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It is that time of year when Mysore turns into one giant celebration. The streets sparkle, the palace glows, *melas* spill into the city and centuries-old traditions step out in full royal regalia.

If Dasara is on your festive calendar, Mysore is where the action is. The 10-day festivities, known as Nadahabba, are steeped in nearly 500 years of history, dating back to the Vijayanagara Empire.

Today, the festival brings together royal traditions, culture, art, food, music and plenty of colour, turning the city into a magnet for visitors.

And at the heart of it all stands Amba Vilas Palace, better known as Mysore Palace.

Tradition runs deep

Mysore Dasara honours Goddess Chamundeshwari's victory over the demon Mahishasura. The festival was celebrated by the Vijayanagara kings as early as the 14th and 15th centuries and was revived by Raja Wadiyar in 1610.

The celebrations were held in the main durbar hall until the time of Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar, the last ruling Maharaja of Mysore. After Independence, the celebrations were held privately.

For the royal family, the festival remains deeply personal.

Samyukta Lakshmi, daughter of Maharajkumari Indrakshi Devi and granddaughter of Jayachamarajendra Wadiyar, recalls annual family trips to Mysore for Dasara, occasions that brought relatives together as much as they celebrated the festival.

Ayudha Puja, observed on the ninth day, was particularly steeped in ritual. Her uncle, H.H. Srikanta Datta Narasimha Raja Wadiyar, would honour and worship weapons, the state horse, elephant, cows and vehicles, decorating them with flowers and ceremonial ornaments.

The Mysore band would play the Mysore anthem, Kayo Shri Gowri, along with Western classical music; performances the family eagerly anticipated, complete with special requests.

A royal affair

During Dasara, Mysore is quite literally dressed for the occasion. Major streets, buildings and road circles are illuminated, creating a spectacle that can be explored through bus tours around the city.

But for a glimpse of Dasara's royal soul, it is the palace that beckons. The erstwhile royal family continues the tradition of celebrating the festival, including the Private Durbar, a deeply evocative ceremony that offers perhaps the closest living echo of Dasara as it was celebrated during the reign of the Maharajas.

For Maya Chandra, Founder-Director, MAYA Films, witnessing the ceremony was an experience she will not forget.

"Witnessing it, I was mesmerised by its elegance, sacredness, and quiet reverence," she says. The titular Maharaja, dressed in ceremonial finery and accompanied by attendants, ascends the throne as priests and palace staff approach to offer their respects.

Viewed from behind sheer tissue curtains, the ceremony



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MARK YOUR CALENDAR

- **October 11:** Chamundeshwari worship and traditional Dasara opening, Chamundi Hill.
- **October 11-21:** Flower & Fruit Show, Kuppanna Park.
- **October 11-25:** Aahara Mela, Maharaja's College Ground.
- **October 17, 18, 20 & 21:** Drone Show, Bannimantap, 8pm.
- **October 18-19:** Kambala Buffalo Races, near VTU College, 9am.
- **October 20:** Ayudha Puja and Torchlight Parade rehearsal, Bannimantap, 7pm.
- **October 21:** Vijayadashami — Jamboo Savari from Mysuru Palace at 4.35pm; Torchlight Parade at Bannimantap, 7pm.

Private Durbar, food melas, wrestling bouts & Jambu Savari reveal the many faces of Mysore's grand Dasara

seems to suspend time.

Having never witnessed the Royal Dasara of a reigning Maharaja, Chandra says she was overcome by emotion, goosebumps, wonder and a profound sense of pride and affection for Mysore's heritage. For her, it was "a rare opportunity to feel close to a legacy that continues through its customs and ceremonies".

Local love, festive buzz

There is a reason people travel across the world to experience cities in celebration mode, from Christmas lights and markets in London and Paris to Mysore during Dasara.

As the sun goes down, the city comes alive. "The sun goes down, the city is lit in the most beautiful lights, and the Mysore palace never ceases to amaze you, especially during Dussehra," says resident Netra Chirag.

Then come the *melas*. There is a food mela featuring local delicacies from across Karnataka, shopping *melas* bringing small businesses from different parts of India, and evening shows centred on history and culture.

A visit to the Vinayaka temple near the palace is also on

the must-do list.

For TS Sujatha, another resident, Dasara is as much about family as it is about spectacle. "Friends and relatives often visit during the auspicious period, turning many of these outings into annual rituals," she says.

The crowds may keep growing, she says, but the city's beauty and charm are at their peak during Dussehra. The hospitality industry, too, sees Dasara as a chance to showcase Mysuru beyond the festival itself.

"Visitors come not only to witness the grandeur of the celebrations but also to experience the city's heritage, cuisine, architecture and warm hospitality," says Keshav Baljee, Executive Director, Royal Orchid Hotels Ltd.

For him, the magic lies in the combination of the procession, cultural programmes, traditional music and dance, local cuisine, illumination and the participation of Mysuru's people.

Dasara, he says, creates a connection between the past and present, allowing visitors to experience the grandeur of the city's royal legacy while discovering Mysuru as a vibrant contemporary destination.

When Dasara gets a little rough

There is more to Mysore's festive heritage than royal ceremonies and palace lights.

The city also has a long-standing association with wrestling. On Vijayadashami, the *Vajramusti* Kalaga, or thunderbolt fight, also known as the diamond fist fight, is showcased as an ancient martial art practice.

The professional athletes involved belong to the Jetti or Jatti community, mainly found

in and around Mysore district.

The combatants traditionally wear light orange-coloured drawers extending halfway down the thigh.

Their right hand is fitted with a *Vajramusti*, a claw-dagger-like weapon with four-pointed knobs resembling sharp knuckles, while the left hand is used to block and counter the opponent. In ancient times, the fight is said to have continued from start to finish and could be fatal. Today, the contest is symbolic and ends once the first strike to the head is made.

And then come the elephants

The grand finale arrives on Vijayadashami, when the Dasara procession, or *Jambu Savari*, takes to the streets.

Decorated elephants form a central part of the procession, with the main elephant carrying the idol of Goddess Chamundeshwari in the Golden Howdah, or *Chinnada Ambari*.

The animals are decked out in traditional finery - *nettipattam* or forehead ornaments, neck and foot bells, neck ropes, *singoti* covers for the tusks, *venchamaram* made from yak tail and colourful umbrellas.

Their presence is no mere pageant prop. The erstwhile kings of Mysore are said to have overseen the training of elephants for Dasara.

Today, these domesticated elephants are set free in training camps in surrounding national parks and camps, including Dubare, Hebbala, Moorkal, Nagarahole, Sunkadakatte and Bandipur.

And that is the enduring draw of Mysore Dasara - it is not simply a festival to watch. It is a city-wide collision of royalty and ritual, heritage and hospitality, spectacle and memory with enough lights, food, music, martial tradition and elephants to make Mysore impossible to ignore.