

[Maha Sivaratri Celebrated in Canada and the U.S. on February 25th](#)

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Siva's Great Night, Most Sacred for Saivites, Honored with Fasting, Devotional Chanting & Puja

Maha Sivaratri, or "Siva's Great Night," is the most sacred of all nights to Saivite Hindus the world over. It is a night of fasting, chanting the names of the Lord, and for the very devout of all-night vigil in the temple or shrine. It is a night to ponder the profound mysteries of existence, to chant the sacred Panchakshara mantram, "Namasivaya." It is a night to contemplate the formless form of the Deity through worship of the time-enduring Sivalingam which symbolizes the union of the formless essence of man with the formless form of Truth. It is a right on which we offer our prayerful supplications and hymns to the Author of all Knowledge, Sankara Siva, that He may lift the veils of ignorance and reveal Himself as the Source and Being of all that is. This special night was observed differently by Saivites in various parts of the New Saivite World. We now share very briefly how this holy day was passed in Canada, Hawaii, San Francisco and New York.

The New Saivite World has recently received news of the many activities of the group in and around Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, some of which is reported elsewhere on their Satsang group, and their recent encounters with the Tamil community that lives in Edmonton. Surely it is Siva's Lila that has brought these two groups together, for both have traditions that reach back to Saint Yogaswami of Jaffna, Sri Lanka, the Tamils through their having grown up in Northern Lanka (some received their names from Yogaswami) and the Canadians through Gurudeva.

Maha Sivaratri in Canada was the highlight of the year's calendar of spiritual observations for Saivites in the Edmonton area. It was decided that all members of the Satsang group would continue to meet in one another's homes once each month or on special festival days. Sivaratri was celebrated at the home of Jeyalingam and Shyamala Nagendran. Jeyalingam is from the Jaffna peninsula. He told those present that, as a child, he was taken by his mother to see Yogaswami.

After giving the child his blessing. Yogaswami gave the mother two bananas, then took one back, saying, "I think one will be enough." Taking the sage's simple remark to heart, the mother interpreted it to mean that she would only have one child, as indeed she did. Jeyalingam's parents are now also living in Alberta, Canada, in the southern city of Lethbridge. Members of the Edmonton Satsang are looking forward to being able to meet this fine family one day. Shyamala Nagendran, Jeyalingam's wife, is an accomplished dancer. She teaches the Tamil children the South Indian dance form, called Bharata Natyam. Her dance classes are held early on Sunday afternoon, and she is then able to attend the weekly Satsang gatherings. For this occasion the stone Ganesha Deity, which is taken to each member's home for the Satsang meetings, was brought to her home.

Every effort was made in Edmonton to observe Sivaratri as it would be observed in the Jaffna area. This was effected under the guidance of Mr. Selvaraja, also from Jaffna. He proposed that strict tradition called for a puja to be held every hour along with bhajan, to begin at 6:00 AM. This was to continue until 6:00 AM the following morning. A break could be taken, usually ten minutes in each hour, for coffee and snacks - to help keep everyone awake! The Canadian group could not follow so strict a routine, and settled for a very devout few hours in the evening. The highlight was a phone call to Gurudeva at 7:30 PM. Three of the Tamil men spoke for the first time with Master. Master instructed Shanmuga Devam to tell everyone who might be shy to speak with him due to their knowledge of Yogaswami's renowned boldness with visitors and devotees that he "has never lost his temper yet. I don't know just when I might need it." Gurudeva also mentioned that he would have Inspired Talks sent to all at the gathering so that they might get to know him better. At the Sivaratri celebration copies of Sivaneri were distributed. Many of those present had met Dr. Sanmugasundaran when he visited Edmonton last summer. There followed a wonderful array of devotional bhajans.

Maha Sivaratri was celebrated at Sivashram with devotees pilgrimaging to Kadavul Temple and San Marga from all four of the main Hawaiian island. Those attending included, from the Big Island, the Goode family, Robert, Priscilla, Brock and Lori, the Nalluran family, Muni, Sivakumari, Muruga and Kali. From Maui came Sitara Nadesan and Gayatri Devi. From Oahu came Rajan and Savitri Kumaran, Kali Nicholson, Jeanne Leong and Sara Sunjar and infant Adi. And finally from our own island, Kauai, came the Lackey family, Derwyn, Carol and Jeffrey.

The evening began with a puja at 5:00 PM at the San Marga Lingam, followed by a puja at the Kadavul Hindu Temple at Sivashram and chanting in the Guru Temple. Gurudeva had one of the monastics read from "Gods in Exile," a book he wrote a

few years back on Deity worship. At nine all attended a powerful Siva puja in the Kadavul Koyil, then returned to the Guru Temple where Master spoke to all present on the worship of Lord Siva. We quote briefly from his remarks that evening. "All of you have been worshipping Lord Ganesha and He is the God wherever you are in your evolution. That is why Ganesha devotees are contented people. They consider that they have all the time in the world to deal with their dharma, to work through their karma in this life, and then in the next life and the next. They are not in a hurry if they are sincere devotees. There is no rush. This is the Saivite view of unfoldment, the Eastern view, and it is very different indeed from the intense impatience that beginner in the West often exhibit. Yogaswami world often say, 'No hurry. No worry. No sorry.' By worshipping Ganesha first you stabilize the mind, allowing you to return from your meditations into a very stable area of the mind. Siva is God. Ganesha and Muruga are Gods, Mahadevas. But Siva is God - the Self and the Primal Soul, the formless and the personal Supreme Being. He is the Creator, but no less that which destroys. Siva is everywhere transcendent, and personal, the Original or Primal Soul, the First Soul. Out of that form came a myriad of other forms. Siva has two major darshans. One is the outbreath and one is the inbreath. The outbreath is creation, the inbreath is Siva constantly pulling you towards Himself. You have already experienced the outbreath for you are a fully created soul. Now you are being drawn back to the Source through evolution. Lord Muruga helps you on your way through the practice of yoga and through all of the so-called bardos - all of the chasms of the mind that you can enter and exit, and sometimes cannot exit. Through all of your karmic experiences He releases and opens inner doors, cuts through the stuff of the mind with His Grace and releases you from seeming bondages that Ganesha would allow you to slowly unwind through a natural pattern that might span many lifetimes. With Lord Muruga that same experience or release would take but an instant. He is the giver of boons, and he assists you on the evolutionary path that Siva has set you upon. Now, Lord Ganesha is content wherever you are on that path. He is the Lord of Dharma. He Himself is the law of karma and his myriad devas control the various karmas systematically, methodically. Every Hindu is close to Ganesha, and it is easy to be in tune with His Darshan. But on this Maha Sivaratri we should recall that Siva is God, the Absolute Reality and total goal of life. And that I am! That you are!"

In San Francisco Sivaratri was celebrated in the Ganesha Shrine. Those who attended the noon puja on the 25th were Bonnie Momtaz and her son Cameron, Bruce Peterson, Susan Scott, Marianne Sheeks and her two daughters, and the Muturaman Iyer family. The evening puja was attended by the Burnett family, the Katir family, Deva Rajan, Wanda Eisler, Soma and Surya Sundaram, the Seyon family, Nandi and Surina Devam, Larry and Pat Bloom, Manu Yogendra, Kim Englesby, Bruce Peterson, Nathan Palani, and Satya and Vasuki Sivam. In addition two Indian families spontaneously joined in for the evening's devotionals.

Thousands of Hindu pilgrims from all parts of North America gathered together at the Ganesha Temple in Flushing, New York, to pay homage to the Father of Creation, Lord Siva. The actual celebration there began nine days earlier at the Mahaganapati Temple, with an abhishekam performed to Rudra Siva on each of the nine days preceding Maha Sivaratri itself. On Sunday, February 25th, all assembled for a grand day of puja, chanting, dancing and worship from 10:00 AM until 11:00 PM.

A highly festive atmosphere persisted throughout that special day in New York as devotees filed in and out steadily, offering their obeisance to Lord Siva. Informality prevailed here and there as close and old friends met and conversed freely, and as the children, forgetting for a moment where they were, would run and play children's games one with another. Yet there was behind it all the strong and inner chanting of the Brahmins and the tireless pujaris performing archanai after archanai, reminding all present of the sacredness of the occasion.

Festivities began in the morning with a Rudra Homam (Fire Puja to Siva), the most ancient and impressive of the ceremonies performed at the New York Temple. Fire is set to the broken shards of the coconut shell and small sticks of firewood which are placed together in an open hexagonal hearth in the middle of the temple. With devotees seated all around, the puja commences. The priest sits facing the fire with dozens of containers nearby holding the ghee, oil, honey, flower petals, rice, turmeric, vibuthi and other items needed. As he chants the timeless Sanskrit adulations to God, he offers these items to the sacred fire. Occasionally he will pause to light a block of camphor which he places carefully around the fire. The priest's motions are graceful and meaningful, driven by the rhythm of his devotional chants.

After the Fire Puja a Siva Abhishekam was performed on a small Siva Lingam placed beside the large stone Siva Lingam. The small one is a mere 1 1/2 inches high and exquisitely made from a translucent amber stone. There followed the weekly Sunday Mahaganapati abhishekam.

In the afternoon, Ms. Ratilekha Dash performed an Oddissi style temple dance. These are dances of devotion offered to the Deity. Mrs. Dash has been trained in this dance form since her early childhood, and her performance was deeply moving for all who had the privilege to share in it. The stage was set with pictures of the Deities and before the performance began she offered flowered and lit oil lamps

before each of the Gods.

During this time residents of tiruvadi East Monastery were busy helping the pujari prepare for the evening activities, decorating the front of the Siva sanctum and adjacent Paravati shrine with gladiolas. Hundreds and hundreds of flowers were used, strung into garlands to the chanting of bhajans to Lords Siva, Muruga and Ganesha. These flowers are obtained weekly by the Sivanadiyar of the Church from three sources: the rose bushes planted last fall at the Tiruvadi East Monastery, from nearby Queens Botanical Gardens where work is done in exchange for the flowers, and from the Manhattan flower market where unsold flowers are begged weekly. They also assisted in the humble chores of preparing oil lamps, cracking a mountain of coconuts that would later be used as offerings, making lush garlands to bedeck the Lord, and so forth. Great quantities of prasadam were being brought by all devotees as well as fruit.

The high point of the celebration came in the evening as Dr. Potti performed another potent Rudra Homam. This was followed by Rudra Abhishekam and Siva Sahasranama puja - the chanting in Sanskrit of the 1,008 names of Lord Siva. For more than thirty minutes an unbroken stream of milk poured upon the Siva Lingam as the two pujaris, Swami Atmananda and Pandit Vidwans, took turns in making this blessed offering. As one pujari's copper vessel ran nearly empty, the other would begin his oblation from another urn so that Siva would receive a continuous offering from beginning to end. This long, beautiful white mantle breaking over the crown of the large black Lingam and spreading itself in abundant white rivers across the surface together with unceasing chanting had its intended effect on all, capturing and containing awareness in a contemplative mood.

After the milk bath, Siva was offered an oblation of yogurt and then water. Before this final bath, water was poured into nine brass pots of various sizes ranging from a few ounces to a gallon or so. The water was then blessed in the manner familiar to Saiva Siddhanta Church members - by chanting and tossing flower petals into it. These pots had been set beside the Homam Fire during that ceremony. Now Dr. Potti walked between the Siva Shrine and the homam nine times as he brought each of the pots, one at a time, to the pujari. As the Lingam was then being dressed, and the curtain was drawn closed, Mr. Subbha Rao gave a brief talk, explaining that Siva is the Lord of Jnana, of wisdom, and that one who wishes to attain the state of Jnana must therefore worship Lord Siva and gain His Grace. He also explained that "linga" is made up of two Sanskrit words, one meaning "what everything comes toward," and the other meaning "what everything becomes dissolved in." Therefore, he explained, the Siva Lingam represents that formless

form to which we must all come and dissolve ourselves into.

Then the devotees were blessed by the enchanting singing and devotional readings performed by pandit Damodar Shastri. His delivery in reading is so fine that even though one may not understand the language, there is still the sense of the meaning conveyed in the very tones of his voice as he chants these ancient prayers. For many the very summit of the evening came as he led the entire congregation in his enthralling "Aum Namasivaya."

Then the curtains parted, the darshan rushed forth to flood all who stood in awe. A veritable tide of devotees moved forward as a one body to take the sacred flame, milk, prasadam, vibuthi and flowers. More prasadam was to be served later in the hall downstairs. The children were then invited to come forward and receive a comic book - either Siva-Parvati or Kabir. It was announced that these were a gift to the devotees from Master Subramuniya, "a great friend of this temple who holds a grand vision for it as a fountain of inspiration for Hindus in the West." As he handed them out, Prof. Sharma was chanting Siva chants and offered a blessing to each child, and adult, who received one.

As the throng slowly made its way downstairs, a few devotees came to stand close to the shrine, and to quietly bask in the great darshan that radiated out from the Siva Lingam in the wake of these profound and sanctified ceremonies. Siva stood bedecked in jewels and flowers, girt by mountains of flowers and fruits and coconuts, illuminated by the many flickering oil lamps - it was a sight and a memory for all to carry with them through the year ahead. Aum Sivaya Nama Aum!

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