

Tony Blair Faith Foundation

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A Diwali Reflection by Professor Anantanand Rambachan



Diwali is celebrated in the Hindu month of Kartika, which corresponds to October-November in the Western calendar. Although Diwali is a festival in its own right, it is also the climax and culmination of a season of Hindu festivals that begins during the preceding month of Ashvina (September-October). This is the month of Navaratri, the festival of Nine Nights, when the One God is worshipped as Divine Mother in the forms of Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati. Following this, Hindus celebrate Dasara or Vijayadashami, the festival of victory, commemorating the triumph of goodness over evil and fear. At the end comes Diwali, the festival of lights and illumination.

The sequence of this season of festivals provides us with a meaningful way of reflecting about the significance of Diwali. Navaratri, which starts the season, offers us a special time to honor God as mother. Although God transcends all gender categories, God can be thought of equally as father or as mother. Navaratri begins with the worship of God as Durga, who is associated with the power and energy of the God in creation and in the triumph over evil. Her grace is sought for the strengthening of our wills, for self-determination in our lives and for overcoming evil, both within ourselves and in the world. Powerlessness makes us susceptible to the domination of evil. The freedom to determine one's destiny is an important ingredient for a meaningful human life, but the ultimate source of our power and independence is God.

The worship of the divine as Lakshmi follows the worship of Durga. If Durga represents the power of the divine and our own need for self-determination, Lakshmi is associated with divine abundance and prosperity. The Hindu tradition is not indifferent to the significance of wealth and prosperity for our wellbeing and as a requirement for our growth and development. In the absence of wealth, justly acquired and distributed, power is tenuous and uncertain and we are likely to become subject to the authoritarian rule of others. Poverty is a form of powerlessness and power is meaningless without economic self-determination. Durga and Lakshmi complement each other in very important ways.

The nine nights of Navaratri culminate with the worship of God as Saraswati. If Durga represents divine power and Lakshmi, divine abundance, Saraswati represents divine wisdom, the knowledge through which God creates and sustains. In the Hindu worldview, knowledge is valued above all else. The reason is because knowledge has the practical task of finding a solution to the problem of human suffering. The highest motivation for knowledge is a compassionate concern for overcoming human misery.

The worship of God as Saraswati reminds us that the uncontrolled pursuit of power and wealth, as ends, is dangerous. These must be understood as means to the nobler and higher end of freeing human beings from suffering. The fruits of knowledge must be applied compassionately for the alleviation of human misery. The highest knowledge is that which enables us to see God in all and which awakens compassion in our hearts.

Navaratri, the festival of nine nights, underlines the necessity for a proper balance, in our individual lives and in the life of our nation, among the necessary goals of power, economic prosperity and wisdom. If power and wealth must be inspired by compassion, knowledge must not be disconnected from the real-life concerns of human beings for self-determination and freedom from poverty.

In this balance is to be found true victory (Vijayadashami) and the key to individual and national wellbeing. This balance brings illumination and light (Diwali) to our lives and we can celebrate and rejoice by lighting up our homes, villages, and cities. We can embrace each other in love, exchange gifts and share the delights of good food.

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