

A Column of Light On Shivaratri

The lakhs of shiva temples all over India include the famous temples at Amarnath in Kashmir, Somanath in Gujarat, Vishwanath in Varanasi and Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain. The names of these Shiva temples define Shiva's various divine functions, exalting Him as the supreme Soul. The linga is worshipped as the very image of Shiva. The linga indicating the Shiva has neither male nor female human form like of the other deities; the lord is an incorporeal point of Light. That is why the 12 well-known Shiva temples in India are also known as Jyotirlinga Math, signifying his form of Light.

The three lines marked on the Shivalinga known as *Tripundi* symbolise the three-fold characteristics of the *Trimurti* or the lord of three subtle deities. *Trinetri* or the one who has the third eye of wisdom, *Trikaldarshi* or the one who surveys the three aspects of time and *Trilokinath* or the lord of the three worlds. Shiva is also known as Shambhu or Swayambhu and Sada shiva meaning that he is the Supreme Soul.

Legend tells us that Rama invoked Shiva at Rameshwaram and Krishna offered his prayers to Him at Gopeshwar Vrindavan. Memorials to these legends also indicate that Shiva is worshipped as the Supreme Father of all deities. Shiva is praised as the Creator, Sustainer and Destroyer. But what does he create, sustain and destroy? If he is the sustainer, then what accounts for the scourge of poverty, hunger and sickness in this world? Does he cause the destruction and death of his creation? The Trinity or the divine triad in many faiths symbolises these three roles of God.

God does not create the elements and all the constituents of nature. Nor does He create human beings or human souls. Matter, souls and God are neither created nor destroyed; they are eternal and imperishable. Each has its own unique attribute, power and function. The drama of the world is an eternal interplay of these three forces. Everything in nature is cyclic; everything that is seemingly born, grows and dies is actually being renewed, from one form to another.

So what does God create? In reality, God does not create a new world out of nothing; He rejuvenates the old by divinising man's intellect with wisdom, imparted through Brahma, who along with Vishnu and Shankar makes up the Trinity. The literal meaning of the word Shiva is benefactor Supreme Soul. Shiva brings benefit to all souls by performing the divine functions of creating a new pure world where righteous, divine and happy human beings live, destroying all vice and evil from the old, impure world.

Shivaratri, the night, symbolises the darkness of ignorance. Shiva carries out his task of transformation when human beings, lost in the night of ignorance, touch the nadir of moral degradation and unrighteousness rules the world. The process of renewal implies destruction of the old for a new structure cannot be raised upon a dilapidated one. Destruction is inherent in the eternal scheme of the world drama. Nothing that is created stays new forever. Everything in this world degenerates and changes form with the passage of time. When unrighteousness reaches extreme proportions, the perverted human intellect devises deadly weapons of mass destruction, which play their part in destruction of the old world. The process is speeded up by natural calamities and civil wars. So Shivshankar symbolises the annihilation of all that is bad and vicious. Destruction is not a direct or wilful act of God; it is a corollary to the process of establishment of a new world order. It is a blessing in disguise because it removes all that is evil and impure, and liberates humans from the bondage of sin and sorrow. Once the process of destruction is complete, an era of complete purity, peace and prosperity, called *Satyuga* or Golden Age dawns on earth, marking the beginning of a new cycle of world drama where all human beings are free from vice; they are divine and virtuous. Even nature is at her prime. Rulers are elevated beings, who are created in the image of God, and this concept is depicted in the form of Vishnu, the four-armed sustainer.

God's role is unique; He performs the highest task of purifying the world and yet, remains free of the bondage of action. He does not enjoy the fruit of his divine work, which is why he is known as *akarta* and *abhogta* (beyond action and its results).