

SHIVRATRI: PRAYING FOR HUSBANDS

Jawhar Sircar

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(English Version)

Like every other year, it is expected that thousands of devotees would be keeping a pious fast on the night of the 17th February this year, for Maha-Shivaratri, which coincides with the 13th/14th day of Krishnapaksha in the month of Phalgun. It is one of the holiest days in the Hindu calendar and the most important among the twelve Shivaratris celebrated throughout the year. Some say this was the day when Siva appeared in his Linga form and the Puranas mention that Shiva wed Parvati on this day. But why does the world have to celebrate this birthday or even the marriage, which was as tempestuous and interesting as most human marriages? It is said that the planetary positions in the northern hemisphere are in such a conjunction that day that it is a potent catalyst which can help a person improve his spiritual and other energies. Shiva himself is said to have declared to his wife Uma that if this tithi is observed, it could destroy the consequences of all sins and confer final liberation. Some actually believe that Sanskrit mantras like Maha-Mrityunjaya really enhance their powers, on this very night. In this small piece, however, we will not focus on rites, rituals, mantras of Shiva-ratri but try to understand why and when this festival assumed importance among the masses of Bengal.

For researchers like me, Shiva remains a fascinating deity as even the English educated urban youth, who usually keep a safe distance from 'native' culture and religion, have now become his ardent fans: thanks to Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy. I have often wondered how this god of the cold Himalayas could manage to live with just a single piece of tiger skin around his waist, and yet

remain a great favourite in Bengal where many people quickly put on mufflers and monkey caps, if the temperature ever drops below 25 degrees. Let us also remember that Brahma lost his position in the original Hindu triumvirate, i.e., Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar, and manages with just one temple at Pushkar dedicated to him, among the millions of temples that dot the country and Vishnu formed a Dashavatara grand alliance, Shiva's seat in the great triad is quite secure. He outlived even Indra, who exists now only as a suffix in names like Narendra, he actually expanded domain rather extensively: all the way from Mansarovar in Tibet/China to the last tip of southern India, in Kanyakumari. His one dozen Jyotirlingas stretch from Kedarnath to Somnath, and from Baidhyanath to Kashi Vishwanath and then go down to Rameshwaram and again up Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and other states.

Even if Shiva is not originally a great Vedic deity like Varun or Indra, his night is said to have been worshipped for ages. The story of Raja Chitrabhanu of the Ikshvahu dynasty and the Ishana Samhita are quoted to prove antiquity. Puranas, like the Shiva, Padma, Skanda, Matsya and Vayu are also cited, but they refer to Shiva's mahatmya in general, not necessarily to this Ratri. Thus, scholars like John Murdoch, who compiled the earliest serious, detailed studies of Indian festivals made by Wilson, Crooke, Hughes and Wilkins, wrote in 1904 that "notwithstanding its reputed sanctity, it is evidently quite modern". It is a fact that many deities may be quite ancient, but our present worship could be fairly recent: like the community (barowari) Durga Pujas or the popular Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra, both of which are just a century old. However, in the early part of the eighteenth century, Abbe Dubois (Aab-bey Dub-waa) mentions this night in his famous book 'Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies'. Indians use the word pracheen quite vaguely, but we can still safely presume that this Ratri

must be more than two hundred years old as a mass level festival, which is fairly old when compared to many others.

The Rituals of Shivaratri have also been documented in several Kalpadrumas and Tithi Tattwas. Some appear quite Tantric in character. To appreciate the question of age of the festival, one must understand that the Shiva model that succeeded in Bengal was not so much the king of Kailash, but the humble peasant of Shivayana literature. He is a potbellied peasant, who smokes ganja with his ganas and is chased around by an angry Parvati, with a broom in her hand. We may also recall that the primary tale of Shivaratri focuses on a hunter, who had climbed the branch of a bael tree on Shivaratri and happened to throw leaves throughout the night, quite inadvertently, upon a Shiv Linga that was at the foot of the tree. When he died, Shiva's hordes fought with Yama's messengers for the body that was taken direct to heaven, as Shiva wanted to reward him for his act of piety on the night of Shivaratri. We also need to recall a story of Kalketu, the hunter, who came out of the forests in the Middle Ages to set up a kingdom, where agriculture would be the mainstay not the hunting.

In simple terms, Bengal was coming to terms with Pauranik deities, between the 15th and 17th Centuries, when more and more persons joined settled life and agriculture, forsaking their earlier professions of hunting, gathering, fishing and herding cattle. The Mangal Kavyas, celebrated the defeat of the great Pauranik deities of North India like the Shiva of Kailash and even Durga at the hands of the god deities of the poor like Chandi, Dharma and Mansa. Let us just recall the stories of Mangal Kavyas of Manasa, Chandi, Dharma and other gods of the subalterns. The peasant Shiva became an instant hit with the newly emerging farmers from the so called lower orders and this 'democratisation' of worship is what distinguishes Bengal from other provinces.

