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Mahashivratri: The Great Night of Shiva

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Mahashivratri: The Great Night of Shiva

Most Hindu festivals mark a day. Mahashivratri marks a night. Devotees stay awake through all of it.

This lesson explains when it falls, what people do, and the stories behind it.



A Shivalinga decorated with flowers and bel leaves during Maha Shivaratri rituals. Photo by Suvan Singh, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

When is Mahashivratri and why does it matter?

What is Maha Shivaratri?

Maha Shivaratri means the “great night of Shiva”. Britannica calls it the main festival of Shiva.

It marks the union of Shiva and Parvati, says the tourism ministry.

The night also stands for light winning over darkness.

Sources: britannica.com; incredibleindia.gov.in

When does it fall?

The **14th day of the dark half** (waning moon) of every lunar month is sacred to Shiva.

The night is most joyful in **Magha** (January-February) and above all in **Phalguna** (February-March).

The tourism ministry says Maha Shivratri falls in February-March. It calls this the most powerful of these nights.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in; britannica.com

What does the night celebrate?

The ministry says the night marks the union of **Shiva** and **Parvati**.

It also says the universe began on this night.

So the night is seen as light winning over darkness.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in; britannica.com

Why is this night called the most powerful?

Each month has a Shivratri on its 14th night. Maha Shivratri falls in February-March.

The ministry cites yoga teaching. It says the 14th night brings a rise of energy in people.

It calls this night the strongest of all.

So staying awake with an erect spine is a key part of it.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

> **Quick check 1.** Maha Shivaratri is observed on the 14th day of the waning moon. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Is it only a local festival?

No. The tourism ministry says it is kept all across India.

Britannica shows a big fair at Mandi in Himachal Pradesh.

It adds that a famous Shiva temple in Nepal is busiest on this night.

Sources: britannica.com

What do devotees do on the night?

Why is the night spent awake?

The day before, devotees observe a **fast**. At night they keep a **vigil** with prayer and stories about Shiva.

The tourism ministry adds that devotees stay awake with the spine erect through the night.

The next day brings feasting and festival fairs, Britannica says.

Sources: britannica.com; incredibleindia.gov.in

How does the day begin?

Devotees rise early on the day of Maha Shivratri. They take a ritual bath, preferably in the purifying waters of the Ganga.

Priests then perform the abhishekam at temples.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

> **Quick check 2.** Devotees fast and stay awake all night. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What happens to the lingam?

Worship of the **lingam**, the symbol of Shiva, is the heart of the night.

In the ritual bath called **abhishekam**, priests offer milk, honey and water to the Shiva Lingam.

Offerings also include ber (jujube), betel leaves and bilwa leaves, says the Ministry of Tourism.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in; britannica.com

What special offerings are made?

Britannica shows a lingam decked with bilva fruit and other gifts.

The ministry lists ber (jujube), betel leaves and bilwa leaves.

It says they add sacredness.

Devotees chant “Om Namah Shivay” during the bath.

Sources: britannica.com; incredibleindia.gov.in

What happens the day after?

The day after the vigil is joyful. Britannica mentions feasting and fairs.

In the Lingayat sect of South India, people give gifts to the guru, a personal guide.

Devotees believe worship on this night brings great good.

Sources: britannica.com

> **Quick check 3.** In abhishekam, devotees bathe the Shiva Lingam with milk, honey and water. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

How is art tied to the festival?

The tourism ministry says the festival has long joined faith and art.

Dance festivals are held each year at temples like Konark and Chidambaram.

At Chidambaram, **Natyanjali** means “worship through dance”.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

Which temples host dance festivals?

Big temples hold dance festivals. Konark, Khajuraho and Chidambaram are three.

Khajuraho also hosts a grand fair.

At Chidambaram, Natyanjali shows old dance poses from a text on dance.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

Which legends explain the night?

Why is the night linked to poison?

Gods and demons once churned the ocean of milk to get **Amrit**, the elixir of life.

The first thing to rise was **Halahala**, a deadly poison.

Shiva agreed to help and drank it. This saved all three worlds from destruction.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

> **Quick check 4.** One legend says Shiva drank a deadly poison from the sea. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

What is the Tandava legend?

Another legend says Shiva dances the **Tandava** on this night.

This is his divine dance of making, keeping and ending the world.

Some also say the universe began on this night.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in; britannica.com

Where do pilgrims go?

Many devotees visit 12 sacred Shiva shrines called **Jyotirlingas**.

Three are Kashi, Somnath and Ujjain.

Devotees also rise early for a holy bath, ideally in the Ganga.

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in; britannica.com

What is the Mandi fair?

Mandi in Himachal Pradesh holds a big Maha Shivaratri fair.

Britannica says images of gods are carried in palanquins in a procession.

So the festival is a public event, not only a temple ritual.

Sources: britannica.com

Is the festival kept outside India?

Yes. A famous Shiva temple in Nepal is busiest during Maha Shivaratri.

Britannica says the festival comes in February or early March. It marks the start of spring.

UNESCO named the Kathmandu Valley a World Heritage site in 1979.

Sources: britannica.com

> **Quick check 5.** Somnath is one of the 12 holy Shiva shrines. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Practice MCQs

1. On which lunar day does Maha Shivaratri fall?

A. The 8th day of the waxing moon

B. The full-moon day

C. The 14th day of the waning moon

D. The first day of the bright half

See answer ↓

2. Which two months does Britannica name for the most joyous Maha Shivaratri?

A. Shravana and Bhadrapada

B. Magha and Phalguna

C. Ashvin and Kartika

D. Chaitra and Vaishakha

See answer ↓

3. What do devotees do through the night of Maha Shivaratri?

A. They travel by sea

B. They keep a vigil with prayer and stories of Shiva

C. They sleep early after a feast

D. They hold a night market

See answer ↓

4. What is the lingam that is worshipped on Maha Shivaratri?

A. A symbol of Shiva

B. A symbol of Vishnu

C. A temple tower

D. A holy river

See answer ↓

5. What is the ritual bath of the Shiva Lingam with milk, honey and water called?

A. Bhasma

B. Abhishekam

C. Natyanjali

D. Pradakshina

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.**
   Britannica says the 14th day of the dark half of each lunar month is sacred to Shiva. The Ministry of Tourism also places Shivratri on the 14th lunar day.
   ↑ Q1
2. **B.**
   Britannica says it is a time of particular rejoicing in Magha and especially Phalguna. The Ministry of Tourism says it falls in February-March.
   ↑ Q2
3. **B.**
   Britannica says the participant observes a fast the day before and a night vigil. The Ministry of Tourism describes the fasting and staying awake through the night.
   ↑ Q3
4. **A.**
   Britannica calls the lingam the symbol of Shiva. The Ministry of Tourism calls the Shiva Linga a representation of Shiva.
   ↑ Q4
5. **B.**
   The Ministry of Tourism calls this ritual bath abhishekam. Britannica says special worship of the lingam is the heart of the night vigil.
   ↑ Q5

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** Britannica and the Ministry of Tourism both place it on the 14th lunar day of the dark half. ↑ 1
2. **True.** Both sources describe fasting and a night-long vigil. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The Ministry of Tourism describes this ritual bath and its offerings. ↑ 3
4. **True.** The Ministry of Tourism gives this legend in its account of the festival. ↑ 4
5. **True.** The tourism ministry names it with Kashi and Ujjain. ↑ 5

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