
MAHASIVARATRI IN KASHMIR

By Dr. Advaitavadini Kaul

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The earliest evidence of worship of Rudra-Siva, Pasupati has been discovered in the Indus valley. Worship of Mother Goddess and of Rudra-Siva was the distinctive feature of the religion followed by the Indus valley people. In Mohanjodaro, Siva worship seems to have been a prevailing folk cult. In the *Yajurveda* the cult of Rudra-Siva is given a philosophical meaning. Thus two processes continued side by side. In the first process Siva worship has continued as a folk cult without interruption and at the other level the metaphysical and symbolical interpretations have found successive statements in Vedic and Puranic literature. The continuity of Siva worship in folk tradition can be witnessed in hundreds and thousands of Siva lingas installed in every part of the country.

Mahasivaratri is one of the most important festivals associated with Siva worship. In different parts of the country, various myths are ascribed to the observance of the day. Kashmir has the most distinct celebration. According to one legend, Lord Siva performs the ritualistic dance of Creation, Preservation and Dissolution on this night and so devotees also spend the night fully awake while reciting praises of Siva. In some parts of the country Sivaratri is believed to have been the night when Siva consumed the poison to save the world. Siva was in pain and agony. The whole night, water, milk and other cooling material are poured on the Siva linga to relieve Siva of the heat. Saiva tradition of Kashmir has been very strong at both levels-the metaphysical and as ritualistic practice. The celebration of Sivaratri is unique in Kashmir. It is celebrated with the same zest and grandeur as Diwali is celebrated in North India. The earliest available text (6th/7th Cen. A.D.) from Kashmir the *Nilamatapurana*, lists the festivals and rituals of Kashmir. It describes Sivaratri festival as: "Sivalinga from which the blanket like plaster of purified butter has been removed is to be worshipped on the dark 14th of Phalgunā.... Sivalinga is to be worshipped with perfumes, garlands, unguents and naivedya consisting of animals made of flour. The worshippers are enjoined to observe fast during the day and vigil at night listening to the Sivadharmas and the stories of Siva incarnations. On the 15th day, the worship of Siva is prescribed and worshippers have to take meals consisting of Kulmasa and sweetmeats" (527-533).

Acharya Utpaladeva and erudite Saiva philosopher of Kashmir (8th C A.D.) has referred to Sivaratri in his beautiful *Sivastotravali* as the highest state of *sadhana*; "Victory unto the Sivaratri (inscrutable and hence inexplicable) which majestically shines in unlimited expanse of inherent brilliance when the subjective, the objective and the cognitive faculties of *sadhaka* stand totally withdrawn (as the fruition of consummated *sadhana*).". The recitation of Acharya Abhinavagupta's *Bhairavastuti* forms an important part of

Sivaratri *puja* in Kashmir even today. Among the Kashmiris Sivaratri is known as 'Herath' often interpreted as 'Hara ratri.'

In Kashmir, Sivaratri is a fortnight long festival. It commences on the first day of dark fortnight of Phalgun, with the washing and cleaning of the house. This can continue up to the 7th day of the fortnight. The 8th day is considered very auspicious and on that day, early in the morning devotees walk to the temple of Goddess Sharika situated on a hillock known as Hari Parbat, to the northeast of Srinagar. Many devotees would stay there for the night to participate in bhajan-kirtan. On the 9th and 10th day, it is very common among the womenfolk to visit their parents and on the 10th day, it is customary for every woman to return to the in-law's house with gifts in cash and kind. For the newly wedded daughters, it is a very special festival. The traditional gifts of *kangri* (fire pot) and a pair of *khadau* (wooden footwear) are still prevalent.

On the 11th day fist is prepared for dinner. It is partaken only after the *puja*. The place selected for performing Sivaratri *puja* is usually the prayer room. It is specially decorated for the occasion. It is on the 12th day that the essential items for the *puja* are purchased at an auspicious hour of the day. This consists of earthenware, herbs, camphor, dhoop, flowers etc. On the 13th morning, the earthenware consisting of utensils of different shapes and sizes are decorated and placed in a prescribed design. Now a days earthen utensils of brassware or stainless steel. The main deity that is worshipped on this occasion is Vatukanatha Bhairava. Bhairava is synonymous with Lord Siva. Hence the replicas representing Vatukanatha Bhairava and other deities of Siva pantheon are worshipped in the form of these utensils of different shapes and sizes, decorated with flowers, garland and *mauli* is tied around these pots. *Tilakam* is also applied. Then they are filled with walnuts and water.

In the evening, the head of the family who has observed fast the whole day performs the *puja* to Sanyapotulu resembling Siva linga (Parthesvara). Vatukanatha Bhairava is represented by two types of pots-one is a big pitcher filled with walnuts (usually 101) and water. Another is a large and deep bowlshaped vessel known as *Kashmiri as Dul*. In this cooked dishes are offered to satisfy the Bhairava. These dishes usually consist of various non-vegetarian items of fish and mutton. After the *puja* and a small *yajna* is also performed to propitiate all gods and also in the memory of the deceased. It is after the *yajna* that delicious dishes prepared for the occasion are offered to the Bhairava. After the conclusion of the *puja*, the eldest lady in the house, just before retiring to be empties the bowl in which the offerings are made in a far off corner of the compound.

The next day of Sivaratri is the day of feasting. People exchange greeting and gifts. There is merriment all around. On the *Amavasya* day ritualistic *puja* is performed to the consecrated walnuts with rice cakes. From the next day, starts the distribution of the *naivedya* (offering) of soaked walnuts along with bread to all relations, neighbours and friends irrespective of caste and creed. The exercise concludes on the 8th day of the next fortnight. On the evening of this day women of the house clean the place where *puja* was done. They collect the left over grass and flowers in a plate on which earthen lamps are lit. Women from all houses would conduct procession to the river side (*Vitasta*) and put it in the water to flow with the currents. This would present an enchanting sight. Children, especially boys enjoyed the occasion by collecting old fire pots. They tie them with a rope of the wrist rotating them around

themselves. This symbolizes the end of winter and thus this merry making. Now a days though Sivaratri is celebrated by Kashmiri pandits with the same reverence, the festivity is lacking in spirit because of their dislocation from their homes in the valley.

Dr. Kaul is the Asst. Editor, in Kala Kosa and coordinates IGNCAs publications.