

THE MANY FORMS OF LORD SHIVA

The god Shiva, Lord of Yoga, Lord of Souls, Lord of Dance, and to some the Supreme Deity of the universe, is a god of paradoxes and oppositions. He is part of the “trinity” of major Hindu gods, worshipped as the dominant god by Shaivists, and was already extremely popular by the 7th century (Peterson, 10/19/15). He is tied to nature, destruction, demons, yoga, purity, lust, the sun, the moon, masculinity, and femininity. He is a legendary hero, a passionate lover, and a powerful ascetic; the source of life and master of death. He takes on a dazzling array of roles with such contrasting attributes that, to an outsider, he can hardly be seen as a single actor but a multitude of completely different gods. For example, the Agamas of the Tamil tradition identify *twenty-five* forms in which he can be represented (Peterson, 95); he has 1000 names in just the *Linga Purana* (O’Flaherty, 191). Like many if not most Hindu deities, these disparities are the product of centuries of synthesis between countless artistic, theological, and regional traditions (Peterson, 96). How can these differences be reconciled into a single divinity? What are the threads that tie every contradicting appearance together and make it “Shiva,” not any other divinity in Hinduism’s enormous pantheon? To answer these questions, it is necessary to investigate each of his forms in turn. The Ascetic, the Householder, the Desecrator, the Dancer, and the Linga are five of the most popular forms extolled in worship and *bhakti* poetry, and each one holds insight into the true, unifying nature of Shiva’s divinity.

Begin with the Ascetic, the Lord of Yoga, who unlike other deities derives his power from his formidable austerities – not the sacrifices of his devotees. His power is enormous; as are the personal sacrifices he makes. In appearance, he is shown to have coral-red skin, covered in snow-white cremation ashes, and wear a tiger skin (Ions, 42). A third eye sits in the middle of his

forehead, he wears the sacred thread, and has up to eight arms (Peterson, 97). He carries a trident, a small drum, and a skull-topped club; his matted hair is in a top-knot and adorned with a crescent moon (Dimmit and Van Buitenen, 150). Through his hair runs the Ganges; he stands beneath the falls and it is distributed into the seven holy rivers (Ions, 43). His throat is stained blue from the poison he willingly swallowed to save the world when the snake Vāsuki released venom into the cosmic seas of milk while the other gods used him to churn the seas in search of ambrosia, the elixir of immortality (Peterson, 97). From these short retellings it is clear that Shiva's appearance has been of central importance to the foundational myths of Shaivist Hinduism. Each marking, color, and adornment has a history of Shiva's acts of power as the supreme god of the universe. His body is a record of the trials he has gone through, often to the benefit of ordinary people. Especially as an ascetic, he is shown to be an approachable god who will favor anyone who worships him, even the imperfect worship of Tiger-foot and the ignorant worship of Eye-saint (Coomaraswamy and Nivedita, 303). Shiva spends nearly all of his time in this form meditating and practicing *yoga*; for this reason, his power is so immense. He is celibate, immobile, and pure. The disruption of these activities is catastrophic. Even a moment of play by his wife Uma, covering his eyes, cast the entire world into darkness and caused his third eye to appear, so fiery that it set the forests aflame and destroyed the Himalayas; it was also within his power to restore them completely once he had recovered (Coomaraswamy and Nivedita, 299). Ascetic Shiva is mighty, disciplined, immaterial, and a fearsome benefactor to the world and to humans.

Asceticism is a life stage in Hinduism, preceded by the entirely different role of householder. Yet Shiva plays both these roles at once. His inseparable companion, consort, and sometimes wife takes on many names and reincarnations, although it is widely believed they are all forms of the Goddess herself. She is a symbol of unity, joined to him so closely that she is considered a part of

Shiva himself, just another “side” to the multi-faceted lord (Peterson, 101). She is Parvati, the mountain girl; Uma, the mother; Sati, the virtuous; Durga, the inaccessible; Kali, the cruel – her role, too, changes throughout the myths, at times being the feminine temper to cool his anger, other times, the unpredictable destruction of the female *shakti* (Dimmit and Van Buitenen, 150). Together they are representations of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, the primal material of nature and that of the cosmos (Dimmit and Van Buitenen, 153). Their relationship is erotic, a symbol of fertility, often times turbulent, and everything that an ascetic cannot be. The nature of biology is a theological difficulty, too – Shiva is supposed to be the sole creator of the universe, but reproduction requires the dualism of a partner. They are polar opposites and yet are joined as one; this paradox is often reconciled in the androgynous form of Ardhanarinara, the male *and* female form. It is an attempt to unify the very different roles of women and men, nature and cosmos, that Shiva is expected to represent. Earrings are a particularly important iconographic attribute that denotes this form, as Ardhanarinara wears a woman’s in one ear and a man’s in the other (Peterson, 97). His ornaments are transformed as he is transformed, hermit to husband – his nakedness to clothing, his ashes washed away, his skulls turned to children’s toys (O’Flaherty, 238, 243, 245, 252). The role of Goddess’ playful, lustful husband is in direct conflict with his role as Lord of Yoga. Instead of the disciplined, rigorously monastic god who lives alone in the mountains, he is seen time and time again in the arms of his lover, quarreling about children, and offending his fathers-in-law. Ardhanarinara is one way in which the male-female duality of his creator role is reconciled, but the conflict of this role with his others remains to be seen.

So far, Shiva has appeared in powerful but largely benevolent forms, but he also has several roles that are much darker and more terrifying. As the Lord of Beasts and Lord of Souls, he dances in the forbidden cremation ground, the most impure place of all. He haunts these cemeteries in the

evening and at twilight, in celebration of victories over demons but also in the company of his host of grotesque *ganas* – goblins, spirits, ghosts (Peterson, 98). He wears a headdress of snakes and necklaces of skulls (Ions, 44). He is the drunk Lord of Ghosts (Daniélou, 196). His dances are violent and fearsome, so provocative that the wives of the sages of the Pine Forest are consumed with lust just at seeing him. In this form, he is linked with symbols of death; he is dirty, eerie, strange, and an extreme outsider to good dharmic society (Dimmit and Van Buitenen, 152). This presents the intriguing question – why worship a god who represents everything forbidden and taboo? He breaks the rules of good conduct under Hindu belief structures. He is in constant contact with the impurity of death and blood, and welcomes the adultery of the sages’ wives. He is guilty of Brahminicide, for which he was condemned to the status of wandering mendicant (Ions, 42). What is to be admired? In this form he is at his most perplexing and mysterious, yet not without virtue. He is still the slayer of demons, protector of the world, and duly penitent for his crimes (Peterson, 99). Shiva, god of paradoxes, can be a symbol of life and fertility as a householder, or a symbol of desecration and death as the graveyard dancer. The duality of these roles does not weaken his role as supreme lord, but in fact fortify it. His ability to contain all of human experience makes him a more powerful, impressive deity.

One of Shiva’s most well-known forms in the West is that of Nataraja, Lord of the Dance, the fearsome deity that creates and destroys the world through his dancing. He will inevitably annihilate the world as we know it, as required by the cyclical nature of the Hindu universe, and he will be behind its creation when it is re-formed anew (Ions, 151). All of the universe is said to reverberate to the rhythm of this dance and his drumbeat (Dimmit and Van Buitenen, 148). It is said to fulfill his five activities: creation, preservation, destruction, illusion, and salvation (Coomaraswamy, 70). His dances can be comedic, erotic, violent, or constructive; they can be in

joy or in sorrow, represent cosmic truth or simply be an embarrassment at a human wedding (Dimmit and Van Buitenen, 152). He has four hands, braided and adorned hair, and is dressed in much jewelry and the sacred thread. His hands hold a drum, fire, the symbol for “do not fear” and the last points at the dwarf of ignorance beneath his feet (Coomaraswamy, 69). These, especially, are an aspect of his appearance that is worshipped and admired. They are beautiful, golden, adorned, and holy (Peterson, 107, 119, 120). This is not just an aesthetic description, for in Indian culture, feet are a way to show respect and veneration for those above or elder to you. The feet of gurus, parents, and other superiors can be dusted or touched in order to show admiration (Peterson, 98). Thus the feet that belong to Shiva, lord of the universe, are to be especially loved and revered. Like his other forms, he is powerful, temperate, and impassioned. His role here, however, is overwhelmingly less tied to the earth – he is unattached to any particular person or aspect of the human world, and instead is its vigorous ruler, master of its fate. In many ways he takes on a character more familiar to the god of the Abrahamic traditions, for he is impersonal, cosmic, unstoppable, predestined, omnipresent, and unapproachable. Shiva has before appeared in forms unpredictable and tempestuous, but here he is anchored in to his single most important duty of sustaining the universe as we know it.

The last appearance of Shiva to be examined is that of the *linga*. While the others were dynamic and iconic, the *linga* is an aniconic symbol – one that does not seek to represent a form, but has power within its own right. This kind of symbol power can be compared to a Christian cross or a Jewish star of David. Shiva’s *linga* is the image that is worshipped, in the home and in the temple, and wherein the lord is established or made manifest. Is it at once a primal representation of masculinity, often joined with his *shakti* in the form of a *yoni*, and also much more than that (Peterson, 101). It represents power and potency, spirituality and bliss, divine unity

and the dwelling place of the god Shiva (Dimmit and Van Buitenen, 154). It is unmanifest, the formless “Principle” (Daniélou, 213). All other gods are just multiplicities of it and so they are the ones worshipped in images (Daniélou, 222). It is essential and revered in the worship of Shiva and while very different from his other aspects in that it has no adventures or myths to tell, it is still a tremendous representation of his character and what he symbolizes as the supreme god of Shaivist Hinduism.

The lord Shiva is a paradox, a deity charged with the polarity of every facet of his personality and mythology. His only truly immalleable characteristic is his quick temper. Is he beautiful, graceful, and lordly, as in the forms of ascetic and husband to the Goddess? Is he dangerous, uncontrollable, and fearsome, as in the forms of Nataraja and the haunter of cremation grounds? Is he admirable and a role model of spirituality, like the Lord of Yoga and the Lord of Dance? Is he lustful and material, like the Lord of Souls and resentful husband? He is all of these things. He is horrible and erotic, death and sex, as fearful as he is desirable (O’Flaherty, 236). It is possible to redeem all his contradictory aspects because they make him more attractive, as a character and as a god. Humans enjoy how multidimensional he is; he makes for fantastic, intoxicating stories and exciting worship. More than that, however, there is something very profound about a god who is the unity of every polarity – one who oversees all aspects of the human experience. His dualistic nature is contradictory but serves to expand the domain of his powers. Dancing among the *ganas*, he is the ruler of the impure; as ascetic, he rules the pure. As husband to the Goddess he celebrates the importance of material duties; as a celibate *yogin*, he celebrates the ability to reject the material world. These roles allow him to claim all of life experience as within his dominion. Since humans have to be both material and spiritual, Shiva must be both (O’Flaherty, 254). He is the realization of all possibilities (O’Flaherty, 253). The

universe is full of contradictions and oppositions, so it is only reasonable that the lord of the universe is just as kaleidoscopic. Above all, Shiva is *auspicious* (Peterson, 95). Each of his appearances and aspects are just representations of the universe at large.

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