



## SHIVARATRI – THE GREAT NIGHT OF SHIVA

Mahashivaratri is celebrated throughout the country; it is particularly popular in Uttar Pradesh. Mahashivaratri falls on the 14th day of the dark half of 'Phalgun' (February-March). The name means "the night of Shiva". The ceremonies take place mainly at night. This is a festival observed in honour of Lord Shiva and it is believed that on this day Lord Shiva was married to Parvati.

Devotees bathe at sunrise, preferably in the Ganga, or any other holy water source (like Shiva Sagartank at Khajurao). They offer prayers to the sun (surya), Vishnu and Shiva. This is a purificatory rite, an important part of all Hindu festivals. Wearing a clean piece of clothing after the holy bath, worshippers carry pots of water to the temple and bathe the Shivling. The temple reverberates with the sound of bells and shouts of shankerji ki jai 'Hail Shiva'. Devotees go around the Shivling, three or seven times, and then pour water over it.

Lord Shiva is the deity of death and destruction, without which growth and rebirth could not take place. Lord Shiva's third eye in the centre of His forehead opens only in extreme anger, whilst His matted hair carries the Goddess Ganga down to earth.

All Hindus observe Mahashivaratri. Devotees gather in great numbers and attend the temples of Shiva, perform pooja to the Shivaling, sing bajans, offer prayers and on this day one has to observe a fast. This worship continues late into the night when coconut, bilva leaves (Bilipatra) and other foods are offered to Lord Shiva and his divine consort Parvati. People observe a strict fast on this day. The Shivalingam is worshipped throughout the night by washing it every three hours with milk, curd, honey, rose water, etc., whilst the chanting of the Mantra "Om Namah Shivaya" continues. Offerings of Bilva leaves are made to the Lingam as Bilva leaves are considered very sacred and it is said that Goddess Lakshmi resides in them.

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Lord Swaminarayan has placed Lord Shiva equal to Narayana (Shikshapatri 47 'And the oneness of Narayan and Shivaji should be understood, as the Vedas have described both to be brahmaroopa'). The relationship between Shiva and Narayan is that of bhakt and Bhagwan, Radha and Krishna, Nar and Narayan

Lord Shiva is also regarded as one of the five foremost deities (Shikshapatri 84 'And those under My shelter should respectfully believe in these 5 deities: Lord Vishnu, Lord Shiva, Ganapati (or Ganesh), Parvati (Lord Shiva's consort), and Surya (the sun-

god), for these reasons Lord Swaminarayan has requested that we must perform poojan of Lord Shiva with Bilva leaves (Shikshapatri 149 'and in the Indian month of Shravan, lovingly perform or have someone perform on one's behalf) the worship of Shree Mahadeva (Lord Shiva) in the various ways, using bilva-leaves, etc. and also observe the rules of fasting on this day.

### **Lord Narayan goes to Badrinath- Ladhuba and Dharma**

In the Skand Puran it is mentioned that Shivji once resided in Badrikashram. Lord Narayan decided He wanted to perform penance here. However, Shivji and Paravati would need to vacate the area before he could move in. One day when Shivji and Paravati were going to the Tapt Kund for a bath, He stood before them in the form of a small child crying profusely. Shivji understood immediately who the child was, however, Paravati's motherly instincts took over as soon as she laid eyes on Him.

Despite Shivji's many assurances that He would be fine and they should continue as planned, Paravati refused to leave the crying child out in the cold. Instead, she brought Him into the house and put Him to sleep, whilst she and Shivji went for a bath. In their absence, Lord Narayan quickly closed the doors from the inside. When they returned and found that they could not get in, Shivji laughed and said 'see I warned you. This child is no other than Lord Narayan Himself. No matter, if He wishes to stay here we will move elsewhere. Shivji and Paravati moved to another mountain known as Kedarnath.

### **Churning of the ocean and drinking of Halahal (poison)- Ghanshyam group (totos)**

During the Samudra Manthan, To get the wealth which was buried at the bed of the ocean it was necessary for the demi-gods and demons to work together and churn the sea. During the churning of the sea many riches appeared. However, poison (Halahal) also was brought out of the ocean.

The poison was so strong that as the stench of it spread it suffocated everything in its path. This terrified the gods and demons as the poison was capable of destroying the entire world, and they ran to Shiva for help. The only one who could solve this problem was Shiva. Everyone prayed to him and asked him to help them.

To stop the plight of the worlds, Shiv Bhagwan drank the poison and held it in his throat. His neck turned dark blue and he has since been known as Nilkanth. (Nil means blue and Kanth means neck).



### **Ganesh's birth- Jeevuba and Bhakti**

On the heights of mount kailash, the divine household of Shiva and Parvati stood divided; for Shiva came and went as he pleased and Parvati was irritated by his intrusions on her privacy to the extent of entering her private chambers even while she was having her bath. Out of that divine dissension Parvati decided to settle matters once and for all. Before going for her bath the next time, she rubbed off the sandalwood paste on her body and out of it created the figure of a young boy. She infused life into the figure and told him he was her son and should guard the entrance while she bathed.

Soon after, Shiva came to see Parvati but the young boy blocked his way and would not let him in. Shiva, unaware that this lad was his son, became furious and in great anger fought with this boy whose head got severed from his body in the ensuing battle. Parvati, returning from her bath, saw her headless son and threatened in her rage to destroy the heavens and the earth, so great was her sorrow.

Shiva pacified her and instructed his followers (known as ganas) to head north and bring the head of the first living being they encounter. The first creature they encountered was an elephant. They thus cut off its head and placed it on the body of Parvati's son and breathed life into him. Thus overjoyed, Parvati embraced her son.

### **Shiva Parvati Wedding- Jasuba group(ladies)**

Lord Shiva and his wife Sati were returning from listening to a Ram Kantha. On their way through a forest, Shiva saw Lord Rama searching for his wife Sita who had been kidnapped by Ravana, the King of Lanka. Lord Shiva bowed his head in reverence to Lord Rama. Sati was surprised by Lord Shiva's behavior and inquired why he was paying obeisance to a mere mortal. Shiva informed Sati that Rama was an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. Sati, however, was not satisfied with the reply and Lord asked her to go and verify the truth for herself.

Using her power to change forms, Sati took the form of Sita appeared before Rama. Lord Rama immediately recognized the true identity of the Goddess. At this, Sati realized the truth about Lord Ram. But, Sita was like a mother to Lord Shiva and since Sati took the form of Sita her status had changed. From that time, Shiva detached himself from her as a wife. Sati was sad with the change of attitude of Lord Shiva but she stayed on at Mount Kailash, the abode of Lord Shiva.

Later, Sati's father Daksha organised a yagna, but did not invite Sati or Shiva as he had an altercation with Shiva in the court of Brahma. But, Sati who wanted to attend the Yagna, went even though Lord Shiva did not appreciate the idea. To her great anguish, Daksha ignored her presence and did not even offer Prasad for Shiva. Sati felt humiliated and was struck with profound grief. She jumped into the yagna fire and immolated herself.

Lord Shiva became extremely furious when he heard the news of Sati's immolation. Carrying the body of Sati, Shiva began to perform Rudra Tandava (the dance of destruction) and wiped out the kingdom of Daksha. Everybody was terrified as Shiva's Tandava had the power to destroy the entire universe.

Lord Siva was now alone undertook rigorous penance and retired to the Himalayas. Sati took a re-birth as Parvati in the family of God Himalaya. She performed penance to break Shiva's meditation and win his attention. Through her devotion and persuasion by sages devas, Parvati was finally able to lure Shiva into marriage and away from asceticism.

### **Mohini Roop- Dhanbai Fai and Gnan**

When the nectar came out of the ocean during the churning, the demons stole the nectar and The Devs fought with them to try get it back. The reason they did this was to avoid the demons drinking the nectar and becoming immortal. As it was difficult to get the nectar off the demons, the Demi gods enlisted the help of Vishnu Bhagwan who took the form of Mohini and trapped the demons into her beauty.

When this leela took place, Shiv Bhagwan was doing deep penance. When he returned he came to know that his ishtadev Lord Vishnu had taken the form of Mohini. A desire arose in him in which he wanted to see the roop of Mohini. Lord Vishnu said that it would be unwise as he would not be able to control himself.

However, Shiva Bhagwan insisted that he wanted darshan of this form. To please his eternal devotee, Lord Vishnu obliged. Upon seeing this form, Shiv Bhagwan was overwhelmed with her beauty and insisted on a union with her. From the union a great fire arose which marked the beginning of Shiv Bagwan's 9<sup>th</sup> avtar, Hanuman.

### **The legend of ganga- Bhaktimata and Vairagya**

Once King Sagar - the ruler of Ayodhya and an ancestor of Lord Rama successfully performed the Ashwamedha Yagya for 99 times. Each time, he sent the horse around the earth it returned to the kingdom unchallenged. However, Indra - the King of God's became jealous of King Sagar's success. So when King Sagar performed the sacrifice of the 100th time, Indra kidnapped and hid the Yagya horse in the hermitage of Kapila Muni

In search of the horse, sixty thousand princes from Ayodhya reached Kapil Muni's hermitage. They mistook the sage to be the abductor and attacked him. An enraged Kapila Muni burnt the 60,000 princes to ashes. On hearing about the plight of his father and uncles, King Bhagiratha - one of the grandchildren of King Sagar requested Kapila Muni to grant a solution to the problem. Kapila Muni advised that the waters of the river Ganga would miraculously bring back the dead princes to life.

King Bhagirath left his kingdom and began to mediate for the salvation of the souls of

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his ancestors. It is said that Bhagirath observed a penance to Brahma for a thousand years, requesting Ganga to come down to earth from heaven and wash over his ancestor's ashes to release them from a curse and allow them to go to heaven. Pleased with the devotion, Brahma granted Bhagirath's wish but told him to pray to Lord Shiva, as he alone could sustain the weight of her descent.

Accordingly, Lord Shiva held out his thick matted hair to catch the river as she descended. The meandering through Shiva's lock softened Ganga's journey to the earth and the holy waters of river Ganga thus washed away the ashes of Bhagirath's ancestors. The Ganga, thus, became an attribute of Shiva. This manifestation of Shiva is known as Gangadhara.