

## **Mahasivaratri at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in Saylorsburg**

Mahasivaratri was celebrated at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam in Saylorsburg, PA, on Sunday, March 10. The day started with the usual daily morning prayers of Abhisheka to Lord Ganesha and Lord Dakshinamurti. Swami Pratyagbodhanandaji inaugurated "Om Namah Shivaya" chanting at 7am and it was followed by several devotees who took turns throughout the day lending their voices. The chanting was accompanied by sounds of tambourines, tabla, and cymbals playing in the background. With Pujya Swamiji's blessings, the Akhanda Japa concluded at 7pm with the final minutes listening to a recording of his voice chanting "Om Namah Shivaya" which brought great enthusiasm to the devotees.

Priest Ganeshji then led the group with a sankalpa before beginning the Abhisheka to Lord Dakshinamurti. The traditional puja included offerings of milk, curds, honey, haldi, and flowers brought by the devotees. Sri Suddhatmaji led the chanting of Sri Rudram and other suktas. While the priest completed the puja, Swami Pratyagbodhanandaji addressed the gathering.

Swamiji shared stories about Mahasivaratri from the Siva Purana which describes the significance of this special occasion. According to one legend, during the samudra manthan, a pot of poison emerged from the ocean. This terrified the Gods and demons as the poison was capable of destroying the entire world, and they ran to Lord Siva for help. To protect the world from its evil effects, Lord Siva drank the deathly poison but held it in his throat instead of swallowing it. This made his throat turn blue, and he was given the name Neelakantha, the blue-throated one. Mahasivaratri is the celebration of this event by which Lord Siva saved the world.

Another legend explains the all-night worship of Lord Siva on Mahasivaratri. There was once a poor tribal man who was great devotee of Lord Siva. One day he went deep into the forest to collect firewood. However he lost his way and could not return home before nightfall. As darkness fell, he heard the growls of wild animals. Terrified, he climbed onto the nearest tree for shelter till day-break. Perched amongst the branches, he was afraid he would doze and fall off the tree. The tree happened to be a bel tree. To stay awake during the night, he decided to pluck one leaf at a time from the tree and drop it, while chanting the name of Lord Siva. At dawn, he realized that he had dropped a thousand leaves onto a Linga. This unwitting all-night worship pleased Lord Siva, by whose grace the tribal was rewarded with divine bliss. This story demonstrates that even if sivaratri vrata is performed unconsciously, great punya is obtained.

Devotees arrived at the temple throughout the day and by evening, there were well over 200 people at the Gurukulam. The program concluded with evening arati and prasada was served in the dining hall afterwards. It was a great blessing for all who attended this function.

*Sarjita Naik*