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Shaivism

Sneh Lata*

Research Scholar, Department of History, Panjab University Chandigarh

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Shaivism refers to a religious tradition, which focuses on the deity Shiva. The worshippers of god Shiva are called Shaivas.¹ Shaivism developed as a major system of religious beliefs and practices in India. It is very difficult to trace the early history of Shaivism. There are wide gaps in the available records, but we know that at each point where the veil of history lifts, the worship of Shiva was there. In the 7,000 years old Indus Valley Civilization, we find the famous seal of Shiva known as Lord Pashupati.² The seal shows Shiva seated in a yogic pose.³

Apart from some speculation over an Indus valley seal as a representation of Shiva, the earliest references to Shiva are also found in the *Rigveda* where three hymns are addressed to him as Rudra, 'the roarer'. Shaivism appears to have developed out of the worship of the Vedic god Rudra, in him was merged the concept of terrific and at the same time pacific Rudra Shiva.⁴ benevolent healer and cooler of disease.⁵ The early idea of Rudra –Shiva signified the power of the Omnipotent at first terrible and dreadful, but when appeased, was willing to listen to the prayers of men and grant them the boons. This idea of Rudra-Shiva appears to have been further developed under the wave of theistic influence. R. G. Bhandarkar has traced the history of Shaivism in India based on literary and epigraphic sources. According to him prayers, praise, and offerings could appease Rudra, who went about howling with the stormy winds.⁶ However, so close was the connection between the work of disintegration and reintegration that both were assigned to the presidency of one divine personification, who in his character of destroyer and

re-creator ought properly to be designated by the composite name Rudra-Shiva.⁷

The *Atharv Veda* describes Rudra in clear language as having the combination of two contradictory characteristics i.e., the benignant (Bhava), and the malignant (Sarva), and adds that the same god holds the thunderbolt in his hand for punishing the sinners.⁸

Rudra was a peripheral deity in the Vedic pantheon and the descriptions of him as living away from the Aryan communities may indicate that his origin was non-Vedic, yet the fact that he was included in these hymns shows that he was still, however peripherally, a part of the Vedic pantheon. While Rudra –Shiva was eulogized in the *Rig Veda* and identified with a theistic absolute in the *Shvetashvatra Upanishad*, there are other references to Shiva and Shiva worship. As Shiva made his presence known so forcefully and was, of necessity, absorbed within the Vedic pantheon, the Shiva traditions were incorporated into Vedic ideology and practice.⁹ In the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama worshipped Shiva, as did his rival Ravana. In the *Mahabharata*, we find again the worship of Shiva. Buddha in 624 B.C. was said to have been born in a Shaivite family.

Shaivism found increasing representation in Puran literature. The identification of Shiva with the one impersonal spirit of the Universe was really asserted categorically by Shaiva sectarians; Shaivism for them was exclusive devotion to god Shiva. God Shiva to the highest position in the Hindu system could be sought among the eighteen *Puranas*. These writings were more generally in favor of the supremacy of Vishnu, but a certain number, such as the *Linga Purana*, *Shiva Purana*, *Kumara Purana* and *Skanda Purana* have considered Shiva the supreme God.¹⁰ Architectural and sculptural evidence from all over India leaves no doubt about the popularity of

¹ John Cambell Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics, And Saints of India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi p. 109

² A.P. Karmarkar, *The Religions of India*, Vol. 1, Mira Publishing House, Lonavala (India), 1950, p. 6; A.L. Basham, *A Cultural History of India*, Oxford University Press, 1975, p.61

³ A.P. Karmarkar, *The Religions of India*, Vol. I, p. 6

⁴ J.N. Banerjee, 'Some Aspects of Traditional Hindu Religion', Bisheshwar Prasad (ed.), *Ideas in History*, Asia Publishing House, Delhi, 1968, p. 7.

⁵ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 151.

⁶ R.G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Systems*, Indological Book House, Varanasi, 1965, pp. 102-103.

⁷ Monier Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India Vedism, Brahmanism and Hinduism*, Oriental Books Corporation, New Delhi, 1974, reprint, p. 75.

⁸ Rabindra Kumar Siddhantashastree, *Saivism Through the Ages*, pp. 3-4.

⁹ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 150

¹⁰ Monier Williams, *Religious Thoughts and Life in India Vedism, Brahmanism and Hinduism*, pp. 73-74

Shaivism. The symbol of Lord Shiva known as Shivalinga and its worship came into existence long before the advent of image-worship. As regards the origin of image-worship, some indications of it are found in the *Mahabhasya* of Patanjali.¹¹

The belief in Rudra Shiva became established in ancient times before further developments raised him to the status of supreme creator and ruler of the universe.¹² Shiva himself was converted into a fierce universe destroyer (*Sarva-bhuta-hara*), who annihilated at the end of every great age (*kalpa*) not only men and all created things, but good and evil demons, and even Brahma, Vishnu and all the inferior gods. He was called *Smasana-vasin*, 'dweller in burial-places'. Cemeteries and burning grounds were his favourite haunts; imps and demons (*bhutas* and *pisacas*) were his ready servants. One legend made him wear the bones and skulls as ornaments and garlands.¹³

Shiva was a god of ambiguity and paradox. He has been described by Wendy Doniger O' Flaherty as the 'erotic ascetic', who was also the celibate yogi, practicing austerities in the Himalayas. He was the three-eyed god who had burn desire with his third eye, danced in the cremation ground and yet seduced the sages' wives in the pine forest. He was the wild matted-haired ascetic, yet he was also the ideal family man and householder with a wife, Parvati, and their two sons.¹⁴ Uma or Parvati came to be associated with Shiva as his consort.¹⁵ The marriage of Shiva and Parvati became a popular motif in sculpture, Ganesha and Karttikeya became associated with them. Ganga's descent from the matted locks of Shiva became an important myth. The prelude in *Udaypur Prasasthi* describes Shiva with Ganga and snakes garland.¹⁶ He is also shown in sculpture as the master of dancing, musical instruments, Shastras and yoga. Equally popular are images in which he is depicted standing side by side with Uma or sitting with her on Nandi, Parvati has been depicted sitting on his thigh in the Uma Maheshavaree image.¹⁷

The most important thing to discern with reference to the Shaiva tradition is that Shiva is the epitome of the androgynous god. When Shiva is in his androgynous form, he is referred to as *ardhanarisvara*. He has the female form in one-half of his body. In splendor, he is comparable to the fire. By his own will, he can divide himself into two, separate women, and a separate

man. The name *Arddha-nariswara*, though mentioned in the records of Garjara Pratihara family and Sena epigraphs refers to Shiva with his spouse Parvati in their half figures.¹⁸ The term Shiva, the sage as androgynous, interprets itself.¹⁹

The earliest historical record, which mentions the worship of Shiva, is that of Megasthenes, the Greek envoy to Pataliputra, in about 300 B.C. He describes the two Indian deities under the name of Dionysus and Herakles, generally identified as Shiva and Krishna.²⁰ Megasthenes noted the worship of Shiva in his book *Indica*. He thought that the deity whom Indians worshipped was Dionysus, a Greek god who had some affinity with Shiva.²¹

Some of the foreign dynasties who established their rule in the Indian subcontinent such as the Sakas, Pallavs and Kushanas often turned to Shaivism. Shaivism became popular as it was given royal patronage by the Kushana rulers. Some of the Kushana rulers were ardent Shaivites and minted their coins with image of Shiva and his emblems.²² Wema Kadphises, a powerful prince of the Kushana race, who ruled over a large part of northern and North-Western India about the middle of the third century A.D., was an ardent devotee of Maheswara, as he had the image of the God Shiva holding a trident in his hand and a figure of a Nandi imprinted on the coins issued by him.²³ Kandhaphises II was a follower of Shiva. His successor Kanishka was also a worshipper of Shiva.

During the Gupta period (c.320-500CE), Puranic religion developed and expanded. This expansion was accompanied by the development of Brahmanical form of worship, the *smarta* or *pauranika*, based on those texts. With the decline of the Guptas, while smarta worship was well established, there occurred an increase of esoteric cults, many of which, or elements of which, became absorbed into *brahmanical* forms of worship. The *Shiva Puranas*, *Linga Purana* contained Shiva elements such as the installing of *linga* in temples, descriptions of various forms of Shiva, information on asceticism and yoga, particularly the yoga of the Pasupatas - the earliest Shaiva sect.²⁴

Shaivism rose to prominence during the Gupta period. The inscription of the Gupta period bears many

¹¹ Rabindra Kumar Siddhantashastree, *Saivism Through the Ages*, p. 50

¹² R.G.Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism, Saivism and Minor Systems*, pp. 102-104.

¹³ Monier Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India Vedism, Brahmanism and Hinduism*, p. 82.

¹⁴ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 15.

¹⁵ John Cambell Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India*, p. 112.

¹⁶ Jas Burgess, R. Hultsch and A. Puhler, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. I, Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1983, p. 233.

¹⁷ J.S Grewal, *Social and Cultural History of Punjab: Prehistoric, Ancient and Early Medieval*, Manohar, New Delhi, 2004, p. 156.

¹⁸ Hirananda Sastri, *Epigraphia Indica*, Vol. XIX, 1927-28, Archaeological Survey of India, Delhi, 1983, p. 175

¹⁹ Carl Olson, *The Saiva Mystic and the Symbol of Androgyny*, Journal of Religious Studies, Cambridge University Press, Vol. 17 no. 3 September 1981, p. 378.

²⁰ R.C.Manjundar, *The Age of Imperial Unity*, Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay, 1951, p. 456

²¹ Sudhakar Chattopadhyaya, *The Evolution of Hindu Sects: Up to the Time of Sankaracarya*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1970, pp. 4-7.

²² D.C. Sircar, *Studies in Indian Coins*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1968, p. 11

²³ D.A. Pai, *Religious Sects in Ancient India*, Eastern Book Linkers, Delhi, reprint 1981, p. 63. See also R. G. Bhandarkar, *Vaishnavism Saivism and Minor Religious Systems*, p. 115

²⁴ Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 154

epithets of its popularity. Ujjain rose to prominence as an important Shaivite centre. Many sacred texts of Shaivism were composed during this period, which included *Agamas*, *Tantras* and *Puranas* connected with Lord Shiva and mother Goddess. Shaivism continued to flourish during the post Gupta period also. Pushyabhuti, one of king Harsha's ancestors, was an ardent devotee of Shiva and Harsha himself offered his devotions to Shiva.²⁵ The influence of vigorous brahmanical revival in the north did not fail to show itself in the south and during the two centuries of the early Chalukya dynasty (550-750 A.D.), the Brahmanical form of Hindu religion received special attention.

The Satavahanas ruled a vast territory in the south for over 400 years in the post Mauryan era. They patronized Vedic religion and worshipped many gods including Shiva and Skanda.²⁶ They worshipped Shiva under such names as Shiva, Mahadeva, Bhava and Bhutapala. They also worshipped his vehicle Nandi and his son Skanda. The Chandels of Bundelkhand in the 9th century A.D. built more than 30 temples of Shiva and other deities at Khajuraho. During the same period elsewhere, the Rajput rulers built many temples in honor of Shiva and Shakti. In the south, the Chalukyas, the Pallavas and the Cholas built many temples in honour of Shiva, like and one at Badami, the Kailasanatha Temple at Kanchi, Briahdiswara Temple at Tanjore. The Pallava Kings witnessed the development of Shaiva literature of the Tamils. For the first time, we hear of Shaiva *siddhanta* being mentioned in one of the Pallava inscriptions.²⁷

The Cholas were also great devotees of Shiva. One of the great patrons of medieval Shaivism was the Chola king Rajaraja I. He built many temples in his honor but one of the greatest was by Rajarajesvara the most impressive temple of India, with a granite tower of fourteen stories, measuring 190 feet by 250 feet. The main deity of the temple was a colossal Shiva Linga.²⁸ This temple received the homage and offerings by the king, his family and his kingdom. Rajaraja himself presented gold articles weighing almost five hundred pounds troy weight, silver objects of more than six hundred pounds troy and myriad jewels. The king's elder sister Kundavai was the second generous donor of silver and jewels. Rajaraja also gave land, making over the royal share of produce from numerous villages throughout his dominion and as far as Sri

Lanka. These endowments yielded a huge annual income of the temple. To supply ghee for cooking and burning oil lamps, livestock was donated to the temple. One inscription details 2,832 cows, 1,644 ewes, and 30 she-buffalos that were assigned to 366 cowherds, who were in turn required to supply ghee to the temple at the rate of one *ulakku* (roughly half a pint) per day for every 48 cows or 96 ewes (an *ulakku* of ghee per day was to keep a 'perpetual lamp' burning continuously).²⁹

During the 10th century A.D., Shiva temples were built in Assam also.³⁰ The epigraphy of Rajputa kings contains numerous references to the Shiva temples, their construction and donations to the deity. The Paramara records describe the construction of the temple of Nilakantha and Mahakala. Mahamandaleswara Temple was founded by a feudatory of Paramara king Jaya Singh in the honor of Shiva.³¹ Ratanpur inscription of 11th century A.D. describes the construction of two Shiva temples at Kumarkota.³² In 919 A.D., a Shiva temple was built in the name of Kedar Shiva.³³ In Gwalior inscription of King Bauk, we find an important verse of lord Shiva whose temple was built by the king in the name of Siddheswar Mahadeva.³⁴ Hence Shiva became to his worshippers the great god (*Mahadeva*) and lord of the universe (*jagat-pitri*, *visva-natha*), who, although he had numerous forms, was generally worshipped under one mystical shape- a plain upright stone, the sign or symbol (*linga*) of generative and creative power – scattered in millions of shrines over every part of India.³⁵ Shiva was called Mahadeva, Sambhu and *Tryambaka*.³⁶ He was Mahasvera- the lord of Bhuts. Shiva was called Nilakantha because he drank the poison at Brahman's bidding.³⁷

Shiva was a God of Himalayan. He was the God of the land of the *rishis*. His home was Kailash and the Manasarovar Lake, which was also the origin of the Vedic Saraswati River.³⁸ Varanasi was the strong

²⁵ D.A. Pai, *Religious Sects in Ancient India*, p. 63.

²⁶ Durga Prasad, *History of the Andhras upto 1565 A.D.*, P.G. Publishers, Guntur, pp. 43, 57

²⁷ T.B. Siddalingaiah, *Origin and Development of Saiva Siddhanta Upto 14th Century*, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai, 1979, pp. 13-16

²⁸ Richard H. Davis, *Worshipping Siva in Medieval India: Ritual in an Oscillating Universe*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 2008 reprint, pp. 4-5; Sita Narasimhan, *Saivism Under the Imperial Cholas as Revealed Through Their Monuments*, Sharada Publishing House, 2006, p. 14

²⁹ Richard H. Davis, *Worshipping Siva in Medieval India*, p. 5

³⁰ Thomas Watters, *On Yuan Chwang's Travels in India*. Vol. II, Royal Asiatic Society, London, 1904, p. 186.

³¹ Hirananda Sastri, K.N. Dikshits and N.P. Chakravarti, *Epigraphia Indica and Record of the Archaeological Survey of India*, Vol. XXI, Manager of Publications, 1931- 32, Delhi, p. 42.

³² *Epigraphia Indica and Record of the Archaeological Survey of India*, Vol. XXVI, pp. 268-9.

³³ *Epigraphia Indica and Record of the Archaeological Survey of India*, Vol. 1, p. 40.

³⁴ *Epigraphia Indica and Record of the Archaeological Survey of India*, Vol. XVIII, p. 96.

³⁵ Monier Williams, *Religious Thought and Life in India*, p. 78

³⁶ A.Birth, *The Religions of India*, S. Chand & Co., Delhi, 1969, p. 161.

³⁷ E.W.Hopkins, *Epic Mythology*, Indological B.H., Varanasi, 1968, p. 219.

³⁸ David Frawley, *Gods, Sages and Kings: Vedic Secrets of Ancient Civilization*, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi, 1993, p. 228.

hold of Shaivism in northern India.³⁹ Some records from Rajputana also contain references of Shiva temples.⁴⁰ These accounts of the erection of the Shiva temples by different rulers support the contention that Shiva worship was more popular in Madhya Pradesh, Central India, Rajaputana and southern India. Shaivism was undoubtedly the most successful among the religious systems that received royal patronage during the early medieval period. The epigraphy records of various dynasties ruling over northern India in ancient and early medieval period abound with the account of Shiva cult, which flourished in this age.

Corresponding Author

Sneh Lata*

Research Scholar, Department of History, Panjab University Chandigarh

E-Mail – arora.kips@gmail.com

³⁹ Samuel Beal, (tr.), *SI-YU-KI: Buddhist Records of The Western World*, Vol. II, Trubner & co., Ludgate Hill, London, 1884, pp. 44-5.

⁴⁰ *Epigraphia Indica and Record of the Archaeological Survey of India*, Vol. II, P. 119.