

worshipped. *Abhishekam* is offered with all eleven prescribed ingredients, and is also offered to Goddess *Pārvati* in the first phase.

*Bilva Samarpana śloka* is chanted during the second phase and the *pañchākshari* during the third, to enable devotees to participate. *Śivarātri* is not complete without honoring *Śri Nandikeśwarar*, the *vāhanā* (vehicle) of Lord *Śiva*. In the fourth phase, as is offered during *Pradosham*, *Śri Nandikeśwarar abhishekam* is offered along with one for Lord *Śiva*, concluding the *abhishekam* portion of *Śivarātri*.

**Special Alankārams** (decorations) for Lord *Śiva* are offered after each of the four *abhishekams*. *Alankārams* give us the satisfaction to see our beloved Lord the way we want to see Him.

**Śri Śiva Pooja by children (Saturday, Feb. 25<sup>th</sup> at 4:00 pm)**, is an excellent opportunity for children to participate in this important ritual. For our religion to flourish and endure, it's imperative for us to ensure that it is embraced and appreciated by the next generation. A temple is an ideal place where such exposure and inculcation could happen simply by participating in such activities.

**Śri Śiva-Pārvati Kalyāna Mahotsavam** (celebration of the wedding of the Divine couple), is the ideal closing ritual. As is evident by a pivotal *śloka* chanted during a divine *kalyāna utsavam*, the sole purpose of a divine *Kalyāna utsavam* is *jagath rakshanam* (protection of the world) and *lokanām mangalam* (happiness of the world), leading to *loka kshémam* (global prosperity and harmony).

This global harmony can be achieved through Lord's grace. Goddess is the personification of *dayā* (compassion). It is therefore fitting that the ability of the Lord to give, be united with the compassion of the Goddess to do so. By symbolically uniting them, we have contributed towards global harmony, as well as the welfare of our near and dear ones.

**Hārati** is the showing of the lamp in front of the Lord in a circular motion. This signals the completion of a ritual. As the lamp illuminates the Deity, our mind opens to receive Divine thoughts. **Mahā-Hārati** is the concluding ritual of the day. **Prasādam** is the sacred food that is offered to and blessed by the Lord, and later distributed. This is a good way to do **annadānam** (food charity).

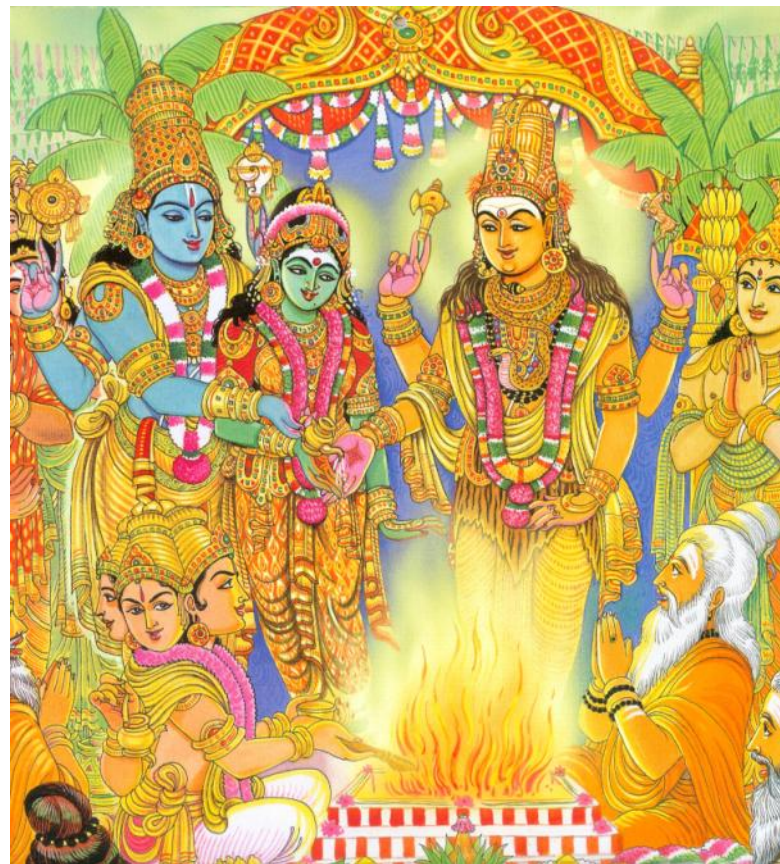
OM NAMAHA ŚIVĀYA (Salutations to Lord *Śiva*)



**Mahā Śivarātri Celebrations**  
Tue. February 21<sup>st</sup> - Sat. February 25<sup>th</sup> 2017



## **Significance of the Rituals -** **Mahā Śivarātri**



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## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RITUALS - MAHĀ ŚIVARĀTRI

**Bhakti** (devotion) is essential for both religious and spiritual pursuits. To develop *bhakti*, it is imperative to form and nurture a personal relationship with our *kula* (family) or *ishta* (chosen) *devata* (Deity).

To help nurture our *bhakti* for Lord *Śiva*, ancient sages have earmarked the annual **Mahā Śivarātri** as optimal for contemplation, introspection, fasts, ritualistic worship, prayers as offerings to Lord *Śiva*. It is believed that those who observe these will earn His bountiful grace, are cleansed of their sins, freed from worldly anxieties, and will grow spiritually.

**Rituals** uniquely combine physical, oral and mental prayer, and form a very important aspect of religious discipline. They are prescribed in our scriptures, and are regarded as pre-requisites to spirituality, as they prepare us to receive Divine knowledge. Understanding the rituals and their purpose could enhance our appreciation of them.

**Ganapati** and **Navagraha Homams** (Vedic fire worship) are offered first, to invoke, honor and seek the blessings of Lord *Ganeśa* to remove all obstacles, and for the *Navagrahas* to nullify any negative influences of the planets. **Poornāhuti**, the final and complete *āhuti* (offering) of the *homam*, is an auspicious time to receive bountiful blessings. With the blessings of *Guru Sage Agastiyar*, the *Mahotsavam* duly begins.

**Abhishekam** (divine bath), and **Rudra Triśati (300) Nāma Archana**, which is auspicious as it is from the Vedas, follow. A *kalaśa* is a small pot filled with *teertha* (water), representing a *devata* (deity.) The **Kalaśa Sthāpanam** (installing of the *kalaśas*) invokes and invites the Divine spirits into four sets of eleven *kalaśas*.

That which protects the one who chants it mentally is called a **mantra**. **Japa** (Continuous repetition of a *mantra*) purifies and charges us with the power embedded in the *mantra*. Certain *mantras* activate our invisible *chakras* and energize us. They are also an aid for meditation.

**Śri Śiva Moola Mantra**, also known as the **Panchākshari** (the five-syllable mantra), is chanted continuously while installing the *kalaśas*, as well as during the **Śri Siva moola mantra japam/homam**. This is offered to Lord *Śiva* for six *kālam*s (times) – during the morning and evening sessions until *Śivarātri*. The mantra's vibration permeates into the *kalaśa* water, sanctifying it with Divine *śakti* (energy). On *Śivarātri*, one of four sets of *kalaśa teertha* is poured on the *Śivalinga*, during each

of the four phases, as the final oblation of the *abhishekam*, to transfer this Divine *śakti*. An **archana**, which follows, consists of reciting either 108 (*ashtottara-śata*), 300 (*triśati*), or 1,000 (*sahasra nāma* (names)).

During **Pradosham** (which occurs twice a month), Lord *Śiva* and Goddess *Pārvati* are said to have given *darśan* as a happy couple. All *devas* gather around them, and so, is an opportune time to seek blessings from all. **Mahā Pradosham** is the one that is closest to *Sivarātri*.

Our *purānas* tell us about *Mārkaṇḍeya* who became a *chiranjeevi* (immortal), and Saint *Kannappa* who gained *moksha* after sincerely observing the *pradosha vrata*. On the other hand, the demons *Hiranyakaśipu* and *Hiranyāksha* were born ill-fated, having been conceived during the sacred *pradosha kālā*.

*Laghu* (short) or *Mahā* (long) *Nyāsam* (purification) is chanted to systematically purify our body, mind and soul, prior to chanting *Śri Rudram*. **Mahā-nyāsam** is very elaborate, recited before offering *Rudrābhishekam* (*abhishekam* while chanting *Rudram*). **Śri Rudra** (a form of Lord *Śiva*) as *Indra*, *Agni*, *Yama*, etc. is invoked in our limbs, triggering an immediate feeling of Divine presence.

**Śri Rudram** is an ancient hymn from the *Krishna Yajur Veda*, consisting of eleven *Namakam* (verses beginning or ending with “*nama*”), which invoke and worship various names and attributes of Lord *Śiva*, and eleven *Chamakam* (verses ending with “*cha mé*”), which lists our ‘wishes’. *Rudram* will be chanted on all sessions during *Abhishekam*. **Śri Rudra japa** (Repeated recitation) would generate intense Divine vibration all through the night.

Lord *Śiva* is an *Abhisheka-priya* [He Who loves *abhishekam* (ceremonial oblation)]. **Abhishekams** are offered on all four phases of this all-night vigil. *Abhishekam* is an important aspect of the *shodaśopachāra pooja* (a formal worship offering sixteen different hospitalities), where the priests invoke the Lord in the Divine image and offers various formalities to the accompaniment of Vedic chanting.

In this **Ekādaśavāra Rudrābhishekam** offered during the first phase, all eleven *anuvākams* (sections) of the *namakam* are chanted followed by one of the eleven *anuvākams* of the *chamakam*. This pattern is repeated *Ekādaśa* (eleven) times with each of the other *anuvākams* of the *chamakam*. All the *Ekādaśa Rudras* (eleven forms of *Rudra*) are