

SHIVA PURANA

Vyasa

Reading

Siva: The Erotic Ascetic, Wendy O'Flaherty (Doniger), 1973
Hindu Myths, Wendy Doniger, 2004

Cultural significance

While it is difficult to determine the specific significance of this single mythic text apart from the other seventeen that make up the genre of the *puranas*, we can say it represents a very old and continuing strata of Hinduism. Shiva is not only a very ancient god in India, he is arguably the oldest god or goddess still worshipped anywhere in the world. He is depicted on one of the seals from the Indus Valley civilisation, which is approximately 4,500 years old. On that seal, he is seated in a yogic pose, which remains his characteristic position right up to the present day. In this respect, Shiva represents the ascetic, the person who leaves society behind and seeks knowledge beyond the classroom. Indian society, even more than most societies, is governed by time-honoured rules, codes and customs that restrict behaviour and attitudes. Shiva is a symbol, in today's world, of the person who breaks the mould and leaves those conventions behind. At the same time that he symbolises the 'wild one,' he also embodies the serenity of domestic union. In contemporary visual culture, Shiva the married man is equally as popular as Shiva the renouncer. Whether on film posters or temple sculptures, he is shown with his consort, Parvati. Their marriage is as common in Indian art as that of Rama and Sita. Another ubiquitous image shows the 'perfect family.' Shiva and Parvati sit side by side on a mountain peak, with Shiva's mount (the bull Nandi) in front of them, flanked by their two children: Ganesa with his vehicle (a rat), and Kartikeya with his mount (a peacock). Parvati, the other main character in the Shiva Purana, is also hugely popular in modern India. She represents both the ideal mother and the powerful female, a combination that is not often achieved in reality.

Overview

The *Shiva Purana* is one of eighteen texts of Hindu mythology given the genre label of *purana*, which simply means 'old' or 'in the past.' Most of the puranas were composed between about 600 and 1400 CE, with the *Shiva Purana* falling somewhere in the middle of that time range. Like all these texts, which are really compendia of Hindu lore, stories and legends, the *Shiva Purana* has no actual 'author'. Tradition and the text itself, however, claims that it was the product of a legendary sage and poet named Vyasa. Even traditional Hindus, however, accept that this text, like the other compilations of myths, evolved as oral Indian stories were written down by scribes, recited by others, augmented by still others and then redacted by modern scholars beginning with the late 18th century. There are also several different recensions of the *Shiva Purana* (depending on which region of the country they were compiled), some with more than 65,000 lines of verse. Most variants have either six or seven chapters, and all centre on the life of the deities Shiva and his wife Parvati. In addition to stories, the text also contains descriptions, sermons and dissertations on Siva's divinity; it recounts his emblems, attributes, exploits and incarnations; and it narrates legends on the origin and importance of the *lingam* (Shiva's phallic image) and the merits of installing and consecrating it.

Story

The story begins with a Prologue. A sage, named Suta, who has been trained by Vyasa, is reciting the text to a group of assembled Brahmins in a forest. After naming the Brahmins, and providing their genealogies, Suta, who becomes our narrator, sets out the preconditions for listening to and comprehending the text. The listener should be 'intelligent, pure in mind and delighted at heart and a follower of conventions.' If the listener is not like this, we are told, the recitation will make him that

way. It is further explained that the text has three elements--'listening, devotion and meditation'— which will lead to yogic union with Shiva, the absolute, and result in him favouring you. We are then told that the text will narrate all the stories about Shiva, including those with philosophical meanings. As if to test our readiness to hear this story, the narrator says that while Shiva is essentially timeless, he has 1008 names, which he then goes on to list. Then we are given the eight forms of Shiva, which cover his earthly and water forms, his solar and fire forms. Next comes a delineation of Shiva's powers and how they are related to our five senses. This is followed by abstruse philosophical discussions about the nature of the soul and the universe. The core of this message is that Shiva and Parvati form a symbiotic pair: Shiva is detached wisdom, and Parvati (called Shakti) is energy.

A story is then told about Shiva and his marriage to Sati (an earlier form of Parvati), who was the daughter of a Brahmin priest. This father is an irascible, crabby old fellow with nothing good to say about his son-in-law who wanders around 'half naked, with snakes around his neck, smoking marijuana.' Just to spite Shiva, the father organises a large ritual sacrifice, to which he does not invite the god. This insult causes Sati to commit suicide by burning herself (giving rise to the tradition of *sati*, when a Hindu widow throws herself on her husband's funeral pyre). In response, Shiva kills the father by burning him with the power of his third eye.

Next, we find Shiva deep in meditation on a mountain peak, when he is approached by Parvati and her father. This father is different and asks Shiva to allow Parvati to wait on him. Shiva, although not keen, agrees. When Parvati's overtures are rejected, she enlists the aid of the gods, who send Kama, god of love. Shiva, however, again uses his third eye to incinerate the poor messenger, although he later relents and gives Kama a bodiless existence. Soon thereafter, Parvati does seduce Shiva and they are married. Then comes the story of how their first child was born. Shiva is away in meditation when Parvati wants to bathe in a pool. She creates a young son by mixing clay and turmeric powder, and then tells him to guard the path to the pool, so that no one will see her bathing. When Shiva returns, the boy prevents him from advancing on the path, and Shiva cuts off his head. When Parvati explains, he then finds an elephant head as a replacement. This is the origin story of Ganesa, the elephant-head god.

The next story involves a dispute between Brahma and Vishnu about who is the most powerful god. As they harangue each other, an enormous phallus-shaped pillar of fire shoots up between them. Vishnu becomes his avatar of a boar, which dives down to find the bottom the limitless pillar, while Brahma becomes a goose that flies up to locate the top. When neither can find what they were looking for, Shiva emerges from the pillar and declares that he was the supreme deity.

The final major incident concerns the river Ganges. A sage, called Bhagiratha is desperate to perform a funeral ceremony for his ancestors but, after years of draught, there is no water in the rivers. The sage then sits in deep meditation and begs Brahma to bring the Ganges from heaven to earth. Brahma agrees but then tells the sage to worship Shiva because only he has the strength to mitigate the terrible force that the cascading Ganges will cause. The earth will be shattered, Brahma says, unless Shiva manages to break its fall from heaven. Shiva agrees to help and calmly lets the raging water fall first on his snake-hood (or, in some versions, on his matted hair) and only then trickle down to earth. This story, depicted in famous sculptures in south India, is known as the 'Descent of the Ganges.'



(Descent of the Ganges, Mahabalipuram, 7th - 8th c. CE. In the centre, in the cleft, is Shiva with his snake-hood to break the fall of the mighty river, while sages and animals worship him)

Themes

Power The one theme that emerges most prominently through the various legends and myths narrated within the *Shiva Purana* is power, particularly in the pairing of Shiva and Parvati. Their union is a metaphor for the coupling of inert male energy and active female energy, in other words, the symbiosis of asceticism and eroticism. In philosophical terms, this concept is known as *shiva-shakti*. In many of the stories, Shiva is the great renouncer, who by restraining his 'seed' builds up tremendous power (referred to as *tapas*). Even on the coldest nights in the high Himalayas, Shiva's intense meditation creates heat to keep him warm. This interdependence of ascetic and the erotic elements of life is represented by the erect phallus, which is Shiva's symbol: it has great power because it is restrained. Shiva uses his power in several stories in the text. He opens his third eye and destroys the god of love; he opens it again to remove his annoying father-in-law. He is able to absorb the force of the falling Ganges because he is powerful. And he is more powerful than even Brahma and Vishnu, who cannot locate his limits. Perhaps the most popular iconographic representation of Shiva is as a dancer (Nataraja), who is encircled by flames, holds fire in one hand and crushes a demon underfoot. He is the god of destruction because he has power.

Devotion The other theme that permeates the text is the efficacy of devotion. This is a less abstract and more practical teaching about the ability of ordinary men and women to gain boons from the gods. What we see, time and time again in these stories is the idea that if a person is genuinely and intensely engaged in prayer, he or she will win favours from the god or goddess who is worshipped. The extended Prologue to the text goes into great detail about the form and benefits of devotion. A person can show devotion by listening to the recital of the *Shiva Purana* and by composing poetry about Shiva, as well as the usual means of thinking about and serving a deity. Historically, this is one of the important elements of the *Shiva Purana*, that it combines the two great streams of Hindu tradition, philosophy and ritual, into one set of instructions. It contains subtle philosophical discussions (drawing on the much earlier Vedas and Upanishads) and combines that cerebral material with the more pragmatic dimension of the devotional (*bhakti*) movement that flowered north India in the centuries after the Gupta Empire (4-6th c. CE). With the stories narrated in

the text, it is not necessary, for example, to understand the metaphysical meaning of Shiva's pillar of fire that defeats Brahma and Vishnu; it is enough to worship the pillar as Shiva (it represents his phallus). Similarly, the ontological complications of the Shiva-Shakti concept can be ignored as long as we pay homage to Shiva the god and to Shakti the goddess.

Characters (major ones only)

Shiva Shiva is the Hindu god, who represents asceticism and also sexuality. He is mostly seen as a force for destruction, although he also has more benign traits, too.

Parvati Parvati is a goddess, who has many forms (Sati, Shakti, Durga, Kali) and is married to Shiva. She is a representation of domesticity as well as female energy.

Ganesa Ganesa is the elephant-headed god, who is the son of Parvati and (by extension) Shiva. He is regarded as the 'remover of obstacles.'

Kartikeya Kartikeya is the other son of Parvati and Shiva, who is associated with youth and beauty.

Mahesa Mahesa is the buffalo-headed king of the demons, who is killed by Parvati in her manifestation as Shakti.

Shiva (Ascetic)

Character Shiva is a figure of great power in this text, a god who builds up his energy by withdrawing from the world and engaging in meditation. In this respect, he is seen as a representation of untamed nature. In earlier texts, he is known as Rudra, 'the howler,' suggestive of a wild animal. At the same time, Shiva is also a figure of great sexuality, as his symbol of the erect phallus (*lingam*) makes clear. Although he is tamed, to an extent, through his marriage to Parvati, he remains a somewhat reluctant husband, who prefers to wander off for another few hours of meditation in the forest or on a mountain. He is also not especially fond of his two sons, one of whom he almost succeeds in killing during a disagreement. The various elements of his iconography suggest the multiple sides of his character. He has a third eye, which symbolises wisdom. He is smeared with ashes, wears a necklace of skulls and carries a begging bowl, all of which indicate his ascetic nature and his defeat of death. He carries a trident, which shows his destructive power. He holds a drum, which he plays while he dances. And the River Ganges flows down from his matted hair, which comes from a story in which Shiva prevented the river from crashing down and destroying the earth. In other images, Shiva is depicted as half-man and half-woman (*ardhanar-isvara*), to symbolise his sexual and philosophical union with the female principle (Parvati and Shakti). He is thus very unlike Vishnu, the other great god of Hinduism. Where Vishnu is moderate, considerate and conventional, Shiva is wild, irascible and unpredictable. Dancing in the funeral grounds, half naked, with his necklace of skulls, not to mention marijuana smoking, he was outside polite society. No wonder that no one wanted him as a son-in-law.

Activities Shiva is an ascetic, which means that he spends hours, sometimes days, in meditation. He likes snowy mountain peaks, but a dark forest will also do. He sometimes goes begging with a bowl, stops to dance over cremated bodies by the river, and then relaxes with a pipe of marijuana. Once he has been caught by Parvati, he settles down to a version of domestic life, but still finds time to sneak off for more hours of sitting still and emptying his mind. At other times, he goes hunting and comes home late. Even when he see him sitting beside his wife and children, it is notable that he sits on a tiger skin, used by ascetics, with his hair long and his body covered by ash.

Illustrative moments

Ascetic Throughout the long, long text of the *Shiva Purana*, Shiva is portrayed as an ascetic. He sits on a mountain peak, nearly naked, smeared with ashes, in deep meditation. This serene seclusion is fine for Shiva, who is building up knowledge and, more crucially, power (*tapas*) as a result of his self-restraint. For the rest of the world, including the gods, however, Shiva's withdrawal from normal activity creates a problem. Typically, he would be using his powers to assist the gods in their

never-ending battle with the demons. In a characteristic scene, the demons, led by a particularly ferocious character called Tarakasura, are menacing the gods and sages. When the gods petition Brahma for advice, he informs them that, as a result of an old curse, Tarakasura will only be defeated by a son born from Shiva and Parvati. And now Shiva is as far away from love-making as possible, deep in his snowy retreat. Then Indra, king of the gods, has an idea. He will send Kama, the god of love, to induce lust in Shiva, who will then mate with Parvati and produce the child who will defeat the demons. Simple, except that Shiva is so far withdrawn that everyone doubts if Kama can affect him. In addition, Shiva has placed his bull, Nandi, at the entrance to his mountain abode, to prevent anyone from entering. Not to be deterred by a bull, Kama takes the forms of a spring breeze and sneaks through the gate and up the spot where Shiva sits cross-legged. Slowly, he approaches and then fires a flower-arrow at the meditating god, who awakens immediately, opens his third eye and releases a flame that burns Kama to cinders. This is the iconic moment of Shiva's asceticism. He has grown so powerful, by withholding his sexual energy, that he can incinerate even the god of love.

Sexual At the same time, and often literally in the next minute, Shiva is also a god of great sexuality. If we ever had any doubt about his sensuality, we need only remember that his symbol is the *lingam*, an erect phallus. The sexual dimension of Shiva's character is displayed many times in the text, including immediately after the display of asceticism (described above) when he burns Kama. After that display, Shiva falls in love with Parvati and their union produces the son who does slay the demon. But an even more exaggerated illustration occurs in a later incident. The situation is similar: the gods approach Shiva because, once again, a demon is wreaking havoc and they need his assistance. This time the problem is that Shiva is making love, so they wait outside the room. Hours pass before they decide to enter the room, but Shiva remains completely unaware of them and continues his love-making. Days go by, then weeks and years, until finally the assembly of gods manage to interrupt Shiva's erotic play. In doing so, however, his seed spills out and falls into a container that immediately catches fire; in some versions, the seed becomes a libation for the god of fire, Agni. Here, then, we have what looks like the direct opposite of the restrained Shiva. In fact, however, the sexual energy that he possesses has the same fiery component that his ascetic power contains and which burned the god of love. It is this ambivalence, with one thing masquerading as its opposite, that makes the character of Shiva so fascinating.

Angry If Shiva's feats of both asceticism and sexuality seems a bit beyond the normal capacities of most men, there is another side to his character which brings him more within human reckoning. He often gets angry, and not always for righteous reasons. The best and best-known illustration of his anger is found in the story about Ganesa, son of Shiva and Parvati. In fact, he's not quite born of their union since he is created by Parvati herself, but he is later adopted by Shiva. The scene is a quiet pond deep in the forest, where Shiva and Parvati live. He, as usual, has gone off to spend hours in meditation, while she wants to take a bath. Without anyone to prevent a stranger from eyeing her in the pond, she creates a son by mixing clay with turmeric (yellow powder). She tells him on no account to let anyone pass him while she is naked in the pool. The problem arises when Shiva returns and sees this strange little boy barring his way. 'Let me pass, you impudent beggar,' Shiva cries, half in anger and half in amazement. But the little boy does not budge and says, 'I will not let you, or anyone, pass.' Shiva laughs and becomes more incensed. Then he invokes *maya*, god of illusion, who sends an army of demons who fight with the boy. In the midst of the scuffle, Shiva simply lopes off the boy's head. In the end, Parvati manages to persuade her angry husband to replace the boy's head with that of the first being he sees in the forest, which happens to be an elephant. And that is how the elephant-headed Ganesa got his head. It is a story that does not cover Shiva with glory; indeed, he appears as a rash, reckless and violent man-god. And he is angry not because of any great crime or misdeed that has befallen him. Instead, he is incensed, his pride pricked, that a little boy would dare to impede him, the Great God Shiva.

Parvati (Powerful)

Character Parvati is a many-sided figure. As the wife of Shiva, she is a goddess of fertility and domesticity. In the *Shiva Purana*, she fulfils the role of dutiful wife and mother. She is seen as a 'civilising' force on the somewhat wild and untamed Shiva, who prefers deep forests and high mountains to the domestic hearth. She is also a maternal figure, as the mother of Ganesa and Kartikeya. More than that, Parvati is a woman of great energy, even ferocious energy, which the gods sometimes employ to defeat their apparently invincible enemies, the demons. And this

energised manifestation of Parvati takes on a special meaning as the embodiment of a philosophical concept of divinity, known as *shakti*. This is important because, although Parvati is almost always understood in terms of her relationship with Shiva, in her form as *shakti*, Parvati is thought to transcend Shiva. As *shakti*, Parvati is the manifest energy of the cosmos, whereas Shiva is the latent energy. Another complication of the Parvati-Shiva relationship is that they are often referred to as a single figure, or the 'god who is half woman' (*ardhanar-isvara*). Overwhelmingly, however, Parvati is understood as the wife of Shiva, protecting him, raising his children and providing him with a home. That is one reason that she is often shown riding a tiger or lion, symbolising her power to domesticate the wild aspect of nature, that is, her husband. Sometimes, though, as we will see in the examples given below, she is much more than a sweet smiling consort.

Activities Parvati is often engaged in normal domestic chores. She sweeps the house, or the floor of a cave; she cooks meals and looks after children. Usually depicted as a dark but beautiful woman, Parvati also spends time grooming and dressing herself. She is often shown in a dancing pose or sitting in meditation, with her hands held in two particular gestures: one gesture shows courage or 'non-fear', while other shows generosity or 'munificence.' And in the *Shiva Purana*, she is often said to play with a pet parrot.

Illustrative moments

Domestic One element of Parvati's complex character is that she is a wife and mother. If Shiva is the archetypal ascetic, a man of the forest, without family, Parvati is the ultimate domesticated woman, who provides him with a home and children. The best illustration of her domesticity is a story in which she seduces Shiva, the arch renouncer. Having seen Shiva from afar, she falls in love with him and visits his mountain cave every day, sweeping the floor and decorating it with flowers. Shiva, however, hardly takes notice of her. Determined, Parvati decides to become an ascetic herself, thinking that then she could get close to him. One day, as she leaves Shiva's cave, she forces his servant to promise that he will not allow another woman inside in her absence. After she leaves, a demon disguises herself as Parvati and sneaks past the guard and starts to make love to Shiva, planning to kill him with the sharp knives hidden in her vagina. Fortunately, Shiva gets wise and kills the demon first. When Parvati returns, she turns the servant to stone, but is still rejected by Shiva, until Brahma takes pity on her and transforms her into an irresistible beauty. Shiva, despite his meditation, cannot resist and they are married in an elaborate ceremony attended by all the gods. This story demonstrates the absolute desire of Parvati to become a wife, to take care of a man and later to have his children.

Ferocious There is, however, another side to this dutiful and docile wife. Parvati is also an avenging and ferocious goddess, shown with many arms that wield swords and axes, riding astride a tiger or a lion. A famous display of this warrior aspect of Parvati's character is the story of her slaying a buffalo-headed demon. The story is that a king of the demons was a pious worshipper of Brahma, from whom he obtained a boon that he could not be killed by either a 'god, man or an animal.' The buffalo-headed demon now considers himself invincible, being too egotistical to even include 'women' in the boon of invulnerability. Swollen with pride, the demon goes on a rampage, even threatening Indra, king of the gods. Frightened, the gods decide to hit back but cannot defeat the demon. They then consult Brahma, who tells them of the boon, and they decide to combine all their powers in Parvati. Parvati then becomes known as Durga, who holds in her arms the various weapons of the various gods. Parvati as Durga, then attacks the demon, but he keeps changing shape, deceiving her with multiple forms. Finally, after fifteen days, when he transforms himself back into a buffalo, she kills him using Shiva's trident. This is the famous moment when Parvati demonstrates the enormous power she possesses. It may appear to be incompatible with the domesticated goddess, which is her other side, but this duality is at the core of her character. It is the hidden layer of the feminine principle, with which Hindus endow their goddesses.



(Parvati, as Durga, killing the buffalo-headed demon, Tanjore, tamil Nadu, 11th c. CE)

Divine The other absolutely essential element of Parvati's character is that she is a goddess. And the distinctive aspect of her divinity is that she represents the personification of female creative energy, called *shakti*. Indeed, Parvati is often known as Shakti, or Adi Shakti (the original energy). *Shakti* is not simply 'female power', however, as is sometimes assumed. It is, in fact, also present in men but in a latent form, which is then activated when it comes in contact with female *shakti*. This coupling is then said to be responsible for all creation, from the cosmos to every small form of life. The moment when Parvati displays this 'cosmic power' is found in another story of her subduing a demon. This time the demon leader is called Raktabija and his special defence is an impenetrable skin, again a boon from the gods for his pious worship of them. In addition, whenever a drop of his blood reaches the ground, another demon is born; that is why he is called 'blood-seed' (*rakta-bija*). Parvati (in her *Shakti* form) is aware of this and manages to defeat him by cutting off his head and then drinking all his blood before a drop reached the ground. It is gruesome, and not something we would normally associate with such a philosophical concept as that of *shakti*. However, that it is the nature of Hindu representations of Parvati—they are complex and sometimes perplexing. Perhaps this explanation found in the *Shiva Purana* itself is helpful: 'Shiva and Parvati [*shakti*] are essentially one. Just as heat and fire, they are inseparable and cannot do without each other. *Shakti* is the snake in motion, and Shiva is the motionless snake. If one is the calm sea, the other is the ocean full of waves.'