

# SIVARATRI MAHIMA & ITS SIGNIFICANCE

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SILENT ADORATIONS TO LORD SIVA, consort of Parvati, the destructive aspect of Brahman, who is known by the names Sambhu, Sankara, Mahadeva, Sadasiva, Visvanatha, Hara, Tripurari, Gangadhara, Sulapani, Nilakantha, Dakshinamurti, Chandrasekhara, Nilalohita, etc., who is the bestower of auspiciousness, immortality and divine knowledge on His devotees, and who does *Tandava Nritya* or the Dance of Death at the end of Time, the Cosmic *Pralaya*, and who is the real Regenerator but not the destroyer.

MAHA SIVARATRI IS THE GREAT night consecrated to Lord Siva. Maha Sivaratri falls on *Trayodasi* or the thirteenth day of the dark fortnight of Kumbha month (February-March).

In the *Santi Parva* of the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma refers to the observance of Maha Sivaratri by king Chitrabhanu, when he was giving the discourse on Dharma, resting on his bed of arrows.

Once upon a time, king Chitrabhanu of the Ikshvaku dynasty, who was ruling over the whole of Jambudvipa, and his wife were observing a fast on the day of Maha Sivaratri. The Sage Ashtavakra came on a visit to the court of the king.

The Sage asked: "O king, why are you observing fast today?" King Chitrabhanu explained the reason for observing a fast on that day. He had the gift of remembering the incidents of his previous birth.

HE SAID TO THE SAGE ASHTAVAKRA: "I was a hunter by name Susvar in my previous birth. I eked out my livelihood by killing and selling birds and animals. One day, I was roaming in a forest in search of animals. I was overtaken by the darkness of night. I was not able to return home and so I

climbed up a Bilva tree for shelter. I shot a deer that day but I had no time to take it home. As I was tormented by hunger and thirst, I kept awake throughout the night. I shed profuse tears when I thought of my poor wife and children who were starving and anxiously awaiting my return. I engaged myself in plucking and dropping down the Bilva leaves. There was a Siva Linga at the foot of the Bilva tree. The tears and the leaves fell upon the Siva Linga.

"The day dawned. I returned home and sold the deer. I got food for myself and for my family. I was about to break my fast. A stranger came to me and begged for food. I served him with food first and then I took my food. At the hour of death, I saw two messengers of Lord Siva. They were sent down for the sake of conducting my soul to the abode of Siva. I learnt there for the first time of the great merit I had earned by the observance of the fast on the night of Maha Sivaratri, though I did it unconsciously by an accident. I lived in the abode of Siva and enjoyed divine bliss for long ages. I am now reborn on this earth as Chitrabhanu".

## SPIRITUAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SIVARATRI

THE SCRIPTURES RECORD THE following dialogue between Sastri and Atmanathan, giving the inner meaning of the above story:

**SASTRI:** It is an allegory. The wild animals that the hunter fought with are lust, anger, greed, infatuation, jealousy and hatred. The jungle is the fourfold mind, consisting of the subconscious mind, the intellect, the ego and the conscious mind. It is in the mind that these "wild animals" roam about freely.

They must be killed. Our hunter was pursuing them because he was a Yogi. If you want to be a real Yogi you have to conquer these evil tendencies. Do you remember the name of the hunter in the story?

**ATMANATHAN:** Yes, he was called Suswara.

**SASTRI:** That's right. It means "melodious." The hunter had a pleasant melodious voice. If a person practices *Yama* and *Niyama* and is ever conquering his evil tendencies, he will develop certain external marks of a Yogi. The first marks are lightness of the body, health, steadiness, clearness of countenance and a pleasant voice. This stage has been spoken of in detail in the *Swetawatara Upanishad*. The hunter or the Yogi had for many years practiced Yoga and had reached the first stage. So he is given the name Suswara. Do you remember where he was born?

**ATMANATHAN:** Yes, his birthplace is Varanasi.

**SASTRI:** Now, the Yogis call the *Ajna Chakra* by the name Varanasi. This is the point midway between the eyebrows. It is regarded as the meeting place of the three nerve currents (*nadis*), namely, the *Ida*, *Pingala* and the *Sushumna*. An aspirant is instructed to concentrate on that point. That helps him to conquer his desires and evil qualities like anger and so on. It is there that he gets a vision of the Divine Light within.

**ATMANATHAN:** Very interesting! But how do you explain his climbing up the bilva tree and all the other details of the worship?

**SASTRI:** Have you ever seen a bilva leaf?

**ATMANATHAN:** It has three leaves on one stalk.

**SASTRI:** True. The tree represents the spinal column. The leaves are threefold. They represent the *Ida*, *Pingala* and

Sushumna nadis, which are the regions for the activity of the moon, the sun and fire respectively, or which may be thought of as the three eyes of Siva. The climbing of the tree is meant to represent the ascension of the *Kundalini Shakti*, the serpentine power, from the lowest nerve centre called the *Muladhara* to the Ajna Chakra. That is the work of the Yogi.

**ATMANATHAN:** Yes, I have heard of the Kundalini and the various psychic centres in the body. Please go on further; I am very interested to know more.

**SASTRI:** Good. The Yogi was in the waking state when he began his meditation. He bundled up the birds and the animals he had slain and, tying them on a branch of the tree, he rested there. That means he had fully conquered his thoughts and rendered them inactive. He had gone through the steps of Yama, Niyama, *Pratyahara*, etc. On the tree he was practising concentration and meditation. When he felt sleepy, it means that he was about to lose consciousness and go into deep sleep. So he determined to keep awake.

**ATMANATHAN:** That is now clear to me; you certainly do explain it very well. But why did he weep for his wife and children?

**SASTRI:** His wife and children are none other than the world. One who seeks the Grace of God must become an embodiment of love. He must have an all-embracing sympathy. His shedding of tears is symbolical of his universal love. In Yoga also, one cannot have illumination without Divine Grace.

Without practising universal love, one cannot win that Grace. One must perceive one's own Self everywhere. The preliminary stage is to identify one's own mind with the minds of all created beings. That is fellow-feeling or sympathy. Then one must rise above the limitations of the mind and merge it in the Self. That happens only in the stage



*Lord Siva. Sketch by Pamela Olecki*

of Samadhi, not earlier.

**ATMANATHAN:** Why did he pluck and drop the bilva leaves?

**SASTRI:** That is mentioned in the story only to show that he had no extraneous thoughts. He was not even conscious of what he was doing. All his activity was confined to the three nadis. The

leaves, I have said before, represent the three nadis. He was in fact in the second state, namely, the dream state, before he passed into the deep sleep state.

**ATMANATHAN:** He kept vigil the whole night, it is said.

**SASTRI:** Yes, that means that he passed through the deep sleep state successfully. The dawning of day symbolizes the entrance into the fourth state called *Turiya* or superconsciousness.

**ATMANATHAN:** It is said that he came down and saw the Lingam. What does that mean?

**SASTRI:** That means that in the *Turiya* state he saw the Siva Lingam or the mark of Siva in the form of the inner lights. In other words, he had the vision of the Lord. That was an indication to him that he would realize the supreme, eternal abode of Lord Siva in course of time.

**ATMANATHAN:** It appears from what you say that the sight of the lights is not the final stage?

**SASTRI:** Oh no! That is only one step, albeit a difficult one. Now think of how the story continues. He goes home and feeds a stranger. A stranger is one whom you have not seen before. The stranger is none other than the hunter himself, transformed into a new person. The food was the likes and dislikes which he had killed the previous night.

But he did not consume the whole of it. A little still remained. That was why he had to be reborn as King Chitrabhanu. Going to the world of Siva (*Salokya*) is not enough to prevent this. There are other stages besides *Salokya*. **ATMANATHAN:** Yes, I have understood now. ❖