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Sivaratri on the lovely isle of Mauritius is a national holiday and a coming together of Saivites, Vaishnavites, Smartas and - it's true - even Christians. This year, a record-breaking 400,000 devotees participated in Siva's Holy Night. It is known that for Hindus everywhere Sivaratri is a day of joy coupled with spiritual sacrifices - including fasting, staying awake in worshipful consciousness all night long, visiting the temple, etc. But in Mauritius this is but the beginning of the main test of devotion - an arduous pilgrimage which loudly proclaims the love and dedication of the people to all the world.

Mauritius is a miniscule island-country 'floating' in the peaceful Indian Ocean 1,300 miles from the coast of South Africa, 3,500 miles from Bombay, India and 3,900 miles from Perth, Australia. It is a mere 750 square miles in size, its brilliant beaches strung pearl-like around its 100-mile coast. It is strewn with scattered rock formations, like Siva Lingoes, erupting from the thick green carpet of sugar cane and tropical foliage, criss-crossed by clear bubbling springs and graced with every beauty from shore to shore.

The races in Mauritius are a stew chef's delight, mixed beautifully and peacefully. Fifty-two percent of the population is Hindu, including Tamils, Hindis, Marathis, Urdis and others. It is one of the few nations on the earth where Hindus enjoy political control, though politics and religion tend to keep a wise distance.

History has brought this island jewel under the sway of the French and, more recently, the British, and these two are the actual and official national languages. History has taken a dramatic turn for Mauritius. In less than 200 years it has been transformed from a totally uninhabited island paradise to the third most densely populated land mass on the earth - 950,000 people now reign in Mauritius following their independence from England in 1968.

On February 11th, fully one-half of Mauritius undertook a pilgrimage for Lord Siva that would buckle the knees of many hearty and healthy souls - a 40-mile hike to Grand Bassin, a five-acre bowlshaped lake perched dramatically atop the island's central highlands in a natural volcanic cavity. It was a spectacular sight, pilgrims crowding every path and roadway, men women and children - some carrying large, heavy, flower-bedecked kavadees, all braving tropical suns and drenching rains for a single purpose - to reach the shores of the 2,400 foot high sacred lake, gather its special waters into small vessels and pots, pour half of that over a large white marble Siva Lingam enshrined nearby, and then trek another 20 miles back down the mountain where, on Maha Sivaratri day, the remaining water was lovingly poured over the Siva Lingam in their own home shrine, seeking His blessings and guidance through yet another year.

How rare it is to find a sub-tropical island where Saivism is so strong, where there are 125 Siva temples, dozens and dozens of Hindu institutions, and which is called "Siva Alayam" or "Siva's Place" by all the population: where Sivaratri is a national holiday supported by local banks and businesses, and where devotion is powerful enough to draw so many to endure the hardships of a 3-day trek. A new awareness is arising throughout Mauritius, a new pride in their forefather's Hindu roots, a new resistance to the efforts of the minority Christians and Muslims to convert members to their own faith. The Hindu people of Mauritius are a proud people from a rich Hindu background and their strength and commitment may help those in other lands to hold fast to the oldest and, in the view of the devout, the most profound religion in the world.

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