

Maha Shivratri

Maha Shivaratri is celebrated with great devotion and religious feeling by Hindus, in honor of Lord Shiva, one of the Hindu Gods forming the Trinity. The festival falls on the moonless, 14th night of the new moon in the Hindu month of Phalgun (in the month of February - March, according to English Calendar). On the festival of Maha Shivaratri, devotees observe day and night fast and worship Shiva Lingam, to appease Lord Shiva.

There are many **interesting legends** related to the festival of Maha Shivaratri, explaining the reason behind its celebrations as well as its significance.

According to one of the most popular legends, Shivaratri is the wedding day of Lord Shiva and Parvati.

It is also believed that Lord Shiva performed 'Tandava', the dance of the creation, preservation and destruction on this auspicious night of Shivaratri.

According to another popular legend, described in Linga Purana, it was on Shivaratri that Lord Shiva manifested himself in the form of a Linga for the first time. Since then, the day is considered to be extremely auspicious by the devotees of Shiva and they celebrate it as Maha Shivaratri - the grand night of Shiva.

According to another popular legend during the great mythical churning of the ocean called *Samudra Manthan*, a pot of poison emerged from the ocean. The gods and the demons were terrified as it could destroy the entire world. When they ran to Shiva for help, he in order to protect the world, drank the deadly poison but held it in his throat instead of swallowing it. This turned his throat blue, and since then he came to be known as 'Nilkantha', the blue-throated one. Shivratri celebrates this event by which Shiva saved the world.

According to another legend in the Shiva Purana, once the other two of the threesomes of Hindu Gods, Brahma and Vishnu, were fighting over who was the superior of the two. Horrified at the intensity of the battle, the other gods asked Shiva to intervene. To make them realize the futility of their fight, Shiva assumed the form of a huge column of fire in between Brahma and Vishnu. Awestruck by its magnitude, they decided to find one end each to establish supremacy over the other. Brahma assumed the form of a swan and went upwards and Vishnu as Varaha went into the earth. But light has no limit and though they searched for thousands of miles, neither could find the end. On his journey upwards, Brahma came across a Ketaki flower wafting down slowly. When asked where she had come from, the Ketaki replied that she had been placed at the top of the fiery column as an offering. Unable to find the uppermost limit, Brahma decided to end his search and take the flower as a witness.

At this, the angry Shiva revealed his true form. He punished Brahma for telling a lie, and cursed him that no one would ever pray to him. The Ketaki flower too was banned from being used as an offering for any worship, as she had testified falsely. Since it was on the 14th day in the dark half of the month of Phalgun that Shiva first manifested himself in the form of a Linga, the day is especially auspicious and is celebrated as Mahashivaratri. Worshipping Shiva on this day is believed to bestow one with happiness and prosperity.

A legend explains the all-night worship of Shiva on Shivratri. There was once a poor tribal man who was great devotee of Shiva. One day he went deep into the forest to collect firewood. However he lost his way and could not return home before nightfall. As darkness fell, he heard the growls of wild animals. Terrified, he climbed onto the nearest tree for shelter till day-break. Perched amongst the branches, he was afraid he would doze and fall off the tree. To stay awake, he decided to pluck a leaf at a time from the tree and drop it, while chanting the name of Shiva. At dawn, he realized that he had dropped a thousand leaves onto a Linga to keep himself awake, the tribal plucked one leaf at a time from the tree and dropped it below which he had not seen in the dark. The tree happened to be a wood apple or bel tree. This unwitting all-night worship pleased Shiva, by whose grace the tribal was rewarded with divine bliss. This story is also recited on Mahashivaratri by devotees on fast. After observing the all-night fast, devotees eat the Prasad offered to Shiva.

How devotees celebrate the festival.

Devotees wake up early in the morning of the Mahashivratri day and take a ritual sunrise bath, preferably in the holy waters of river Ganga. They also offer prayers to the Sun God, Vishnu and Shiva as a part of a purification rite observed on all-important Hindu festivals. After wearing fresh new clothes devotees visit the give the customary bath to the Shivalinga.

On a Shivratri day, Shiva temples are thronged by devotees, mainly women, who come to perform the traditional Shivalinga pooja and seek blessings from the god.

Devotees pay a visit to the nearest Lord Shiva temple carrying the traditional puja items like milk, water, bel leaves, fruits, incense stick, oil lamp etc.

Ritual worship of Shiva Linga is done by temple priests every three hours all through the day and night of Shivaratri Festival. Shouts of 'Shivaji ki Jai', chanting of the mantra, 'Om Namah Shivaya' and ringing of temple bells make the atmosphere religious and devotional.

Nightlong vigil on Shivratri or the Jaagran is celebrated by singing of devotional hymns and songs in worship of Lord Shiva. And, it is only in the following morning that the devotees break their fast by consuming prasad offered to the Lord.

Tradition of Drinking Thandai Since Lord Shiva is regarded as an ascetic god, Maha Shivratri is very popular with ascetics. Thandai, a drink made with bhang (cannabis), almonds, and milk, is essentially drunk by the devout on the day as cannabis is said to have been very dear to Shiva.

Merits of Shivaratri Puja

According to Shiva Purana, sincere worship of Lord Shiva yields merits including spiritual growth for the devotees. It also provides extensive details on the right way to perform Shivratri Puja.

Shiva Purana further says that performing **abhisheka** of ShivaLinga with **six different ingredients** including milk, yoghurt, honey, ghee, sugar and water while chanting Sri Rudram, Chamakam and Dasa Shanthi pleases Lord Shiva the most. According to the mythology, each of these ingredient used in the abhisheka blesses a unique quality:

- **Milk** is for the blessing of purity and piouness.

- **Yogurt** is for prosperity and progeny.

· **Honey** is for sweet speech.

· **Ghee** is for victory.

· **Sugar** is for happiness.

· **Water** is for purity.