

Mahashivaratri

The Story of an Eternal Festival

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Every week throughout the year, one day is sacred to the Lord Shiva, but once a year a day is set aside as Mahashivaratri — the Great Festival of Shiva. It is a movable festival, kept on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of the lunar month of Phalgun. This year (1972) it falls on February 13th.

Once celebrated on a vast scale throughout India, it now only sees peak performance at two places, separated by a considerable distance as well as a border. The best celebration to be witnessed is at the Pashupatinath (Lord of Animal Life) Temple at Kathmandu, Nepal. The other is celebrated on the Teleti, the sacred area at the base of Mount Girnar in Saurashtra. Because politics have tended to separate Nepal and India, this has encouraged Girnar to develop more and more.

The great cluster of seven peaks which suddenly push themselves up from the extensive flat area below makes them a unique sight from a distance. The journey to their peaks displays an even more wonderful sight. Two Europeans who wrote much about India during the days of British rule, described Girnar as “Not only the most wonderful sight in India, but in the whole world.” Girnar is missing from all tourist propaganda issued by the Central Government or the State Government of Gujarat.

A few days before Mahashivaratri, a vast number of sadhus make their way to the secret spot and crowd the many ashrams on the Teleti for the great midnight scene. It is here that one can see a large number of naked saints, the very epitomes of the Nivritti Marga or Path of Renunciation which they have chosen. The Naga sect come here in vast numbers and this is one time and place where practically all sects meet in concord. Nudity is here held in highest regard. Even sadhus who wear longotis or small loin cloths, drop the curtain on this occasion; let the microcosm be as the macrocosm.

In those happy blissful carefree days of ancient India, long before the Vedic Aryans came to disturb the verdant scene, the Lord Shiva reigned supreme with his consort, not only throughout the whole great sub-continent of Jambudvipa, but in many distant places of the world. It was here on this soil of India that men and women developed what was probably the earliest true religion, culture and way of life. We know from unquestionable proof that this Shiva-Shakti culture was flourishing more than five thousand years ago (7000 BC) and can rightfully conjecture that it must have had a history which began much earlier. Traces of this very ancient cult can be found in every religion which has appeared on the earth. Even today, in this ultra-modern age and miraculously escaping Christian suppression or destruction, there are still a vast

number of the Phallic-Pashupati cults still existing in Europe.

There is considerable opinion that the indigenous people of India prior to the Aryan immigration were a dark-skinned people. If this is so it is certainly strange that their God and Goddess were both described in countless texts as white-skinned. The Dakshinamurti Upanishad, probably itself a text rewritten from older oral traditions, describes Shiva as "The Lord sitting cross legged whose hair is matted and adorned with the shining crescent moon, whose body is white as milk and who has three eyes." Here we have a description similar to the figures of the Mohenjodaro and Harappa seals. This is also the prototype of the yogi and the contemplative, but although a relative symbol and form, it was also, to these early Indian Pagans, the living manifestation of the real Shiva as Absolute whom Indus Valley inscriptions describe as "The Supreme Being who exists by itself." These concepts still exist today.

To make relative comparisons, for clarity, Shiva assumes different values according to the disciple. Shiva is not a name but a quality and means Auspicious or the Auspicious One. To a few, Shiva is Paramatman, Brahman, the Absolute, but many more prefer to see Shiva as a personal God given to compassion for his worshippers, and the dispenser of both spiritual and material blessings. Related to the Absolute concept is Shiva as Yoganath, the Lord of Yoga, wherein he becomes teacher, path and goal. As such he is the Adi Guru or Highest Guru of sannyasins who have renounced the world to attain the Absolute.

In the vast pantheon of Indian gods, great and small, Shiva possesses a mixture of the weird and wonderful and even brings a strange equipoise and harmony to fantastic patterns and symbols.

Modern artists now dress Shiva in leopard skins and coloured clothes to make the Absolute respectable. Most go so far as to hang a sacred Brahmin thread on a God who flourished in India thousands of years before a single Brahmin entered! Let us thank Shiva that Shiva can stand all this and more. The texts which describe Shiva cannot be modernized or overwashed with Christian respectability so easily. Let us examine one of them.

Among the many priceless gems in the *Bhagavatam*, there are many cases where the non-Vedic or Tantrik deities have been changed into the name of the Vaishnava God Vishnu. In many stories this was too easy, but some texts are so detailed in their relationship with Shiva that a change was not possible. One such story tells of the Sage Kasyapa who married Diti, one of Daksha's daughters, and therefore the sister of Sati, the wife of Shiva. It would appear that Kasyapa gave too much attention to his strict disciplines and performance of sacrifices. Diti would be neglected no longer and went to her husband and demanded he perform the ancient ritual which gave women children.

Kasyapa saw the justice of the demand and promised to give her satisfaction in the love duel, but that moment was not suitable and she must wait a little for complete darkness. This was in accord with the ancient traditional beliefs that Shiva roamed the earth at the three sacred periods of sunrise, noon and sunset. It would be inauspicious if the Lord spied two people copulating at the time when they should be engaged in the rituals of worship. Kasyapa explains in a wonderful passage, which throws much light on both Shiva and his qualities, as well as aspects of life which did not meet with his approval.

“This is the sunset hour, when the Lord Shiva, riding on Nandi, the sacred bull, moves about the world with his retinue. He, the Lord Shankara, sees all with his three eyes. There is none like him in the whole universe and He has no equal. Those who wish to break through the veil of ignorance emulate His divine qualities. He who is the goal of the righteous, is seen in that wild appearance which He has seen fit to adopt, to teach the path of Self realization.

“Miserable creatures adorn the body with rich dresses and costume although it is only fit to be food for dogs. Thus adorned and embellished with flowers and cosmetics, they mistake the body to be the real Self. Seeing Shiva completely naked, smeared with ashes, wearing a necklace of skulls and having matted hair thick with dust, they laugh at Reality — Supreme Shiva — not understanding that His purpose is to teach them the useless nature of the body and treat it indifferently. Shiva spurns the wealth and power which pitiful human beings expect as a reward for religious devotion and piety. He alone is the cause of the universe and Maya (delusion) is His slave. He is the Absolute, Perfect Being and His ways are inscrutable.”

The pre-Aryan people had the intelligence to realize that if you projected the Absolute as a male figure, it could be represented as a female figure also. People must have found creation more easily understood in terms of cosmic copulation, a male and female principle bringing things into being, as a yang-yin of Chinese thought. This was easily understood for it was the natural process of their own lives. They did not think of the plausibility of cosmic weavers and tailors and so God and Goddess were both naked. They could not suspect that anything created by the Divine was dirty or improper, but rather saw the most fitting symbols of the God and Goddess in terms of penis and womb (lingam and yoni; the yoni is the womb and not the external female sexual organ). They saw the whole universe as a great womb in which worlds were born and came to being.

When we muse on the vast world of philosophies, ideas and dreams, sacred as well as insane, social, political and scientific, we see the struggle of men to think and not build up ghosts which only vanish in the dust. One day, perhaps, mankind will find that the oldest was really the ultimate and in his search for immortality he must return to where he started.

Now we can see that a Divine Guru, not only teaches us in terms of a doctrine of practical instructions, but by the way he lives. Thus millions of Indians have seen the manifest form of Shiva as their guide on the path.

One of the early traditions and one of the world's most ancient, is Shiva in the form of Dakshinamurti — the South-Facing Guru. In this form, seated on a low platform, with one leg hanging down in front, he communicated the Sanatana Dharma or Eternal Wisdom to the four Kumaras who appeared early in creation. The Guru spoke no words but taught them by the transmission of mind-to-mind, thus giving us an early example of what was to become a popular concept in Zen. Its purpose was to show that man can realize the Absolute when the human mind is in complete equipoise with the Cosmic Mind.

There is a Hindu scripture called *The Thousand Names of Shiva*. Dakshinamurti is one of them. Actually none of them are really names in the sense that we generally use the word. They are all rather qualities or descriptions. They are spread throughout India as names of temples or sacred places. One of the oldest Upanishads refers to

Shiva as Kalagni-Rudra (Rudra the Lord of Fire and Time). Rudra has many meanings and could be Ruddy or the Howler. Shiva as Rudra managed to work his way into the most sacred of the Aryan *Vedas*, the *Rig-Veda*, though the references are not too flattering. But that is of no matter. Enemies will often, if not always, describe us more accurately than will our friends. When Daksha crossed swords with Shiva, his son-in-law, we get a much franker description of Shiva than might come from a respectable devotee. This description is not only one which could also be applied to the greater saints of India but might have real meaning to the dropout of today. Here we quote briefly. The full story must come later.

Standing in the centre of the vast assembly of gods and men, Daksha pointed his bony, ghee-soaked finger at Shiva, his son-in-law, and uttered this terrible denunciation:

“Loo-ook at Him. A disgrace to this assembly and one who brings discredit to the Gods. Is he not the laziest and most nonproductive one who refuses to work or undertake duties? By him the righteous path of Veda is tarnished. He has married my daughter in the presence of Agni, Brahmins and relatives, yet is devoid of the respect he should show as my son-in-law. He does not think of himself as my son and when he sees me he does not salute me or inquire about my welfare. Instead, he remains silent and closes his eyes like a monkey.

“Loo-ook at him! He has no modesty or sense of shame and comes here, just as he walks about, completely naked and smeared with the ashes he has taken from cremation grounds. His associates are lunatics, drunkards and madmen. His very retinue are really ghosts, devils and spirits. Lord indeed! he is only the lord of lazy servants who deny proper service and responsibility to their masters. His decorations are evil creatures and the necklace of human bones pollutes this place. His matted hair is dusted with impurities from the cremation ground where he likes to reside. Shiva! No, not Shiva — Auspicious — but Inauspicious! I weep to think that I was tricked into giving my daughter Sati to him in marriage. From henceforth, we will get no share in sacrifices performed by me.”

Shiva did not rate high in Daksha’s popularity list, but Daksha should be seen and understood as the symbol of the Vedic Brahmin ritualist who wanted to present the Aryan purity and its religion, in spite of the great merger which was taking place to bring about the fusion of Vedic and Tantrik cultures into one all-embracing way of life. While Daksha denounced, Shiva remained silent.

Let us return to the Teleti of Girnar, the Lord of Mountains. Sadhus throng the ashrams and roads. Some have erected little huts of sticks and leaves by the roadsides. The climax takes place at midnight when the sadhus take their bath and assemble to offer praise to the Lord Shiva. It is the end of winter and still cool but they endure all in the ecstasy of naked submission to the Absolute as Shiva.

The great concord of saints is not without its spectacles. Some of the sadhus have taken vows never for a period of so many years to lie or sit on the ground, even to sleep. They stand with their arms resting on a flat piece of wood fixed on a pole, and this becomes their only support to rest or sleep. By the side of the road, a tall sadhu leans against a tree eating fruit. He is completely naked and his only possession, a trisula or three-pointed spear, as high as himself, rests against one shoulder.

Further along the road is another naked sadhu putting on a spectacular show. He stands with his legs apart, sufficient to permit huge stones or rocks which have been

ties to his penis, to swing free. The weight of the rocks must be enormous and the sadhu has no competitors. Nothing to do with true spiritual life, but helpful in encouraging donations. Some of these types stand on the points of nails fixed in small blocks of wood. The performance starts with a challenge that he will stand on these uncomfortable supports and remain completely immobile until ten rupees have been donated. Usually he has an accomplice standing by and if things go on too long he gives a signal and his friend terminates the painful performance by promptly donating the remainder of the money. Mahashivaratri is the cake and the showmanship is the icing sugar which makes the festival more palatable.

Midnight on Mahashivaratri is no less bewitching than midnight festivals in other lands. As the sadhus go to take their bath and maneuver their way into the pool, from the vast concord of naked bodies we hear the great mantra of the Lord:

“Hara Hara Mahadeva Shiva-Shambhu Kashi Vishvanatha Ganga!” (Hara is the Great God, Shiva called Shambhu, Lord of the World, residing at Kashi on the Ganges!)

Benares, now called Varanasi — the original name corrupted to Benares — also has its great celebrations of this festival.

Within the boundary of Varanasi is an area called Kashi which for millennia has been regarded as the seat and city of Shiva-Kashinath. Today it is the one great city of the world where you will see the most religion and the least spirituality. But in spite of this defect, it draws like a magnet and has a peculiar and mystic fascination of its own. It is, perhaps, the most concentrated and visible aspect of modern Hinduism that can be seen today. It has more sacred bathing ghats than any other city and they stretch unending along the bank of the Ganges.

Kashi has the long-standing tradition that if you die there, irrespective of what evil might have been done, you will go directly to heaven. Hundreds, in old age, still go there for this purpose. Great numbers of old Brahmins go to Kashi and become initiated as Dandi Swamis — the Swamis who carry the staff. There they wear the ochre robe and pass their days in prayer and gossip, to await that great moment when they will be carried to the burning ground and wake up in heaven.

Only a Brahmin can be initiated as a Dandi Swami, and this is the only qualification. They are not sannyasins, but take to a stage in life called *vanaprastha*, something akin to a hermit, but one still observing prayer and ritual. In the past, it was India's answer to the old age pension. Most beg their food from the house of a Brahmin. Some institutions have also been set up to give meals and people donate money to the sect to purchase the wood for their ultimate disposal.

Women *vanaprasthas* are now very rare and generally cared for by families, but the life is actually open to women just as much as men, though they do not take initiation. The Dandi Swamis acknowledge Shiva as the Supreme Lord, but as individuals their concepts are very relative. The *vanaprastha* stage of life is not sectarian and can be assumed by any man or woman of any caste and they can continue the worship of deities of their own choice.

A lovely story is told which demonstrates the traditions of Kashi and the eternal Ganges. Parvati, the Consort of Shiva, was playing the role of a woman more than a Goddess and rebuking Shiva for his readiness to grant boons and blessings too easily. She added her final feminine thrust to say that if Shiva was in dire trouble, nobody would try to help him.

Shiva took up the challenge and said they would arrange a test. He would lie on the ground and pretend he was dead. The Goddess would then pose as a distraught widow. She would then tell anyone who passed that the God of Kashi had granted her a special boon and if any stranger who was pure in heart touched the body, her husband would come to life again and she would be rescued from widowhood.

Many came by but most hurried on because Hindus had been taught that it was inauspicious to touch a dead body and in this way they would lose their chance to go to heaven. As the hours passed, the test brought no success. Suddenly a man came along looking the very picture of dejection and misery. He stopped to listen to Parvati's plea but sadly turned away and said: "Good lady, your devotion to your husband should be honoured, but I am unworthy to fulfill the task. I have wanted the world too much and it has only brought me misery. My life has been too evil for me to be able to serve you in this way."

Hanging his head, he turned to move on. Then, suddenly, he turned back. "Wait, good lady, there is a way." The man rushed down to the Ganges and plunged in the water. Hurrying back, he laid his wet hands on Shiva's head. Shiva stirred and sat up, but before he could speak, the man rushed down to the river and immersed himself a second time. Shiva laughed, but the Goddess put her questions.

"Why, good man, did you first refuse but touched my husband after bathing in the river?" The man laughed and replied: "Should it not be known by all that any person who bathes in the Ganges at Kashi washes off all taint of evil and becomes pure?" "But," asked the Goddess, "why the second bath, if you had been made pure?"

"Did I not touch your husband's corpse and is that not a new impurity?"

This time, Parvati laughed with Shiva and the man suddenly realized who they were and threw himself at their feet.

Shiva said: "For this day's work, in which your faith and sincerity excelled all other men, I will grant you a boon. Ask for whatever you wish."

"Be careful," said the Goddess.

The man looked at the face of Shiva. "What boon can I ask, when I am weary of the world, but the boon of your grace which will grant me strength and confidence to tread your path to liberation? Grant me this."

Shiva held up his hand, making the *mudra* of granting boons, and said: "So shall it be and when you have cast off the last body you will shine as an immortal among the stars."

Later, Parvati said to Shiva: "I never seem to be able to get the better of you." Shiva turned to her and whispered: "You should take a bath in the Ganges."

Mankind has gone a long way, up and down, down and up and now mostly down. Ancient values, tempered in the forge of time, are being rejected for new untried ideas. Happiness in worldly life is still the only real criterion by which mankind can measure its life. Progress is not always found with the latest innovations, concepts or ideas, and mankind may soon have to learn that ancient Pagan ways of life and values have still the most to offer. There is still some gem of real wonder in that old Pagan life where men learned not only how to live but also how to die. Those who can see Shiva and Shakti as undifferentiated union have no need to think of "Gay Liberation" or "Women's Liberation" or any concepts to establish sex equality. What Nature made, Nature will preserve.

India has taught us the balance of life and the true pulsating rhythm by which all things are accomplished. It is the most earnest and serious way of life the world has ever known, yet does not have real meaning until we can lampoon it and learn to laugh with it. This way of life, thronged with cheats and hypocrites, contained the greatest man who ever lived. The path which is overcovered with the most rubbish and superstitions, carries on its crest the highest wisdom of the Absolute. When you enter the stream, think of the goal on the other shore and do not waste words or tears lamenting on the water which is going past.

A word of warning, human creatures! If you love your world and its frustrations, its empty promises, tears and anguish, its war, shattering noise and disasters, its passions, pathos, pillories and pilfering, its weary ways of unending toil and trouble, its devil dance which leads you to the grave, then BEWARE and turn your eyes away from the Lord of Yoga; flee from this Shiva and His Shakti, lest your delusions are destroyed and you are led to liberation.

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