The Great Night of Lord Shiva

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Priests prepare for a night of devotion when four Shiva poojas are conducted

With Maha Shivarathri just round the corner, plan a trip to a Shiva temple to accrue divine blessings and experience one of the most auspicious events in Sri Lanka's Hindu calendar.

Words Daleena Samara | **Photographs** Varnan Sivanesan

Some nights are more blessed than others. The night of Maha Shivarathri is one. Known as the Great Night of Lord Shiva, it is a period when good vibes overflow for Hindus who flock by the thousands to Shaivite temples across the country. If you can handle the crowds and the profusion of exotic sights, scents and sounds, there's no better time than this to accrue divine blessings.

The temple, decked with lights and auspicious decorations, heaves with the fervour of the devout. Chants of *Om Namasivayam* mix with drum beats, cymbals and flutes, and the scents of rosewater, saffron and incense. Dress conservatively and remember that you cannot wear shoes in a temple. Wear a pair of light slippers that you can leave outside or tuck into a bag and keep with you.

Lord of the Dance, symbolic of balance in the universe, the multifarious Lord Shiva is acknowledgd as the supreme God of the Hindu pantheon. As part of the Hindu divine triad, he is the destroyer to Brahma's creator and Vishnu's preserver. However, it is not life that Shiva destroys but spiritual ignorance about the true nature of existence, paving the way for higher wisdom. Shiva is also known as the Mahadev or Supreme God, possessing absolute purity, absolute knowledge and absolute spiritual practice. Shiva in dance as Nataraja represents the great illusion of life, or *maya*. In a meditative pose, he is symbolic of God Ishvara.

All of this makes Maha Shivarathri a very holy date on the Hindu calendar. As with all Hindu festivals, homes are cleaned and purified, and family members wash themselves and don clean new clothes to spend the day observing rituals, first at home and then usually at the temple.

Don't expect to feast because Maha Shivarathri calls for self-restraint. Unlike other

Hindu festivals, the day and night are spent fasting – but you can nibble dry fruits and sip milk. The very serious abstain from all foods and liquids throughout, breaking fast the following morning. The sacrifice is believed to help focus the mind on the myriad devotional activities to be observed. Sincere devotion is rewarded with merit and purification of obstacles. At home, the family may conduct *bhajans*, the recitation of devotional songs dedicated to Shiva, and visit the temple in the evening for a night-long vigil.

> Maha Shivarathri is also said to be the night when Lord Shiva proved he was the greatest in the Hindu divine pantheon

The vigil has its origins in one of the many legends associated with Maha Shivarathri. It is said that Lord Shiva once saved the world from destruction by consuming poison spat out by the cosmic snake Vasuki, who was serving as the churning rope when the Ocean of Milk was mixed to produce *amrita*, the nectar of the Gods. According to the legend, the gods had been weakened by long disputes with the *asuras* or evil forces, and needed *amrita* to regain their strength. But before it was produced, Vasuki vomited out poisons that threatened to destroy both man and gods. The gods prayed to Lord Shiva for help and he quickly consumed the poison. To stop him from swallowing it, Shiva’s wife Parvati tied a rope around his neck, which turned him blue. The other gods kept him awake all night to make sure he did not succumb to any toxic residue. Thus the long night is filled with prayers in his praise and poojas at his feet.

Maha Shivarathri is also said to be the night when Lord Shiva proved he was the greatest in the Hindu divine pantheon. A dispute had arisen between gods Brahma and Vishnu as to who was greater. Shiva solved it by sending forth a great beam of light that bridged the earth and the heavens. He told the sparring gods that the one who found an end of the beam first was the greatest. Brahma turned himself into an animal and began to dig the earth to find one end, while Vishnu turned himself into a swan and flew off to find the other. Both failed and ceded that it was Shiva who was the most powerful.

Among the many legends celebrated on this day is the marriage of Shiva and Parvati. Thus statues of the bride and groom, draped in silks and jewellery, and garlanded with scented flowers, are displayed for offerings and poojas. In some temples, statues of the couple are carried to all corners of the temple to dispel evil

and invoke blessings.

Shiva is also said to have manifested as a lingam (symbolic of the phallus) on this night. Thus the Shivalingam pooja, the most important part of the temple ritual. The lingam is placed in a receptacle called the yoni (which represents the womb) and is ritually bathed in cold water, cold milk, curd, ghee and other auspicious materials. Devotees walk around the lingam in a particular fashion making sure never to cross the outlet that drains the abulution substances. Offerings of coconuts, a stalk of three *dimbul* (woodapple) leaves and auspicious flowers are made. Devotees smear holy ash on their forheads, the three stripes representing three attributes of Shiva.

The poojas are repeated throughout the night until the morning, when after a bath, the fast is broken. The symbolism of the two deities and the lingam and yoni encapsulate the union of Shiva and Shakti, the oneness that supersedes duality. The lingam in the inner sanctum of the temple represents oneness beyond duality, while other forms of Shiva symbolise his various divine potentialities.

If you are planning to join in, don’t forget the offerings. You can purchase them from stalls outside the temple or prepare them in advance yourself. This year, the festival falls on March 7th. Shiva temples across the island will be packed, so get there early.







