



SOUJYA SIVARAMAN

Varalakshmi Vrata

Taking a Vow of Love & Loyalty

Varalakshmi Vrata is one of those rare festivals that are strictly feminine. At this time women celebrate and reaffirm their connection with Goddess Lakshmi, the Divine Mother and provider of abundance and wealth. It is both a celebration and a strict observance,

practiced exclusively by married women. Wives take turns honoring each other as representatives of the Goddess, exchanging sweets, spices, new clothing and money. Women chant the prayers, prepare the offerings and conduct the entire ceremony themselves.

Who is Varalakshmi and what is the vow?

Varalakshmi is the giver of *vara*, meaning boons or wishes. In this form Lakshmi brings prosperity, well-being and fulfilment to the home. The vow, or *vrata*, is each woman's pledge to honor the female principle in the highest manner by observing this elaborate festival.

Where is the festival celebrated and when?

Married women in Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra celebrate this festival on the Friday preceding the full moon in the Hindu month of Shravana (August/September).

What are the customs for this day?

Women who wish to wholeheartedly seek the Goddess' protection receive blessings to do so from another who practices the tradition. Girls may participate but do not perform the puja. Homes are thoroughly cleaned, decorated and prepared the day



SOUJYA SIVARAMAN

before for the Goddess' arrival. The next morning, a ceremony is performed honoring Ganesha, the Lord of Beginnings. Then, through song, the women invite Varalakshmi into their home shrines. She is represented by a brass vessel (*kalasha*) filled with uncooked rice, betel leaves, betel nuts, coins, turmeric root, dates and other auspicious items. A coconut is seated over the mouth of the pot. The face of the Goddess, an impression usually made in silver (sometimes a coin), is attached to the coconut fibre. The *kalasha* is then decorated with jewelry and draped with cloth and brocade to look like a beautiful Goddess. Several women attach a black-beaded braid with a tasselled ornament at the end.

What rite binds the women to Lakshmi?

Hindu women pray for their family's

SOUMYA SITARAMAN



prosperity and well-being. A *toram* or *sara-du*—a thread stained in turmeric paste with nine knots in a row—is tied to the Goddess. A similar thread is prepared for each lady and placed in front of the Goddess during the puja. After the rituals, the thread-bracelets are distributed and worn on the right wrist as a mark of protection.

Are the food preparations elaborate?

The recipes are unimaginably complex and

time-consuming. Their loving preparation is itself a means of venerating the Goddess and, through Her, all women. To be proper, a feast must have at least a dozen appams, salty pongal, steamed rice cakes and kolakattai, twelve each with coconut filling and sesame seed filling—to name a few items on the menu. Camaraderie abounds and blessings flow in abundance as participants feast on delicacies. Foods prepared for this day are surpassed at no other festival.



SOUMYA DAY / WIKIMEDIA

Making Idli

Healthy steamed rice cakes, a staple breakfast food in South India
Preparation time: overnight

Cooking time: 30 minutes

Serves: 6–8

Cooking equipment: A steamer and idli (or muffin) cups.

Ingredients

1 cup unbroken de-husked black gram urad dal, 3 cups rice (brown rice is healthiest), salt to taste

Method

1. Soak rice and lentils in sufficient water for 2 hours.
2. Grind the mix into a fine, fluffy paste, adding water as needed to form a batter thicker than pancake batter. Let ferment overnight.
3. Mix the salt into the batter.
4. Butter the steamer trays.
5. Scoop one ladle of batter into each cup on the tray.
6. Steam for 20 minutes or until the steam smells of cooked dough.
7. Scoop out the idlis. If dough is sticky, steam them a little longer.
8. Enjoy them while hot, with savory chutney and sambal!

Tidbits About Varalakshmi's Festivities

How do women relate to Varalakshmi? Varalakshmi is the epitome of femininity. She is the giver of pleasure, happiness, love and peace. She embodies strength, resilience and fortitude. She is the teacher, bestowing knowledge. Women pray that they may possess all Her strengths to fulfill their demanding roles in life. A Hindu woman is considered the Lakshmi of her home, the one who brings good fortune. In Hindu marriages, the bride is Lakshmi personified. In the traditional home, Every Hindu wife and mother

is addressed by the title Shrimati, the auspicious one, or Saubhagyavati, the epitome of good fortune.

Are there many forms of Lakshmi?

Though Goddess Lakshmi is one, She is worshiped on different occasions in slightly different aspects, including Gajalakshmi, the royal form of the Goddess, flanked by elephants, representing power; Dhanalakshmi, the supreme giver of wealth; and Danyalakshmi, keeper of grains and abundant food.

Hinduism: Fact & Fiction

FACT: Hindu women are honored as bringers of good luck and fortune. They are considered the keepers of culture, tradition, values and morals in a Hindu home. They have equal footing with men in education, politics and the arts. A husband and wife are viewed as yoked oxen, each having to pull the cart of family life for it to move forward. Priests only receive serious responsibilities in a temple after getting married, when they are considered to be stable and responsible.

FICTION: Some wrongly believe that dowry is a mandatory practice with religious roots. It is, in fact, a social custom that came into practice when succession laws favored only the male children in the family. A daughter's wedding was an opportunity to give her a share of her parents' wealth, which she would have no legal claim over later. The law has changed today to give equal rights to heirs of either gender, and parents are also changing, albeit gradually.