

MAHASHIVARATRI

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It was the festival of lights at a remote village named Kotappa Konda. On that night in early summer, the hamlet was filled with thousands of lights along its narrow dusty lanes. At a distance, a mountain rose surrounded in the darkness. A blaze of dazzling lights illuminated the ancient temple of Lord Shiva in the holy shrine sitting atop the hill. The roadway ahead reaching the temple like a twisted snake was also brightly lit making it easy for lakhs of heaving devotees slowly scaling the steepness.

At the foot of the hill where the village remained cloistered for the rest of the year has blared and blazed alive beyond the wildest imagination of a rare visitor like me. In the next twenty-four hours the village whips the cauldron of religious fervor, an unrestrained joy of celebration, a parade of street parties. The whole place was oozing with people, in lakhs. As I rolled my car, navigating through jostling crowds I dragged inch by inch; itâ??s obvious from the safety of my car the whole village was drowned in a sea of people.

Stalls of every make and size and variety lined the streets that the village could boast. Tea stained counters, makeshift kitchens with functional equipment serving varieties of meats, men gathered about them chomping. Younger children tugged close to the parentsâ?? eyed hungrily at dripping ice cream pushcarts and Jars full of colorful sweets and snacks, and a few children fondled the iced cones with their tiny tongues. Women in their colorful traditional saris draped in a festival relish, strings of flowers adored their oiled plaits seen bargaining for the best discounts, and words flowed fast and furious before they struck the deal.

Far beyond the clatter filled lanes, occupying vast tracts of fields a carnival ambiance was briskly taking shape. There were hundreds of hard hands ferociously working as if preparing for a battle to showcase their entertaining armor at the first shade of nightfall. I caught a faint music rising from the grounds, massive structures of â??prabhaluâ?? as traditionally known looked something like a huge vertical bamboo grid almost a hundred feet tall shooting up into the summer sky. I counted fifteen of them each outdoing each other in the extravagance of decorations. The higher and lofty â??the prabhaluâ?? itâ??s rated as a lavishly prideful display â?? a big boasted ego for the landlords from the villages. Temporary platforms erected would be used later as dance floors no sooner than the night sets. I could see hundreds of loudspeakers fastened to bamboo frames erected in rows in the space fronting the stage that would take in thousands of audience once the dance floor erupts to life with dancers clad in skirts and silks as soon as the curtain of festivity fizzed open.

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Then we reached the temple of Lord Shiva, the arrangements, to accommodate lakhs of people queued in massive trails of rows, entered every corner available were adequately good. Most people looked tired, perhaps the hours of waiting showed on their faces, old crinkled faces, young drowsy looks, and eager expressions of women â?? the whole multitude had poise in their feet, trust in hearts and devotion in their weathered eyes. They got pushed, and shoved by the security personnel in one direction, towards the sanctum. The crowds moved in little steps forward, chanting the name of Lord Shiva as if the chant filled energy in their weakened bodies to reach the altar of the god. Their hands joined above the heads as a mark of sheer devotion. Just for a glimpse of the holy deity, the crowds of disciples endured every hardship thrown at them. It may take hours before they would come out having had the luck of quick look of the lord for a few seconds. I saw them as a fortunate few with glitter in eyes, glow on their faces.

Hands folded in supplication, particularly the men in their seventies or eighties as I glanced at them; I had a question for myself, â??whatâ??s that their prayer would be? Do they need to put up such hardships to bow before the god?â?? Their folded, wrinkled, aged hands represented pain and hope. Whatever the age everyone needed hope to survive; it was the wisdom after watching them for a few hours had revealed to me.

For most of the disciples, Lord Shiva is a bright star in their dark backgrounds. Itâ??s the enduring hope that flowed in their feet to stand unquiveringly for hours to savor a spilt-second connect with the deity.

For me, the good vibrations spending time among the sincerest devotees felt like a healing balm soothing the inner storm Iâ??m battling for many years. Enjoying the early summer evening among lakhs of hopefuls I viewed a thousand feet below at the distant blazing brilliance spreading in the clear sky. I could see the vast grounds filling with increasingly excited and impatient crowds. I couldnâ??t make out from where these masses of people were seeping from.

Three more friends joined me and we planned to meet the other group of the convoy to reach the guest house for dinner and later sway with the milling crowds and enjoy; I donâ??t know what secrets are in store for us in the exploding carnival ooze.

It had all seemed like so much fun from the start. Everyone was having a good time enjoying spiritual luck on such an auspicious day. My friend took over from me the driving seat, as we descended the hill, massive crowds filled all available margin walking down the steep, narrow road and as many moving up to reach the temple. It was a scary scenario; the roadway has hardly a vehicle span left and no space for anyone to walk on. Besides hundreds of buses are commuting up and down ferrying hordes of pilgrims.

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As we adjusted in the car, I realized we lost sight of vehicles where the other groups of friends were moving. The place was so closed in by hills that our mobiles went dead. Four of us were isolated; we trooped slowly down the road almost wedged between the crushing crowds and brusque bus drivers. We got stuck in the car; nothing is visible except the overcrowded buses and people snaking through the available space and screaming at us. On a dangerously steep road, we are gridlocked; we had no clue how to come out of the situation. After an hour or so we slowly crawled along the traffic and reached a point of relative safety.

At that point, I never knew the next two hours we four of us would get entangled in an alarming crowd of zombies. As soon as we reached down, it was evident the police guarded and barricaded all the routes. Every entry points leading to the carnival area, into the village was blocked. The only way left for us to walk, but restless groups had already encircled my car. I felt like Iâ??m floating amidst a cloudburst of masses. I could see them banging the vehicle shoving and pushing it. They seemed unruly and footloose. There were rabble and noise everywhere, and at the moment we didnâ??t know which way to go or how we should escape the bizarre crisis. One tug, I knew the car would bump into people. It was easy to imagine what would be the fate of four of us if my friend at the driving seat faintly touched the accelerator.

Finally, police personnel came to our rescue suggested taking a crumpled, dusty road as only a way out possible, and we donâ??t know where the neglected dingy pathway led to. We had no option left, it seemed like a quarry area, huge boulders strewn everywhere, dreadfully hidden barring few lights and our head beam lights we cruised suspiciously through pitch dark night. Everyone inside was waiting and breathing. Our eyes were popping trying to find what is ahead of us.

Meanwhile, our friendsâ?? group was frantically punching their mobiles to trace us, after more than an hour of blind driving and suspended tension we could catch a huge spread of bright white light glowing in the sky. A line of cheer appeared on our faces. I lowered the window to find out are we closer to the village through the crowds seemed no less alarming. Somehow we struggled to spot the guest house â?? our nightâ??s resting place. After two hours of suspense and frustration, our bodies relaxed once joined the waiting friends, and everyone seemed in an upbeat mood, and the aroma of cooked food helped ease our tensed nerves and rumbling stomachs.

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The background story of this narrative:

(A groups of friends â?? twenty-five of us, Class of â??78 from Agricultural College Bapatla, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh in India, visited Kotappa Konda on the eve of â??Sivaratriâ?? in a convoy of twelve cars.

The day of Mahashivaratri Festival or the â??The night of Shivaâ?? is celebrated on a moonless night in March. Itâ??s celebrated with devotion and religious fervor in honor of Lord Shiva.

From hundreds of surrounding villages, about six to seven lakh people throng to take part in â??day and nightâ?? fast at Kotappa Konda. Itâ??s all to celebrate â??Mahashivaratriâ?? and get a divine glimpse of Lord Shiva in the temple perched on a mountain at 1400 feet.

As night fell as if the floodgates of mankind cracked opened; it shocked me popping at the tsunami of men, women, children, bullock carts, tractors, and motorbikes, cars, flooded into the vast acres of space allotted for a night long merrymaking: racy, suggestive, naughty dancing amidst ear-piercing music sounds and breath-taking psychedelic patterns of loud lighting of â??prabhaluâ??.

I never saw people poured in like huge waves â?? itâ??s a riotous mass of deluge; lakhs of crowds scrambled together in one place. Everyone seemed in a dancing spree hysterically unrestrained, no inhibitions, no worry, and a deceptive religious fervor as an excuse.

One extraordinary saving grace was the one-upmanship of police planning and control to make it an incident-free event).

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1. Uncategorized

Tags

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