

HOLY DAYS THAT AMERICA'S HINDUS CELEBRATE



Rama Navami

Birthday of Rama, the Ideal Man

An incarnation of God, an ideal man, dutiful son and just king: these are just a few ways to describe Lord Rama, an exemplar of honor, reverence, self-control and duty. He fought battles, became king, married a Goddess, traveled far and befriended exotic beings who were steadfast in their loyalty and courage. Rama Navami is the celebration of His birthday, when Hindus honor and remember Him with devotional singing, dramatic performance and non-stop recitation of His remarkable life story, the *Ramayana*.

When is Rama's birth celebrated?

Rama was born on *navami*, the ninth day of the waxing moon, in the Indian month of Chaitra (late March or early April). Sometimes the festival is observed for nine days before or after *navami*.

How do Hindus observe Rama Navami?

Devotees fast or eat only fruit or special food offerings prepared for the day. They participate in non-stop reading of the 24,000-verse epic *Ramayana*, at home or in a temple. Images or statues of baby Rama are placed in cradles and rocked by devotees. Homes resound with singing. In the evening, crowds attend *Ramalila*, in which storytellers and dance-drama troupes depict the *Ramayana*. It is common to remain awake the whole night, engaged in devotional practices. Devotees contribute generously to temples and charitable



organizations. They make buttermilk and a lime drink called *panaka*, serving them to the public without charge. Some temples make *khoa*, a sweet made from thickened milk. This festival is especially popular in Uttar Pradesh, where Rama's kingdom of Ayodhya is located.

Is the festival observed at temples?

Many temples hold grand celebrations on this day, especially those with shrines for Lord Rama, His wife Sita, His brother Lakshmana and His loyal friend Hanuman, Lord of Monkeys. *Panaka* and garlands of the sacred tulsi plant are offered as families pray for "Rama-Rajya," a time when dharma will once again be upheld in the world. In South India, the day is celebrated as the marriage anniversary of Rama and Sita. A ceremonial wedding is held at temples with great fanfare.

Why is Rama so popular?

Rama is one of the ten avatars or incarnations of Lord Vishnu. He is revered as the perfect husband and ruler, who held duty to king and country above all else. He held strong to his ideals in the face of tremendous trials, including exile from His kingdom and separation from His beloved wife, Sita, herself an embodiment of virtue and truth. He is honored and glorified for His unshakable adherence to dharma, righteousness. The story of Rama is deeply influential and popular in the societies of the Indian subcontinent and across Southeast Asia.



Panaka

Sweet Indian Limeade

Ingredients

½ cup of jaggery or brown sugar, 4 cups water, juice of one lime, 1½ tsp of grated fresh ginger, 1 tsp ghee or oil, a pinch of cardamom powder

Method

Mix ingredients and serve cold.

Spicy Buttermilk

Ingredients

2 cups buttermilk (or yoghurt), 2 cups water, 3 curry leaves, chopped coriander leaves (cilantro), 1 finely chopped green chilli, 1½ tsp ginger powder, 1 tsp mustard seeds, 1 pinch asafoetida, salt to taste

Method

Heat oil in saucepan and add mustard seeds; allow it to splutter, then add curry leaves, ginger, green chilies and asafoetida, stirring vigorously. Mix with remaining ingredients and beat until smooth.

Tidbits About Lord Rama

What is the story of Rama? A tale of love and separation, the *Ramayana* has moved the hearts of millions of Hindus over the ages. To honor a promise made by his father, King Dasaratha, prince Rama abandons His claim to the throne and spends 14 years in exile. Wife Sita and brother Lakshmana join him in exile, a time of perils and tribulations. Sita is abducted by Ravana, the monarch of Lanka. After a long and arduous search, Rama discovers Sita's whereabouts, with the help of Hanuman. A colossal war ensues against Ravana's armies. In a duel of majestic proportions, powerful and magical beings wield mighty weaponry in formidable battles. Rama slays Ravana and liberates Sita. Having completed His exile, Rama returns to be crowned king, loved by one and all.

Who wrote the epic? Some 25 centuries ago, a sage ordered a thief to sit under a tree and chant "ma-ra" until he returned. Years passed, and an ant-hill covered the man, who had lost himself to the chant. The sage returned and broke the anthill, naming the thief Valmiki, meaning "from an anthill." Inspired

by his expanded awareness, Valmiki immortalized Rama by composing the *Ramayana*, a work unmatched in poetic excellence and



longevity. *Shri Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas in Hindi and the *Kamba Ramayanam* by the poet Kambar in Tamil stand alongside Valmiki's epic in Sanskrit.

Who was Sita?

Sita was a powerful, gifted, beautiful woman, utterly devoted to her husband. Found in the fields as a babe by King Janaka, Sita was raised a princess. She walked alongside Rama in exile. When abducted by Ravana, she was unshakeable in her faith that her husband would rescue her. She walked through fire to prove her purity. To prevent further slander, Rama sent her away to the forest. She patiently bore separation from her husband a second time and bore twins named Lav and Kush. When they were reunited with their father, she commanded Mother Earth to swallow her. The Earth split open and Sita disappeared.

Fact & Fiction

FACT: Hinduism has more than one sacred scripture, with several books considered revered or holy. While all Hindus revere the sanctity of the primordial *Vedas*, distinct sects recognize scripture that is most aligned with their theological beliefs, but not universal to all Hindus. Examples are the *Agamas*, *Ramayana*, *Puranas* and *Mahabharata*.

FICTION: Some deride Hinduism as primitive because certain of its Deities have animal features. Actually, most religions share this characteristic. The Greek God Pan and the Egyptian Deities Anubis and Horus are examples. In Christianity and Judaism, the biblical prophet Ezekiel describes the angels known as cherubim as having the faces of a lion, an ox, an eagle and a man, with the feet of a calf and four wings.