

What do we and Hindus think about the meaning, purpose and gender of Power? (8 – 12 years)

Learning outcomes

Emerging

- Explain why female deities are revered in Hinduism as well as male
- Offer a response in discussions of gender and power

Expected

- Explain, using at least two pieces of information, what is celebrated at the festival of Navratri
- Explain the nature and role of Durga in Hindu belief
- Offer a view as to whether power can or should be linked to gender

Exceeding

- Explain the meaning of the three archetypes
- Offer your response to the idea of balance in the universe

Key words and concepts

- **Divine:** In the Hindu context this refers to the Benevolence that transcends normal human comprehension.
- **Shakti:** Raw Energy that moves through all matter in every existing world (denoted as feminine comparable to the Yin/Yang concept in Chinese Philosophy).
- **Devi:** Divine Force or Power at work in the world – feminine aspect (note: depicted as female), often translated as ‘Goddess’ but this is a confusion with popular perception of Greek/Roman Mythology.
- **Deva:** Divine Will at work in the world – masculine aspect (note: depicted as male), often translated as ‘God’ but this is a confusion with either the Abrahamic entitlement in the singular or in the plural with popular perception of Greek/Roman Mythology.
- **Divine Consort:** Each named Devi is depicted as the Consort (Marriage Partner) of a corresponding Deva. This teaches that Divine Intervention or Agency is the co- operative union of benevolent, transcending Will/Intention (masculine) and Power (feminine).
- **Trimurti:** The collective reference for the three main Divine Forces at work in the world (i.e. Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva).
- **Tridevi:** Tridevi is a collective reference for their three Consorts (Saraswati, Lakshmi and Durga).
- **Saraswati:** The Devi who embodies the Power of Pure Knowledge, the ability to understand it (learning), explore it (science) and express it, both creatively (Arts and Music) and verbally (True Speech). Consort of Brahma (Divine Creative Intention).
- **Durga:** The Devi who embodies the Power of Explosive Transformation. Her stories tell of fierce battles

killing demons and protecting the righteous. She can manifest when needed with the supreme power of the entire universe. She is the Consort of Shiva (Divine Transformative Intention).

- **Lakshmi:** The Devi who embodies the Power of Material Resource, such as Wealth, Health, Beauty and Good Fortune. She is the Consort of Vishnu (Divine Sustaining Intention).
- **Navaratri or Navratri:** Name of the Hindu Festival celebrated twice a year (March and October) at two points of transition between Seasons. Sanskrit meaning literally 'Nine Nights' which are dedicated to Durga in some states and to the Tridevi in others.
- **Raas Garba and Dandiya:** Two folk dances originating in the Indian state of Gujarat which are specifically danced during Navratri and are linked to the themes of the festival. (Worth a go!)

Learning activities

The learning is based around the Navratri festival. Find images or videos of Navratri being celebrated such as on the BBC schools service, You Tube or True Tube.

You will also want to find images of three female deities: Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati for later in the activities.

Basic information about this festival:

- Navratri is celebrated twice a year
- Navratri celebrated at harvest (October) is dedicated to the goddess Durga
- Durga represents the power of the mother or the female
- Navratri lasts for 9 days
- Hindus ask for a good harvest, for peace and prosperity and celebrate the fertility and bounty of feminine power
- Lakshmi and Saraswati are also honoured; together Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswati are three different representations of cosmic power.
- Explain that pupils are going to learn about the Festival of Navratri when Hindus celebrate the Divine Power they believe is available to all of us (not just Hindus) in whichever form is best for us, in the way a loving *mother* helps her children. This will help them explore *what people think about types of power in themselves and the world* and question *what role gender plays* and *what power as a force for good* might look like.
- Remind them that Hindus believe that God is neither male nor female but is everywhere in everything and everyone. Thus they believe God can intervene to support righteous living (meaning for universal good) at anytime in any form including as a man, woman, child, animal, river, etc. Explain the forms that are celebrated at Navratri are three Mothers.
- Ask the pupils to think of words they may use to *describe* a mother. List these up on a board. Now ask them to think of activities/actions that they think mothers *do*. Again capture these on the board. Now consider mothers from the animal kingdom (hunting, fighting off predators, etc.), does this bring forth any more adjectives or verbs?
- [N.B. The three archetypes are:

1. Provider – supplying material well-being and nourishment: Lakshmi;
2. Protector/Powerhouse - fighting off predators / pure strength: Durga;
3. Teacher – teaching / explaining / advising: Saraswati.]

Deepen and widen the discussion to get a good spread of words through as many different ‘forms’ of mothering as possible. Some words like ‘helper’ can be unpacked into types of help.

- Ask pupils to work in groups with three very large pieces of paper per group. Ask the groups to write ‘Provider’ in large letters in the middle of the first sheet, ‘Protector’ in the middle of the 2nd and ‘Teacher’ in the middle of the 3rd. Their task then is to write or draw around the key aspects the ideas, actions, tools and questions they associate with those roles. Encourage the pupils to consider the differences between the three aspects.

You may need a fourth sheet (Other) for characteristics that are either more human than divine such as ‘Cranky’ or ‘Bad-tempered’ or don’t fit into the archetypes.

Reviewing the fourth sheets may offer up a potentially very useful broader discussion.

- Introduce the images of the three female deities (or ‘Devis’); either handing them out or showing them on the whiteboard, one at a time. Explain that each picture represents a different form of Divine Mother. Explain that Hindus believe that all the power needed to succeed comes to human beings through Divine Mothers providing the three lists of things already discussed, that is, Knowledge (Power of Understanding), Personal Strength (Raw Transformation Power) or Material Abundance (Power of Physical Well- Being). Before exploring the images in detail, give the pupils a chance to examine carefully for themselves the symbols and colours of each picture and see if they can suggest which image goes with which of the archetypes they have defined.
- Now go through each deity engaging the pupils’ questions and ideas in considering what each deity is sitting on, holding and wearing. Explain that it is possible to take these definitions literally, i.e., as supernatural beings that may manifest in the world, but that it may also apply to our lives here and now in terms of wanting more of the resources the Mothers offer to be in our lives. Clarify, that just like a human mother, the Divine Mothers do not ‘take over’ and do things ‘for us’. Hindus believe that they assist us in finding the skills and strengths we need inside ourselves.
- Put the Lists of words about mothers that the pupils have already compiled on the board below each Deity and ask pupils to add some more words to their sheets that they think Hindus would associate with each of the key aspects.
- Ask pupils what sorts of situations might people feel the need for wealth, wisdom or strength. Aim for concrete examples of each of these in their own lives and list them on the board. Who would many Hindus pray to for help with each of these? Go through each ‘need’ and ask How might a Hindu feel those prayers might be answered. Does strength have to be physical? Does physical well-being have to mean money?
- Explain that, in the Christian Bible, God is often presented as a ‘Father’ figure (although there are some female metaphors) but that, for many Christians, prayer for help in times of trouble is often directed to holy people called ‘saints’ and there are many male and female saints. This is not because they think the saints are divine or equal to God, but because the saints lived such good lives that they are very close to God and thus have power to ask God to help those who pray to them. Many Christians in the

Orthodox, Catholic and Anglican traditions pray to Mary, who, as the mother of Jesus (who is believed to be 'God and man'), is in the best position to intercede with God to request his help. Can they see this is different from how Hindus relate to the Devis? [Highlight how the female figures in Christian traditions are loving **intercessors** with God rather than God themselves.]

- Ask pupils to list some words that a Christian might use to describe God as Father. What words might they use to describe Mary? Ask pupils to compare her qualities to the three Hindu Deities we have looked at [Highlight similarities, e.g., loved as a mother, as well as differences, e.g. 'holy not divine'] and to say how they are each thought to make a difference to believers' lives.
- Invite pupils to link things that are important to them, e.g. who helps them, with the way we might offer to help other people, and different kinds of help; physical and mental / spiritual. Encourage them to think about who they might turn to in their own lives. What sort of skills would the person they turn to, need to help them and what form would that help take? How might they help someone who was confused, for example unable to do their homework? or had less money or was physically weaker and being bullied? [This could be a very worthwhile drama lesson with some interesting role-play activities about what they feel is appropriate assistance/relationship with someone with less power / advantages than themselves.]
- Broaden the discussion into thinking about how wealthy or powerful countries treat those with less. Ask pupils to say when they think aid or trade are most appropriate. What about Fairtrade? If powerful nations used the qualities of the Tridevi how might that affect their foreign policy?

By now the children would have a good understanding of the three Devis. Hindus remind themselves of this relationship with female divinity twice a year during Navratri. What does this festival look like?

- **Play the video clips you have found as well as any images you would like to display.**
- Explain that during Navratri many Hindus fast during the day and then feast and dance in the evening time on traditional festival food. During the fast Hindus only eat foods that can be eaten very simply and with minimal process such as fruit, nuts etc. This is to encourage them to take time out from focussing on their material appetites and wishes but instead to focus on their spiritual goals of personal discipline and following divine guidance rather than personal desires. Ask pupils to identify what it might be good for them to give up for a week even though they might find it difficult to (such as a television program or chocolate) and give reasons. Consider asking them to actually try doing this for parts of the day (or a week!) and perhaps be sponsored for each day they succeed in doing so as a charity fundraiser. Journal their thoughts and feelings if they do it or make up an imaginary journal of someone their age trying to do so.
- Explain that once the fasting days and dancing nights are completed (this varies across regions and families, but typically on the 8th or 9th day), a special feast is prepared and offered to young girls. This is to celebrate and reflect on the Divine Contribution of females in families as Mothers, Sisters and Daughters, Creators of Life, Bringers of Love and Good fortune into men's lives. The nine nights are dedicated as three nights for each of the three divine forms. Thus femaleness has a very special place in Hindu Spiritual life. Can the pupils think of other religions that have special female images [e.g., Christian Saints, Mary, Mother of Jesus, etc]; Are there any powerful females that you look up to or turn to in times of trouble? Why might it be important for some people to turn to women for help?

- Ask pupils whether Hindus would traditionally think men or women are more powerful in the family? [No right or wrong answer to this – just a discussion point about who if anyone, might be ‘in charge’?] Who has most ‘say’ in the home? What do the pupils think themselves? Does it matter if it’s Father or Mother? Ask pupils to give reasons for their answers and compare across the class.
- **Provide pupils with a printed version of the Deities; Lakshmi, Durga and Saraswati.** Ask them to work in pairs/small groups to recall aspects of each Deity, labelling the different items with key points about what Hindus believe is being illustrated/symbolised.
- Encourage pupils to discuss the details of the pictures in their pairs/groups and then to share ideas on the most important aspects for them. Prompt their thinking by asking whether they can tell which figure represents what sort of Divine Maternal help and whether they can work out why each Hindu Deity is sitting on such a different symbol?
- Ask pupils to then add their own labels saying what they think is good about each of the Female Deities symbolic gifts, e.g. ‘The lute plays music’, ‘The sword is powerful’, ‘The book is for wisdom’. Provide pupils with some of these words to help them. [Of course the symbolism goes deeper than this; the idea is to start pupils thinking about how worshipping the different Female Deities helps believers in a variety of ways.]
- Now divide the class into three groups. Assign a deity to each group. Ask each group to note what form of ‘Blessing’ their Female Deity represents (Protection/Strength, Provider/Well-being, Wisdom/Understanding). Ask pupils to imagine three (or more) situations that a child or adult might find themselves in when being blessed by their Deity would help. Have one example prepared for each Deity in case they get stuck! Pupils can work out their ideas in smaller groups, type them up on a computer as three separate sheets, then compare across the group. Ensure that the deity’s name is NOT on any of the papers! Collect in all nine situation sheets, shuffle them up and number them 1 to 9. Hang onto these for the next activity (below).
- Explain that you would now like them to work out the role and meaning of the Female Deities in a range of situations. Divide the class into nine groups. Provide each group with one situation sheet made earlier. Ask each group to read the situation and to record their answer of which Deity’s power would be most helpful on a piece of paper next to each Situation number – give each group just 3 or 4 minutes for each situation. They then pass their situation on to the next group and so on till all groups have considered all the situations. This might be easier to share electronically so pupils can all consider all the situations at their own pace in pairs on computers. Share and discuss the answers across the class. What advice might *pupils* give if they were being appealed to for advice about these situations?
- Tell pupils the story of how Durga vanquished the Demon.
The gods (Devas) are always in conflict with the demons (Asuras). The army of the buffalo demon, Mahishasura, defeats the gods. The gods are cast out of heaven. They appeal to Vishnu and Shiva for help. These two produce a light from which Durga is born.
She enters into battle with the demon army, slaying every last one. Durga has rescued the gods and achieved victory over evil.
- This is the central story of Navratri.
Ask pupils to write their own ‘metaphorical’ story with a character needing to call upon each of the three

Deities turn by turn to help him or her through the challenges within the story. The challenges need to be such that each needs the particular blessing of each Deity to overcome the problem. The story should include questions that the main character asks about their dilemmas and how what the consequences might be of following or ignoring the help of the Deities.