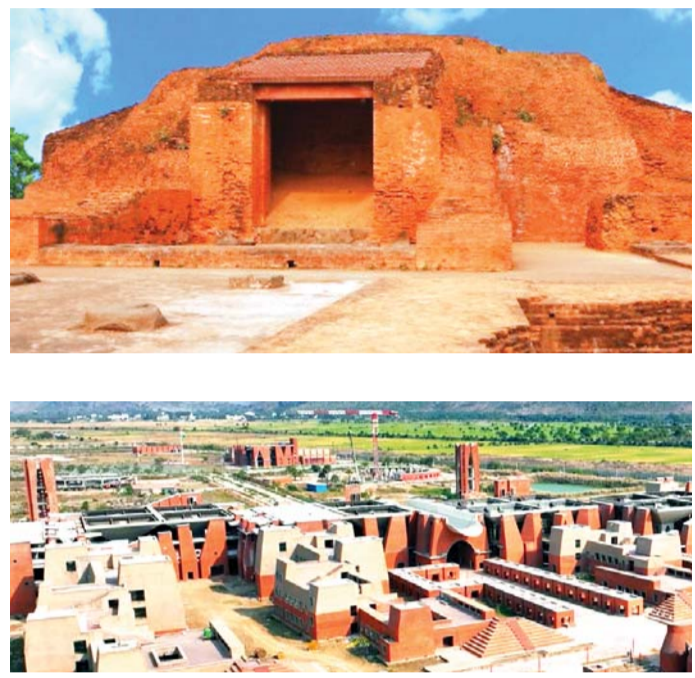


## #CULTURE

### India's Knowledge Renaissance

Can Vikramashila bring back the Glory Days?



Shruti Kothari

Once upon a time, India was the world's go-to destination for higher learning. Think of it as the Ivy League

of the ancient world, only grander. Scholars from China, Korea, Persia, and even Greece travelled great distances to study at the iconic institutions of Nalanda, Takshashila, and Vikramashila. These weren't just universities, they were vibrant ecosystems of thought, where knowledge was free-flowing, ideas were debated, and history was written.

#### Lost but Not Forgotten

While Nalanda often steals the spotlight, Vikramashila University was just as remarkable. Established in the 8th century by the Pala dynasty, it was a hub for Buddhist philosophy, advanced studies, and even tantric traditions. It was a place where knowledge seekers immersed themselves in rigorous academic discourse, shaping philosophical and scientific thought for centuries. Nalanda and Vikramashila were not just centers of Buddhist learning, they were melting pots of culture, science, and innovation.

Vikramashila University housed some of the most renowned scholars of its time. The great Buddhist teacher Atisha Dipankara, who played a pivotal role in the revival of Buddhism in Tibet, was one of its most famous alumni. Monks and scholars from various parts of Asia studied and taught here, refining their knowledge in subjects ranging from logic and grammar to astronomy and metaphysics. The institution had six primary faculties, each dedicated to a different discipline.

#### The Road Ahead

India's intellectual past is not just a matter of pride, it is a reminder of what is possible. The ruins of these universities still stand, silent yet powerful symbols of an era when India led the world in knowledge production. Their revival is not about recreating the past brick by brick, but about reclaiming the spirit of inquiry, innovation, and intellectual excellence.

The world today is witnessing a rapid shift in educational paradigms, where interdisciplinary learning, research-driven academia, and cultural exchange are at the forefront. If India aspires to be a global leader in education

once again, it must channel the essence of its lost universities. By fostering research-driven learning, encouraging global collaborations, and emphasizing India's rich knowledge traditions alongside modern advancements, the country can write a new chapter in its intellectual journey.

As Vikramashila stands on the brink of revival, it is not just a monument that is being restored, it is a vision. A vision of India reclaiming its rightful place as the cradle of wisdom, innovation, and global learning. The past was glorious, but the future? It can be even brighter.



Dr. Shri Gopal Kabra  
Veteran Doctor & Voracious writer on medical affairs

About a week after Holi, in the month of March, a pooja or ceremonial worship of a Hindu deity, *Sheetla Maata* is performed in Rajasthan. It is called Sheetla Ashtami, the day being the eighth of the lunar month. When I was a child, my mother would take out the idol of Sheetla Maata from the corner of the paranda, the place where drinking water was kept in earthen pots. To me, the idol was nothing more than a peculiarly shaped piece of stone, but to my mother, it was the goddess herself. With great care and reverence, my mother would apply a vermilion mark on it and install it for the pooja.

On this day, no fire was lit in the kitchen, and so, no hot food was prepared. Only items cooked the night before were partaken but after the Sheetla pooja. Though eaten cold, these traditional dishes were mouth-watering. *Bajre ki vaatyaa raabdi* (fermented millet soup) was the family favourite. This was prepared by adding millet flour to *chachh* (buttermilk), cooked and left to ferment naturally. Adding roasted *jeera* (cumin) made it a soothing, soporific drink. Another



favourite was *kanji bade*. Ground *raayee* (mustard seeds), *heeng* (asafoetida) and *kaala namak* (black salt) were added to water and left to ferment for a day till the mixture acquired a tangy taste and exuded an appetizing aroma. To this were added *daal ka vada* (ground, frittered and

fried gram balls). The gram balls were laced with *saunf* (fennel) to enhance its distinctive and lingering flavour. *Ker sangria ki subji* (a vegetable dish of Rajasthan) berry and beans), *gulgula* (fried sweet dough balls), *pooris*, fried, salted and smoked

crunchy *ganwar ki phali* (cluster beans) and several other such items completed a meal fit for royalty. Mother would call us to for the pooja when everything was ready. The Maata would be bathed and the run-off would be applied on our eyes. *Poori raabadi* would be offered and we would bow to her while mother applied vermilion on our foreheads and invoked Maata's benevolence and blessings on us. Sheetla Maata was believed to be the goddess who protected humanity from the then-prevalent smallpox, measles and other deadly scourges. We could not imagine a goddess in that stone piece and would do the pooja with reluctance. Sensing this, Mother would mildly scold us, fearing that our



My mother's Ram was the symbol of all the moral values and life lessons, the *samskar* that we imbibed from her. She lived for her Ram Lala, or *Thakurji*, as she often called him, and for her children. She did not worship but cared and served her Thakurji. She called this *Thakurji ki seva*. So much so, that the last thing she requested before she closed her eyes forever was to extract a vow from her daughter-in-law that she would continue, uninterrupted, the *seva* of her Thakurji.

## A Matter Of Faith

### #SHEETLA ASHTAMI



lack of faith may displease Sheetla and we would be visited by smallpox. This was the best she could do. My mother's faith in Sheetla Maata was innate and we had faith in our mother, so, we were content to leave it at that. No doubt, the delicious food helped. Her faith, indeed, had a sobering effect on us. Having completed the pooja, Mother was at peace with herself. Is it any wonder that, even today, Sheetla Maata pooja is performed in Hindu families? It's not just the ritual but the innate faith which it is performed that

brings an inexplicable peace of mind in its wake. My mother was a simple soul. Barely literate, she had no intellectual pretensions. The moral values she inculcated in us were by a singular personal example, a simple life devoted to her Ram Lala, the infant Ram. Her affectionate devotion to the child Ram was pure and heartwarming. She worshipped Him as a child, and more importantly, for her children. She did not call it pooja (wor-

ship) but *seva* (care or service) of her *Ram Lala*. She would wake Him up in the morning, give Him *abhishek* (bath) with *gangajal*-laced water, collecting the run off as *charamrit* (holy water), dress Him up in clothes she had herself stitched, place Him on his throne, offer Him dry fruits, which became *prasad* for us, light a lamp and sing hymns in the praise of the Lord, tinkling a little bell in one hand. In later years, we would not leave home for work without going to her room and bowing before Ram Lala as she sought His blessings for us and gave us *charamrit* and *prasad* as His grace. She would say, "Ram to thare *andar hai* (God is with you and within you all the time). Keep tuned to your *antaratma* (soul or

inner being), listen to his voice." About a person with no compassion or the good of others at heart, she would say, "Bi ko to ram margyo (his Ram is dead)." When I bowed before her and she put her hand on my head, it gave me a feeling of her being constantly with me. Her Ram was with me all the time. She was

the bridge between us and her Ram. Her love for her Ram Lala and yearning for His benevolence enabled her to be at peace with herself and the world. My mother's Ram was the symbol of all the moral values and life lessons, the *samskar* that

we imbibed from her. She lived for her Ram Lala, or Thakurji, as she often called him, and for her children. She did not worship but cared and served her Thakurji. She called this *Thakurji ki seva*. So much so, that the last thing she requested before she closed her eyes forever was to extract a vow from her daughter-in-law that she would continue, uninterrupted, the *seva* of her Thakurji. She was at peace with her Thakurji and the world when she breathed her last. She left her Ram Lala with us. I can still feel her hand resting on my head to bless me. Every night, before she drifted off to sleep, I would massage my mother's aching feet. Massaging the feet of the elders at night was a tradition in most *Maruwari* joint families and the very thought of this floods my mind with poignant memories. This is how we would bid goodnight to our parents and grandparents. While she received her nightly ministrations, my mother never sermonized. Her soft talk generally concerned the wellbeing of the members of our extended joint family. It was always for doing something for them. She would ask me to write to them or instruct me to do what had to be done. While she, perhaps, never meant them to be, these half-hour periods were precious lessons in the purpose of life. I have my mother to thank for enabling me to maintain harmony with my many relations in the way she desired. Now, at the age of 88, I wish for few things more than that this family tradition continues.

## Purple Day

Purple Day is an incredible grassroots celebration that is aimed at raising worldwide awareness of epilepsy, a condition that affects over 65 million people globally. Epilepsy is a neurological condition that causes seizures and often begins in childhood, and it's so important that we raise awareness of the challenges that people with epilepsy can face in social situations. The wonderful idea behind Purple Day is to educate those who are not yet familiar with the condition, and for those who have epilepsy to know that they are not alone.



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## #CHAITRA NAVRATRI 2025

# A Festival of Divine Energy, Renewal, and Spiritual Awakening

It's a cosmic invitation to shed the old, embrace the divine, and ignite the inner spark that fuels our lives.

As spring unfurls its golden embrace and nature hums a melody of renewal, a sacred energy begins to stir. It's Chaitra Navratri, nine powerful nights dedicated to the worship of Goddess Durga. But this is no ordinary festival. It's a cosmic invitation to shed the old, embrace the divine, and ignite the inner spark that fuels our lives.

#### ARE YOU READY TO EMBARK ON THIS SPIRITUAL JOURNEY?

When is Chaitra Navratri 2025?

Circle the dates! March 30 to April 7, nine days of devotion, discipline, and divine blessings. The festival kicks off with *Ghatasthapana*, the sacred invocation of the Goddess, and if you're wondering when the universe aligns just right for this, mark 8:13 A.M. to 10:22 A.M. as the most auspicious time on March 30. Missed it? Don't worry! There's an *Abhinit Muhurat* from 12:01 P.M. to 12:50 P.M., because the divine always finds a way to reach those who seek it.



#### The Legends That Make Chaitra Navratri Epic

Every festival has a story, but Chaitra Navratri? It's a saga! Imagine a world gripped by darkness. The mighty demon *Mahishasura* has unleashed terror, his power making him nearly invincible. The gods, desperate and helpless, channel all their energies into a single, breathtaking creation, Goddess Durga. Fiery, radiant, unstoppable. For nine relentless days, the heavens tremble as she battles Mahishasura, finally vanquishing him on the tenth day. That's the moment god triumphs over evil, and that's the essence of

#### The Goddess in Nine Divine Forms

Nine days, nine nights, and nine awe-inspiring *avatars* of Maa Durga. Each day, she reveals a different form, guiding us through different aspects of life. *Shailputri* teaches resilience, *Brahmacharini* inspires self-discipline, *Chandraghanta* roars with bravery, and *Kushmanda* radiates cosmic energy. Then comes *Skandamata*, the nurturing force, *Katayani*, the fierce warrior,

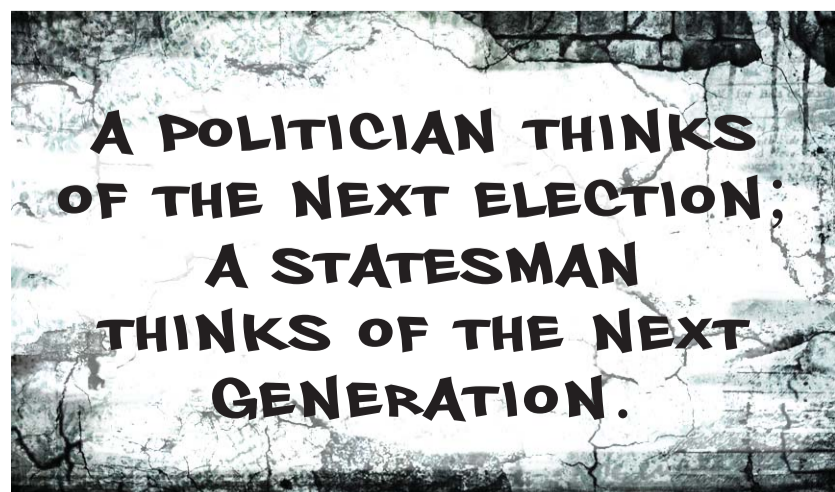
#### The Rituals More Than Just Tradition

Navratri isn't just a festival, it's a practice in mindfulness, devotion, and self-transformation. Fasting? It's not just about food, it's about cleansing body, mind, and soul. The morning prayers, the chants, the flickering diyas, they create a rhythm that syncs us with the universe itself. And then, there's *Kanya Puja*, where young girls are worshipped as living embodiments of the Goddess. It's a beautiful reminder that Shakti, power, resides in every girl, every woman, every soul. And let's not forget *Ram Navami*, the grand finale of Chaitra Navratri. The air buzzes with the chants of Lord Rama's name, temples light up in celebration, and hearts swell with devotion. It's the perfect conclusion, a day that celebrates divine righteousness, unwavering faith, and the victory of truth.

#### Why Chaitra Navratri Matters More Than Ever

In the rush of life, we often forget to pause, reflect, and recharge. Chaitra Navratri is that sacred pause, a time to reignite our inner strength, reconnect with our spiritual roots, and renew our energies. It's a cosmic reminder that no matter how chaotic life gets, there is always divine order, divine guidance, and divine protection. As the festival approaches, ask yourself: What battles am I fighting? What burdens do I need to let go of? What blessings do I seek? This Chaitra Navratri, don't just celebrate, immerse yourself. Invoke the Goddess, embrace her strength, and let her guide you towards a life filled with courage, wisdom, and divine grace. *Jai Maa Durga!* Wishing you a spiritually powerful and deeply fulfilling Chaitra Navratri 2025!

## THE WALL



## BABY BLUES



By Rick Kirkman & Jerry Scott



## ZITS



By Jerry Scott & Jim Borgman