

# Primer on Dashain

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## Abstract

This is a quick primer on the most important Nepali festival, Dashain.

## 1 Introduction

Dashain is a fifteen-day festival, celebrated in Nepal, the northern Indian states of Sikkim, Assam, and Darjeeling district, as well as in various communities in Bhutan and Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> It is the longest and most auspicious festival in the *Bikram Sambat* calendar (i.e., the historical and official Hindu calendar of Nepal); families distributed across the globe travel to celebrate together. Roughly, Dashain takes place in the Autumn of each year. The most important days are the first, seventh, eighth, ninth, and tenth.

## 2 Significance

In Hindu mythology, the demon Mahishasura created terror in Devaloka, the world where the gods live. The goddess Durga was incarnated in order to slay Mahishasura; Dashain is a celebration of that victory. More specifically, the first nine days of Dashain symbolise the battle which took place between the different manifestations of Durga and Mahishasura; the tenth day symbolises the day on which Durga finally defeated Mahishasura. I'll expand further below on the significance of the eleventh to fifteenth days of the festival.

## 3 Days of Dashain

I'll now describe in more detail the most significant of the fifteen days of Dashain.

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<sup>1</sup>Here I focus upon Dashain as celebrated in Nepal.

## Day 1: Ghatasthapana dashain

On this first day of Dashain, *ghatasthapana dashain*, a kalasha<sup>2</sup> is filled with holy water, then covered with cow dung and sewn with barley seeds. The kalasha is then put in the centre of a rectangular sand block; the remaining bed of sand is also seeded. A priest starts the puja by asking Durga to bless the vessel with her presence; this ritual is performed at a certain auspicious time, determined by astrologers.

The room in which these rituals are performed is known as the *Dashain ghar*. Traditionally, outsiders and women would not be allowed to enter the Dashain ghar, and a male family member would worship the kalasha twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening. In modern Hindu society, both men and women are equally responsible for performing these rites. The rituals continue until the seventh day. The kalasha is kept away from direct sunlight, and is offered only holy water. By the tenth day, the seeds have grown to five or six inches long; this sacred grass is known as *jamara*.

## Day 7: Fulpati

*Fulpati* is a major celebration occurring on the seventh day of Dashain. In the times of the Nepali monarchy, the celebration would proceed as follows. First, the royal kalasha, banana stalks, jamara and sugar cane (the latter tied with red cloth) would be brought by Brahmins from Gorkha to the Kathmandu valley (a three-day walk). Hundreds of government officials would gather together in the Tundikhel grounds in traditional formal dress to witness the event. The king would observe the ceremony in Tundikhel as the Fulpati parade headed towards the Hanuman Dhoka royal palace. There, there would be a ceremonial display of the Nepali army, together with a celebratory firing of weapons continuing for ten to fifteen minutes.

Since 2008, when the royal family was overthrown, this two-century old tradition has changed, so that now the holy offering of Fulpati proceeds to the residence of the President.

## Day 8: Maha Asthamii

*Maha asthamii*—the eighth day of Dashain—is, traditionally, a day of animal slaughter, intended to appease the most fierce of all Durga's manifestations, the goddess Kali. On this day, the blood of buffaloes,

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<sup>2</sup>A pot with a large base and small mouth, large enough to hold a coconut. The combination of kalasha, coconut, and mango leaves is often used in Hindu rites, and depicted in Hindu iconography.

goats, hens and ducks is offered in ritual sacrifice in temples across Nepal.<sup>3</sup>

## Day 9: Mahanavami

On *mahanavami*, the ‘great ninth day’ of Dashain, official military ritual sacrifices are held in one of the Hanuman Dhoka royal palaces. On this occasion, the state offers the sacrifices of buffaloes under the gunfire salutes; other animal sacrifices are also performed across Nepal.<sup>4</sup>

On mahanavami, the god of craftsmanship Vishvakarma is worshipped in honour of all things which help one to make one’s living in the world. Artisans, craftsmen, traders, and mechanics worship and offer animal and fowl blood to their tools, equipment, and vehicles. Moreover, vehicles are worshiped on this day, since it is believed that doing so wards off accidents for the next year.

## Day 10: Dashami

The tenth day is the most important day of Dashain, symbolising Mahishasura’s defeat at the hands of Durga. On this day, *tika* (a mix of rice, yoghurt, and vermillion) is prepared. Elders put the tika, along with the jamara grown earlier in the festival, on the foreheads of younger relatives, to bless them with abundance in coming years. Elders also give *dakshina*—a small amount of money—to those younger relatives. This continues to be observed for the remaining five days of the Dashain festival, during which period families and relatives visit each other to exchange gifts and greetings.

## Day 15: Kojagrat purnima

The final day of Dashain, *kojagrat purnima*, occurs on the day of the full moon. The literal meaning of ‘kojagrat’ is ‘one who is awake’. On this day, the goddess of wealth Laxmi is worshipped, as it is believed that she descends to Earth and showers those who stay awake all night with wealth and prosperity.

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<sup>3</sup>For example, the Rohote goat sacrifice—now discontinued. Note, though, that the Rohote sacrifice was performed in the village leader’s house, rather than a temple.

<sup>4</sup>This day is also known as the ‘demon-hunting day’, because, according to Hindu mythology, members of Mahishasura’s defeated demon army tried to save themselves by hiding in the bodies of animals and fowl.