

THE OBSERVANCE OF SIVARATRI

by

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Sivaratri is an important festival, with deep religious and spiritual significance. It is the day on which Siva as the manifested form of the Absolute in its function of universal transformation is adored by all devotees. This worship is performed on the 14th day of the dark half of the lunar month of Phalgunā (February-March).

The day is especially significant as an opportunity for austerity and spiritual contemplation. The principal items of the observance of the day are fast, vigil, *havan*, *yajna*, and continuous recitation of the Divine Name together with worship of Siva throughout the night. Fast does not merely mean abstaining from taking physical food but a spiritual exercise of the withdrawal of sense powers altogether in a continuous mood of God-consciousness. The *havan*, or *yajna*, is an external act of offering into the sacred fire, and is symbolic of the dedication of oneself to God in utter surrender. The formulae chanted during the *havan* are mantras which have the power to generate a vibration in the atmosphere around and to invoke certain divine forces. The *havan*, essentially, as it is performed at the Divine Life Society, Rishikesh, is intended to generate forces tending towards world peace in addition to spiritual benefit to the

devotees. Similar is the purpose of the chanting of the Divine Name.

The worship during the night is done through various consecrated articles such as bael leaves and flowers. The bael leaf is regarded as especially sacred to Siva. To the chant of the Divine Name, one hundred thousand offerings of bael leaves are made to Siva on this night. Another part of the worship is called *abhiskeka*, or the offering of the divine bath to the Deity with such articles as milk, curd, ghee, sugarcane juice, honey, rose water, etc. These are all symbolic of self-consecration and Divine contemplation.

In the Hindu religion particularly, God is addressed and regarded as the Supreme Emperor or King, and invoked and worshipped with royal grandeur. The vigil aspect of this day is, again, a spiritual exercise, and is intended to overcome one's usual tendency to go to sleep every day as a consequence of repressed desires lying latent within. For, the maintenance of spiritual consciousness is neither a sensory consciousness of objects nor an abolition of consciousness, which two aspects of life are obviated by the two abstinences in the form of fast and vigil.

The concluding worship is the grand culmination, wherein *arati*, or the sacred waving of light, is performed to the Lord with lighted camphor and wicks soaked in ghee or oil. The emanations of these consecrated flames are not only charged with the power of mantras chanted simultaneously, but they also spread an aroma of health-giving and rejuvenating forces in the atmosphere.

Prayers in the early morning, at the moment called Brahmamuhurta (1-1/2 hours before sunrise), as well as discourses by saints and learned persons form a part of the great function.