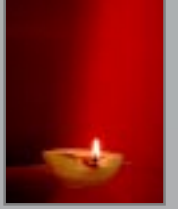


The philosophical explanation

The philosophical aspect of the story of Narakasura and his downfall could also be analysed as the depiction of the three gunas namely, *tamasic*, *rajasic* and *sattvic* qualities. The demon represents the quality of tamas - '*Narakastama unnaahah,*' (Bhagavata XI-19-43).

Varaha is symbolic of the *Atman* and the word '*Vara*' means excellent and most beautiful, while *Bhumi*, Narakasura's mother, symbolises the material things of life. In short, this portrays the Atman with its true nature of excellence being veiled by a cloud of material things. Naraka's tyrannical activities, represent the quality of rajas. Thus Naraka, the embodiment of tamas and rajas was completely swayed by wrong thoughts and actions and was totally under the control of his ego and desires. When the Devas asked Krishna to help, the sattvic aspect comes into play portrayed by Krishna and His Consort, Satyabama.

The story symbolically describes the conquest of tamas and rajas, the two base qualities, by sattva, the noble quality. This conquest unveils one's own true nature, the Atman.



Another perspective

Tradition has also associated Deepavali with Lord Rama's and Sita's return to Ayodhya after fourteen years of exile. That evening, Sita went to the bank of the river to perform the Sandhya puja, the evening prayer, carrying an oil lamp with her. In like manner, she was followed by all the Ayodhya women. They returned to their homes after the Sandhyopasana with the lamps and this day came to be known as the Festival of Lights. The return to Ayodhya connotes a return to peace and a righteous rule by Lord Rama.

The celebration

All Hindus await the festival of Deepavali eagerly. Days ahead, the women start preparing for the occasion - cleaning up the houses, preparing sweetmeats and acquiring new clothes. Everywhere there is an exuberance of activity, manifesting love and affection.

With the dawn of Deepavali, all cleanse themselves with an oil bath, the *Ganga-snaanam*, as it is called. Metaphorically, this is to wash off the contamination caused by the impurities, the Narakas within - '*Malankaluvuvaar*' as Saint Manikkavasagar sang. Good thoughts are likened to the oil that is smeared on the body, washing away the dirt and grime of evil thoughts. This is the inner meaning of the bath.

The Tulasi Puranam speaks of Goddess Lakshmi as the One associated with oil and water and known as Ganga Devi. A bath of this nature is therefore sacred and brings prosperity by removing sin and securing merit. On this day, Goddess Lakshmi, is said to grace homes and places of work that are bright with illumination. Legend has it that in the Samvat era, the wise King Vikramajit instituted Deepavali as the dawn of the New Year for the business community and dedicated this day to Lakshmi, Goddess of Wealth, Beauty and Prosperity.