



Stories from the Puranas Retold

Nalini Sahay

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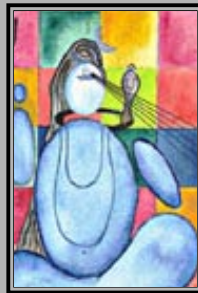


Stories about Shiva



Introduction

Our gods and goddesses have strong and vibrant personalities as described in the hymns of the Vedas and the stories in the Puranas. Most Hindus have heard these stories in childhood and have an easy familiarity with the ways of life and living that the gods display in their various Avatars. There is always a take-away message in the stories - sometimes it is ambiguous and leads to more questions; sometimes the message simply defines good and evil, right and wrong - but always, there is the possibility of relating to ones own personality and ones own situation. No doubt, this is why the stories have endured. I for one carry a sense of comfort that there is a special god/goddess to recall in a certain situation. The stories actually hold our faith, allowing us to accept all the gods as one and the one god as many.



There is also the matter of images. In a way the images of India - the great idols in worship, the wayside shrines, the calendar art images, the great and the small sculpture - are abstraction of the stories and the personal message of the stories.

In this book, written entirely for the web, the stories have been cast in a simplified mould. The intent is to familiarize the new visitor and to aid recall for the old friend.

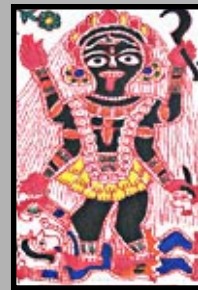
All the images were commissioned by me with Tribal and Folk Artists. We had only to tell them the story and they drew the pictures. They knew the stories! Language was no barrier. Some readers may be familiar with the styles of Indian Folk and Tribal Art and will instantly recognize the Madhubani, the Warli, the Oriya and Bengal folk art. For others, given below is a chart :

An attempt is made in the stories to show the harmony between the gods and goddess; time coalesces and the gods are present at each others life events, a general value system emerges; the invocation is of god love rather than god fear.

We hope the reader enjoys this presentation of ancient text and is encouraged to delve deeper into our well of faith.



Andhra leather puppet and folk art



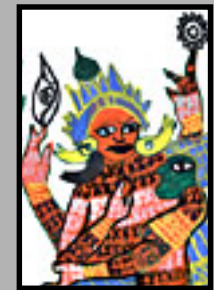
Madhubani style



Bengal folk art



Warli style



Madhya Pradesh
tribal art



Shiva the strong, silent one.



Brahma's sons were having a boasting match. Agni, Vayu and Indra each made extravagant statements about their promises. Suddenly there appeared a little goblin (Yaksha) who showed them a blade of grass. He asked the three of them to destroy it. Agni's flames could not consume it, Vayu's breath could not dislodge it. Indra's thunderbolt could not shake it. In unison the trio wondered how they could not burn it, blow it or splice it. The little goblin scornfully said that it was beyond their powers. In one voice they asked who? He replied that it was Shiva with a chortle and he disappeared. Agni and Vayu were downcast but Indra gripped his thunderbolt and scowled. He decided that he would teach this Shiva a lesson. So he set off for Kailash.



...Shiva the strong, silent one.



On arriving at Kailash he saw this naked ascetic. In a loud voice, he asked him who he was. He answered that he was Shiva. Indra by now was so full of his pomposity, that he said how could a naked ascetic covered in ash teach him, the great Indra and his brothers a lesson. Shiva was silent. Indra got so carried away with his imagined superiority that he raised his little thunderbolt to strike Shiva. Shiva just opened his third eye slightly. Brahma who had been silent all along was distraught at Indra's insulting behavior. He begged Shiva not to destroy him. His reasoning was that if Indra the leader of the gods was destroyed there would be mayhem.

The universe would be over run with demons. Shiva hurled his fire into the ocean. From the boiling water arose the demon Jalandhara. Jalandhara became the master mind of the demon clan.

Shiva



...Shiva the strong, silent one.

The gods were downtrodden and Indra was driven out of Indralok. He was a broken god and he went to Brahma for help. Brahma counselled him to go and seek Shiva's help. But Indra was nervous as he remembered that Shiva had said to him, that he would be humiliated by him.

Brahma urged him to go as he said that Shiva was not a grudge bearer. Jalandhara imagined that he was the strongest and when Indra told him about Shiva, he asked who he was. Indra told him that he was an ascetic who lived on mount Kailash. Cocky Jalandhara went off to Kailash to fight Shiva. Shiva smiled at the demon and drew a circle round his toe. Then he told him that he would fight him if he carried this bit of land on his head. Jalandhara readily agreed and placed the piece of earth on his head. It became bigger and bigger and heavier and heavier.. Jalandhara's neck snapped and skull cracked. The last thoughts he had were that Shiva carried the crescent moon on his head whereas he could not even hold a tiny piece of earth, if Shiva did not will it.



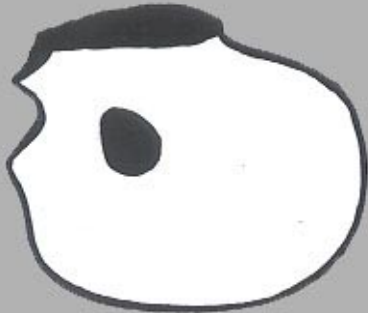
Why Shiva dressed as a Sadhu/Priest?



There was a time when there was nothing left in the universe. It had all been destroyed. There remained only the air and a flat expanse of water. Brahma slept for thousands of aeons. Day broke when Brahma awakened. He assumed five heads and set about to create the universe. Simultaneously another body was created and this form had three eyes. From his breath Brahma created consciousness with which he imbued both himself and Rudra, the god with the third eye..



...Why Shiva dressed as a Sadhu/Priest?



Rudra, whose consciousness directed him towards questioning, asked Brahma where he came from and who created him? Brahma, whose assumptions were more certain, took umbrage and stated that he, Brahma created everything. A terrible quarrel resulted. Finally, Rudra cut off Brahma's fifth head and thereafter has been called Shiva. The head remained struck to Shiva's hand and it would not fall to the ground. Shiva fled to Varanasi and undertook great penance by the banks of the river. Shiva was absolved from his sin with the understanding that both he and Brahma would coexist. But as a part of his penance, he was to carry Brahma's skull with him wherever he went. So Shiva has always remained a searching ascetic.



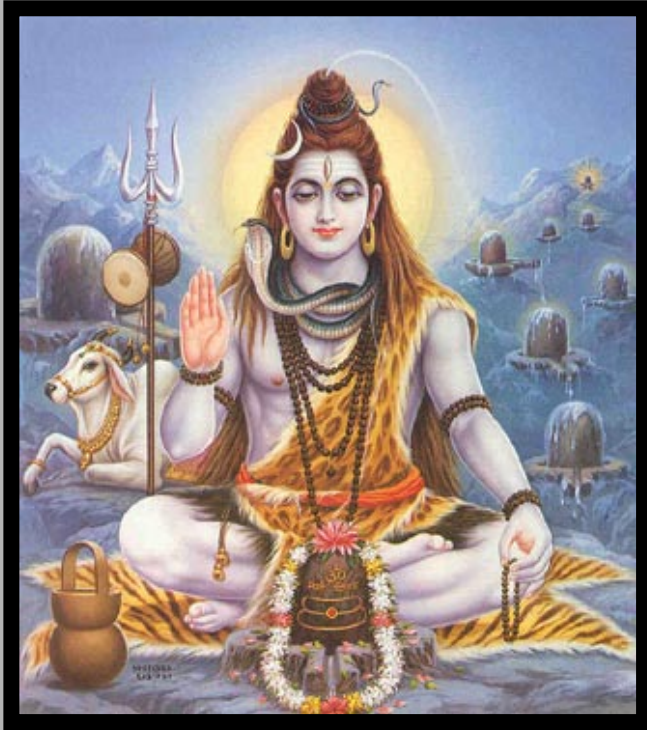
How Shiva came to be worshipped as a Linga?



There are several stories about how Shiva came to be represented as a Linga for worship. According to the Padmapurana, Bhrigu, the great ascetic came to visit Shiva at his abode. He was not allowed to enter immediately as Shiva was with Parvati. Bhrigu being hot tempered and impetuous cursed that whenever men contemplate on Shiva, the abiding representative image would be that of a linga and a yoni.



...How Shiva came to be worshipped as a Linga?



According to the Vamana Purana, Shiva was mad with grief when Sati died. He wandered from hermitage to hermitage, blind with sorrow, unseeing and restless. The hermit's wives fell in love with him and they followed him. This enraged the hermits and they cursed him, saying that he would lose his man-hood. Vishnu and Brahma were horrified and they interceded on Shiva's behalf, who remained unaware of all this commotion. The hermits agreed to take back their curse on the condition that Shiva be only represented by the Linga which then became an image of worship.



...How Shiva came to be worshipped as a Linga?



Another story from Shiva Purana describes how the King of Kamarupa triumphed over a monster by praying to the Linga. Bhima the monster became invincible after being granted a boon by Rama. He attacked the king of Kamarupa and grabbed his wealth and kingdom. The king was kept in solitary confinement in a dungeon. The king was a Shiva devotee and he kept making clay figures of the Linga and worshipped them daily. In the meanwhile the monster Bhima was becoming more powerful and evil. He conquered more kingdoms and banned all prayers and rituals. The gods were severely affected.



...How Shiva came to be worshipped as a Linga?



They begged Shiva to help them. Shiva promised that he would destroy Bhima through the prayers of the king of Kamarupa. One day, when the king was in meditation before the Linga, the guard entered his cell. In astonishment he ran to tell his master Bhima what was happening. Bhima pulled out his sword and roared at Kamarupa, who continued his meditation undeterred. Bhima shouted and shouted but the king would not respond. In fury, Bhima determined to strike off the king's head but he was afraid to touch a man in prayer. So he slashed at the clay Linga. Instantly, he realized his folly, for the Linga was indeed Shiva, and nothing could destroy him. Bhima and his army became worshippers of the Shiva Linga and caused great temples to be built for Shiva.



Shiva the Yogi



While Shiva was doing penance in Varanasi, many thoughts came to him. He was angry with himself for cutting off Brahma's head. He was sorrowful about his anger. There had to be way where by one could be detached and in control of one's mind. Then the revelation came to him. There had to be a balance between the mind and the body. There must be a union of the mental, physical and emotional processes.



...Shiva the Yogi



This was Yoga. Shiva started teaching, even as he himself learnt and experimented. He charged no fee and he told his students that they were reborn again and again because of their actions. His lessons were attended by sages, ascetics, goblins, monsters and gods. All these people felt the pressure of life, of want, of desire. After explaining the philosophy of Yoga, Shiva showed them how to go about it. He talked about becoming aware of one's actions and practicing discipline.



...Shiva the Yogi



He then demonstrated 840,000 poses (asanas) which were derived from birds, beasts and trees. These asana's affected the well being of the body and they energized the practitioners. He then taught pranayama (balance of life force) through breathing practices. He asked them to internalize their thoughts and feelings through pranayama. The final stage was through meditation which led to samadhi. His students listened open mouthed. They followed his instructions and they were ecstatic. They now knew the secret of life. They were at peace with themselves. Patanjali compiled these teachings in the Yoga Sutra.



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