

## Mother of the Three Worlds

*With the power to feed the entire universe, the goddess of food ensures that her worshippers never go hungry ...*

ANNAPURNA literally means 'one of plenteous food'. An incarnation of Goddess Parvati, Annapurna is the Hindu goddess of food and cooking.

Holding a jeweled vessel containing food in one hand and a spoon to distribute food in the other, Goddess Annapurna provides food and nourishment to the entire universe. Even Lord Shiva, her husband, is often depicted with a skull begging bowl before the goddess, asking for food.

Legend has it Shiva once told Parvati that the world is an illusion and matter is just a mirage, here one moment, gone the next. Even food is just *maya*. On hearing this, Parvati being the mother of all material things including food, lost her temper. 'If I am just an illusion, let's see how you and the rest of the world get along without me,' she said and disappeared from the world.

Her disappearance caused devastation in the world. Time stood still, seasons did not change and a terrible drought made the earth completely barren. Not even a morsel of food was left in the three worlds of *Akaash*, *Pataal* and *Dharti*. Parvati's heart melted when she saw the misery of the universe, and she appeared at Kashi to set up a kitchen.



**Generous deity:** Annapurna Devi

On hearing about her return, Lord Shiva ran to her and presented his bowl in alms saying, 'Now I realise that the material world cannot be dismissed as an illusion.'

Parvati smiled and fed Shiva with her own hands. Since then, Parvati is worshipped as Annapurna Devi - the mother goddess of food. Her image serving food to lord Shiva is depicted in many temples across India. It is said that the goddess does not eat a morsel, unless all her devotees in her temple have been fed.

In Unja village of Gujarat, she is worshipped as Umiya Maata. While in Kerala, a packet of food is left tied to the branch of a tree at a temple dedicated to the goddess, even after all devotees have been fed. This is done with the thought that even a thief should not go without food.

Sage Adi Shankaracharya has captured the greatness of Goddess Annapurna in this soulful verse:

*Annapoorne sadaa poorne Shankarah Praanavallabhe  
Gnana Vairagya Siddhyartham Bhikshaan Dehi ca Parvati*

Mother Annapurna, you who are eternally complete, you, the very life of lord Shiva, give me food (in alms) so that I can sustain my body to achieve the Supreme Knowledge.

## Beyond the glittering frenzy of Navratri

*Rediscovering the spiritual meaning of the nine nights would show that there's more to the festival than just dancing in fancy outfits...*

THE NINE heady nights of Navratri may simply mean dressing up in traditional attire and gyrating to the tunes of Gujarati *raas-garba* songs and often even Bollywood numbers to most youngsters. The deep religious significance of this festival is often lost behind the sequined full umbrella skirts and *cholis* (blouses) with dazzling mirror work. The purpose of the dance has perhaps changed to that of evoking fun and plain enjoyment devoid of spiritual depth.

Taking a peek into the world beyond the jazzy high-energy dances would show that Navratri is originally a deeply religious festival of worship through dance. The word Navratri in Sanskrit literally means nine nights. During these festive nights, nine different forms of Shakti (female divinity) are worshipped. These are Durga (the inaccessible one), Bhadrakali, Amba or Jagadamba (mother of the universe), Annapurna (one who bestows grains in plenty), Sarvamangala (one who gives joy to all), Bhairavi, Chandika or Chandi, Lalita and Bhavani.

The festival is divided into sets of three days to worship three different aspects of the goddess. The first three days



**Twirling Thrills:** Women perform garba steps

are dedicated to Durga who is touted as the destroyer of all impurities, vices and defects in humankind. During the next three days, goddess Lakshmi, the giver of spiritual wealth is invoked. The final three days are spent in worshipping the goddess of wisdom, Saraswati.

During Navratri, some devotees of Durga observe a fast and prayers are offered for the protection of health and property. On the tenth day of Navratri, Dusshera, an effigy of

Ravana is burnt to celebrate the victory of good (Rama) over evil.

The traditional form of dance practiced during the festival is garba, which originated in Gujarat. The term *garba* refers to a *deep* or a small earthenware lamp. During Navratri, a light is placed inside a pot with attractive designs, around which women dance. Similarly, *raas*, the form of dance that involves striking wooden sticks or *dandiya* fitted with bells in unison, goes back to the legends of Lord Krishna.

Perhaps, re-invoking the spiritual aspects of the dance would add that extra energy to the festivities and help to experience an inner happiness that goes beyond just fun.