

Shivaratri Festival

March 4, 2019



SHIVA is a member of the Hindu trinity that comprises the creator Brahma, the protector Mahaavishnu, and the godhead Shiva whose primary responsibility is maintaining and renewing the life cycle. Shiva is the only godhead who is forever in deep meditation, totally absorbed in contemplation in His abode, Kailasa Mountain in the great Himalaya.

Shiva is an ascetic, and several religious stories and dramas portray that all attempts to distract Him from that principal pursuit through temptations always ended up with disaster for those initiating such an effort. Thus Kaama, the Lord of Desires, who tried such a distraction was burned alive through fire when Shiva opened His third eye. On the other hand Shiva was all compassion when it came to saving the world from the serpent Vaasuki's poison during the *amritamanthana* (Churning of the Milky Ocean). Vaasuki, used as a churning rope, was so tired and sick from the repeated action of churning that he vomited the most potent poison into the ocean of milk. Fearing the destruction of the world, Shiva immediately drank the poison. He Himself would have succumbed were it not for the timely intervention by Paarvati, His consort. Paarvati held Shiva's throat tightly, preventing entry of the poison into His body. It is said that the arrested poison turned the throat a blue color, thus the name Neelakantta, meaning blue-throated.

The power of Lord Shiva's eternal penance or *tapascharya* is such that it is customary to invoke Shiva before the beginning of any religious or spiritual endeavors so that any and all bad vibrations in the immediate vicinity of the worship or practice are eliminated by the mere utterance of His praise. When Hindus contemplate Shiva, the strongest impression received is that of an embodiment of eternal calm and peace, fully absorbed in deep thought of the Self, worshipful, humble, rigorous, and spiritual with a sheer abandon in the context of anything materialistic. Shiva's image appears to provoke the fundamental question: "What is this life all about?" and forces us to demand an answer such as sacrifice, worship and service as the potential elements towards salvation. Shiva is worshipped as a lingam to help us contemplate the need to think of Him as the most basic and essentially formless one. Shiva is commonly portrayed as an ascetic with a serpent around His neck, vibhooti (sacred ash) adorning His face and essentially bare

body, a *trishul* (trident) in one hand and a *kamandalu* (container of water for use in religious practices) in another, and a *damaruga* (small drum) in yet another hand.

Hindus believe that out of the cosmic dance by which Shiva is portrayed as *Nataraja* (Lord of Dance), the very first sounds emerging from His *damaruga* led to Sanskrit sounds, and thus the origin of the language of the devaas. Even now dancers trained in Indian dance forms perform *Shiva Taandava Naatya* (Shiva's Cosmic Dance) as a preferred item in their repertoire. Millions of devotees around the world worship Shiva and on a certain night in February each year, the whole night becomes a time to worship Parameshwara, the Mahaadeva: to celebrate Shivaratri.

Extracted from the Booklet "**How to Conduct Puja to Shiva**" by Dr. A.V. Srinivasan

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