

Impressum

Ashutosh Vardhana:

Why we celebrate Maha-Shivaratri, or: The wedding of the gods

Length: 1740 words = 9800 characters

e: ashutosh.vardhana@rochdalewriters.org.uk

© 2001 Ashutosh Vardhana

Date: 20 December 2001

Mk2.1

EDITORIAL INTRODUCTION

On 13 March this year (2002) Hindus celebrate the festival of Maha-Shivaratri, the great night of Lord Shiva, his wedding to Goddess Parvati, and how she managed to win him for a husband. Ashutosh Vardhana tells the story behind this great festival.

Ashutosh Vardhana:

**Why we celebrate Maha-Shivaratri,
or:
The wedding of the gods**

A little girl, Sati, falls in love with God, God in his manifestation as Lord Shiva. She does not only say so because religion or good manners require it but she means it, cannot help loving him and does not even know why. But Shiva is not a respectable God, he is poor, he has matted hair like a Rastafarian, he looks like a tramp and likes talking to illegal immigrants. Sati's father, King Daksha, is not happy with his daughter's choice, but she is stubborn, and in royal families the girls can choose their husband as they wish. When she is old enough for the big ceremony of the Bridal Choice (Swayamvára), she chooses Shiva and there is nothing her father can do about it.

'You have chosen a beggar, so now go and live with your beggar. If you get tired of him, you can return here but I do not want to see him in my house,' says the King.

Sati lives happily with her husband for many years. One day she hears that her father is about to hold a big fire sacrifice, a religious ceremony, in those days as big and important as the Olympic Games today. Every important person in the world will be there, but her husband Shiva has not been invited. So Sati goes on her own. She is the daughter, she needs no invitation.

When she arrived, her father started abusing her husband, Lord Shiva, in such vile terms that Sati said: 'I cannot stop you from saying what you are saying, for you are my father, and I owe you respect, but no loyal wife must ever listen to such things being said about her husband, and there is a sure way of stopping it.' With that she jumped into the sacrificial fire and was instantly consumed. It is because of this Sati, Lord Shiva's wife, that the old, now illegal, custom, that loyal widows burnt themselves on their husband's funeral pyre, in order to be united with him in death, is called 'Sati'.



Lord Shiva meditating in the Himalayas

When Shiva heard that King Daksha had driven his beloved wife to her untimely death, he made war on King Daksha and killed him. Then he withdrew into the Himalayas to meditate, and remained there completely absorbed and unmoved for thousands of years.

Meanwhile Sati was reborn with a new body as Parvati, daughter of King Himavat, the King of the Mountains. She still loved Lord Shiva and her only desire was to be reunited with him, her husband from all eternity and in all eternity.

The other gods wanted her to get married again and have Lord Shiva's son, who they knew would be a great hero (Karttikeya), needed to fight an evil demon. So they tried to help her to find Lord Shiva and then wake him from his state of deep meditation. Their allies were Vasanta, the god of spring, and Kama, the god of love.

They went to the icy mountains where Lord Shiva was meditating, Vasanta brought the warm winds, made the trees sprout, the

flowers blossom and the birds sing, Parvati was hiding behind a bush, and Kama was waiting with his arrow to shoot at Shiva's heart the moment Shiva set eyes on Parvati. If he had succeeded, Shiva would instantly have fallen in love with Parvati. But Shiva was very angry when he realised that he was to be disturbed and seduced, shot one glance from his third eye at Kama, and Kama was turned to ashes. Shiva never saw Parvati and returned to his meditation.

Having failed to win Shiva through the beauty of her body, Parvati decided to win him through the beauty of her soul. So she started doing tapas (fasting and other penances), imposing hardships on her body in order to become independent from the pleasure and pain that a body can yield and concentrate her mind on God. She did this for three thousand years.

Shiva heard about her saintly reputation and came in the shape of a young Brahmin to give Parvati a last test. He called her a fool for wanting Shiva as a husband, called Shiva a beggar and ridiculed his appearance. Parvati defended Shiva with great fire and showed that she was not only beautiful and devoted but also learned. She is the epitome of the learned woman, capable of holding her ground, even against a Brahmin. She is an example we should all emulate.

Then Shiva revealed himself to her, and they prepared for their great wedding in the capital of King Himavat. All his subjects were invited, and since he was the king of the mountains, his subjects were the mountains.

The Alps came from Austria, the Pyrenees from Spain, the Caucasus from Asia, the Atlas from Morocco and from the Sahara, the Andes from South America, the Pennines from England, Ben Nevis from Scotland, Mount Snowdon from Wales, Vesuvius from Italy, Etna from Sicily, and Mount Athos (with 1,472 monks) from Greece.

Nobody wanted to miss this wedding. All the earth was suddenly flat like a chapati because all the mountains had gone to Parvati's wedding.

Even Pendle Hill from Lancashire attended the wedding. He was a bit of a show-off and he wanted to give the witches which lived on him a hard time. So Pendle Hill decided to walk on only two legs (instead of a thousand, like the other mountains) and that made him rather wobbly.

Pendle Hill on his way to India (passing through Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan) carried lots of Indians and Pakistanis from Blackburn (and some from Preston and Bolton as well). They came from all religions and communities. They loved going to weddings, any wedding, but especially this one, and they did not want to miss the chance of a free ride to India and Pakistan. Afterwards they went off to visit their relatives there.



Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati reunited at last

Now, Pendle Hill did not only wobble, he also swaggered deliberately, and took several tons of Thwaites Ale for the road, and they are not paying me for mentioning the fact. (Anyway, drinking is bad even for Hindus.)

The Hill swung like a pendulum (or a wedding bell), and all the witches fell off and broke their necks. That's why the Hill is called "Pendle" Hill and why there are no more witches on it. But the Lancashire Indians and Pakistanis, both Muslims and Hindus, did not fall off, for they are good people and helped each other to hang on, and therefore nothing can shake them. They know, life is hard enough as it is, and we don't have to make it worse by fighting our neighbours and kinsmen, whatever their religion. If we love each other, we will be so much happier.

Perhaps there has never been a greater and more important wedding in the history of the world. This was the wedding of all weddings. It showed all of us what really great love is, love that continues not only during one lifetime but over innumerable lifetimes, love that overcomes even the greatest obstacles, as Parvati did overcome them. She was determined to get her man, and she did get him. She showed us that it is perfectly respectable for a woman to take the initiative, not only in matters of marriage of course, and our youngsters are beginning to learn that.

This was a wedding of Gods, and people realised that both were equal, even identical, if you look at it in the right way. Just as all of us are really God, if we look at ourselves in the right way. Trying to become aware of that is the highest aim in our religion.

People realised that loving God is, or should be, much the same way as when a husband loves his wife, and the other way round, that is to say: husband and wife should treat and love each other as if the other were God. It should not be words only but it should be real, and can be real: it should be felt in the heart, as it was for Parvati. People admired the example that Parvati had set to all of us.

From the union of Lord Shiva and Parvati a great hero, Karttikeya, was born. He is also a god and, like Shiva, is especially worshipped in South India.

During the night of Maha-Shivaratri, devotees should ideally stay up and pray and meditate. South Indian temples stay open all night for this festival.

If you want to read the marvellous story of Sati, Parvati and Lord Shiva in full, you can find it at the following website:
<http://www.tudo.co.uk/hindustories/index.html>
Email: ashutosh.vardhana@tudo.co.uk

NOTE FOR READERS UNFAMILIAR WITH HINDUISM

Contrary to common perception, we Hindus believe in one God, who is neither man nor woman, who is **absolute**, unchangeable and universal, who is 'existence-consciousness-bliss' (sat-chit-ananda), and about whom we can say nothing else that is really valid. Unlike God-the-Absolute, the **many** gods that our stories talk about and that our pictures depict are changeable. Their purpose is to aid the different inclinations of each devotee and help him/her to move from the visible towards the invisible, concentrate his affection on god and to lead a life that brings him closer to the experience of god. Since God, in whatever religion, is everywhere, the Jewish, Christian and Muslim God, being one with our absolute God, resides also in our images. All of us therefore have good reason to be friends, worship God wherever we find him, and to support each other in our different ways of worshipping God, be it in mosque or mandir, for God is one by whatever name we call him and whether we 'depict' him or not.

^^^eof