

# Shiva: A Confluence of Diverse Traditions

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SHIVA, KNOWN AS MAHADEVA, Great God, is worshipped all over India and even beyond. He is revered by simple rural folks, brahmanas, bhaktas, yogis, *siddhas*, *kiratas*, indigenous people of the eastern Himalayas, Tibetans, those who speak Dravidian languages, and even gods and goddesses. Shiva has a thousand names, which are recited daily by thousands of people, describing every known aspect of the Godhead. He is omnipotent, yet he is *bhola*, simple, too; he is *vinasha karta*, god of destruction, yet he is *ashutosha*, easily pleased; he is a combination of all the virtues, and yet he is beyond all qualities. Though he is the Supreme Being, he is pleased with the simple offerings of water, *vilva* (aegle marmelos) leaves, or with wild flowers. Anyone can worship him at any time and with anything. How Shiva can combine so many qualities and characteristics is a great wonder.

The origins of Shiva worship are very ancient. The traditions of pre-Vedic and Vedic times have melded into what we now call the cult of Shiva. Unfortunately, in modern times there has



been a gross misrepresentation of Shiva worship as phallic worship, a mistake that has been taken up, unthinkingly, by many people even in India. Lingam in Sanskrit means mark, sign, token, emblem, distinguishing mark, characteristic, and so on. Seeing the lingam one is reminded of Shiva, not of a phallus.

### Ancient Beliefs and Practices

The many aboriginal people of India, who still cling to their ancient ways, as well as the refined brahmana cults claim direct lineage from Shiva. Some historians opine that the concept and the worship of Shiva was started by the people of a place most probably called Meluhha by the people of the Harappan civilization—2600–1700 BCE.<sup>1</sup> The most interesting seal found by Sir John H Marshall during the Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro excavations is that of a figure that was identified as Shiva. The figure shows a male deity wearing buffalo horns, seated in a *padmasana*, lotus asana, with hands held straight touching the knees. Subsequent research expressed doubts about Marshall's interpretation.<sup>2</sup> However, a good number of prehistoric relics resembling lingams are found all over India, including the sites of Harappa and Mohenjo-Daro.

All this has led to the simplistic interpretation of phallic worship by many people and scholars, 'but the *linga* may have been in origin no more than just a symbol of Śiva, as the *śalagrama* is of Viṣṇu' (67). Like the Shiva lingams found near the Harappan sites, no such stones have been found in the ancient sites of Lothal and Kalibangan, except circular ones.<sup>3</sup> But one should not jump to any conclusion about these, as unidentified stones of the Harappan culture, particularly fire-altars and sacrificial platforms resembling Vedic designs, were discovered in Lothal and Dholavira in Gujarat.

Out of the many races and autochthonous people of India, those belonging to the super-family of languages called Austro-Asiatic deserve special mention. These people derived their concepts of art and craft by observing nature and as usual produced a mythology consisting of many gods and goddesses. Like most tribal people in other parts of the world, their worship also oriented around the sun, the principal deity that

guided day, night, heat, and rain. These people, the ancestors of the Shavaras, Hill Marias, Kollas, Bhils, and Gonds, used ploughs tipped with a rock after they learnt the art of cultivation. Amazed at the harvests and the fertility of the earth, they contemplated upon nature's mystery and powers. These simple people believed that the sun, through its rays, brought rain and injected it into the soil to increase its fertility.

Over the years the rock-plough became a true representative of the sun, the Purusha; the earth into which the plough penetrated was depicted as Prakriti. The tip of the rock began to be worshipped in place of God in the sky. For a long time this God had no human form. People who cultivated the land wanted to worship a tangible God which they could thank, praise, and propitiate. These early farmers and forest and mountain dwellers spoke of themselves as Har, Hara, Ho, and Horo—which means 'man'. Therefore, the energy of the sun was thought to be manifested through every person, who in turn was responsible for increasing the fertility and the yield of the fields. There is a legend among the Gonds about how Shiva Mahadeva acquired a form out of the rounded stones found in the river Narmada. It is well known that the *bana*-lingam, found in the Narmada river basin, is worshipped as a symbol of Shiva. The legend consists of a conversation between Shiva, without any form, and the supreme God.

There the god *Mahādeva* was ruling from the upper sea to the lower sea. What was *Mahādeva* doing? He was swimming like a rolling stone; he had no hand or feet. He remained like the trunk (of a tree). Then *Mahādeva* performed austerities for twelve months. And the *Bhagawan* came and stood close to *Mahādeva* and called to him, 'Thy devotion is finished, emerge out of water,' he said. 'How shall I emerge? I have no hands, no feet, no eyes.' Then *Mahādeva*

received a Man's form. Thus Man's complete form was made in the luminous world.<sup>4</sup>

It would be unwise to think that the form of Shiva that was worshipped in the early days is the same as the one worshipped today. In the earliest times gods and the goddesses were worshipped through their *pratika*, symbols. In Hinduism one can see that these old forms of worship are still retained and coexist with *pratimas*, images. Some of the different *pratikas* used to worship different deities are, for instance, the *bana*-lingam, for Shiva; the *shalagrama*, stone symbol, for Vishnu; the glowing-red pebbles found in the Narmada, for Ganesha; the rock crystals found in Gujarat and Rajasthan, for Surya; and a lump of crude iron found in the mines of Central India, for Gauri. Hence, the *bana*-lingam was a mere representation of the god meant for rich fertility, good harvest, abundant prey from the jungles, and safer livelihood.

The gods also took on various names, according to the duties which they discharged: Kshetrपाला, protector of the field—the body of the Goddess Earth; Kama Devata, god of love; Grama Devata, protector of the village; and so on. For a long time sacrifice was offered to Surya through the plough-tip smeared with sacrificial blood, which was offered to the soil, satisfying Purusha and Prakriti. In some early hunter-gatherer communities, near the Vindhya mountain range and even in what is now Odisha, people worshipped a vertically placed monolithic stone on a stand as a village deity. This stone was carried along with the people when they moved from one place to other. The tribals of Ho, Munda, and Khorja of the Chota-Nagpur region also follow the tradition of offering worship to a vertically placed stone. In the western districts of West Bengal, adivasis place on the grave of the deceased a vertical stone, which is called *vir-kanr*.

This custom is followed in varying patterns in peninsular India.<sup>5</sup> The same practice is also found among the Khasis of Meghalaya. They place a vertical stone on the grave of a male, and a horizontal stone on a female's grave. The placing of stones signifies not only the identification of the grave but the presence of God in the graveyard, which paves the way to heaven for the deceased.

Sanskrit literature is replete with references to the *kirata* people, worshippers of Shiva living near Mount Kailas, the sacred abode of Shiva. Though we cannot trace the early stages of how these people began to worship Shiva, most of their practices appear primitive and tell of a long history still to be unravelled.

### **Dravidian Origins of Shiva Worship**

The majority of the *vyotirlingas*, luminous lingams, identified by Acharya Shankara, are located within what were tribal areas. These lingams are still worshipped by the aboriginals as their presiding deities. The *vyotirlinga* of Srisailem in Andhra Pradesh is known as Chenchu Malliah, the god of the Chenchus.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Tryambakeshvara and Omkareshvara are identified with local tribal-folks. The Vaidyanath Shiva is the deity of the Shavara people, who also used to worship Jagannath at Puri. The *vyotirlinga* of Somnath in Kathiawad is believed to be the primitive deity of local fisher-folks. Here the diameter of the lingam is more spread than elsewhere and is without any *gouri-patta*, base shaped like a vessel. Apart from being worshipped now through Vedic rituals, all these lingams are also worshipped by the local adivasis according to their own traditions. The shape and size of the deity did not reflect phallic worship, as wrongly imagined.

The Dravidians have an ancient tradition of Shiva worship. It is a popular notion that most of the present concepts of Shiva are derived from Dravidian traditions. There are millions of

pastoral people in western Pakistan who speak a Dravidian language, but who have been linguistically isolated for thousands of years from the rest. This made some scholars tentatively presume that the Indus Valley civilization was planned and constructed by the Mediterranean Dravidian people. And the seal with a figure in *padmasana* wearing buffalo horns and surrounded by animals is presumed to be the figure of *pashupatinath*, the Lord of the beasts—Shiva. Though this theory is controversial,<sup>7</sup> it is undoubtedly true that the culture of Shiva worship was nurtured by Dravidians in the ancient past, and that a number of autochthonous cults prevailing in different parts of the region ultimately were submerged in the present-day Shiva worship.

The Murugan cult was also prevalent among the major tribal groups of South India. The totem worshippers called Nagas, which inhabited large areas to the south of the Vindhya ranges, were the chief followers of Murugan, probably through his previous name of Sheyon—the god with the red complexion. The oldest Tamil hymns refer to him as the deity of the tribes of the hunters of the hilly regions and as Velan, who carries the *vel*, spear. Ancient Tamil Sangam literature depicted him as the victorious ‘red god’, who bears the gem-like peacock flag and rides a peacock or an elephant. By the sixth century CE the Murugan or Skanda cult shed its association with the earlier indigenous forms of worship of the hill-tribes—the Veddas and the Kuravas—and became incorporated in the Shaiva Agamas, scriptures. But still, in the scripture *Swamimalai*, Skanda is worshipped as Shivaguru or Swaminatha, because he expounded to Shiva the significance of the *pranava*, Om.<sup>8</sup>

All these traditions imply that the cult of Shiva followed aboriginal rites and rituals of Murugan or Skanda, and that Skanda was regarded as the guru of Shiva. Dr Nihar Ranjan Roy infers

that the red-complexioned deity of the marshy-hilly regions has exclusively been the deity of the Dravidian-speaking people, known as Shivan, meaning red or blood, and Shembu, meaning copper; both of them were later assimilated into the Vedic god Rudra, which led to Shivan becoming Shiva and Shembu becoming Shambhu.<sup>9</sup> Dr Roy indicates that the Murugan cult, which ultimately mixed with the Agama cult of Shaivism, was transformed into the Shiva cult of South India.

Parallel to the prevalent worship of Murugan among the hill tribes of South India was the worship of *grama-devatas*, village deities, and *griha-devatas*, household deities, through aboriginal rituals and emblems. This practice still continues, though it varies from village to village. A typical example is found at Achant, a village in the Guntur district of Andhra Pradesh. Here Shiva is worshipped as a lingam that has the form of a woman’s breast. The Shiva lingam has no pedestal but emanates directly from the ground. It is said that the remaining part of the dancing girl, with the yoni on which the lingam rests, lies buried in the ground. This lingam has three natural holes to suggest the three eyes of the Lord.<sup>10</sup>

Rudra is an important deity from among the many Vedic gods and goddesses. Rudra’s other names, first mentioned in the *Shatapatha Brahmana*, are Sharva, Pashupati, Ugra, Bhava, Ishvara, Mahadeva, Bhishma, Ishana, Yuvana, and Kala.<sup>11</sup> Though Rudra is mentioned a number of times in the Rig Veda, the first reference to Shiva, as he is now known, is this: ‘To him the strong, great, tawny fair-complexioned I utter forth a mighty hymn of praise.’<sup>12</sup> ‘Rudra’ means ‘roaring’ or ‘crying’. He was referred to in some hymns as the father of the gods called Maruts. In the Yajur Veda we find Rudra killing the asuras and destroying the *tripura*, their three cities. The supremacy of Shiva is expounded in the *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*: ‘Rudra, who is the origin and

the source of the divine powers of the gods, who is the protector of the universe, the great seer, saw Hiranyagarbha as he was being born. May he endow us with good understanding.<sup>13</sup> In this Upanishad Rudra is equated with Shiva (4.14). He is also spoken of as the Purusha, in whom the created world dissolves, and so on (5.3). In spite of such astounding verses regarding Shiva in this Upanishad, which is part of the Krishna Yajur Veda, nothing is mentioned about ritual worship. Only Shiva's absolute aspect is emphasized here.

The Atharva Veda contains the 'Rudra Suktam', which describes his deeds and qualities, and also speaks of him as Sharva, Pashupati, Ugra, Bhava, Isha, and so on.<sup>14</sup> One of the most famous Vedic hymns is the 'Rudra Prashna', found in the Krishna Yajur Veda. This long Sukta, chanted daily by thousands of people, is a comprehensive

praise of Rudra-Shiva. All his aspects and names are enumerated in powerful and sublime terms.

The theology of Kashmir Shaivism contributed heavily to the mainstream Shiva philosophies during the eighth and ninth centuries, and even later. It superseded the dualistic and popular Shaiva Siddhanta school. Kashmir Shaivism was widespread till about the twelfth century and survives today in a few pockets of India. Kashmir Shaivism is also called Trika, triad, because it consists of three energies, or goddesses—*para*, *para-apara*, and *apara*—or three modes of knowledge—Shiva, Shakti, and *nara*, human, or *anu*, atom. The system has two main schools called Spanda, cosmic vibration, and Pratyabhijna, spontaneous recognition of the Reality. The philosophy comes close to Acharya Shankara's Advaita philosophy, as it

Prince Subuddhi (a heroic ancestor of the Rathore dynasty) meets Shiva in the Forest of Illusion, by Amardas Bhatti, 1830



IMAGE: GOUACHE ON HANDMADE PAPER / MEHRANGARH MUSEUM TRUST


shows that the ultimate Reality is non-dual. Through Kashmir Shaivism a new philosophical era was ushered in about the manifestation of Shiva-Shakti, which later was a catalyst in forming numerous Shaiva and Shakta cults, leading to the development of various tantras.

Swami Vivekananda, a great devotee of Shiva, clarified the understanding of Shiva worship at the Paris Congress of Religions of 1900:

The worship of the Shiva-Linga had originated from the famous hymn in the Atharva-Veda Samhita sung in the praise of the Yupa-Stambha, the sacrificial post. In that hymn a description is found of the beginningless and endless Stambha or Skambha, and it is shown that the said Skambha is put in place of the eternal Brahman. As afterwards the Yajna (sacrificial) fire, its smoke, ashes, and flames, the Soma plant, and the ox that used to carry on its back the wood for the Vedic sacrifice gave place to the conceptions of the brightness of the Shiva's body, his tawny matted-hair, his blue throat, and the riding on the bull of the Shiva, and so on—just so, the Yupa-Skambha gave place in time to the Shiva-Linga, and was deified to the high Devahood of Shri Shankara.<sup>15</sup>

Sufficient archaeological and other research has been conducted on ancient art and artefacts in India in order to establish the ancient worship of Shiva. Besides, one can also trace how that simple worship evolved into a universal worship of a universal God. It is also being firmly established that the Shiva traditions we see today are a confederation and confluence of various cults, cultures, practices, and beliefs spread across the country from ancient times. Swamiji gives a graphic account of Shiva's influence in India and the world in one of his prolific writings, 'The East and the West':

Here is the selfsame Old Shiva seated as before, the bloody Mother Kali, worshipped with the selfsame paraphernalia, the pastoral Shepherd

of Love, Shri Krishna, playing on His flute. Once this Old Shiva, riding on His bull and taboring on His Damaru travelled from India, on the one side, to Sumatra, Borneo, Celebes, Australia, as far as the shores of America, and on the other side, this Old Shiva battened His bull in Tibet, China, Japan, and as far up as Siberia, and is still doing the same. The Mother Kali is still exacting Her worship even in China and Japan. ... Behold the Himalayas! There to the north is Kailas, the main abode of the Old Shiva. That throne the ten-headed, twenty-armed, mighty Ravana could not shake. ... Here in India will ever be the Old Shiva taboring on his Damaru, the Mother Kali worshipped with animal sacrifice, and the lovable Shri Krishna playing on His flute (5.445). 

## References

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3. *Lothal*, 46.
4. Jayakar Pupul, *The Earth Mother* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1980), 30.
5. See Ashok Roy, 'Siva O Siva-Linger Sandhane', *Udbodhan*, 112/2 (February 2010-1416 BS), 103.
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7. See Romila Thapar, 'The Historiography of the Concept of Aryan', *Historical Beginning and the Concept of the Aryan* (Delhi: National Book Trust, 2006), 22.
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9. See Dr Nihar Ranjan Roy, *Bangalir Itihas: Adiparva* (Kolkata: Dey's, 1993), 56.
10. See *The Earth Mother*, 31.
11. See *Shatapata Brahmana*, Kanda 6.
12. Rig Veda, 2.33.8.
13. *Shvetashvatara Upanishad*, 4.12.
14. See Atharva Veda, 11.2.1-31.
15. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, 9 vols (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1-8, 1989; 9, 1997), 4.424.