



Newsletter Archives

The Shiva Linga Images of Cosmic Manhood in Art and Mythology

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The Shiva Linga - Images of Cosmic Manhood in Art and Mythology

Article of the Month - June 2003



The renowned sage Bhrigu once ventured to the abode of Lord Shiva, wanting to consult him on an important spiritual matter. On reaching, he knocked the door of Shiva's residence. There was no reply. He knocked again, this time a little louder. No avail. The knocking turned to pounding and then to a desperate beating. Finally Shiva emerged, taking his own time. He had his wife Parvati on his left arm.

Obviously, the Great Lord had thought it fit to first complete his lovemaking with the goddess, rather than immediately divert his attention to the venerated ascetic. Incensed at the treatment meted out to him, the sage cursed Shiva that henceforth, since he was so fond of making love, he would be worshipped in the image of his organ of generation, rather than his anthropomorphic representation. Thus, to this day, Shiva is worshipped in the form of the male organ of procreation, often alone, and frequently conjoined with the corresponding female organ, which is sculpted as a receptacle to receive Shiva's seed.





This representation of Shiva is known as the lingam. The word lingam literally means a 'sign' or distinguishing mark. Thus says the Linga Purana: "The distinctive sign by which one can recognize the nature of something is called lingam."

There are variations on the birth of this symbol of Lord Shiva, some of which ascribe an esoteric and abstract origin to it. For example when Shiva is visualized as the intangible primordial Creative Power, the lingam is said to be his sign (symbol) which can be worshipped by his followers, who require a concrete entity to focus their prayers on. This stream of thought however does not negate the phallic connotations of the lingam. Its literal meaning as a distinguishing mark links these two interpretations. Consider a newborn male child. What is the sign which distinguishes its sex?

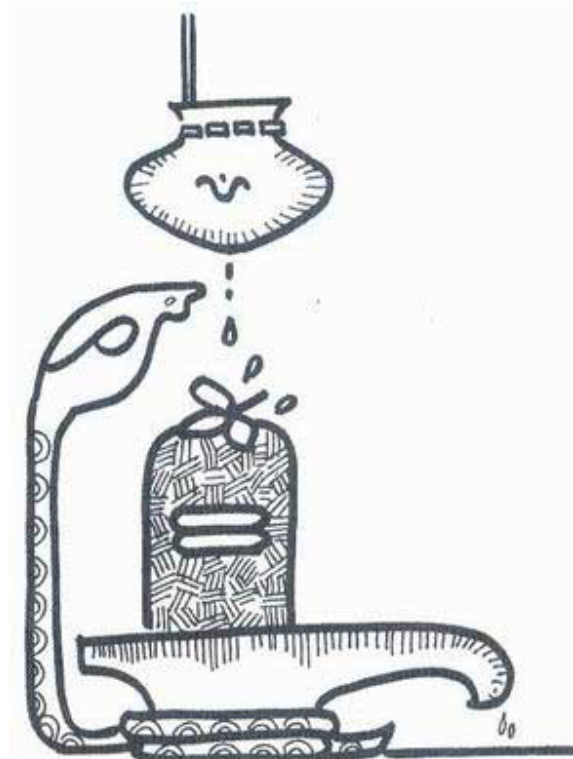
Thus, the phallus is the lingam, the symbol of Shiva's manhood, and of which the human organ is just a microcosmic reflection.

Another instructive legend describes why the lingam is believed to be one of the most potent emblems in Hindu ideals. It all started with Brahma and Vishnu, who were arguing over their relative supremacy. Their vain arguments were interrupted by a superluminous glow from a strange and blazing pillar, its shape reminiscent of the linga. Both of them sped towards this indescribable flaming light, which grew before their eyes into infinity, piercing the earth and extending through the heavens. Overwhelmed and terrified by the unfathomable vision, the two gods decided to seek the beginning and end of this burning immensity. Brahma taking the form of a swan flew upwards, and Vishnu dove down acquiring the shape of a boar. Both of the gods however, could not fathom the extent of this fiery column at either end, and returned exhausted and bewildered to the level they had started from. At that moment, the central part of the pillar split open and Shiva revealed himself in his full glory. Overawed, both Brahma and Vishnu bowed before him. Thunderous laughter, or the sound of AUM, issued from the pillar, filling the sky.



Primarily, the glowing, flaming linga was a pillar of fire, connecting heaven and earth. It had no end and no beginning, but it had direction, upwards, as does the earthly fire. In metaphysical terms, it was (is), the vertical axis which both holds apart and joins heaven and earth, dividing and uniting them at the same time, an apt symbol of cosmic integrity. Like the Tree of Life, it is both the foundation and support that ensures equilibrium between heaven and earth.

In Vedic hymns, Rudra (an epithet for Shiva) is identified with Agni, who in these sacred texts is deified as the carrier of the sacrificial offerings to the gods for whom they are intended. Hence, Agni is the mediator between men and gods, and acts as a metaphysical bridge between the two, just like the cosmic linga. A pertinent observation here is that every creative process is accompanied by the generation of heat. Indeed the sexual act is nothing but the offering of the seed of life into the sacred fire of love. Hence, Agni, the God of Fire, is eminently suited as a metaphoric emblem of the tejas (creative heat) of Shiva, both metaphysically and physically.



A typical Shaivite shrine has dharapatra above the linga, with a serpent parasol behind.

In this context it is interesting to note that in temples where the linga is worshipped, there is often a conical pot (Skt. Dharapatra), kept hanging over it. At the bottom of this vessel is a small hole, from which water drips continuously. The idea is to cool the 'fiery' linga. In the shrine, Shiva is eternally in embrace of the goddess. By entering the sacred enclosure we are, in a sense, interrupting his amours. Thus water is poured to stifle the hotheaded god's temper. Shiva is Bhairava (quick-tempered), but he is also Ashutosh (One who calms down quickly). Indeed, a devotee needs to calm his god before asking for favors.

Another description of the origin of the lingam gives a more sensuous portrayal. According to this view, there once lived in a forest, a group of hermits with their wives. At some point of time, Shiva ventured their way, resplendent in his naked glory. The virtuous wives, the very epitomes of chastity, lost all their moral qualms, and went berserk with desire at the sight of his tempting body. In addition to their restraint, they also shed their inhibitions, ornaments, and clothes, and embraced this naked stranger in a wild, uncontrolled frenzy.

In one version, the forest sages gave a similar curse to Shiva as Bhrgu above. A second source says that naturally angered by this unabashed display of passion by their better halves, they snatched out Shiva's phallus and threw it on the ground. In a sacred twist to the tale, it is believed that it broke into twelve pieces when it struck the earth, and at each of the spots a pilgrimage center sprung up. These twelve sacred sites are today known as the 'Twelve Jyotirlingas,' and are important destinations in the itinerary of a Shaivite pilgrim. The word jyotirlinga itself means a 'linga of light,' thus further cementing the association of Shiva's phallus with the cosmic pillar of light.

Yet another legend says that the severed linga of Shiva proved to be proverbially too hot to handle. Falling to the ground, it did not come to rest, but moved about,



burning anything and everything that came in its way. Even the combined efforts of all the gods could not restrain its fierce fieriness. Finally it was Mother Earth, whom the linga penetrated, who managed to quench it inside her womb.



Nepal: Ithyphallic Shiva,
17th Century, Kathmandu

In this regard it must also be stressed here that though Shiva is visualized as an ithyphallic deity, his true message is not a licence to licentiousness.

According to Aghananda Bharati, Shiva's erect organ connotes the very opposite in this context. It stands for 'seminal retention,' and represents complete yogic control of the senses. Shiva's linga is always vertical, pointing upwards as the phallus of an accomplished yogi, with the semen (Sanskrit. virya) rising up, rather than discharging itself.

Here a parallel is drawn with the uncoiled energy of kundalini, which rises and climbs the length of its path. Indeed the vertical is the direction of the sacred; it is a symbol of ascent, pointing to heaven and transcendent regions. The spermatozoid substance when reabsorbed through sexual abstinence, nourishes the cerebral matter. Rising, according to yogic formula, through the subtle channels flanking the backbone, it renders the intellectual faculties more acute. The Yogi perceives sexual energy as though it were coiled up at the base of the spine, which is why it is called kundalini (coiled) and likened to a sleeping snake. When, by means of mental concentration, it awakens and unwinds its coils, it rises like a column of fire toward the zenith, toward the top of the skull and pierces it to reach the transcendent worlds. Shiva's liberated



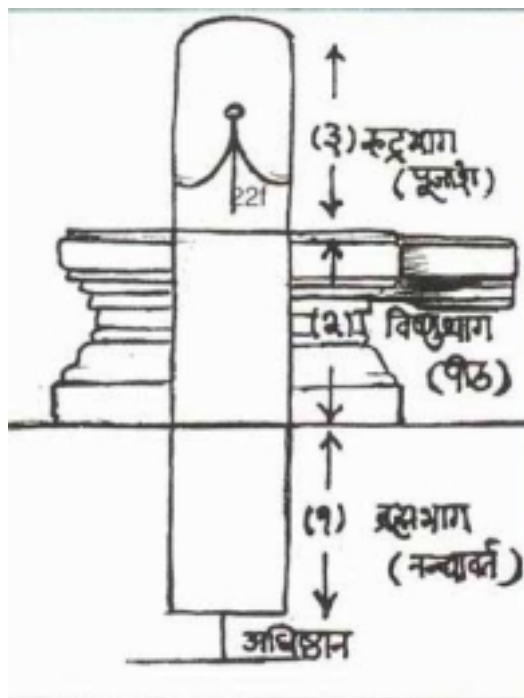
phallus represents this illuminating power rising heavenward beyond the material world. Thus is the linga likened to a pillar of light, guiding us to true knowledge.

The Two Images of Shiva

Images of Shiva are of two kinds: iconic (anthropomorphic) and aniconic. The former represents Shiva as a human being while the latter envisages an abstract origin for him. In this manner is Shiva different from other deities. The images of all other deities bestow only sensuous enjoyment since they are invariably represented in an anthropomorphic form, appealing solely to the sense organs. But Shiva grants both enjoyment and spiritual release. As an icon, he has the body of man, but in his aniconic form he is visualized as the cosmic pillar. Yet this pillar also evokes his phallus. As an abstract shape, the pillar symbolizes a purely conceptual reality that cannot be sensed in material terms. Visually however, the shape of the cylindrical pillar with a rounded top resembles that of the phallus. Also when the time came for Shiva to reveal himself to both Brahma and Vishnu, he did so in the form of a linga. Hence the linga is an object of the greatest sanctity, more sacred than any anthropomorphic image of Shiva. Not surprisingly thus, the innermost sanctuary of all Shiva temples is reserved for the linga, while the outer precincts of the sacred architecture may show him in his human form. Indeed, though his iconic images abound, no such image ever occupies the center of attention in a Shiva temple, this honor being reserved exclusively for his linga.

According to Stella Kramrisch, the linga of Shiva has three levels of signification, these are:

- 1). As a sign of Shiva: This is evident in the literary meaning of the word 'linga,' and also in the fact that the linga fell from Shiva's own body. Indeed, God resides in whatever is part of god.
- 2). The Linga as Phallus: This is depicted in the tale of the curse of sage Bhrigu, and Shiva's violation of the chaste wives of the ascetics in the forest.
- 3). The Linga as made up of cosmic substance: Established in the tale of the rivalry of Brahma and Vishnu.



In a different three-fold division, it is believed that the linga contains within itself all the three divinities making up the Indian trinity of Supreme Godhead, namely Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva. Brahma abides in the lower part that is hidden inside the earth. Vishnu occupies the middle portion of the linga that is covered by the pedestal, and finally there is Shiva, in the top portion that is visible above the pedestal.

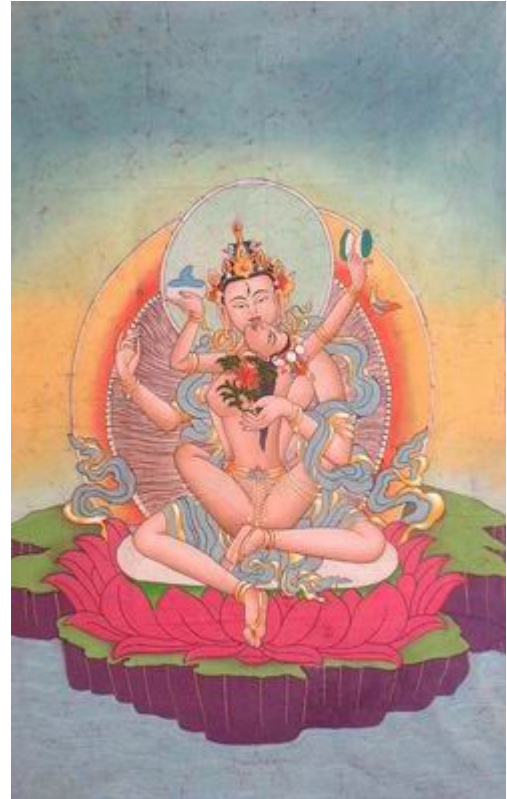
The Shiva portion (Rudra-bhaga) is also known as 'puja-ansha,' or the part of the linga that is to be worshipped. The Vishnu part is identified with Devi ('yonis tu jagad-dhatri Vishnu-svarupini). The Rudra-bhaga is said to be masculine, Vishnu part feminine, and the Brahma part neuter. There is a logical framework behind this identification. Shiva's masculinity is obvious because of his phallic connotations, while Vishnu is often visualized as a woman in ancient mythology. This has its origin in the incident, when to deprive the demons of the nectar of

immortality, Vishnu took on the form of a woman, aptly named Mohini (one who bewitches). Lastly Brahma, as the creator, represents that primordial unmanifest state which precedes all creation. In this archetypal state there is no perceptible duality, and no distinction of positive and negative forces. Only when there is a tendency to create does the first spark of duality appear in this undifferentiated stratum. This duality has the character of complementary poles of attraction, which is eventually manifested in the whole of creation by male and female characteristics. Hence Brahma, by virtue of preceding the duality inherent in creation, is non-dual, neither male, nor female.

Most commonly, in the sanctuaries where it is worshipped, the lingam is represented surrounded by the female organ of generation, the yoni. The yoni grasps the lingam, and indeed it is only when the phallus, the giver of semen, is surrounded by the yoni that procreation can take place. From the relation of linga and yoni, the whole world arises. Everything therefore bears the signature of the linga and the yoni. Each individual linga that enters a womb and procreates is a harbinger of divinity, and engaging in a sacred act.

Brahma has for his cognizance, the lotus. For Vishnu it is the discus; and Indra has his thunderbolt. But we ordinary mortals do not carry any of the distinguishing characteristics of these gods. On the other hand, each of us does have either a linga or a womb. Hence all creatures of this world are but a part of the composite image of the Shiva linga, grasped by the womb of the goddess.

Since the linga is shown to encompass the trinity (Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva) and also all creatures of the earth, it is safely logical to say that those ancient venerables who conceived of this awesome symbol were right in deducing that the entire living world, nay the entire universe, is a part of the lingam of Shiva.



Worship of the Linga



The sect of Shiva worshippers known as Lingayats are distinguishable by the miniature linga they wear on their bodies throughout their lives. It is kept in a silver receptacle hung around the neck, and is believed to act both as a protective talisman and an amulet to defeat negative influences.

The Lingayata's are a unique community who do not believe in the caste system, and are known for their indiscriminating attitude towards all. Not surprisingly, a Lingayat woman menstruating continues to keep the linga on her body near her heart. This is in contrast to orthodox thought where women traditionally do not associate themselves with sacred imagery during their periods.



Female Lingayat Virashaiva or layperson (linga banajiga) wearing a silver linga casket (ayigalu) in modified egg form (gundgurdi). Lingam caskets are also worn by men and women on the left arm or by a Lingayat Jangam priest on the top of the head under a cloth cap.



Shiva lingam with pilgrim's offerings.

The linga is indeed a great equalizer. Any ordinary devotee will testify to this who has seen worshippers, regardless of sex, caste, or creed, washing and pouring generous libations on the linga, while simultaneously caressing it intimately. Also, the linga is always installed at the ground level, while other anthropomorphic deities remain established at a height, beyond the reach of the ordinary worshipper.

The linga is not just the organ of generation, but a sign of the progenitor and the essence of cosmic manhood manifested in the microcosm. By worshipping it we are not merely deifying a physical organ, but recognizing a form that is both eternal and universal.



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