

Linga - Its Antiquity, Evolution and Significance in Veerashaivism

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Veerashaivism is an outgrowth and offshoot of Shaivism. The worship of Shiva constitutes the center of this religion. Shiva is worshipped in two ways: 1) Sthavara Linga form (Linga worshipped in a temple after it is formally and ritually installed), and 2) Ishtalinga (Linga worshipped in a personal way and always carried on the body). Ishtalinga constitutes a very significant part of Veerashaivism and it is the bedrock of Astavarana. In this article, an attempt is made to describe its antiquity, evolution, and significance in the Indian cultural tradition as well as in Veerashaivism.

The antiquity of Linga is traced to Indus Valley Culture or Harappan culture. Sir John Marshall defines Indus Valley as pre-Aryan and non-Aryan. He was the Director-General of Archeology during the British Rule. He and his colleagues conducted the first extensive excavations of the Harappa and Mohenjodaro region from 1927-1931. He has written three volumes on this culture. He traced the origin of the worship of Shiva in human as well as Linga form in the Harappan culture. The date of this culture has been estimated to range from 5000 BC to 1500 BC.

The view that Indus Culture is pre-Aryan and non-Aryan is now generally accepted by scholars. This view is based on the differences between the Vedic-Aryan religion and the religion of the Indus people. Shaivism and Veerashaivism have also been traced to this culture, because the worship of Shiva, central to both, was practiced by the people belonging to this cultural tradition. Now we may refer to the discovery of Shiva in the sites of the Indus Valley Culture.

One seal found in the northern area of Mohenjodaro depicts a figure seated in Yogic, Ithyphallic posture. It is surrounded by a tiger, elephant, rhinoceros, water buffalo, and deer. He wears a horned headdress. It appears to have more than one face. Probably it is a tiger mask. He wears tiger skin on his torso and bangle on his arms. Stanley Wolpert, an American historian, and eminent Indologist believes that "This image may be the earliest artistic depiction of Shiva, India's Great God, (Maheshwara)' as 'Lord of Beasts', (Pashupati)."

From the great number of phallic stones discovered at the Indus sites and from the popularity of the Bull (Nandi) as a device on the seals, eminent archeologists and historians have concluded that Shiva was worshipped in several of his subsequent forms by the people of the Harappan Culture.

Another fascinating seal from Mohenjodaro also seems to depict the three-horned deity (the trident is one of Shiva's symbols) standing in the middle of a tree, from whose center he appears to have emerged. Another figure outside the tree is bent in the suppliant posture with arms raised as though in worship to the 'Tree-God'. Behind him, the bull (Nandi) stands in waiting. Beneath them, both stand seven girls who may be dancing around the "Sacred Tree", in festive joy. They perhaps were celebrating harvest or some ancient rites of spring.

Thus the people of the Indus Valley practiced the worship of Linga. Some of the polished stones have been identified with the Linga. It is likely that the Hindus inherited the worship of Shiva in human form. This is perhaps reinforced by the prevalence of the bull (the vehicle of Shiva) or of bull-like animals amongst the symbols. Thus as Lunia points out, "Shaivism has its origin deep-rooted in the Indus valley civilization...the discovery of pointed conical clay, shell and stone pieces, which represents exactly like a Shiva-Linga and explains the worship of Linga in the Indus valley...the cult of Linga worship is borrowed from the Indus valley culture." Since Veerashaivism existed as a branch of Shaivism for a long time, the existence of Veerashaivism may also be traced to the period of the Indus valley culture. The existence of small Linga-like stones indicates that people of that period probably wore the Linga on their bodies, although no definite connection can be established.

During the Vedic period, a gradual synthesis of non-Aryan and Aryan religious beliefs and practices must have taken place. For example, Agni and Rudra of the Vedic period were integrated into non-Aryan Shiva. This shows how the synthesis of Aryan and non-Aryan elements was achieved in the Hindu religion. It is interesting to note that in the early period, Linga represented the Trimurti concept. It means Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara were integrated into a Linga. In this integrated form, Brahma occupied the lower portion of a Sthavara Linga and Vishnu occupied the middle portion and Shiva represented the Sthanu or top position, which looked like a pillar. Later on, Linga came to be exclusively associated with Shiva and the synthetic concept associated with Linga disappeared. On many occasions, as practiced by some sects, Linga was linked with Tantric symbols.

Veerashaivism transformed Linga into a great symbol of worship. From the congregational type of worship of the Sthavara Linga in the temples, Veerashaivism particularly after the twelfth century AD transformed it into a personal form of divine worship. Thus, Veerashaivism made Linga more individualized and personal. Veerashaivism revolutionized the concept of Linga

and made it mandatory on the part of the faithful to wear it on the body. Thus, formless Shiva came to be symbolized and worshipped in the palm.

Eminent scholar C. Shivaramamurthy wrote: “Undoubtedly Shiva the formless is usually shown in his Linga form (in temples and sculptures). Even where the mukhalinga is shown, the face is only part of the symbolic representation of Shiva as the Linga, since even where there is Chaturmukha and the concept is multilateral, the emphasis is still on the formless post-like Sthanu form of Shiva Linga”.

We may now refer to two famous representations of Shiva in Linga form belonging to the ancient period. One Shiva Linga was discovered at Bhita, in Uttara Pradesh, and has been kept in a museum at Lucknow, Uttara Pradesh. It is called the Bhita Shiva Linga and has five heads on Shiva. It belongs to the early Sunga period. It suggests a representation of Sadshiva, with the face connoting tatpurusha, Isana Aghora, Vamadeva, and Sadyojata.

Another famous representation of Shiva Linga in ancient India comes from Gudimallam, near Renigunta in Andhra Pradesh. This is the earliest Sthavara Linga in south India. Gudimallam Linga is five feet high and a two-armed figure of Shiva is seated on it. It testifies to the existence of Shaivism in south India, probably in the second century BC. Scholars point out that this Linga represents an “ordinary kind of Shaivism”. According to Shivaramamurthy, the Gudimallam Linga is a combination of Agni, Rudra, and to an extent the Ashtamurthi concept. Many ancient Indian coins dating back to a few centuries before the Christian era, contains figures of Shiva in human as well as Linga form. Such figures depicting Shiva both in human as well as Linga form in a single piece of stone was commonplace. It is called Lingodhava Murthy of Shiva. Later on Mukha-Linga, that is, Linga bearing Shiva-Mukha either on one side (Eka-Mukha) or on four sides (ChaturMukha) was adopted for worship. Sometimes a four-armed standing of Shiva was carved on one side of Linga. Such figures came to be worshipped from the second century AD.

Lingas without any figure of Shiva carved on them, dated in the first few centuries of the Christian era, have been found in the Mathura region of North India. This shows that afterward, it became a general custom to install Shiva Linga only in temples and use them as main objects of worship. Shiva with two or four arms with his bull (Nandi) by his side was depicted on coins of the Indo-Sythian, Indo Parthian rulers, and Kushana kings of ancient India. Sometimes, figures of Shiva and Parvathi, his consort, were carved in red stone. This sculptural representation of Shiva is called Uma Maheshwara.

In the course of the evaluation of the concept of Shiva, we see that in many Shiva temples in India we do not see the Idol of Shiva but only Linga. We have a wonderful Linga representation in parts of the country. The Linga of ice at Amarnath in Kashmir in the North of India and Linga of White precious stones (Sphaticamani) at Rameshwaram in the far south of India and the stone Shiva Linga at Ujjain in the center of India and Varanasi in Uttara Pradesh have been objects of worship and reverence by thousands of pilgrims annually, even today. The great epics of the country, namely, Ramayana and Mahabharatha, sing the glories of Shiva. He became a member of the Holy Trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Maheshwara, or Shiva). He holds Trishula as his weapon and uses the bull or Nandi as his vehicle.

Now we may examine the significance of Linga in Veerashaivism. Guru's grace manifests itself in the disciple's palm as Linga. Angha is the seeker of the Divine. If he is invested with Linga, he gradually gravitates towards surrender to God. Lingadharana is the seeker's spiritual rebirth. It denotes the grace of the Guru, who represents Parashiva in person. The Guru bestows the Linga upon the disciple by way of initiation or Diksha. He performs this Diksha by means of word, touch, sight, or even by a mere wish. Ishtalinga has worn upon one's person denotes Shiva-Shakti. The Linga presented by Guru functions as AcharaLinga in the nose, as Guru-Linga in the tongue, as Shiva Linga in the eyes, as Jangama-Linga worn in the touch, as Prasada-Linga in the ears, and Mahalinga in the heart. The Linga worn on the person is termed Ishtalinga and Linga meditated in the center of the heart, Pranalinga. The serene peace is derived as Ayath-Linga Svayatlinga and SannihitLinga respectively. The seeker's meditation upon the six Lingas seated in his Angas is known as his Achara or discipline, for the mastery of Shatsthala, Bhakta, Maheshwara, Prasadi, Pranalingi, Sharana, and Aikya together form Shatsthala.

Lingayat devotee called Maheshwara is a monotheist. He never worshiped anything except Ishtalinga. Polytheistic worship of several gods denotes fear and one who fears is no Maheshwara. Allamaprabhu has beautifully revealed the meaning of Ekeshwaranishta or monotheism, in these words:

“They are neither brave nor resolute
Who cannot ride the ready horse
Yet ask for another one.”

A Veerashaivism devotee offers eight-fold worship and sixteen-fold service to Linga.

The above studies lead us to draw a few general conclusions: Linga worship may be traced back to Indus Valley Culture. Shiva was worshipped in human

form as well as in Linga form (inanimate) with Nandi as his vehicle in the ancient period. He was represented in Indian art. During the Vedic age, the Aryan and non-Aryan elements were integrated into Shaivism. Thus Rudra and Agni were identified with Shiva. Linga In the early stages of evolution was combined in the Trimurthi concept. But later on, Linga came to be exclusively symbolized with Shiva. Bhita ShivaLinga and the Gudimallam ShivaLinga represent two significant developments in the evolution of the concept of Shiva in India. Shiva Lingas of different types scattered all over the Indian subcontinent at different holy places indicates the fundamental unity of Shaiva culture and traditions. Shiva symbols were put on the coins even by foreign invaders who had built their political power in ancient India. The national epics of Hindus have glorified the concept of Shiva. Lastly, Veerashaivism, particularly Shivasharanas popularized the worship of the Ishtalinga. Linga worship became individual-centered and integrated the devotee in Veerashaivism with Guru, Jangama, and Shatsthala, which became the highest ideal of Veerashaivism. In fact, the followers of Veerashaivism are also rightly called Lingayats.