

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Celebrating Ecological Regeneration and Family Ties: A Study of *Mahashivratri* at Jubbal in Shimla Hills

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ABSTRACT

The Western Himalaya, particularly Jubbal, is a unique cultural and religious landscape where deep-rooted traditions coexist harmoniously with gradual modernization. Often referred to as God's own land, the region reflects long-standing bonds with Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, as well as a rich tradition of local deities and indigenous belief systems. Though it remained uninfluenced by broader Hindu philosophy and religious practices, the region still has deep faith in *Shivaratri*. The present paper highlights how the celebration of *Mahashivratri* in Jubbal is not just a random celebration of most Hindu festivals, where puja and aarti are the main attractions. The festival here is not a religious one but a personal one, where festivities start as if it were a family function, with cleaning the house, preparing different food items and remembering their married daughter being a must. More than all this, the hidden aspect of worshipping nature's persistence, fertile fields, and seeking abundance around are among the unique practices of this festival in hard, hilly surroundings. This paper examines how *Shivaratri* in Jubbal celebrates ecological regeneration and social value in its unique way.

Keywords: Jubbal, *Mahashivratri*, Folk Culture, Shaivism, Ecological balance, Ritual Practices

FULL PAPER

Introduction

The western Himalaya is home to gods and goddesses, and to god-fearing, honest people who respect all religions. Their old conventions have never stood in the way of progress in this science-dominated world. Their gods never fought for religion. Their fight was always aimed at promoting peace and harmony, and a feeling of mutual trust among the people. In the Vedic age, at the beginning, there were only 33 gods. Rigveda 1.139.11 identifies the 33 Vedic gods, classified as "three times eleven" (33) deities residing in three realms. "Gods who are eleven in heaven; who are eleven on earth, and who are eleven dwelling with glory in mid-air, may be pleased with this our sacrifice." This number, however, gradually increased as new gods were discovered and added to the pantheon, and it soon reached a figure of 3339 (Rv. III.9.9). This enormous growth is, of course, no exception in the case of Himalayan gods. The gods and goddesses assume the most diverse forms here in the hills; not only gods and godlings, but even demons and devils are venerated.

Hinduism practiced in the Shimla Hills, especially in Jubbal, is not the mainstream Hinduism as practiced in the rest of India. It is not that the inhabitants of Shimla Hills did not believe in the cosmic trinity Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva; it is not that they did not subscribe to Durga, Kali and the related goddess emanating therefrom, but the religion and customs here have remained, to this day, peculiar and unique. The ancient inhabitants of these hill States probably cherished an early form of Shaivism. However, it is not known whether the Shiva of Himachal Pradesh was an offshoot of the Indus Valley civilization or of local origin. The question raised above, however, is purely academic. Sometimes, the mainstream *devta* (God in the local language) is adopted locally. The adoption is not officially made, but it still happens. The adopted Shiva, let us say, undergoes a period of change and development in folk imagination. Conversely, there is a local cult, indigenous to the areas. Over time, the figure enshrined in the local cult becomes linked to the mainstream deity. There is no doubt that Shiva has been a popular deity in Jubbal, worshipped not only in the villages but also in the valleys and on the peaks. Many names in the region are associated with Shiva, and even the provincial devta Mahashu sounds like a localized form of *Mahashiv*. Closely connected with the worship of Shiva, and far more widely spread, is the Shakti cult. The Goddess is thought to be the benevolent universal mother and protector of all the living creatures and is also known as Uma, Devi or Parvati. There is, however, another, more violent aspect to her character, indicated by names such as Kali, Durga and Mahishasurmardini. In Jubbal, she resides in Hatkoti.

The present paper examines how the celebration of *Mahashivratri* in Jubbal differs from the popular one in Mandi and also highlights the various rituals performed during *Mahashivratri* in Jubbal and their symbolic significance. The researchers used field methods in the area and conducted interviews with residents of different villages to create a clear, comprehensive picture of the celebrations during the *Mahashivratri* festival.

The people of Jubbal had deep faith in their *devi-devta* (Local God and Goddess) and took special interest in their fair and festivals. They are not very inclined towards Hindu festivals like Diwali or Holi, but they have big celebrations on *Jagra, Bishu, Jatra, Shant and Bhunda*. *Mahashivratri* is among the very few mainstream Hindu festivals that are celebrated with immense dedication and enthusiasm. Folklore narrates that after “an intense period of penance, Goddess Parvati won Lord Shiva's heart, leading to their celestial wedding” (Chhawchharia, 27). It is believed that the mountains of Himachal witnessed this sacred union, making *Mahashivratri* one of the most revered festivals in the region. In the hills, this divine marriage is symbolically re-enacted, particularly in rural villages where every household becomes a part of the grand festivity.

Rooted in deep tradition and spirituality, this celebration is a blend of ritual, legend, and a feast of rare *pahari* delicacies, prepared over several days. Himachal Pradesh, often referred to as the land of the gods, has long been associated with Lord Shiva. Folklore narrates that after “an intense period of penance, Goddess Parvati won Lord Shiva's heart, leading to their celestial wedding” (Ranchan 35). It is believed that the mountains of Himachal witnessed this sacred union, making *Mahashivratri* one of the most revered festivals in the region. In the hills, this divine marriage is symbolically re-enacted, particularly in rural villages where every household becomes a part of the grand festivity.

Findings: The Celebrations

Preparations begin some days earlier, and people start cleaning their houses, called *Lipai*, for the Occasion. Five to ten days earlier, the people of the house start making *Shakli* (Rice flour crispy *papad*). Though today they are replaced by refined flour and readymade *papad*, some houses still follow the traditional touch. The *Shivratri* itself is celebrated for three days, and households prepare an array of traditional *pahari* dishes, many of which have been passed down through generations. Day one is called *Mashruni* (Soaking of Urad Lentils). The second day is *Khani-Pini*, where traditional dishes like *Bade* (Savory black dal mash fritters), *Poldu* (*Aata Puri*), *Gulve* (Deep-fried sweet wheat-flour pancakes with jaggery) and *Shakli*

(Special rice-based crisp snacks) are prepared. The women of the house prepare all these festivities. They remove the peel of *mash* and grind it to make *Bade*. Traditionally, the sheel-batta (Stone grinder) was used to make the coarse paste, but now machines are available in every house to grind it. Everything is made in large quantities to be shared among neighbors and the family's married daughters. Traditionally, mutton is prepared on this day (Siththa), but as times change and interactions with the outside world increase, many households avoid preparing it.

The third day is the actual day of *Shivratri*. As some family members observe a fast on this day, the woman of the house cleans all the utensils again. She prepares the festive food of *Bade*, *Gulve*, *Poldu* and *Shakli* for offering to Shiva during the evening puja. *Mandap* for the *Shivratri* is an important and interesting attraction of the festival. A *Laut* (garland) is made with *Paza* (tree leaves), *Ban* (tree leaves), *Jau* (*Barley*), *Bharmali* (wild plant) and *Keemp* (Sour fruit like oranges). The *Laut* is considered auspicious as green leaves and fruits of winter in a garland are a sign of natural abundance. These sacred leaves symbolize nature's endurance and are believed to be Lord Shiva's favorite, as they are the only greenery found in villages at this time of year.

At the heart of the ritual is *Rott* (a large, thick roti made of multi-grain flour, including *jau* (barley), wheat, maize, *koda* (Millet flour), and *chaulai* (Seeds)). The *Rott* weighs 1.5 to 2kg and is placed in a corner of the kitchen. This sacred bread, cooked on a traditional *tava*, is placed at the puja altar as an offering to Shiva and Parvati, marking the beginning of their divine marriage reception at Bakunthdham, the mythical abode of Shiva. Garlanded images of Shiva and Parvati are placed in the *mandap*, along with mud and cow dung idols of Shiva, Parvati and Ganesh. Women adorn Parvati with their ornaments and Shiv and Ganesh with *Kusha* (A type of green grass). A *bekhal* bush (thorny bush branch) is also placed on the *Rott* and adorned with small balls made of fried flour on its thorns. Symbolic figures of a *Bakra* (goat) and a *Chailu* (Ram), all crafted from the same multi-grain flour, are also placed on *Rott*. These represent the sacred livestock, which are seen as participants in Shiva's marriage procession. Traditionally, mutton pieces were also offered and placed on *Rott*, but today people avoid it. All the freshly prepared food is also placed in the *mandap* as offerings. A *diya* (earthen Lamp) is lighted and kept lit for the whole night. Even a family member sleeps near the *mandap* to keep an eye on it. They believe, as also mentioned by M. R. Thakur in his book, that the

Shiva himself visits every house of his devotees, and his presence is made known by this lamp, which shoots its flame much higher than before as soon as the Lord comes to the specific house. In case the lamp extinguishes before the puja is

performed, it is considered a bad omen, and the household has to sacrifice a goat to set aside the evil effects. (172)

The next day, early in the morning, the person sleeping by the mandap takes the idols of Shiv, Parvati and Ganesha to the field and buries them there to receive the blessing of a good crop for the year (Chanta). The offerings remain untouched for three days, symbolizing the completion of the marriage ceremonies.

On the day after Mahashivratri, the special festive dishes are lovingly packed in *Ghitis* (A Package of *Shivratri* festivities food like *bade*, *Poldu*, *shakli*, *Gulve*, etc.) and sent to the married daughters of the family. "The next morning of *Shivratri* is the day to distribute the share of married daughters, and therefore the boys and males of the house take *Ghitti* to their house filled with *bade*, *Poldu*, *shakli* and *Gulve*" (Sasramta). A Ram or a Goat made of flour is also kept in it for the daughter's son (*Bhanja*). In earlier times, a large piece of uncooked mutton was also sent as her share. *Ghitti* was a way to let daughters know that they are remembered and missed, and therefore Daughters used to wait desperately for them. Though the tradition of using *Ghitti* has faded over time, the ritual's essence remains alive. Today, instead of earthen pots, these delicacies are neatly packaged and couriered to daughters, keeping the emotional bond intact. Today, the "Ghitti" is replaced by cash envelopes or electronic money transfer (Chauhan). Though even today, the maternal uncles, after the death of their daughters, give their sons the money envelope as *Ghitti*. It symbolizes the parents' blessings and love, ensuring that their daughters, now living in another household, still feel connected to their parental home. The practice is a touching reminder of the deep-rooted respect for married daughters in *Pahari* culture, where they are still cherished and included in all major celebrations. Sometimes *Ghitti* is also sent to the relatives if they have a death in their nearby families or relations.

Symbolic Significance

While many across India observe this day as the night of Shiva's cosmic dance, the people of Himachal remember it as the divine wedding that blessed their mountains. As the area has difficult terrain, Mahashivratri is a time when snow starts melting, giving way to dead green fields and sowing crops. Finding green leaves and bright orange fruits to decorate the mandap and house is a welcome way to bring the greenery indoors. The burning of cow dung idols of Shiv, Parvati and Ganesha in fields is a way to hope for a good crop with the blessings of their beloved god. Another important feature of this celebration is sending food to the married daughters to keep her reputation with her in-laws, so that she is remembered and

still loved by her parents and family. Moreover, sharing abundance with her and her neighbors is also a way to keep society intact.

To conclude, for the people of the hills, *Mahashivratri* in the Shimla hills of Himachal Pradesh is much more than a religious occasion; therefore, the celebration of *Mahashivratri* shows a rich blend of faith, folklore, and daily life. In the erstwhile princely state of Jubbal, this endearing tradition has been followed for generations. For them, it is a celebration that connects them to their heritage, their environment, and their society. Local traditions live alongside broader aspects of Hinduism. Rooted in devotion to Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, the festival goes beyond its religious meaning. While many across India observe this day as the night of Shiva's cosmic dance, the people of Himachal remember it as the divine wedding that blessed their mountains, believed to be the home of Lord Shiva. In the calm and snowy landscapes, with the fragrance of traditional food and the glow of oil lamps, the arrival of Shiva and Parvati is once again welcomed with devotion and joy. It expresses cultural identity and community unity. Through unique rituals, reenactments of the divine marriage, and traditional food preparation, the people of the region maintain a living heritage that connects deeply to their environment and farming lifestyle. Additionally, customs like sharing festive offerings with married daughters reflect the enduring social values of family and belonging. Despite modernization, these practices continue to evolve while retaining their essential character, demonstrating the strength and continuity of *pahari* culture. Thus, Mahashivratri here is not just a sacred observance but also a lively testament to the region's lasting spiritual and cultural heritage.

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