

[America's Gujaratis](#)

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Dancing for God; Hundreds of Hindu Families Join in Uninhibited Worship And Fun During Navaratri in California

Nalluran, Muni Navaratri is one of the most profound festivals in the Hindu year. In the nine nights of Navaratri Hindus worship and align themselves with the Divine Shakti, whose grace and blessings bring good health, knowledge, a cultured manner and prosperity. This year we had the privilege of participating in this festival with the Gujarati community of San Francisco. Each Navaratri evening, members of the Gujarati community gathered in various halls for Garba, a delightful way of worship that incorporates dance and song.

When we arrived at the Garba, it was already in full swing. Five hundred people filled a large hall on Ellis Street, right in the middle of one of San Francisco's roughest neighborhoods in the city. Stepping from the car into the hall, we noticed the anomalous surroundings, but inside was totally different. We passed by a group of young men who watched the door, not knowing what kind of crazy person might just walk in. We were welcomed heartily and directed to the hall where the Garba was taking place. In the middle of the hall was a beautiful shrine to Goddess Laxmi, richly decorated with marigold and carnation garlands and surrounded with traditional offering trays. A table near the shrine groaned under the weight of electronic equipment and musical instruments. A group of men played cymbals and drums, one man sang, and another played the harmonium.

Instantly we knew we were in the midst of an event, one that exuded joy and culture. For one thing, the Garba served an important social function. People were together, and everyone was having a good time. Though some people sat or stood on the side lines, most were dancing. There were circles of young people and circles of middle-aged ladies. Young men danced, then took time out to join in the music making. On one side of the hall, the elders of the community, the grandmothers and grandfather sat and watched, no doubt drifting back in their minds to the days when they had danced as agilely as the young people were dancing tonight. The dancing women were dressed in beautiful saris and many of the men wore silk national shirts. Standing next to me was a little girl who wore a

colorful skirt and blouse embroidered with metallic threads.

Our host pointed out the two large clay pots poised on stands on either side of the altar. The pots had been turned into oil lamps which had been kept burning from the very first moment of the festival. Once we understood about the lamps and the light burning brightly through this wonderful festival, we saw this worship in a different way. As the Garba progressed we began to grasp its spiritual dimension. Everyone let go of their troubles and their day-to-day concerns by getting into the dance and the music with full spirit. There was no room for anything else in that moment. Worry was gone. Spirits soared. The music slowed down, then its pace quickened, then it was over only to start over again in a few minutes. The dancers moved in a circle, striking the sticks of the dancer opposite them, then swinging around and moving on to the next dancer. Six or seven circles were spinning together like human chakras - tightly pressed together all over the room. Everyone joined in with a sense of belonging to a great family. It seemed that everyone had turned themselves into a flame, purified of worldly concerns and burning brightly in their worship of the Divine Goddess Shakti.

At a certain point, the dancing stopped. Then while everyone was singing sacred hymns, the ladies claimed their offering trays and lit the cotton wicks to join in a common arati to the Goddess whose blessings and love they had come together to receive. Slokas or praise were sung as the women with trays stood in a circle and worshipped Goddess Laxmi, waving lights in front of the altar. The arati and the singing went on for a long time. Everyone absorbed the blessings the worship had brought into their lives.

After it was over, a man who recognized us came up to comment on what a nice vibration had come to the hall during the dancing and the worship. We agreed. The lamps were passed around for devotees to take the flame, and then prasadam was offered. The evening was over. As we left, our hosts mentioned that there were Garbas going on at least four or five different locations in the city that night. They also mentioned that this hall had been purchased many years ago, when the first families came to the Bay Area and realized that they needed a place to worship and hold weddings and community events.

To the Cold and Windy Sea: As we talked, they told us that on the last night of the Navaratri festival, the night of Vijaya Dasami, the large clay pots in which flames had been kept alight during the nine-day festival would be taken to the beach and

placed in the sea. We begged to be included. We had really enjoyed and been uplifted by the Garba, and we wanted to see the festival through to the end. A few days later, the night of Vijaya Dasami, two young men came to pick us up and take us to Geary Beach. When we got there, we greeted many of the people whom we had seen at the Ellis Street hall. The large clay lamps, which had been on the sides of the altar, now sat on the cement promenade near the shore. Women and young girls danced in a wide circle around the lamps that glowed in the night. Everyone sang. When all the slokas had been sung, several strong young men carried the clay lamps down the stairs to the beach and across the sand into the ocean. The festival was over the lamp offerings floated out to sea.

In our car on the way home, we noticed several important things about this event. The first was that everyone participated. It wasn't just celebrated by old people and young children. Teenagers and young men and women in their twenties and thirties participated all the way through. They had a good time and enjoyed sharing in the festival with their parents and grandparents. The second thing we noticed is that everyone - even those children and teenagers born and raised in the United States - everyone, spoke Gujarati. Yet everyone seemed to be immersed in the fullness of life in America. We left our Navaratri festival deeply impressed with how successfully the Gujarati community has brought their culture and their faith to America.