence, full of great sorrow, I am fearful
I have great desires and greed, am drunk and intoxicated,
I am tied in bondage to this miserable samsara.
You are my refuge, you alone are my refuge, Oh Mother Bhavānī.

न जानामि दानं न च ध्यानयोगं
न जानामि तन्त्रं न च स्तोत्रमन्त्रम् ।
न जानामि पूजां न च न्यासयोगं
गतिस्त्वं गतिस्त्वं त्वमेका भवानि ॥३॥

I don't know charity, nor meditation, nor yoga,
I don't know tantra, nor stotras, nor mantras,
I don't know puja, nor renunciation of yoga.
You are my refuge, you alone are my refuge, Oh Mother Bhavānī.

Bhajans in Kashmiri that express the same devotion are sung. As example, we have this:

*Gyāne dātā moksha dātā chakh Jagat Mātā tsa chakh
Hey Bhavāni kar me vani, sedh mukhus dim Sarasvati
Pādi kamalan tal be āiseya karne chaeni astutī*

You are the Mother of the Universe and bestower of knowledge and moksha
Hey Bhavānī say the word, and give wisdom to the innocent me
I have come to your lotus feet to do your praises.

The Goddess is also worshiped by chanting Indrākṣī Stotra and Pañcastavī, that

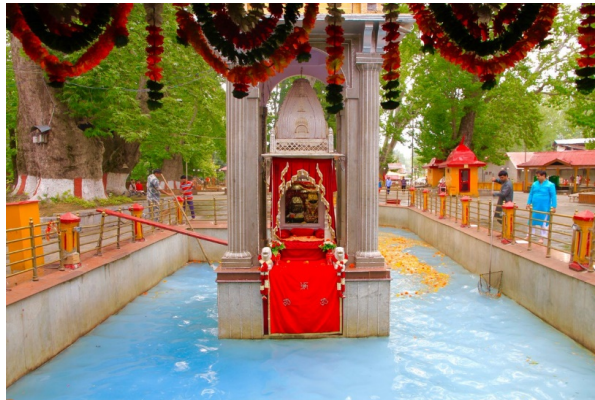
have been popular in Kashmir for over a thousand years. *Indrākṣī Durgā* is manifestation of *Pārvatī*, and the *Pañcastavī* is a collection of five hymns sung in praise of *Lalitā Tripurasundarī*, the Goddess in her most expansive and subtle forms.

Shakti Peeths in Kashmir

There were many Shakti Peeths in Kashmir but a number of them lie abandoned after the Kashmiri Hindus were driven into exile in 1990. I shall speak here of the three principal ones: *Kheer Bhavānī*, *Hari Parbat*, and *Sharada Peeth*.

Kheer Bhavānī

Kheer (*Kṣīra*) *Bhavānī* is a temple dedicated to the Goddess *Bhavānī* (*Maharāgnya* or *Maharājñī*) at a sacred spring. The temple is at a distance of 22 kilometers east of Srinagar near the village of *Tulmula*. The term *kheer* derives from the rice pudding that is offered in the spring to propitiate the Goddess. The *Rājatarāṅginī*, describes *Tulmula* (Skt. *Tūlamūlya*) and the spring of *Maharāgnya* as attracting large number of devotees from Srinagar.



Kheer Bhavānī, Tulmula

A heptagonal spring flows from the west (the head of the Goddess) to the east (the feet). The spring is known to change its color from time to time and red, pink, orange, green, blue, and white have been noticed. A dark shade of the spring water is believed to be inauspicious.

Kheer Bhavānī was visited by Swami Vivekananda in September 1898, who stayed there for a week. He was saddened by its ruined state (it was rebuilt by Maharaja Pratap Singh in 1912). But then Nivedita heard Vivekananda say: “I

have been very wrong... Mother said to me ‘What even if unbelievers should enter My temples, and defile My images! What is that to you? Do you protect ME? Or do I protect you?’”

After Kheer Bhavānī, Vivekananda seemed conscious of the Divine Mother everywhere and in all things. “An overmastering love enveloped him. He believed now in nothing but love, love, love—love so intense that it would be impossible for even the vilest enemies to resist it.”

Shārikā Peeth

Goddess Durgā is worshipped at Hari Parbat (Śārikā-parvata) as Shārikā (Śārikā) is the presiding deity of Srinagar. Another name for the hill is Pradyumna Peeth. Hari Parbat literally translates to “The Myna Hill” and the story is of the Devi who at this spot in the form of a Mynah drops a pebble that transforms into a rock and kills an evil demon.

The Shārikā Temple of the Peeth is located in the middle part of the western slope of the hill. The Goddess is shown with eighteen arms and she sits on a Shri Chakra. The Chakra is engraved on a rock smeared in sindoor. Because of the prominence to the Chakra, the Goddess is also locally known as Chakreshvari and the temple as Chakreshvar.



Śārikā Devī (painting by Veer Munshi)

The entire hill of Hari Parbat is sacred and a number of temples dedicated to

different deities are located on its *parikramā* path. The *parikramā* starts with Ganesh's shrine located on the south-western corner of the hill. From here are two *parikramā* routes; one, along the bottom of the hill, and the other along the fortified stone wall.

The next sacred spots on the route are devoted to the Saptarṣi (Seven primeval Rishis who are the mind-born sons to Brahmā and who have given their name to the Kashmiri Calendar) and to Mahākālī, marked by a small temple by a Chinar tree. In front of the Kali temple is the Siddha Peeth, where devotees chant the names of the Goddess at dawn, the Brahma-muhūrta; next is a stretch of open space known as Devi-Āngan - the playfield of the Goddess.

Ahead on the *parikramā* is a rock on the north-eastern face of the hillock named after Shārikā. After this come the sthāpanās of Mahālakshmi followed by that of Vāmadeva, a form of Shiva, who is regarded as the consort of Goddess Rāgnyā. A small Hanuman temple located on the right side of the foothill is the last sacred spot on the *parikramā* route. Hari Parbat is surrounded by orchards of almonds (Bādām-Vāri) on three sides.

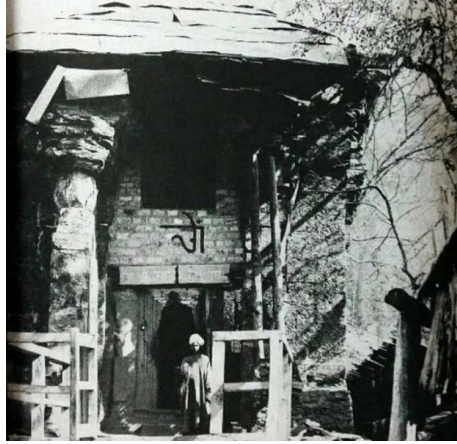


Śārikā Temple at Hari Parbat

Shāradā Peeth

The great temple to Goddess Śāradā was for centuries the most famous Shakti Peeth of Kashmir. The fame of this temple as a place of learning gave Kashmir its other name as Sharada Desha. The temple is at the confluence of the rivers Kishanganga and Madhumatī but it now is 10 kilometers across the line of control

under Pakistan. It is one of the puzzles as to why the Indian army did not attempt to take this site during the 1947-48 War with Pakistan.



A photograph of Sharada Peeth in 1893 by the British scholar Aurel Stein.

Al-Bīrūnī, the famed scholar who accompanied Mahmud of Ghazni on his many military campaigns into India and wrote the *Tārīkh al-Hind*, declared Sharada to be one of the four most significant temples of northwest India, with the other three being that of Sūrya in Multan, Viṣṇu Cakrasvāmin in Thanesar, and Shiva in Somnath. The persistence of this influence is clear from the accounts of the travels of the great South Indian sage-philosophers Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja to Kashmir to debate and consult texts.

Conclusions

Kashmiri traditions have been acutely aware of the deeper meaning of the Navarātri festival due to their organization around the Trika system, which places great emphasis on the worship of the Devi, the dynamic aspect of the Absolute. No wonder Kashmir has been famous in the popular imagination as the Land of the Goddess and the Garden of the Rishis (Ṛṣi Vāṭikā, *Reshavaer* in Kashmiri).

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