

MAHASHIVARATRI

By Devdutt Patnaik

*A time to stay awake through the night contemplating
on the dualities of life of mortal desires and immortal
bliss, earthly obligations and heavenly aspirations,
material needs and spiritual demands.*

Why is the night of Shiva (Shiva-ratri) celebrated on the 13th or 14th night of the waning moon in every lunar cycle? Why is the Mah-Shiva-Ratri (the great night of Shiva) celebrated as winter draws close? These are the questions to which “real” answers may never be known. But one can always speculate. Speculation helps the mind think in ways it never has thought before. Perhaps that is the reason why there are “sacred mysteries” -to help us think of things that we tend to ignore. Through such thought processes one gains insight into the divine.

The traditional story is that on this a night a thief climbed a tree to give his pursuers the slip. He spent the whole night on the tree, passing his time by plucking the leaves. Little did he know that it was Shiva-Ratri and that he was sitting on the Bilva tree and that the leaves he was plucking was falling a Shiva-Linga. He was worshipping Shiva on the holy night, unknowingly. For that, he won an eternal place in the Lord’s heart. Stories that run along these lines are narrated on Shiva-Ratri as devotees hold an all night vigil in Shiva temples. But stories like these tell us why Shiva should be worshipped during Shiva-Ratri. They do not tell us why Shiva-Ratri is sacred.

Shiva is one of the few gods of the Hindu pantheon to be worshiped in the dark half moon of the lunar cycle. That’s not surprising considering there’s

Nothing conventional about Shiva. He is the only god who does not adorn himself with flowers or jewels. He smears his body with ash, wraps himself with elephant’s hide or tiger skin, bedecks himself with wild Dhatura flowers or Rudraksha beads. Serpents slither around his neck. He does not drink Amrita, the nectar of immortality. He drinks Halahala, the poison feared by all. He intoxicates himself with hemp, is surrounded by wild and fearsome Ganas, lives on icy barren mountains. On Shiva’s head is the crescent moon - the same that can be seen in the skies on ShivaRatri. Perhaps a clue as to why Shiva-Ratri is sacred to Shiva can be found in the Crescent moon.

The moon god Chandra is described in Hindi lore as being very attractive and charming. He was married to the 27 Nakshatra-maidens, daughters of the divine priest King Daksha. Daksha was the lord of civilization. He laid qown the rules of the society, was orthodox, authoritarian, ritualistic and patriachal. In Shiva lore, one is told that Daksha was not particularly fond of Shiva As keeper of sacrificial halls and upholder of the strict Brahmanical rules of ritual purification, his disapproval of Shiva’s ways is understandable.

Daksha was annoyed that his youngest daughter Sati was in love with Shiva. Why did she not choose

someone as handsome and charming as Chandra? Why was she willing to give up all royal comforts to be with such an impoverished hermit? As Daksha searched for answers, it came to his attention that Chandra, the moon god was neglecting his wife s. 'He loves only Rohini and ignores the rest of us, "complained the other Nakshatra- maidens. Daksha warned Chandra to change his ways. When Chandra ignored his warnings, Daksha cursed the moongod with the dreaded wasting disease.

As the days passed, Chandra's luster waned. No one came to his rescue. Noone wanted to incur Daksha's displeasure by helping Chandra. In desp air, Chandra turned to Shiva, the only being who had risen above all rules and whims. Shiva smiled and places Chandra on his forehead where Daksha's curse had no effect. The moon-god did not disappear.

Finally, a compromise was reached between Daksha's curse, Shiva's grace and the will of the Nakshatra maidens. Every night ceased being the full moon night as Chandra was forced to visit all his wives. It is said that Chandra visits one wife every night. He wanes as he leaves Rohini's abode and waxes as he approaches her house. On nights, when the moon god is with his favorite wife, it is the full moon. On nights when Chandra has no wife, there is no moon in the sky, for without a consort, a god has no "Shakti"-divine energy.

The crescent moon on Shiva' head represents many things-the desire of a god who does not want to disappear, the human fear of oblivion, the reality of change. In Tantra, the moon represented the cooler, submissive and fleeting aspect of Nature. The sun represented the warmer, dominating and eternal aspect of Nature. Together they represented the totality of life, the union of opposites. While Shiva represented lunar energy, Vishnu represented the Solar energy. Shiva sought to transcend the worldly life, Vishnu actively participated in it. Shiva did not want to marry and Vishnu coaxed into it with great difficulty. In Shiva's willingness to be Devi's groom one finds the reason why Maha-Shivaratri is celebrated just before the arrival of spring. It must be remembered that the major festival following Shiva's holy night is Holi, the festival of fertility of love and joy.

Shiva's marriage to Paravati is a major theme of Shaiva lore. It marks the end of winter, of barrenness and the birth of spring, of fertility. The hermit becomes a householder, world - rejection is coupled with world affirmation. With the Devi by his side, the yogi becomes a bhogi. A balance is achieved between the spirit and the flesh, the ego and the infinite. Maybe that is what Shiva-Ratri's all about. A time to stay awake through the night contemplating on the dualities of life- of mortal desires and immortal bliss, earthly obligations and heavenly aspirations, material needs and spiritual demands. When the balance is met, when Shiva is in the arms of Shakti, when the dance is in perfect harmony, there is truth, awareness and blessed, chit, anand.