



Newsletter Archives

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Shiva - the Ascetic God

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*Na mrityur na shanka na jatibhedah
Pita naibo main naibo mata na janma
Na bandhurna mitrang gururnaibo shishyah,
Sachchidanandarupa Shivohom Shivohom*

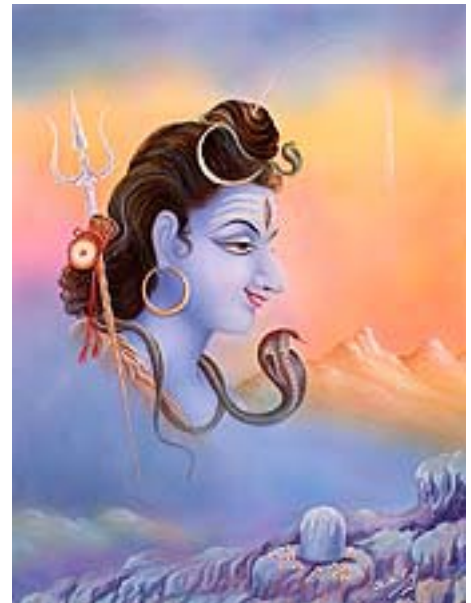
*Na punyong na papong na shaukhyong na dukhong
Na mantra na tirtha na vedah na yagah
Ahang bhojanang naibo bhojyong na bhokta
Chidanandarupah Shivohom Shivohom*

I am beyond death, I am beyond doubts I am beyond divisions.
No one is my father, none my mother, nor was I born
Neither brother nor friend, neither teacher nor pupil,
I am only truth, ecstasy and consciousness, I am Shiva. I am Shiva

Nothing is sin for me, nothing is holy, sadness and happiness are not known to me
I don't need chanting, nor holy places, no veda no yagna
I am neither food, nor do I eat nor am I the enjoyer of these
My abode is always a conscious happiness. I am Shiva... I am Shiva.

The third aspect of the Supreme Being is the process of dissolution of all creation, a precursor to the fresh beginning of the process of creation. This aspect is represented by Lord Shiva - the third of the Hindu Trinity. He represents darkness or Tamas and is often called the angry God (Rudreshwar). Even though associated with destruction and dissolution, since Hinduism believes in the inevitability of creation following destruction, Shiva is also associated with being a cause of creation. As a result, the Linga or phallus is said to be his symbol - the symbol of regeneration.

According to some schools of thought, Shiva represents the entire cosmos. This of course is to be distinguished from the concept of Vishwaroop as described in the section on Vishnu in the sense that while Shiva might represent the cosmos, Vishnu in his Vishwaroop form contains the



**SHIVA - THE SUPREME
BEING**

cosmos and sustains it as well.

Shiva or Maheshwara is the Divine Lord and in him are concentrated the three energies of understanding (Gyana), the will (Ichha) and action (Kriya) - thus forming the fountainhead of all knowledge. The nature of Shiva as representing the entire cosmos has led to his having 1008 names in the various Hindu scriptures extending the Vedic concept of multiple forms of a single divine power. The Vedas do not mention Shiva as the name of the god in question - instead he is named Rudra - the lord of songs, sacrifices, nourishment, the healer of diseases and the provider of property.

The Vishnu Purana (religious Hindu text) describes the origin of Lord Shiva. It says that Brahma was initially unsuccessful in his attempts of creation. He meditated for a child, after which a child sprang forth from his forehead and divided itself into a male and female part. The male part started crying inconsolably. On being asked the reason for crying the child said it did not have a name, at which, Brahma named him Rudra - which also means the one who howls. However Brahma had to give him seven more names - for the seven more times that the child cried, giving Shiva his eight forms: Rudra, Sharva, Bhava, Ugra, Bhima, Pashupati, Ishana, and Mahadeva. The Shiva Purana then goes on to describe how each of these names is associated with an element - the earth, water, fire, wind, sky, a yogi called Kshetragya, the sun, and the moon respectively. The female part of the child born from Brahma's forehead is believed to be Parvati - Shiva's eternal consort.



ARDHANARISHWARA

This story also indicates the origin of another manifestation of Shiva as Ardhanarishwara - where he is depicted as half-male and half-female - the union of substance and energy, the Being and his Shakti (force). The right half - depicting the male - is his own form and the left half - depicting the female part - is his consort Parvati. This depiction represents Shiva as Sadashiva, Adishiva or Adipurusha - the primeval Being - as being the unity of existence. It underlines the fact that division in nature between male and female, between material and energy is only superfluous and in reality all is one. Shiva shows himself as being all that is male and all that is female - through this form of being the inseparable unity.

Shiva is also represented by the Linga (phallus) - and is the most popular form in which Shiva is worshiped. The Linga is made of black or white stone and is often rounded at both top and bottom. The significance of the phallus icon is probably to show that Shiva does not stand or arise out of anything - that it is self-evolved. The egg shape of the Linga also indicates a source of evolution - the Cosmic Egg. The taper at the top of the stone can be likened to the eternal flame of light - the source of all knowledge - or the Jyotir Linga (Jyoti indicates light).

The Linga is also known as the Shiva Lingam or Shiva Linga, whose literal meaning is "body of Shiva". The Linga is one of the



SHIVA LINGA

most popular and powerful symbols in Hinduism, next only to the symbol of Aum or Om. In most of the Indian temples which are dedicated to Lord Shiva, it is the Linga which is the main idol in the santum sanctorum instead of an idol in human form, which is the norm in the case of all other Hindu deities.

A Shivalinga is round or cylindrical in shape, protruding out of a cylindrical or octagonal base, with a lower base supporting the whole structure. The three parts are believed to represent the Hindu Trinity, with the lower base symbolizing Brahma, the circular or octagonal base representing Vishnu and the upper protruding part representing Shiva which suggests that Shiva also encompasses the three gods comprising the Hindu Trinity.

The Shiva Linga resembles various concepts on various planes of existence. Physically the protruding cylindrical portion represents the male sexual organ while the octagonal base represents the female sexual organ (Yoni - the vagina). Mentally it symbolizes the union of mind and body. Spiritually it represents the union between Purusha and Prakriti (the Cosmic Self and Nature, or energy) indicating the cosmic creative potential realized through the union of Shiva and Parvati.

Hindu males in India belonging to the caste of Brahmans have to undergo an initiation ceremony where the person has to perform certain rituals and eventually wear a sacred thread on one's body. The Lingayats comprise a sect of Brahmans in south India, who are followers of Shiva. Lingayats replace the sacred thread with a necklace of small Lingas. It is said that the sexual nature of the Linga has been over-interpreted and over-publicized by western scholars. The Linga is meant to be a symbol and the Shiva-Purana defines the Linga as symbol for realizing the nature of the object that the symbol represents - a shape given to the shapeless so as to elucidate the nature of the shapeless. It says that it is the owner of the Linga - the Progenitor, the Supreme Creator - who is worshipped and not the Linga itself. The Linga merely leads one to Shiva.



NATARAJA - THE KING OF DANCERS

Shiva is deeply associated with dance and is also known as "Nataraja" - the Lord of Dance. The creation of dance and the utterance of the first 16 rhythmic syllables are attributed to Shiva. It is said that the Sanskrit language originated from these 16 syllables. The Natya Shastra - the Hindu text on classical dances - is said to have originated from Shiva, along with various yogic postures.

The most popular "Nataraja" portrayal of Shiva is only one amongst the nine dance forms that Shiva is ever depicted in. The Hindu temple of Chidambaram in Tamil Nadu, India, is the only temple dedicated to Shiva in the form of Nataraja.

All rhythmic movements in the cosmos are the manifested forms of Shiva's cosmic dance - that which ensures stability and balance of the universe. The placement of the heavenly bodies and their interactive movements are but Shiva's dance striving to keep the cosmos in balance. Shiva dances to destroy evil and reduce the suffering of his devotees. His dance slays ignorance and darkness in our minds. And in a grand finale, it dissolves all creation - the entire universe - into a state of suspended activity.

Shiva's dance is associated with a specific Hindu ritual in which it is said that on every 13th evening of the bright lunar fortnight, there exists an hour called the Pradosha when, if Shiva is propitiated, it is said to be the equivalent of offering one's worship to all powers of the cosmos. It is said that at this hour, all gods assemble at mount Kailash (Shiva's abode) to lose themselves in the magic of Nataraja's dance.

Shiva is known by many names in Hindu scriptures. Yajurveda - one of the four Vedas (Hindu philosophical texts) - mentions a god named "Mahadeva" - who is later identified to be the same as Shiva. Today, Mahadeva is synonymous with Shiva. As the supreme yogi (A yogi is a Hindu ascetic sage who practices Yoga as a form of devotion for the Supreme Being), Shiva is called Mahayogi. As the greatest God, he is known as Mahesha. To his three eyes are attributed his names Trinetra, Triambaka, Triaksha and Trinayana (Tri implies three while Netra, Ambaka, Aksha and Nayana imply eye). Shiva, often depicted as a naked ascetic, is also called Digambara (He who has the sky as his garment). His name Shankara means the Giver of Joy while his name Shambhu means the Abode of Joy. Shiva is the eternal time or Mahakal. The moon that he carries on his head has given him the symbolic name Vyomkesha or he who has the sky as his hair. Chandrashekhar (or master of the moon) is also a name attributed to this feature. His name Siddheshwar is derived from his nature of a perfect being. His trident (or Trishul) has earned him the name Trishuldhari while his being the cosmic tutor has given him the name Dakshinamurthi. His abode is mount Kailash and thus his name Kailashpati. Since he is the lord of all creatures, he is called Pashupatinath while as the husband of Uma, he is called Umapati.

Another name of Shiva is Neelkantha. There is an interesting tale surrounding this name. It is said that during the great deluge spanning two Yugas, a pot of nectar of immortality or the Amrit Kumbha got lost in the ocean. The demons (Asuras) and gods (Devas) were fighting over this nectar and Brahma suggested churning the ocean as one churns a pot of milk to extract butter from it. A great mountain was placed on Vishnu in his form of a tortoise and the great snake god, Shesh Nag was used to churn the ocean with the mountain. A great many things appeared from the ocean, along with which appeared poison. To ensure that the universe were spared from the fatal effects of the poison, Shiva is said to have collected all the poison and drank it but did not allow it to go past his throat, which resulted in the poison remaining there and turning his neck blue, thus giving Shiva the name Neel Kantha (Blue Throated).



NEELKANTHA



**BHAGIRATH ESCORTING
GANGA TO EARTH**

There is another interesting tale which tells us about the origins of his name Gangadhar. Legend says that the sixty thousand sons of King Sagar wrongly plundered the hermitage of sage Kapil. The sage, in his anger, cursed the king's sons and burnt them to ashes. The only way that they could be restored to life was if the sacred river Ganga would come down from heaven to wash over their ashes. The king's grandson's grandson - Bhagirath - through severe austerities, propitiated the river Ganga to come down to wash over his ancestors' ashes, which Ganga agreed to.

However, the force with which she would hit earth when she fell from heaven would destroy all creation. It is then that Shiva agreed to take the impact on himself and the river Ganga fell on his matted hair, thus slowing down and gently touching earth.

The name Gangadhar implies he who holds the river Ganga. His matted hair has also earned Shiva the name Jatadhari (Jata implying his long matted hair).

Shiva is also known as Bhairava - or the Frightful One. Sati, the daughter of the king of Gods, Daksha, had chosen to marry Shiva, in spite of her father disapproving the alliance because of the perception of Shiva as an ascetic associated with animals and ghosts, living a frugal life. Once Daksha held a yagna (a ritualistic sacrifice) and invited all the gods, including Sati and Shiva. Sati came to the Yagna alone, where Daksha publicly spoke belittlingly about Shiva. Sati could not bear this insult of her husband and offered herself to the sacrificial pyre. When Shiva learnt of this, he destroyed the yagna and killed Daksha by beheading him. He carried Sati's corpse on his shoulders and ran uncontrollably all around the world for days. Since this would eventually destroy all creation, Vishnu used his Sudarshan Chakra (divine discus) to cut Sati's body into pieces, which then fell all around. These spots where Sati's body parts fell are now known as Shaktipeeths. Shiva took the form of the frightful Bhairava and is said to be guarding each of these Shaktipeeths. Bhairava has a dog as his divine vehicle and each Shaktipeeth temple is accompanied by a temple dedicated to Bhairava. Bhairava is also invoked in prayers to destroy enemies.



BHAIRAVA



**SHIVA WITH FIVE
FACES**

Lord Shiva, when symbolized in human form is depicted with a body white in color, signifying purity and his linkage to snowy mountains. Shiva is often attributed with five faces, each representing one of his five cosmic tasks of creation, establishment, destruction, oblivion, and grace. The five faces are also linked to the primeval Hindu symbol of Om. Four of the five faces are shown looking in the four directions while the fifth is shown looking upward. The face looking towards the north is white in color and is called Sadyojat (or instantly born). The red face looking towards the west is called Vamadeva (Vama signifies the left side and Deva means god) and symbolizes the ego. The face looking towards the south is called Aghora (or that which is void of darkness), is blue or blue-black and symbolizes the intellect. Tatpuruasha (or the supreme being) is the face looking towards the east and is yellow in color. It represents the form of nature manifested on earth. Finally, the face looking upward is named

Ishana (or the supreme ruler) and is copper colored. He symbolizes knowledge in its entirety.

The crescent of the fifth day moon near his head symbolizes his being one with Time as well as his cosmic proportions. It underlines the fact that he controls the mind completely. The crescent moon also represents birth and growth and places the power of procreation along with that of destruction in the same deity.

The river Ganga is shown to be gushing forth from the coiled, thick matted hair. His long hair is indicative of his spiritual powers. Ganga represents the flowing nectar of immortality or the gushing yogic power from the head of the master of all yogics. Ganga also indicates fertility. Another interpretation of Ganga on Shiva's head is explained through the story above, involving Shiva offering to take the impact of Ganga's fall from heaven to earth.

He is typically shown to have three eyes, representing the trinity in all creation, the sun, moon and earth, and the three paths of liberation. The third eye also signifies cosmic wisdom and his ability to see beyond what is visible, i.e. to be able to distinguish the higher truth from illusion or Maya. It is described as Shiva's power of reasoning and discrimination between bad and good. His third eye symbolizes fire, his right eye represents the sun and his left eye represents the moon. While his left and right eyes symbolize Shiva's activity in the physical world, his third eye symbolizes his activity in the metaphysical, spiritual world and represents the power of knowledge. It is with the fire which emanates from this third eye that Shiva destroys the evil of ignorance. The universe emerges into a new cycle of creation when Shiva opens his eyes while it dissolves into a void when he shuts his eyes. Often Shiva is shown with half open eyes, signifying the never ending, ongoing nature of the birth and destruction of the universe. There is an interesting tale related to Shiva's third eye. Once when Shiva was in deep meditation, Uma - Shiva's consort - playfully came up from behind him and placed her hands on his eyes. The universe plunged into darkness with both his eyes closed. Shiva's brow opened up and a sharp ray of light shot out from there, relieving the universe of darkness. However the ray had set the Himalayas aflame, at which Uma begged Shiva's pardon. Shiva restored the mountains to their previous state and the opening on his forehead from where the light had appeared turned into Shiva's third eye.



SHIVA BURNING A MOUNTAIN



TRIDENT OF SHIVA

He holds the Trisul (trident) in his right hand and rules the universe by destroying evil with it. The three spikes of the Trishul represent the three Gunas (qualities) - Satva (mercy), Rajas (passion or desire) and Tamas (darkness and wrath). These qualities are said to be illusory in nature and since Shiva is the master of Maya (illusion) he is able to control these qualities thus becoming the master of the entire cosmos. As Mahakala - the eternal Time - he controls the three aspects of time - also represented by the three spikes - the past, present and the future. The trident also represents the three ways to union with the Supreme Being - Gyana (knowledge), Karma (action) and Bhakti (devotion).

In his left hand he holds the Damaru (musical drum), which represents the primeval syllable Om. Shiva created the Sanskrit language and the grammar of music from the sound of the Damaru. The sound of the damaru is symbolic of the rhythm that is inherent in all of creation. Often Shiva is depicted with four hands, instead of two, with the other two being in the Abhaya (protection) and Varada (granting of boons) postures. Other objects associated with Shiva are the Parasu (battle axe), Aksamala (rosary), Pasa (noose), Khatvanga (magical staff) and Khadaga (sword)..



FOUR ARMED SHIVA



**SHIVA SITTING IN
PADMASANA**

Shiva is usually depicted as sitting in meditation in Padmasana - a popular yogic posture. This is in consonance of his status of an ascetic yogi. However another popular depiction, as described earlier too, is that of Nataraja - in the Tandava dance posture. He is shown wearing a tiger skin around his waist - and sometimes also partially covering his upper body.

Shiva is usually unclad in his upper half, indicating the transcendental nature of his divinity. His body is smeared with ashes indicating the presence of the physical universe but only on the foundation of the transcendental divinity of Shiva. Shiva encompasses and transcends all physical phenomena and remains unaffected by them.

Shiva wears two different earrings on his two ears. On his right ear he wears the Makara Kundala - an earring worn by males, while on the left ear he wears a Tantaka - an earring worn by females. The presence of the male and female aspects in his ornamentation underlines the significance of his symbolization as the Ardhanarishwara - the union of the male and female principles in one - the basis of creation being the union of the male and the female.

Shiva also wears a necklace of Rudraksha or rosary beads. Beads of Rudraksha are said to be the solid form of the tears that Shiva sheds at the woes of his devotees. The word Rudraksha is formed of two words - Rudra and Aksha. Rudra means fiercely strict or uncompromising and is another name for Shiva. Aksha means eye, which signifies that Shiva constantly monitors all creation to ensure that all follow the divine laws laid down by him. The necklace of Rudraksha has 108 beads symbolizing the elements used for creating the cosmos.



RUDRAKSHA ROSARY

The lower half of his body is shown clad in tiger skin, symbolizing the concentration of energy in Shiva. The tiger skin also indicates the need to strip ourselves of our pride, symbolized by a tiger. It is said that once when Shiva was roaming around naked in a forest, the wives of the sages from a nearby hermitage felt attracted towards him. The sages, out of jealousy, let loose a tiger on Shiva, who slew the tiger and tore its skin and wrapped it around himself. The seat on which Shiva sits is also a skin of a tiger.

A Kamandalu or water pot is usually shown as placed on the ground to where Shiva is shown as sitting in meditation. This Kamandalu is supposed to be made from a dry pumpkin and contains nectar. The importance of tearing oneself away from egoistic desires and cleaning one's spiritual self is elucidated by the process of making a Kamandalu in which a ripe pumpkin's fruit is removed and the shell is cleaned and later dried.



**NANDI WITH THE SERPENT
PROTECTING THE SHIVA LINGA**

Shiva's status as the master of creatures is underlined by the presence of two creatures which are perceived opposites in nature, around Shiva. The divine white bull, Nandi is Shiva's trusted vehicle while a snake is always wrapped around Shiva's neck. Thus we find the gentlest as well as the fiercest of creatures submit to the aura of Shiva.

Nandi, Shiva's divine vehicle is represented as a white bull, symbolizing purity and justice. Shiva and Nandi's symbolic association can be traced back to the days of the Indus valley civilization. During those ancient times, dairy farming was one of the primary occupations, thus explaining the appearance of various artifacts indicating a deity much like Shiva. This deity is believed to have been worshipped as the keeper of herds. This deity over time was converted into the present day Shiva, with the bull Nandi as his primary vehicle. The name Pashupatinath - or

lord of creatures - can also be ascribed to the ancient deity of the people of the Indus Valley Civilization. Nandi himself later acquired the status of a lesser God and there are several temples in India dedicated independently to Nandi. However the presence of a statue of Nandi at the gate of the Garbha Griha (sanctum sanctorum) of every Shiva temple is a must and marks the close association of Shiva with Nandi. In Sanskrit, a bull is called Vrisha, which has another connotation - that of righteousness or Dharma. Thus through Nandi, righteousness or Dharma become an integral part of Shiva's aura.

Shiva is typically depicted with a snake around his neck. Often additional snakes are depicted - one, as a sacred thread around his body, and two more, around his wrists as bracelets or his arms as armlets. Having the snakes wrapped around him suggest his control over desire and the sensual world and the lack of effect that maya (illusory world) has on him. The snakes also stand for the yogic power of kundalini, which is typically depicted as a coiled serpent lying dormant in the muladhara chakra or one of the lower spiritual levels of all beings. The serpent gradually uncoils and moves upward as one taps into his own spiritual self through yogic means. However one needs to be aware of the huge energy stored in the kundalini and must learn not only to

release it but also to control it. The depiction of snakes along with Shiva, indicate that Shiva is the master of this cosmic energy and controls it the way he deems fit.

Shiva is often depicted as sitting in a cremation ground. The ashes smeared on Shiva's body are another reminder of Shiva's association with the cremation ground, where the dead are burnt to ashes. His association with the cremation ground symbolizes the fact that Shiva controls death in the physical world and since birth and death are complementary to each other, Shiva is revered as the master of all birth and death.

Though Shiva is described as an angry god in various scriptures, he is mostly depicted as being in a cheerful or jovial mood in various art forms. Usually he is shown with a lot of innocence in his face to mark his name Bholenath or the innocent God. He is generally shown in meditation, as sitting cross-legged in Padmasana - a yogic posture - with his eyes closed. The portrayal of his face expresses love and compassion, to signify his being the god of love.

Parvati is the eternal consort of Shiva and is often depicted alongside Shiva. Parvati was enamored with Shiva from a young age. She is the daughter of Himalaya - the mountain God - and is said to be the reincarnation of Sati - wife of Shiva who had immolated herself in protest of her father having insulted Shiva. Shiva remained in his abode, lost deep in penance, not being able to get over Sati's loss. Parvati, determined to please Shiva, went to Mount Kailash - Shiva's abode - but Shiva remained unmoved by her presence. Not being able to entice Shiva, Parvati sought the help of Madan or Kama - the Hindu God of Love. Kama asked Parvati to dance in front of Shiva and while she did so, he tried a trick of his in which he shot an arrow laced with flowers at Shiva. Shiva's penance broke and in his anger as he set his eyes on Kama, he burnt him to ashes. However as his eyes fell on the dancing Parvati, he immediately fell in love with her. When Kama's wife Rati prayed to Shiva to restore Kama to life, which Shiva did, but only as one without any physical form - as Ananga.



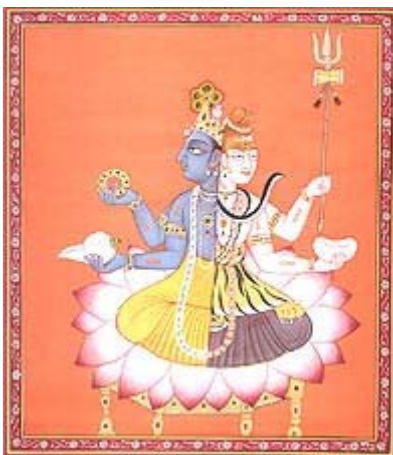
PARVATI



**PARVATI PINES AND PRAYS
FOR LORD SHIVA**

Shiva is one of the most popular of deities in India - accessible to all - irrespective of caste. Usually access to most deities have been historically limited to the highest caste of Brahmins but in the case of Shiva, even those who belong to the lowest of castes have been allowed to touch the image of Shiva and personally offer their prayers to him. There is an interesting tale related to the devotion of a lower caste hunter towards Shiva. It is said that Kannappa - a low caste tribal hunter, was an ardent devotee of Shiva. He was not indoctrinated with the formalized rituals practiced during the offering of prayers to Hindu deities. He used to offer food to the deity

before starting his own meal but out of his love for Shiva, he used to taste the food before offering it to Shiva to ascertain that what he was offering was fit to be consumed by his loved deity. Once he offered flesh to the Shiva Linga in the temple he used to visit regularly, to which the priest objected. Shiva decided to put Kannappa's devotion to test. Kannappa found that one of the eyes painted on the Shiva Linga was bleeding which prompted Kannappa to try and "treat" it with herbs but he failed and the bleeding continued. Desperate to treat Shiva's eye, Kannappa gouged out one of his eyeballs and placed it on the bleeding eye on the Linga and the bleeding stopped immediately. A few days later Kannappa found that the other eye of the Linga had started bleeding. Without hesitation he decided to gouge out his second eye but since without either of his eyes he would not be able to find out where to place the gouged eyeball, he placed his large toe on the bleeding eye of the Linga and put an arrow to his second eye. Pleased and overwhelmed by Kannappa's devotion, Shiva appeared and placed him on his right, restored his lost vision and granted him Mukti or salvation. Kannappa has thereafter been given the status of a Nayannar - or the most devoted followers of Shiva. A temple at Kalahasti in Andhra Pradesh is dedicated to Kannappa, where prayers are offered to Kannappa before Shiva himself.



HARIHARA

Hindu scriptures describe Shiva as being the dearest of deities, and he is worshipped by Gods and demons alike. His divine and yogic powers have earned him numerous followers including Rama and Krishna - incarnations of Vishnu - who propitiated Shiva for his blessings at crucial points in their lives. Many demons like Ravana, Bhasmasur and Surapathma also followers of Shiva and he granted them boons out of his love for his devotees, which have later invited trouble for others as well as himself. Shiva is a deity who is easy to please with a little love and truthful devotion. There is an amusing tale related to Shiva's habit of granting boons easily. Once Bhamasura - a demon - with the ambition of ruling the entire universe propitiated Shiva. Shiva appeared and granted Bhamasura a boon of his choice. Bhamasura wished that he be given such power through which anyone on whose head he would place his hand, would turn to ashes. Shiva innocently granted him the boon and no sooner had he done so, Bhamasura immediately decided to make Shiva his first victim. He chased Shiva endlessly to turn him to ashes. Vishnu, decided to help Shiva out of the bad situation he had created for himself. Vishnu assumed the form of an enchantress - Mohini - and seduced Bhamasura into joining her for a dance thus getting his attention diverted from Shiva. She then fooled Bhamasura into placing his hand on his own head thus killing himself. It is said that Shiva and Mohini combined their energies to form Hari Hara (Hari refers to Vishnu while Hara refers to Shiva) and produced a son - Harihara Putra (or Shiva and Vishnu's son). This son is also known as Sasta or Aiyappa, who is a celibate tribal deity in the Dravidian state of Kerala in India.

The Tantra philosophy in Hinduism considers Shiva one of its primary deities. The male-female duality and the spiritual aspects of their union is one of the important constructs of this philosophy and is symbolized by the singular duality of Shiva and Shakti - the male and the female. Three different traditions exist under the broad umbrella of Tantra - Dakshina, Madhyama and Vama - representing the three Shaktis or powers of Shiva as characterized respectively by Sattva (divine), Rajas (dynamic) and Tamas (dark). Tantra incorporates a set 18 ritualistic scriptures defined in the Shiva Tantras. Some of these defined rituals delve into sexuality and Shiva is considered the Guru of sexuality which leads to the union with the ultimate truth.



SHIVA SHAKTI



**SHIVA WITH PARVATI
AND GANESHA**

Shiva is often propitiated by unmarried Hindu girls because of his unsurpassed qualities of love and generosity. He is considered an ideal husband in spite of his being an ascetic and is worshipped in the hope of having a husband with his ideal characteristics. He is seen as being a devoted husband to Parvati and a loving father to his sons Ganesha and Kartikeya and is often represented in art as a part of a close knit family.

Shiva is worshipped all over India and there are hundreds of temples and shrines dedicated to him, mostly in the form of a Shiva Linga and sometimes as an idol in human form. Typically, offerings to Shiva are very simple - flowers, Bel leaves, milk and sandalwood paste are supposed to please him. Out of all flowers, the Ketaki is not used in offerings and there is a tale ascribed to this practice, which also underlines the somewhat superior status of Shiva amongst the three Gods comprising the Trinity. It is believed that once Lord Shiva stood in the form of a great linga with no end under the ground or in the sky. Brahma and Vishnu threw each other a challenge of superiority in which one of the ends had to be reached. Brahma took the form of a swan and flew upwards while Vishnu turned into a boar and started digging into the ground. However, even after a lot of efforts, neither of the two found the end of the linga. However to exert his superiority, Brahma came back with a ketaki flower he found midway and lied to Vishnu about having found it at the top of the linga. Shiva flew into a rage as soon as Brahma uttered the lie and took his own form from the linga and cast a curse on Brahma and declared that he would never be worshipped. Further, since the Ketaki flower stood witness to Brahma's blatant lie, Shiva cursed the flower as well and since then the Ketaki flower is not used in religious rituals.

A very popular Hindu festival is dedicated to Shiva and is called the Shiva-Ratri, which literally means Shiva's Night. It is held on the fourteenth night of the dark half moon in the month of

Magh (in January or February). Through the night green leaves are showered on Shiva's image. This ritual owes its origins to a tale in which a hunter lost his way in a forest and decides to spend the night under a tree, at the foot of which stood a Shiva Linga. Due to the hunter's frequent movements, leaves kept falling on the Shiva Linga. Shiva felt pleased by this and bestowed the hunter with good fortune.

Shiva brings about the unification of the transient with the transcendental and of all that is illusory with the ultimate truth. For new creation to take shape, that which already is, needs to be destroyed, and Shiva plays the crucial role of destruction for creation - thus becoming both the creator and the destroyer. As the creator he becomes the symbol of mercy and love while as the destroyer he becomes the icon of wisdom and renunciation - so very necessary to understand the intertwined process of creation and destruction. Shiva thus embodies the opposites of the universe - so beautifully iconified in his depiction of the Ardhanareshwara - the union of the male and female. In himself he assimilates the characteristics of the male and the female, creator and the destroyer, celibacy and eroticism.

This article was written by Madhuri Guin

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