

Mahasivaratri - Festival of Siva

Maha Sivaratri is a Hindu festival of devotion to the deity Siva. It is celebrated by Hindus who worship Siva as their primary deity. Maha Sivaratri means “the Great Night of Siva” and it is the fourteenth lunar night (Chaturdasi) of the dark fortnight of the Hindu month of Phalgun. This typically falls between February and March. There are a number of myths regarding the origin of Sivaratri and most of the stories can be found in the Puranas.

Siva has been worshiped in India since ancient times. He has been worshiped in the form of the *Sivalinga* or *jyoti-linga* symbolically representing the *jyoti* or flame of fire. “Siva is the one of the highest gods of the Hindu pantheon” (Mukherji, 35). Although Siva is known as a destroyer he has numerous other characteristics. His names include Mahadeva, “The Great God” and the name Siva means auspicious God. “Among the Hindu triumvirate, Brahma is the creator, Vishnu is the preserver and Shiva is considered the destroyer (Thakur and Roa, 01).

The date of origin of Mahasivaratri is as anonymous as the origin of the Hinduism. The word Sivaratri appears in the *Mahabharata* and in certain Puranas such as *Garuda*, *Padma*, *Skanda* and *Agni Puranas* (Welbon and Glenn, 192).

According to the Shanti Parva of the *Mahabharata*, which is believed to be apocryphal, the Sivaratri vow was put into the Bhishma’s mouth. “Bhishma was the octogenarian leader of the Kuru forces in the great battle of Kurukshetra.” “According to the legend thus put into the mouth of the dying hero, the fast of Sivaratri was first publicly observed by King Chitra Bhanu” who was the king ruling over the whole of Jambu-Dwipa (ancient name of India) (Mukherji, 39).

As King Chitra Bhanu was on a holy fast on the day of Sivaratri, one of his sages, Ashta-Bakra came on a visit and questioned his abstaining. He told Ashta-Bakra that in his previous life

he was a hunter by the name Suswar. He made his living by hunting and killing animals and selling them in the markets to feed his family. On one occasion as he wandered through the forest, he failed to realize that darkness had rolled around and he was unable to go back home. In order to shelter himself he climbed up the *bilva* (wood-apple) tree. He had hunted a deer that day but he could not take it home to feed his family. He thought of his hungry family and wept. His tears along with the leaves of the *bilva* tree landed on the *linga* (Lord Siva). Lord Siva regarded this as an offering from one of his devotees. The next morning as he returned home he bought some food by selling the deer that he hunted in the previous day. A stranger appeared at his doorstep and begged for food before he could eat any himself. Suswar then fed the stranger before he was going to break his own fast. Unknowingly Suswar accomplished the proper observance that Sivaratri requires, a day of fasting and serving food to a Brahman. Suswar lived many years without any idea of the spiritual gain that he attained by accomplishing the *Sivaratri Vrata* (Ascetic observance on the Night of Siva). When the afterlife came, he learned that he had been blessed and was rewarded with a grand life. According to the *Mahabharata*, Suswar lived in *Siva loka*(realm of Siva) for thousands of years and also lived in *Indra loka* or (realm of Indra)- the heaven, and *Brahma loka* or (realm of Brahma) the higher heaven. Finally he was promoted to *Vaikunda*-the realm of the highest heaven (Mukherji, 43).

In the Puranic accounts, Siva married the golden Parvati and tells her that this day is remarkably valued him. Therefore, those who perform the prescribed ascetic observance on this day will be freed from all sins. According to the myths of the *Siva Purana*, the gods Vishnu and Brahma wanted to know who between them the superior power was. This let them to fight each other Siva intervened as a *jyoti* (Flame of fire) to make them realize the futility of their fight (Thakur and Roa, 01).

According to another legend in the *Siva Purana*, during Samudra Manthan (the churning of the ocean) by the Asuras and the Devas, *Halalak* (a highly toxic poison) came out from the ocean and it was capable of destroying the entire creation. Visnu advised the Devas and the Asuras to prey to Siva for their lives. Siva drank the poison and it lodged in his throat; thus Lord Siva is known as Nilakantha (the Blue Throated). In order to dissipate the poison Siva had to stay awake the whole night. The Devas and Asuras prayed the whole night in the vigil. Pleased with their devotion, Nilakantha declared that whoever worshiped him on that day would have their wishes fulfilled.

Celebration of Mahasivaratri

The celebration of Sivaratri differs from place to place, and actual practices also differ depending on the circumstances (Welbon and Yocum 203). For example, in Chennai (Madras) people usually limit themselves to fasting, keeping awake, and listening to stories of *Mahasivaratri*. However in other places such as Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Andhra Pradesh *Mahasivaratri* is celebrated as their royal family festival and their rites of worship are more elaborate (Thakur and Roa, 04). “In certain parts of India people still drink a concoction called bhang, prepared by pouring water over hemp leaves and adding almonds, rose leaves, opium etc (Welbon and Yocum, 204)”. They believe that this is the favourite beverage of Siva.

On Sivaratri day, devotees awake at sunrise and purify them with a bath in the Ganga River or in the sacred water at their local temple. Purification is not only for their body, but also it involves a mental, moral, and spiritually by cleansing by calming certain qualities within them (Manohar 200). During the day devotees will fast; the types of fasting differ from person to person according to their circumstances. Some devotees will fast the whole day and others will

get one light meal (vegetarian food mostly fruits and milk). They may spend their day repeating mantra (*japa of Om namo sivaya*) and Meditation. At night they conduct a Vigil and rites such as offering *bilva* (wood apple) leaves, water, and milk. The rituals involved *abhiseka* (bath to the *Sivalinga*), and offering of *Puspa* (flower), *dhupa* (incense), *dipa* (flame), *naivedya* (food). The next day devotees must entertain a stranger or guest with offerings of food and gift. This is said to accomplish the custom of *Mahasivaratri* and devotees believe they will receive blessing from Siva himself.

Fasting, Vigil, and Puja

Fasting, vigil, and *puja* (Prayer) are the most important religious observance among the devotees of *Sivaratri*. In order to achieve the successful outcome of *Sivaratri*, the devotees must prepare themselves physically, mentally, morally, and spiritually by cultivation of certain merits such as ten set of injunction in the *Kalanirnaya* of *Madhva*(Patmury, 1994);

1. *Ahimsa* (non-violent), it is a rule of conduct that prevent the killing or injuring of living beings. “It is closely connected with the notion that all kinds of violence entail negative karmic consequences (Wikipedia)”.
2. *Satya* (Truthfulness) which includes refraining from false witness. It is a term of power due to its purity and meaning.
3. *Akrodha* (freedom from anger) keeping the mind free from feelings of anger, jealous and hatred (Patmury, 1994).
4. *Bramacarya* (Celibacy) is true love of God, its include being celibacy in mind. Body and mind should wander from though of God (Patmury, 1994).
5. *Daya* (compassion) is being sympathy. It means ‘suffering in the suffering of all beings’

6. *Ksama* (forbearance) is being patience, forgiveness or quietude.
7. *Santatman* (calmness of mind) is being peacefulness and surrender to the God. Accepting happy and pain equally or accepting victory and defeat equally.
8. *Krodhahina* (Devoid of fits of passion) mind and thoughts completely focuses on God.
9. *Tapas* (Austerities) fasting, wakefulness, and concentration (Patmury, 1994).
10. “*Drohahina* (free from malice) destroying all corrupting influences (Patmury, 1994)”.

According to *Sivapurana* (a legend of Siva), *Upavasa* (fasting the whole day) is the most important worship of deity Siva, and there is a special significance of the six essential items are used in the worship of Siva in the festival of *Sivaratri puja*.

1. Ritual bathing of *Sivalinga* with water, milk, honey, and bilva (wood apple) leaves.
2. The vermilion paste applied on the *Sivalinga*
3. Offering of fruits symbolizes long life and indulgence of desires.
4. Burning of incents sticks surrender the wealth.
5. The lighting of the lamp symbolizes attainment of knowledge
6. Offering of betel leaves marks satisfaction with worldly pleasures.

“The fasting and keeping vigilare symbolic of the control of the senses so that they may be restrained from wandering in search of deluding objects (Patmury, 1994)”. Keeping vigil also means waiting for the self-revelation of the Lord. It is also means that awaken from the darkness. Awake from the darkness is believed to be the attainment of self- realization (*Atman*).

Conclusion

Mahasivaratri unifies the many different life and experience in the life of Hindus, not only in the community but also in the relationship between God and worshippers. As we know,

in the Hindu tradition, Brahmin worships the God representing the entire community of worshipers. Though, in the festival of Sivaratri all men and women gain permission to perform the ritual rites from the *brahmins* regardless of their class or caste system. It symbolizes that all human being are equal. Further, by undergoing preliminary purification rites of physical and spiritual purification with “holy water” and “sacred mantras” the relationship between god and devotees even become closer. Man became a giver and God become a receiver of devotees’ offerings, which open up the channels of power and mutual relatedness between God and Men. The channel between God and men blocked the selfish desire and false notation. Finally, the miserable forces of sin and guilt are destroyed by the production of auspicious forces.

The festival of *Sivaratri* begins with the grave vow and accomplishes with the prayers, request for compassion and thanks giving. Devotees of Siva believe that pure love of God is a way of achieving *moksa* (self-realization).

According to J.H.M. Yinger’s definition of religion, “Religion, then, can be defined as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life. It expresses their refusal to capitulate to death, to give up in the face of frustration, to allow hostility to tear apart their human association... the quality of view implies two things: first a belief that evil, pain, bewilderment and injustice are fundamental factors of existence; and second, a conviction that man can ultimately be saved from these facts (Patmury, 1994)”.

According to the Hindus believe, as a destroyer, deity Siva destroys the bad sins, and provide welfare for the worshipers who accomplish the vow of the *Sivaratri*; thus, devotees live more peaceful, more loving with giving and sharing. Therefore, celebrating the festival of *Mahasivaratri* helps human lives become more peaceful and joyful, and it leads to have a

healthful life, which means festivals are not only the believes of particular society, they are the way of life to being part of the world.

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