

What Exactly Is A Shiva Lingam?

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Dedicated To

Sage Vyasa

Who Left for us the Treasure of Knowledge

“Truth is one; wise men speak of it variously.”

- Rigveda

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Preface

When I was a kid, there was a temple of Lord Shiva near my house with a Shiva lingam installed in it. I used to go there intermittently. At that time, I did not know its meaning. I just knew that it was an idol of Lord Shiva, who is a very powerful god and is capable of destroying the whole world if he opens his third eye. Actually, I was scared of him. In my adolescence also, I did not know much about it, but I had a faint idea what it could be because the word *linga* is used mainly to denote a sexual organ or gender in India, but I never talked about it with anyone.

When I grew young, one day I heard my mom whispering to someone about it being the sexual organs of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati. It was the first time I came to know about one of the meanings of the Shiva lingam. At that time, I wondered how we could worship sexual organs even if they are of divine personalities, but then I forgot about it and continued to be a devotee, as it did not make a difference.

Then in the book “The Da Vinci Code,” I read that the Shiva lingam is a symbolic representation of feminine and masculine principles, and so is the Star of David of Jews and other things in different cultures. From then, my perception of looking toward it changed. Then when the popularity and availability of the Internet increased in India and I started exploring Hinduism online as it is my favorite topic, I found that there were many misconceptions about Hinduism among Hindus, and most of them were not aware of real Hinduism, including me. E.g., until then, I did not know that Brahman is the supreme God in Hinduism. I just knew that the Hindu trinity is the most powerful god.

Therefore, I started a website named www.hinduismfacts.org to spread the word about Hinduism and also to learn new things about it. I learned many new things about it in due course, but I did not pay much attention to the Shiva lingam at that time. Also, I was working at that time and was quite busy. Therefore, it was difficult to dedicate a lot of time to this topic. In the year 2017, due to some health issues and other problems, I had to leave my job and got abundant time but was still involved in some other things. In the year 2020, I discovered that my real passion was studying Hinduism, and I was wasting my time on the things that I did not like much. Therefore, I decided to spend most of my time studying Hinduism in-depth but did not know where to start because Hinduism is so vast that even a lifetime is insufficient.

It was when I came across some arguments on Quora about the Shiva lingam, and I decided that my first topic for research would be the Shiva lingam. Also, I am a devotee of Lord Shiva, so it was a good place to start. Initially, I thought it would be easy to find out what it really is, but as I went on collecting more information about it, I understood that I was wrong. I had never thought of the conclusion that I arrived. This book is actually a part of my quest that I am sharing with you. I know some of you would agree with my perspective and some would not, but I have tried my best to give answers that would satisfy the queries of people with different perspectives.

- Mr. Rahul Dudhane

Must Read

To understand the real meaning of the Shiva lingam, first, we need to understand what Hinduism is and what makes the beliefs of Hindus.

Hinduism is a conglomeration of different doctrines and traditions, mainly based on the Vedas, and modified from time to time by great sages and saints without changing its core teachings. The set of beliefs that Hindus have are not only rooted in the Vedas, but also the Puranas, agamas, epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and other numerous religious literature and folktales. Astrology also plays an important role in a Hindu's life. These beliefs vary from region to region, sects to sects, and castes to castes. The upbringing of a person also plays an important role. E.g., a highly educated Hindu tries to find science in the customs and traditions, a spiritual Hindu tries to find spiritual meanings in them, while a less educated one would look at the things as they look like and will not question the faith.

The current form of Hinduism that is practiced by most of the Hindus is Puranic because most of the Hindu beliefs have their roots in the Puranas.

Archaeology is also an important factor to understand the meaning of the Shiva lingam, but it has its own limitations. There could be many things hidden in the womb of the Earth that are yet to be unraveled. Also, there are some things that governments do not reveal because of sociopolitical reasons. E.g., the excavation at the Dwaraka site in Gujarat was stopped suddenly without any valid reason. This site is actually one of the most important archaeological sites in India. Therefore, archaeology alone cannot be a decisive factor, but it would certainly help us arrive at a unanimous decision.

Mostly, when it comes to religious matters, we rely more on the scriptures than other things, but what if there are contradictions among the scriptures? Then, we have to consider the authoritativeness of the scriptures.

Hindu scriptures are divided mainly into two categories, viz. Shruti and Smriti.

A. Shruti: It means "that which is heard." The texts in this category are considered more authoritative because they are believed to be revealed by God and heard by humans (different sages in deep meditation). It consists of four Vedas.

1. Rigveda.
2. Yajurveda.
3. Samaveda.
4. Atharvaveda.

Each of these Vedas includes Upanishads, Samhitas, Brahmanas, and Aranyakas. Among the four Vedas, the Rigveda Samhita is the oldest and the most authoritative text.

B. Smriti: It means “that which is remembered.” The texts in this category are less authoritative than the Shruti texts because they are considered a derivative/secondary work.

It consists of a large number of texts, including but not limited to Vedangas, the Ramayana and Mahabharata, Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras, Arthashastras, Puranas, poetic literature, and commentaries on various texts.

Broadly speaking, Shruti texts are esoteric, and Smriti texts are for common people.

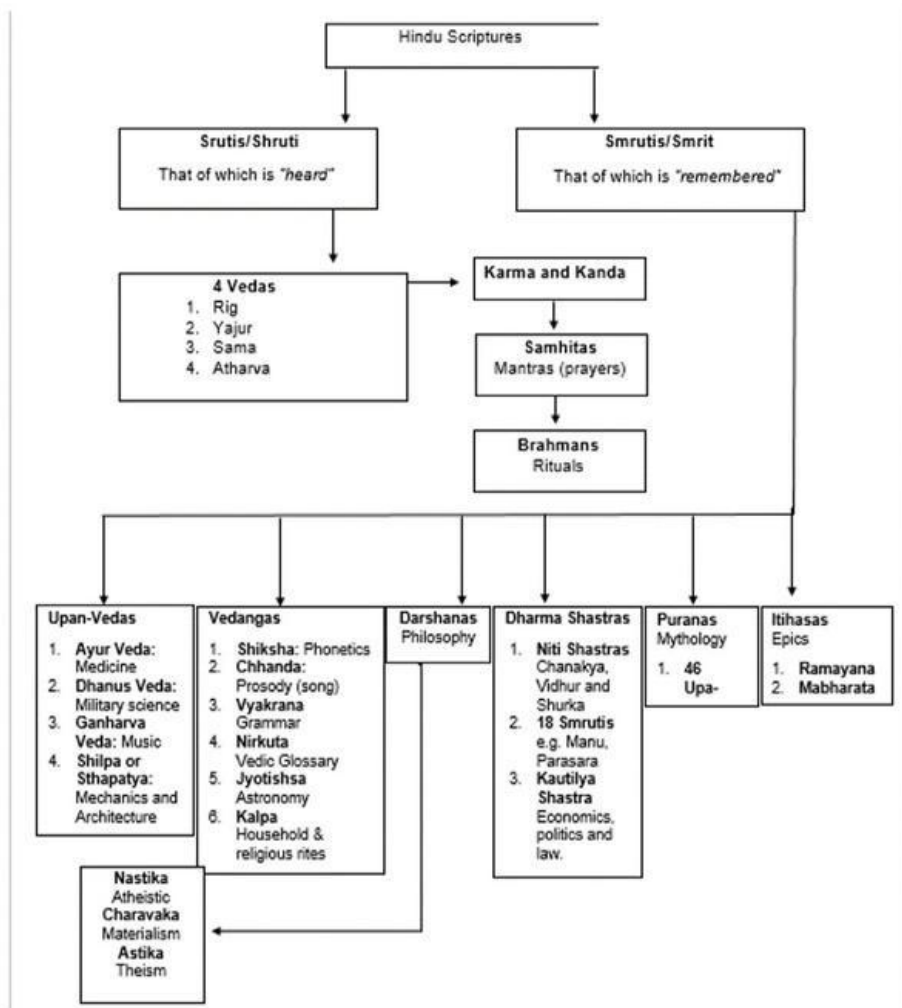


Image – Classification of Hindu texts

Credit: [Quora](#)

Smriti texts try to explain elaborately what is written in the Vedas. Many stories in the Puranas are expansions of the hymns in the Vedas.

We have to consider folktales also as they play an important role to form religious beliefs.

The main problem before us is that nothing is mentioned in the Shruti texts about the Shiva lingam. Rudra in the Vedas becomes Lord Shiva in the Puranas. Therefore, we have to largely rely on the Puranas, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata, especially the Puranas as they contain stories before the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and a lot of information related to the Shiva lingam.

In ancient times, knowledge was transmitted orally from generation to generation. When historians say that a particular book was written in a particular year, they are actually talking about the first written copy of that book that was found. There could be many older copies of that book that are not either found yet or succumbed to time or maybe, that book was just transmitted orally for thousands of years before being written. Therefore, even if modern historians believe that the Puranas were written around 300-400 CE, Hindus believe that they are millions of years old!

The current versions of the Puranas are believed to be compiled by the disciples of Sage Vyasa. The word Vyasa literally means “compiler.” Vyasa is not a name but a designation. Hindus believe that in every yuga, a Vyasa is born who compiles the ancient knowledge and passes it to future generations in a systematic way. The original name of Sage Vyasa, that we are talking about, is Krishna Dvaipayana. It is believed that he acquired this knowledge from Lord Brahma, Sage Narada, and Sanat Kumaras.

Sage Vyasa compiled the original Purana Samhita (collection of mantras) and gave it to his disciple, Lomaharshana, who imparted it to his disciples. The three of them created their own Samhitas. These three and the original one comprise the Mulasamhita, from which the later 18 Puranas were derived. Therefore, the Puranas could date back to around 3200-3100 BCE that is about 5000 years old. It is believed that originally, there were one crore (10 million) shlokas in them, but now there is only 4.5 lakh (0.45 million).

These Puranas were further updated by other sages. That is why there are many contradictions in them. This problem is not unique to Hindu scriptures. There are many contradictions in the Bible also.

The Puranas are polytheistic as well as henotheistic in nature. They proclaim that Brahman is the Supreme God, but seem confused when it comes to who is greater between Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu. Different stories in them depict how Lord Shiva is greater than Lord Vishnu and vice versa. We can see a clear competition between the devotees of Lord Shiva and Lord Vishnu.

Among the 18 Mahapuranas, the Linga Purana is dedicated to the Shiva lingam. Hence, we should consider it more authoritative than other Puranas (only in terms of the Shiva Lingam), but it does not mean that we should completely overlook other texts.

Another problem is the language. All the major Hindu scriptures are written in Sanskrit, and most of the Hindus do not understand it. Therefore, one has to rely mainly on translations. Many of these translations are done by foreigners, and the word *linga* is translated as “phallus” mostly. Hindu scholars also have followed the same path. Therefore, anyone who reads these scriptures does not even think that there could also be other meanings of the Shiva lingam.

Most of the stories in Hindu scriptures are allegorical. Especially with the advancement in science and technology, the new generation of Hindus strongly believes that all these stories contain a lot of scientific knowledge that needs to be deciphered. E.g., the ten stories of Dashavatara (ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu) can be interpreted in different ways, like:

- A. Literally, Lord Vishnu took ten incarnations and restored dharma.
- B. Symbolically, these ten incarnations depict important stages in evolution.
 1. Matsya (part-fish and part-man) - Animals in water like fish are born.
 2. Kurma (tortoise) – Amphibious animals are born.
 3. Varaha (part wild boar and part-man) - Herbivorous animals are born.
 4. Narasimha (part-lion and part-man) - Carnivorous animals are born.
 5. Vamana (dwarf) – Humans are born. Humans used hands and feet for moving from one place to another. Humans started walking on their feet.
 6. Parashurama (the man with an ax) - Humans started using iron (Iron Age).
 7. Rama (the man with a bow and arrows) - Humans started using semi-modern weapons like bow and arrow. They also developed a conscience and became more civilized.
 8. Krishna (a clever man with Sudarshana Chakra) - People became shrewd and started using more advanced weapons (heralding Kali Yuga).
 9. Buddha (who has attended wisdom) – Humans became enlightened or got supreme knowledge.
 10. Kalki - Very advanced human beings, both technologically and genetically.

Some people might argue that the association between Dashavatara and evolution is pseudoscience, but this is not the exception, there are many stories in the Hindu scriptures that prove that these stories contain a lot of scientific knowledge that was passed on to the next generation through stories.

Hindu sages had the knowledge of science, but they also knew that if it falls in the wrong hands, it could prove self-destructive. To prove my point, I have given more examples in the Chapter “Shiva Lingam as a Science Symbol.”

Therefore, in our quest to find out what the Shiva lingam is, we have to consider all those things.

The word scripture has two meanings, one of which is sacred texts. Here, I have used the word scripture as “a holy text.”

1. Introduction



Image 1.1 – The Shiva Lingam at Bhojpur Temple in Madhya Pradesh

Image Credit: [Vijay Tiwari09](#) (licensed under CC-BY-SA 4.0)

A Shiva *linga*, also known as Shiva lingam or *Shivling*, is a short cylindrical pillar-like structure that is rounded on top and fixed on a circular base with a vent. Usually, it is made of a black granite stone. It is one of the most worshiped idols as it is a symbol of Lord Shiva, who is a very popular Hindu god.

There are thousands of temples of Lord Shiva in the world, where people worship him in the form of a Shiva lingam. The most famous of them are 12 *Jyotirlinga* temples and Amarnath cave in India. Thousands of liters of milk are poured daily on Shiva lingams across the world to please Lord Shiva. In Hinduism, there is a subset of Shaivism known as Lingayatism (Lingayats believe theirs is a separate sect/religion), the followers of which worship Shiva in the form of a lingam only and wear it in a necklace.

Most of the Hindu houses contain altars where you would find a Shiva lingam. There are many stories related to it in the Hindu scriptures.

Shiva lingams are found in many parts of the world, including but not limited to India, China, Japan, Vietnam, Ireland, Italy, South Africa, Indonesia, Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Thailand.

The common notion about it is that physically it is a union of private parts of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati, and symbolically, it represents the masculine (*Purusha*) and feminine (*Prakriti*) aspects of God. But there are some problems with these assumptions. They cannot explain certain things that are in practice in Hinduism.

1. There is no mention of goddess Parvati or Shakti in the name “Shiva lingam”.
2. If the word *Jyotirlinga* means the Sign of Radiance, then why does Shiva *linga* mean the phallus of Lord Shiva?
3. The shape of a *Banalinga* is like an egg, and that of a *swayambhu* lingam is like a pillar mostly. There are no structures that represent feminine aspects in them, although some people believe the masculine and feminine aspects are intermingled in them.
4. It is paradoxical to attach sexual meaning to the Shiva lingam, as Lord Shiva is commonly known as an ascetic god.

Following are the five main views about what a Shiva lingam is:

1. Union of private parts of Lord Shiva and Goddess Parvati.
2. Phallus of Lord Shiva.
3. A cosmic pillar that symbolizes Supreme Brahman.
4. *Purusha* and *Prakriti* that symbolizes Supreme Brahman.
5. Scientific symbol.

In this book, we will see what the reasons are behind these views, but before going into that, we will get some essential information about the Shiva lingam in the next few chapters.

1.1 - Why is only Lord Shiva Worshiped in the Form of a Lingam?

The same question was asked by some sages to Suta who narrated the Shiva Purana. He answered it as follows (Shiva Purana, Vidyasvarasamhita, Chapter 5: 9-16):

“O sages, this question is holy and wondrous. Here the speaker is Śiva Himself and not any ordinary person. I shall tell you what Śiva Himself had said and what I heard from my own preceptor. Śiva alone is glorified as Niskala (nameless and formless) since He is identical with Supreme Brahman.

He is also Sakala as He has an embodied form. He is both Sakala and Niṣkala. It is in his Niṣkala aspect that the Liṅga is appropriate.

In the Sakala aspect, the worship of his embodied form is appropriate. Since He has the Sakala and Niṣkala aspects, He is worshipped both in the lingam and in the embodied form by the people and is called the highest Brahman. Other deities, not being Brahman, have no Niṣkala aspect anywhere. Hence, the deities are not worshipped in the formless Liṅga. The other deities are both non-Brahman and individual souls.

In view of their being embodied alone, they are worshipped solely in the bodily form. Sankara has Brahmatva and the others Jīvatva. This has been explained in the meaning of the Pranava (Om), the essence of Vedanta, by Nandikesvara when asked by Sanatkumara, the intelligent son of Brahma, at the mountain Mandara.”

From the above story, it is clear that Lord Shiva himself wants his devotees to worship him in his formless and nameless aspect, and he is the only god who is identical to Supreme Brahman.

There is a story in the Mahabharata (Drona Parva – Ch. CCI) where Ashwatthama asked Sage Vyasa the reason for his defeat by Lord Krishna and Arjuna. Sage Vyasa told him that he was defeated because Lord Krishna and Arjuna worshipped Lord Shiva in the potent form of a *linga* while he paid homage to Lord Shiva's image. Further, he tells him that one who is spiritually advanced can realize Lord Shiva in all forms and see *linga* as the source of all creation is only entitled to worship it.

Many other stories in the Puranas underline the importance of the worship of the Shiva lingam.

Therefore, Hindus worship only Lord Shiva in the form of a lingam.

Actually, this is partially true. Lord Vishnu is also worshiped in an abstract form as a *Shaligram* stone; although, it is not as popular and as common as a Shiva lingam. It is a black stone found on the banks of the Gandaki River in Nepal.

1.2 - Iconography

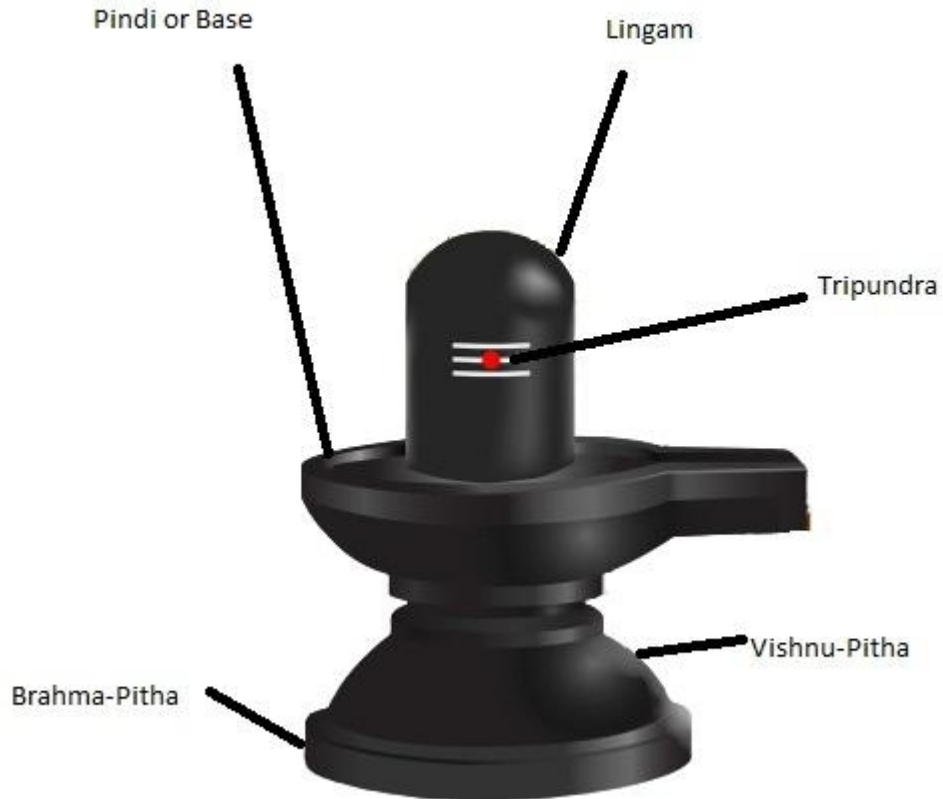


Image 1.2.1 – Shiva Lingam Structure and Nomenclature

The Shiva lingam shown in the above picture is the commonly worshiped type, but it is not necessary that it must be in this shape only.

According to the Linga Purana (1.74.19), there are mainly four parts of a Shiva lingam:

1. Lingam – an aniconic representation of Lord Shiva or Parashiva.
2. Pedestal, *Pindi*, *peetham*, base, *yoni*, or *shalunka* - an aniconic representation of Goddess Shakti or Parashakti, the manifesting power of God.
3. Vishnu *Peetham* – an elongated bowl-like structure that represents Lord Vishnu.
4. Brahma *Peetham* – the lowest circular base symbolizes Lord Brahma.

A Shiva lingam should be kept in such a way that its outlet should face north. Some priests apply *Tripundra* (the three horizontal lines) on a lingam that is the tilaka worn by Lord Shiva on his forehead. The red dot represents his third eye.

Some Shiva lingams have a metal snake coiled around it with its hood over the lingam. In most of the temples, a vessel, with a small hole at the bottom, containing water/milk is hung over it with a drop of water falling on it every few seconds. The shape and structure of a Shiva lingam vary from temple to temple.

In some temples, it is cylindrical with a rounded top and a *peetham*, while in some temples, it is depicted as a phallus without a *peetham*. In the Kedarnath Temple, it looks like a pyramid. Bana-lingams are egg-shaped and some *swayambhu* Shiva lingams look like a pillar. In many Shiva lingams, there are no Vishnu *peetham* and/or Brahma *peetham*. In *swayambhu* Shiva lingams and Bana-lingams, there is no pedestal also.

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