



# TWO SAIVA FESTIVALS OF SOUTH ODISHA – MAHASHIVARATRI AND SHITALA SASTHI: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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## Abstract

*Odisha is a land of fairs and festivals. Among the Saiva festivals, Mahasivaratri and Shitala Sasthi are very important and observed with great devotion in south Odisha like other parts of the state. In different Saiva temples of south Odisha like Gokarnesvara, Nrusinghanath, Guptesvara, Patalesvara, Mahalingesvara, etc. Sivaratri is observed by the devotees with much devotion. Similarly, Shitala Sasthi is another important Saiva festival of south Odisha which is observed with pomp and splendour.*

**Key words:** Mahasivaratri, Shitala Sasthi, Guptesvara, Gokarnesvara, Nilakanthesvara, pana (liquid sweet mixture), Bai-Nacha (dance of kinnaras).

Festivals constitute an inseparable part of any religion. They reflect the culture, tradition and history of the people. The festivals celebrated are intended to purify the soul, to turn away malicious influences, to get rid of evil deeds and to get desired boon from the God. This happens in any religious faith and Saivism is not an exception to it. It has cast its influence on Odishan culture. In south Odisha, two very important Saiva festivals are *Mahashivaratri* and *Shitala Sasthi*. A comparative analysis has been made in this paper between these two festivals.

Several fairs and festivals are associated with Saivism in Odisha from ancient times. With the advancement of time such festivals and fairs have taken the form of *Vrata* and *Osa* in Odisha in due course of time. *Vrata* is the rituals associated with the worship of a deity. One has to take a resolution (*samkalpa*) to observe it with all his/her sincerity from the beginning till its

end. It is meant to fulfill the desire of the devotee. Similarly, *Osa* is also observed by people in a similar manner. *Osa* are only performed by the ladies. The meaning of *Osa* is fasting and after its observance, one has to listen from the *Purohita* (Brahmin) its importance for which it is observed. Here, discussion on *Mahashivaratri* and *Shitala Sasthi* has been made.

### **Mahasivaratri**

Among the festivals of Siva, the most famous is *Mahasivaratri* which falls on the fourteenth day of the dark-fortnight of *Kumbha* or *Phalguna* month (February-March). This festival is so named because that very night is entirely devoted for the worship of Siva. This *Vrata* is also known as *Siva Chaturdasi*. In *Siva Purana*, Siva says to his consort Parvati that no other festival than *Sivaratri* observed by his devotees gives him very much pleasure and satisfaction.<sup>1</sup> This festival is known as *Sivaratri* or Siva's night and is celebrated because it is believed that Lord Siva has swallowed the poison on that night which came out of the ocean and saved the world from destruction.<sup>2</sup> Another story tells that at the time of the deluge (*pralaya*), the whole world was covered with utter darkness and the Divine Mother restored light to the world by offering prayer to Siva. It is said that the rituals that are observed in this festival are the same as observed by the Mother Goddess.<sup>3</sup> In memory of that event, the devotees also spend sleepless night. That is why *Sivaratri* is also known as *Jagara Jatra*.

*Sivaratri* is divided into four parts. In the first part of the night, the milk is poured on the *linga* and the Brahmin worships Siva in *Sodasopachara* (16 varieties of offerings). In the second part of the night, the *lingam* is bathed in curd and the same *Sodasopachara* puja takes place. In the third part of the night, the *linga* is bathed in honey and similar worship takes place as in case of the early two parts of night. At midnight the *Mahadipa* (the grand lamp) is lifted to the top of the temple amidst the chanting of "Om Namah Sivaya" and also the name of that particular *linga* (i.e. *Namah Gokarnesvaraya*, *Namah Nilakanthesvaraya*, *Guptesvara Mahadev Ki – Jay* in case of south Odisha). The devotees break their fast only after the *darshan* of *Mahadipa*<sup>4</sup>. In the last part of the night, just before the sunrise, early in the morning, the final worship of the *linga* is made. The devotees take the *darshan* of the *linga*, go to their house, break their fast after taking the *charanamrita* of Siva. In many cases they first give offerings to the Brahmins and then take the *charanamrita* by breaking the fast.

The *Garuda Purana*, *Skanda Purana*, *Padma Purana*, *Agni Purana* etc. sing the glory of *Mahasivaratri*.<sup>5</sup> Regarding *Mahasivaratri* an episode of the 'Shanti

Parva' of *Mahabharata* has been cited. While resting on the bed of arrows, Bhishma had told about this Mahasivaratri to the Pandavas. The narration goes as stated below<sup>6</sup>:

"King Chitrabhanu of Ikshvaku dynasty was the paramount sovereign of the entire *Jambudvipa*. Once, his wife had observed the *Vrata* of *Mahasivaratri*. During that time, a sage named Astavakra came to his court and asked the king and his family regarding observance of this *Vrata*. The king (as he could know his past life) told the sage that in the last life he was a hunter named Papakarma. Every day he went to forest and killed many animals/birds and by selling their meat, he could earn livelihood for his family. One day, he went to the forest with his bow, arrow and net. He hunted animals and captured many birds also. While returning to his home, it was evening. He saw the wild animals were roaming in the forest. As one tiger came rushing towards him, he suddenly climbed a *vilva* tree and sat in one of the branches. The tiger guarded his prey. It was also raining with drizzle, he tore the *vilva* leaves one after another and threw them down with the belief that the wild animal would go away. He thought about his family throughout the night and became very hungry. All through the night, he was plucking the leaves of the tree and throwing it down. He did not know that it was a *Mahasivaratri* and below the tree, there was a *lingam* on whose head all the *vilva* leaves were falling one after another. When it became morning, the tiger went to the forest and the hunter came to his home and fed his family. After giving food to a Brahmin in that morning, he took food. He continued his profession till his death. When he died, the servants of Yama (God of death) came to take him with them because he had committed sin by killing animals and birds. The servants of Siva also reached during that period to take the deceased hunter with them to the abode of Siva. A duel took place between them. At last, it was decided that though unknowingly, the hunter had observed the rituals of the fasting on a *Mahasivaratri* and all his sins had been washed away due to that pious act. So, his soul was taken to the abode of Siva. Due to his observance of

*Mahasivaratri* only once in his life, he was born again and became king Chitrabhanu of Ikshvaku dynasty.”

Largely, people of Odisha has this episode in mind while observing the *Mahasivaratri Vrata*. To expiate themselves from sin committed in this mundane world, they resort to this *Vrata*.

Another popular fact has been narrated in *Sivaratri Vrata Katha*<sup>7</sup> regarding *Mahasivaratri* which is very popular in Odisha. As per its description, once the sages in Naimisa forest asked Sanat Kumar regarding the observance of *Mahasivaratri*. He started the discussion regarding this *Vrata* stating that once sage Bhagabali of Prayag (Allahabad) had welcomed sage Dharmavanta of Kashmir, who had narrated him regarding a Brahmin named Krishna Sharma. That Brahmin, by rubbing his leg on a detached brick from one Siva temple lying on the bank of the pond had committed a blunder and incurred the displeasure of Siva. That is why, he took birth as a devil and lived in the banyan tree which stood on the bank of the pond. He was free from the curse when his disciple gave him the virtue of one *Sivaratri* at his request. This is another versions of *Mahasivaratri*, widely prevalent in south Odisha, particularly in the Ganjam and Gajapati districts. *Mahasivaratri* is a popular Saiva festival through out the country. In Odisha it is known as *Jagara*. It is only because the devotees spend the whole night remaining awakened through out and worship Siva. This is the most important Saiva festival in Odisha including other parts of India.

*Mahasivaratri* is very famous in south Odisha. At Guptesvara of Koraput, thousands of people, on this day, assemble from Odisha, Andhra Pradesh and Chhatisgarh to observe *Sivaratri* and to see the ‘*Hari-Hara Bheta*’ (meeting of Vishnu and Siva) when *Mahadipa* is lifted up on this occasion at midnight. This festival is celebrated at Mahendragiri in Gajapati district. Lakhs of people from Odisha and different parts of India visit the temples of Kunti, Bhima and Yudhisthira at the top of Mahendragiri. Dance and music programmes throughout the night make Mahendragiri a lively place. In other parts of south Odisha during *Mahasivaratri*, several folk-dances including *Dasakathia*, *Patarasaura* etc. take place in order to keep the people awake through out the night. In other Siva temples of south Odisha like Nrusinghanath temple at Bargaon, Mahalingesvara temple at Jilunda, Kuberesvara temple at Kaima near Buguda, Krishnagiri group of Siva temples, Tribidhesvara temple at Aska, old Siva temple at Chikiti, Tumbesvara temple near Purusottampur, Gopesvara temple at Kesapur, Patalesvara temple at Paikpada, Nilakanthesvara temple at Jagamanda hill, Sarbesvara temple at

Malkangiri, Nilakanthesvara temple at Papadahandi, etc. *Sivaratri* is observed with all its sanctity.

The greatness of *Sivaratri* has been described in *Sivaratri Vratākatha*. When after observing a fast on that day, Siva is worshipped with *bilva* leaves and *Jagara* (vigil) for the whole night is observed, Siva saves the man from hell and bestows enjoyment of happiness and *moksha*, and the man becomes like Siva himself.<sup>8</sup> *Bilva* or *Vilva* (popularly called *Bel*, botanically *Aegle Marmelos* or wood-apple) is a most sacred tree in India. Its leaf is of a triple form with three leaflets and probably on that account consecrated to Siva with his triple functions.<sup>9</sup>

### **Shitala Sasthi (Siva Vivaha)**

*Shitala Sasthi* or marriage of Siva with Parvati is another important Saiva festival largely observed in south and west Odisha. This festival is observed in the month of *Jyestha* (May-June) *Sukla Sasthi tithi* (sixth day of the bright fortnight). It is believed that from the day of *Mahasivaratri*, Siva starts his meditation keeping himself away from all comforts. The meditation ends when he marries Parvati on *Jyestha Shukla Panchami* and comes with her on the next day i.e. *Jyestha Shukla Sasthi* for taking a round in the locality. 'Shitala' in Odia means 'cool'. As it is believed that Siva became cool after his marriage with Parvati, so that day is called *Shitala Sasthi*<sup>10</sup>. From another point of view, it is so named because after intolerable heat of April-May, this takes place in June when it rains and the atmosphere becomes cool. Be that as it may, it is a great Saiva festival in Odisha.

This festival is observed in the following process. The house of Parvati's father is searched before some days. Permission is brought from the house of the person who had acted as the father of Parvati last year. Thereafter, a new person becomes the father of Parvati. The headmen of the village goes to the house of Parvati for *Nirvandha* (negotiation) as middle-man like Vishnu who had gone to Dakshya Prajapati for the same.<sup>11</sup> On the very fifth day of the bright fortnight of *Jyestha*, Siva placed on a palanquin (*Vimana*) accompanied by the people of that village goes in procession to the house of Parvati at night. In the procession, the *Kinnaras* dance and sing song. Fire-crackers are largely used in the procession. This reminds the puranic episode that on this day Siva went with Nandi, Bhrikuti and other Ganas to marry Parvati on this auspicious day. After marriage, he returned being cool on the next day (*sasthi*). The marriage is performed by chanting vedic *mantras* and all the procedures of marriage are followed. After the marriage, all the *Sevayats* (servitors) of the temple participate in a common feast.<sup>12</sup>



On the very day of *Shitala Sasthi*, the return takes place. In the previous night the display of fire-crackers takes place. A competition among various groups of fire-cracker makers take place. The judges select the best group and award prize. The local names of the fire-crackers are – *Haveli, Gachha bana, Kumpi, Champa, Akasamalli, Chakra, Tumba* etc.<sup>13</sup> People prepare such fire-crackers at least before two months. Crowd, in large number, gather to see the competition among various groups of fire-crackers'. This gathering really creates a situation as if a real marriage is taking place there.

During *Shitala Sasthi*, people prepare various items in their house which consist of *Chudaghasa, Kshiri, Kadali-chakata, Dalma, Khai, Kakara, Panasachakata* etc.<sup>14</sup> They also keep various fruits like guava, cucumber, pineapple, palm-fruit etc. ready to offer to the deities when they cross their door. One peculiar thing is seen here that the people wear scented flower garlands around their neck or on the wrist to show them as part of the groom (Siva)'s procession. Like the original marriage, they are also treated cordially with delicious food and drink by the family members of bride (Parvati)'s house. Ofcourse, the function does not end in two days. It lingers upto ten/fifteen days.

A difference is marked here in this festival. In other *Vratas* and *Osas*, people observe fasting and are very serious till the end of the observance. However, in *Shitala Sasthi*, there is exception. Here, people take it casually. They are divided into two groups. The people associated with Parvati's house behave very humbly and treat the people with care who accompany the groom (Siva). On the other hand, the people from the side of the groom behave carelessly and take pride as belonging to the groom's party. Now, the sanctity of the festival is lost to some extent. In some cases, the people of the groom's party are found in drunken state and police have to control them.

Earlier, in *Shitala Sasthi*, petromax lights were used and the *Gotipua nacha* (dance by male) was taking place. Now electric lights / lights functioning in battery with dazzling colours are found. Now instead of *Gotipuas* of locality, the *Kinnaras* from Mumbai, Raipur, Bilaspur are called to dance in the groom's procession.<sup>15</sup> Instead of devotional songs, film songs with high sounding DJs are being sung to attract the people. The religious sanctity of the *Shitala Sasthi* has been lost to a great extent. Still then, *Shitala Sasthi* is observed with pomp and splendour in south Odisha and western Odisha. Other parts of Odisha do not observe this Saiva festival with so much vigour.

In south Odisha, particularly in Mahuri, the zamindar patronized *Shitala Sasthi*. Initially, competition was taking place between two groups of Deras of

Mahuri on that particular day. Later on, the Khaduras (metalsmith) entered into the competition. On that day, the image of Nandi (Bull) of different Siva temples of that area are taken in procession on small chariots. All the chariots are brought to the Hanuman temple situated at the centre of Berhampur town. There, the best chariot is judged and rewarded. People enjoy the display of firecrackers, musical bands, dance, etc. Now this practice has come to disuse after the confiscation of the zamindari and *Shitala Sasthi* has lost its importance.

*Mahasivaratri* and *Sitala Sasthi* are two important Saiva festivals in Odisha, particularly in south Odisha, so far as the second festival is concerned. *Mahasivaratri* has its popularity throughout India whereas *Sitala Sasthi* is observed in south Odisha, west Odisha, Puri and a few other places in the state. These two festivals are observed in a different way.

For the observance of *Sivaratri*, purity of mind is required. On the previous day, the devotees only eat once and avoid taking onion and garlic. Nothing of this sort is required for the observance of *Shitala Sasthi*. Here, only from the side of Parvati, members observe fasting or take a little liquid sweet mixture till the marriage is solemnized.

In *Sivaratri* a great concentration is seen among the devotees. It is best observed when the *Mahadipa* is lifted to the top of the Siva temple at mid-night. On the other hand, no such concentration is required for *Shitala Sasthi*. Here the devotees make merry during the observance of the festival.

A great amount of sanctity is required for the observance of *Sivaratri*. Even people do not drink water through out that night. On the other hand, in case of *Shitala Sasthi*, the followers of the groom (Siva) who go to the house of the bride (Parvati) in a procession, get royal treatment. They are offered with varieties of sweets, cakes, *pana* (liquid sweet mixture prepared from curd, jaggery, different fruits, ghee, milk, etc.). They dance till they are tired. In the next day of marriage (*Shitala Sasthi*), the dance of the kinnaras (*Bai-Nacha*) with DJ music, now a days, takes place and firecracker parties from different nearby villages display the show on firecrackers. Prizes are distributed for securing position in the competition. This is mostly seen in the west part of Odisha.

*Jagara* or *Mahasivaratri* is observed keeping some wishes or desires in mind. Largely couples pray God Siva for getting a son or to get rid of sins committed in this mundane world and so, they observe it. A lot of religious sanctity is involved in it. On the other hand, *Shitala Sasthi* is observed with pomp and splendour. In earlier time, it was observed with *Gotipua Nacha* (a

male was dancing assuming the form of a female). However, now a days, it is being observed where the kinnaras (transgenders) are invited from Mumbai, Kolkata, Delhi for performing dance and a huge crowd gather to watch their dance.

The *Sivaratri* festival is being observed in the same manner to-day as it was in the past. Of course, some entertainment activities like dance, music, *jatra* are taking place near the temple during the night. However, *Shitala Sasthi*, had lot its popularity in south Odisha. With the confiscation of zamindari of Mahuri and other places of south Odisha, now, it is not being observed as it was being done earlier. Except west Odishaa, this *Shitala Sasthi* has lost its importance and is being observed for name's sake.

In fact, *Mahasivaratri* and *Shitala Sasthi* are two important Saiva festivals in Odisha observed by the people. The former is observed with rigorous devotion whereas the latter is celebrated in a lighter vein with pomp and splendour. As a Siva festival, *Mahasivaratri* has retained its importance in south Odisha till date whereas *Shitala Sasthi* has lost its importance and is going to extinct. It will be a lasting tribute to the culture of Odisha, in general and Saivism, in particular if this *Shitala Sasthi* will be given importance by the local people of south Odisha and also by the *Devottar* Department of the Government. Otherwise, this great Saiva festival will be relegated to the distant background in south Odisha and it would be very much difficult to revive it in future.

### Notes and References

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