

## **Dashain Testimony – Saroj D. Prajapati, President of Nepal Education and Cultural Center (NECC), Beallsville, MD**

As a Nepali origin living in the United States of America, it is very important for me to keep my culture and tradition alive. Just like any other festival of Nepal, Dashain plays even more important role in my life. Dashain is the important and greatest Hindu festival for Nepalese people around the world. Nepalese people around the world save their vacation days so they can return home when the Dashain festival is happening and attend it. It is a time when the entire country of Nepal is united in its values and identity. The generations of people of Nepal mainly celebrate this festival to keep their cultural heritage to pass onto their next generations. It is the festival that brings happiness and delivers the message of unity among people.

Dashain starts according to the on the Hindu calendar of Ashvin, the seventh month, which coincides with the shukla paksha (lunar fortnight). The festival ends on Purnima (full moon), usually between September and October. According to Hindu theology, Mahishasura, a demon invades and wreaks havoc on the devaloka, the heaven where gods and devas live. Goddess Durga became the main character of this auspicious occasion. There are many manifestations of Durga, and the days of the festival celebrate each aspect of her.

The festival carries the celebrations that last 15 days in total. However, some of these days carry a more special significance than others. First day of Dashain is the beginning of the festival is marked with a blessing. A Hindu priest or the head of the household takes a large metal pot called a kalasha and pours holy water inside it, then covers it with dung so that Jamara seeds can be planted. These seeds are fast-growing and are expected to sprout within ten days. The pot is then placed in a special prayer room to grow,. This process continues for 6 days. On Seventh day, the largest celebration takes place. The Kalasha is carried along with an assortment of flora such as banana sticks, wood apple leaves, wheatgrass, and sugarcane bound with red cloth. This is referred to as a Phulpati (flowers, plants, and leaves), a full parade and spiritual procession. On the eighth and ninth day, the head of the house perform the pujas at the home and also outside temples. The adults and children wear new clothes to go around the temples to worship and meet other friends and relatives. On this day many work tools and vehicles are blessed through sacrificial offerings. Finally, on the tenth day, Durga defeats or kills Mahishasura, a demon culminating: the triumph of good, essentially why Dashain is celebrated. This day is also known as Vijaya Dashami, when the elder relatives and friends offers the blessings to the children and the youngsters by offering the Tika on their forehead and give money as a token of Sagun. This day strengthens the bonds of the community and connects the generations. This is the day also signifies the victory of Lord Ram over Ravan, a demon who kidnapped his wife Sita.

Although it's not possible for the people outside of Nepal to take time off for 15 days from the school and/or the workplace, they at least observed one day off from their busy schedule to celebrate this main festival of their country of origin. There are many other festival from different areas of the world observed and honored in USA, but Nepali people haven't had opportunity to present themselves the importance of Dashain to the mainstream. The growing numbers of Nepali immigrants in the area definitely making its presence in the community, therefore, I strongly think Dashain should be on the State/County calendars.