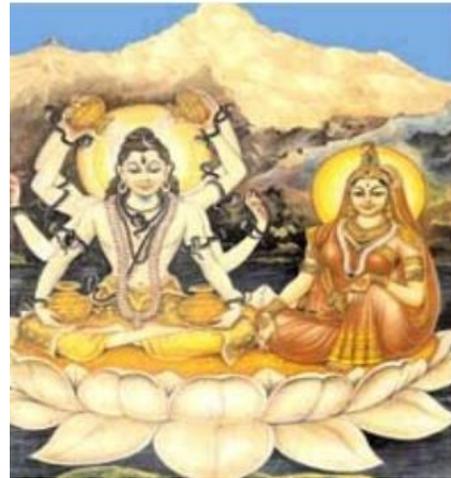


Mahashivrati in Kashmir



'Shivratri' festival is most scrupulously observed by the Kashmiri Pandits, the ancient and original inhabitants of Kashmir. They make thorough preparations and collect eatables, fruits and sweets. The entertainment of the Shivratri festival extends to about three weeks in Kashmiri Pandit house-holds. Each day or a group of days, has a special name and religious function which include social performances also. Some of the names are Akodah, Hurya Aatham, Dyara Daham, Vagarye Bah, Heracnia Truvah, Donya Mavas and Tila Aatham. On each day they have different functions.



The Mahashivratri festival is observed as Herath by Kashmiri Pandits and it celebrates the marriage of Lord Shiva and Goddess Uma. Herath festival begins on the first day of Phalgun Krishna Paksha and ends on the Amavasi day in Phalgun). In between there are numerous auspicious days like Hur Ashtami . This year the main rituals of Maha Shivratri or Herath festival begins on March 1.



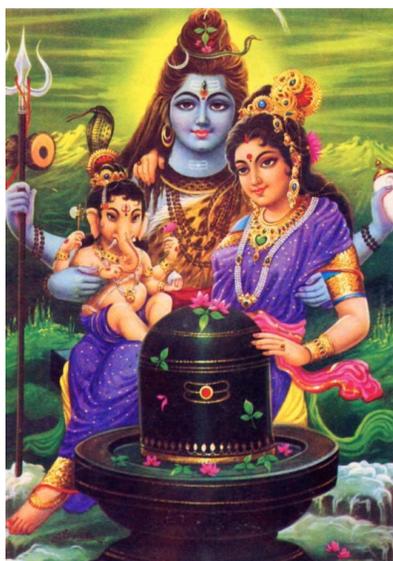
Walnuts, whose shape represents the universe, play an important part in Herath rituals. Walnuts are filled in earthen pots and it is then filled with water. The water is changed every day of the festivals.

A big earthen pot, two medium sized earthen pot, two small earthen pot, clay modeled to the shape of elephant trunk and seven bowls are used in the Herath ritual and they are known as 'Watuk'. The watuk represents Shiva, Parvati, Ganesha, Sapta Rishis and other deities.

Fasting is observed on the important puja day and it comes to an end at night. The rituals come to an end on the Amavasi day, which follows Shivratri. The puja items, flowers and pots are immersed in rivers. Walnuts are distributed as Prasad.

Legends of Mahashivratri

There are various interesting legends related to the festival of Maha Shivaratri. According to one of the most popular legends, Shivaratri marks the wedding day of Lord Shiva and Parvati. Some believe that it was on the auspicious night of Shivaratri that Lord Shiva performed the 'Tandava', the dance of the primal creation, preservation and destruction. Another popular Shivratri legend stated in Linga Purana states that it was on Shivaratri



that Lord Shiva manifested himself in the form of a Linga. Hence the day is considered to be extremely auspicious by Shiva devotees and they celebrate it as Mahashivaratri - the grand night of Shiva.

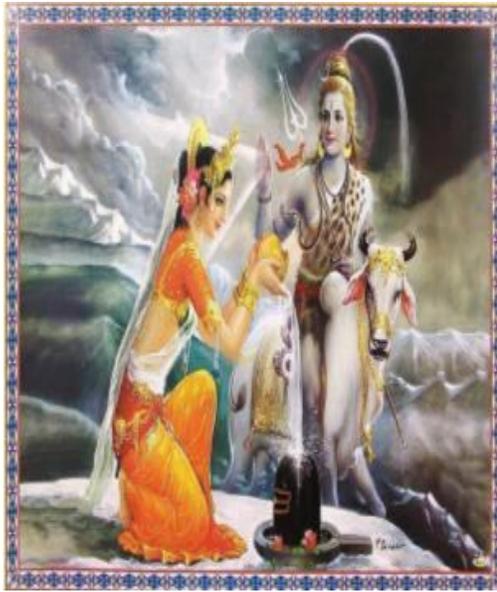
Social Aspect

Shivaratri provides a wonderful and meaningful get-together for all members of the family. Every member of the house-hold is normally in a festive mood. It is a day of prayer and meditation for the elders and one of fun and frolic for the youngsters, particularly children in their new

colorful attires. During the Shivratri festival, all the family members, men, women and children play with cowries (sea shells).

Salaam

The day after Maha Shivaratri Puja is called salaam, a Persian word for greeting. It is a day of fun and feasting, a sort of Thanksgiving Day when relations, friends and colleagues would exchange greetings. The poor would visit Hindu homes and take their share of Shivaratri presents in cash or kind or both as the case may be.



Hayrath Kharch

On Shivaratri day, the head of the family offers pocket money to children and other junior members in the family, including the new brides, sons-in-law and the newly wed daughters, called hayrath kharch. It is also sent to nearest relations, including their new born and newly married children.

Shivaratri puja is also called Vatuk Puja. Vatuk is a Kashmiri word meaning 'collection or an assemblage of different objects'. Since the main puja on

Shivaratri day involves collection of a large number of articles, it is being called by the name Vatuk. They also worship Vatuk Bhairav, supposed to be Shiva's most trusted dwarpal (gate-keeper). In Kashmiri Pandit Community, it is customary for the women-folk, the old and young alike, to visit their parental home and return to their in-laws with some money in token of love which in Kashmiri language is called "atagat" and fire-pot (kangri), considered to be a good omen on this occasion.

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