

MAHA SIVARATHRI

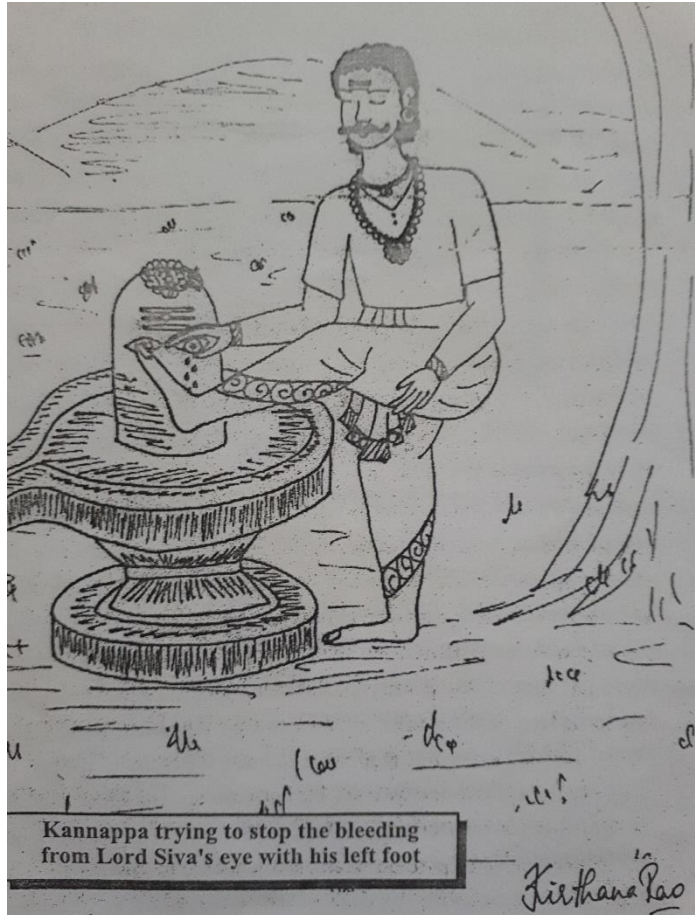
This falls on Magha bahula chaturdasi. Every month, Sivarathri falls on Krishna paksha chaturdasi and is called "Masa Sivarathri". But the Sivarathri occurring on Magha bahula chaturdasi assumes greater significance and is referred to as "Maha Sivarathri". This worship is dedicated to Lord Siva.

Pooja procedure : This pooja is performed in four stages, viz., 9 PM, 12 Midnight, 4 AM and 8 AM next morning with sankalpa. No food should be taken on the previous day. On the evening of Chaturthi, a holy dip is taken in a river, Rudrabhishekam is performed followed by Sahasranama archana with Bilva leaves. The fast is observed the whole day, should keep awake the whole night and perform the pooja as mentioned above and the fast is broken. Large scale pooja is performed in places like Varanasi and Rameswaram.

Story of Maha Sivarathri

There are many legends connected with this pooja. They are :

1. A discourse was taking place in a Siva Temple on Maha sivarathri day throughout the night. A sinner, by chance, happened to listen to this discourse right upto the end. It is said, by Lord's grace, he became a ruler and still later became Veerabhadra.
2. Another story relates to a hunter, who was being chased by a wild animal at dusk. In great fear, he perched himself on a tree. During his vigil in night, he plucked few leaves, threw them down, not knowing that they were Bilva leaves and that they fell on a Shivalinga below. This unintentional act brought great rewards due to the grace of the Lord.
3. There was a great Siva Bhaktha by name, Tinnappa. He used to offer the flesh of animals to the Lord after tasting it. To test his sincerity, the Lord made it appear as if blood was dripping from one eye of the linga. Thinking that someone had harmed the linga, he plucked one of his eyes without hesitation and offered it to the Lord. The oozing of blood



stopped at once. But the same phenomenon repeated in the other eye. Tinnappa thought for a while, if he removed his other eye also, it may be difficult to fix it at exact site, as there will be no visibility. To locate the Lord's eye, he lifted his left foot and placed it over Lord's eye and plucked his other eye also. The Lord was greatly pleased with his devotion and restored his eyes and he came to be called "Kannappa".

4. Once there was a dispute between Lord Mahavishnu and Lord Brahma about their superiority. Lord Siva agreed to mediate. He took the huge form of Amalagni and asked Vishnu and Brahma to find out his head and feet, Brahma took the form of a swan and went in search of Siva's head. Vishnu took the form of a boar and dug the earth to locate Siva's feet. Both failed. But the Ketaki flower gave false indication that Brahma had located Siva's head. In anger, Siva cursed the flower to be the abode of Cobra. Later Siva got pacified and allowed it to be used for worship only on Mahasivarathri day. Mahavishnu and Brahma accepted their defeat. All the three continued to perform their duties. This was called "Lingodbhava kala", the time when this confluence of the Gods took place. While worshipping Lord Siva on this day, people keep chanting the mantra, "OM Namah Sivaya".

The Marathi School and the Maharashtra Association Building Trust, Chennai.