

# TIMES OF INDIA

## A star festival

Date : 5.1.2020 | Edition : Mumbai | Page : 5 | Clip size (cm) : W: 33 H: 25

**T**hirusvathira is one of the 27 *nakshatras* — stars, asterisms, or lunar houses, segments of the ecliptic, through which the moon transits while orbiting the Earth.

The people of Kerala celebrate Thirusvathira as a festival dedicated to Shiva and his consort Parvati. It is also believed to be the birth-star of Shiva. The word seems to have come from 'Rudra', yet another name of Shiva. Thirusvathira is celebrated each year in the month of Dhanu (Sagittarius/December-January), the fifth among the 12 months, as per the Malayalam calendar.

Before unfolding the traditions and customs related to Thirusvathira celebrations, let us look at the legends and events leading to the festivity.

Prajapati Daksha, son of Brahma, and his wife Prasuti had 24 daughters, including Sati and Rati, who were married to Shiva and Kamadeva, respectively. This makes Shiva and Kamadeva co-brothers. Kamadeva's weapon is a sugarcane bow and a floral arrow. It is believed that a man and woman are sure to fall in love with each other if they are hit by Kamadeva's arrow.

Sati was in love with Shiva and wanted to marry him. But Daksha disapproved of the alliance as Shiva was always attired in a tiger-skin and adorned with hooded serpents and skulls; he lived close to burial grounds no option but to get Sati married to Shiva. However, his annoyance and aversion to Shiva continued and he waited for an opportunity to insult him.

Once, Shiva and Sati had to take part in a *yajna*, where Daksha was also invited. Daksha arrived late and as he walked in, all those who had assembled at the venue bowed to welcome him except for Shiva and Sati who remained seated. An infuriated Daksha abused Shiva and ridiculed his attire, pursuits and way of life. While Shiva remained composed, Nandi, Shiva's *vahana* could not tolerate Daksha's pride and gross misconduct and cursed the king.

Time passed and one day, Daksha organised a grand *yajna*. However, he did not invite Shiva and Sati to the event. Though she felt hurt, Sati pleaded with Shiva to accompany her to her father's *yajna*. Shiva did not want to go and suggested that Sati also should not go. However, Sati decided to go alone. When she reached there, she was surprised to find that all her sisters and their spouses had been invited. Even



# A Star Festival



Amidst singing, dancing, fasting and feasting, people celebrate Thirusvathira as the victory of eternal love and romance, writes UNNIKRISHNAN POONKUNNAM

her mother ignored her. Unable to bear the humiliation, Sati jumped into the ritual fire.

When he came to know of Sati's death, an enraged Shiva summoned two fiery beings — Veerabhadra and Mahakali — and commanded them to wage a war against Daksha. Finally

defeated, a humbled and repentant Daksha became a devotee of Shiva.

Despite punishing Daksha for his misdeeds, Shiva stayed inconsolable due to Sati's loss. He vowed not to get married again and proceeded to the Himalayas to engage in penance.

Meanwhile, Sati was reborn as Par-

vati and her parents took birth as the mountain-king Himavan and his wife Mena. When Parvati grew up, like Sati, she too fell in love with Shiva. Though she vowed that she would marry none other than Shiva, her desire could not be fulfilled, as he was not at all willing to break his vow of not remarrying.

The two crossed each other's path on several occasions, but Shiva always ignored her. Though disheartened, Parvati never gave up her hope and efforts to woo Shiva.

In the meantime, Taraka, an asura had obtained a boon from Brahma that if at all he had to die, his end should be in the hands of the son of Shiva. He was aware that such an outcome was unlikely, since Shiva was unwilling to get married, and in such an event, where was the question of him begetting a son? Worried over Taraka's ever-increasing atrocities, Brahma, Vishnu and other gods decided to assign Kamadeva with the task of making Shiva fall in love with Parvati. Accompanied by his wife Rati, the love god reached the spot

where Shiva was meditating. Parvati was in the vicinity.

Just when Parvati walked closer to Shiva, Kamadeva shot a floral arrow at Shiva. Instantly passion arose in Shiva's mind towards Parvati. However, he restrained himself and upon realising that it was Kamadeva's doing, an upset Shiva opened his third eye and reduced Kamadeva to ashes. A shocked Rati broke down and wept bitterly. Seeing her, Shiva had a change of heart and revived Kamadeva.

At the request of all the gods, Shiva agreed to marry Parvati. Their son Karthikeya became the commander-in-chief of Indra and he slayed Tarakasura in a fierce battle.

It is believed that Shiva and Parvati got married on Thirusvathira day and the people of Kerala celebrate Thirusvathira to invoke the blessings of the divine couple. On this day, devotees, mostly women, observe *vratham*, fast, for ten days prior to the transition of the moon through Thirusvathira.

Fasting and taking bath before sunrise are the two important prerequisites for the *vratham*. Rice preparations are not allowed on those days. Devotees consume only gruel made of broken wheat, tender coconut water with its pulp and ripe bananas.

The most important ritual while bathing is *Thudikkottu*, which is nothing but creating a reverberating sound jointly by the bathers in the water by holding the left fist below the sur with the right fist, singing praises of Shiva-Parvati and also Kamadeva, whose floral arrow had united them. Yet another significant custom is *Pathippoochudal*, or adorning the hair with garlands made of ten kinds of flowers, *sasapushpam*, at midnight. For the newly weds, the first celebration after the wedding is known as *Poothinmathila*.

During the Thirusvathira celebrations, unique dishes are prepared to break the fast. They include a delicious dish called *puzhukku*, which is made of different varieties of tubers, raw banana and grated coconut.

As a part of the celebrations, there is amusement as well as entertainment. Dressed in traditional *kasavu vesthi*, women sing, dance, and play on the *conjal*, swing. They take part in *kattikottikal*, a type of group dance that lasts for several hours, slowly drawing the curtains on Thirusvathira, celebrating the victory of eternal love and romance. ■

Thirusvathira will be celebrated on January 10