

CHAPTER - 5

THE MYTHOLOGICAL BRIDGE

Mythological Studies investigate the understanding of human experience revealed in mythology and in the diverse links between myth and ritual, literature, art, culture, and religious experience. Regarding the importance of myth and mythological studies Doniger¹ observes:

“Myth is cross-culturally translatable, which is to say comparable, commensurable. The simultaneous engagement of the two ends of the continuum, the same and the different, the general and the particular, requires a peculiar kind of double vision, and myth, among all genres is uniquely able to maintain that vision. Myth is the most interdisciplinary narrative”

Skanda Purana: Providing the building blocks for Saiva mythology

The study of *Saiva* mythology has made significant progress during the last two decades with the ‘discovery’ of the original *Skanda Purana*.. Chitgopekar believes that Puranic myths are “multivocal”; having several layers of meanings, hence our approach to them should be eclectic. As all myths are part of an ongoing oral and textual tradition, rather than tracing the stages of their evolution, she has delineated their salient features.

With the discovery of the ancient 6th -7th CE text of *Skanda Purana*, *Saiva* mythology has made significant progress. The orders and sects relegated to background in later Saivite texts like *Pasupatas* and *Kapalikas* are now seen in a completely different light. Explaining the importance of this text in understanding early forms of *Saiva* religion Chitgopekar² says:

‘This anonymous 6th/7th-century text stands as a model of an early Saiva Purana presenting an integrated view of the cosmos and its affairs in which the god Śiva is regarded as supreme.’

¹ Doniger, Wendy. *The Implied Spider: Politics and Theology in Myth*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998, p.9

² Chitgopekar, ‘Encountering Saivism, the deity, the milieu, the entourage, Pub. By The Hindu, 1998

The *Siva Maha Purana* starts with the *Siva Purana Mahatyam*, which is actually an extract from the *Skanda Purana*, hence implying the importance of the latter text. *Skandapurana* furnishes a description of sacred Saiva sites. It comes across as a very valuable source for the history and geographical spread of early *Saivism*. In addition it contains an account of the origins of the *Pasupata* movement in its descriptions of Karohana, the site of Siva's descent as *Lakulisa*. Bisschop³ talks about two different versions of *Skandapurana*, one transmitted in early Nepalese palm-leaf manuscripts, another transmitted in two later recensions styled *Ambikakhanda* and *Revakhanda*. The latter version has never been published before and opens up new perspectives for the study of the transmission of Puranic literature and the historical development of *Saivism*. While talking about early *Saivism* the text focuses a lot on *Pasupata* form of *Saivism* hence making it very important for my study. Out of seven khandas three *Mahesvara*, *Kashi* and *Prabhasa* khanda are important for our study.

Mahesvara khand as the name itself suggests its importance after eulogizing Siva and attributing a subsidiary status to Visnu and Brahma moves to explaining the myth of *Daksavadha*. Interestingly the myth is narrated by *Lomas Rishi* and apart from narrating the story he focuses on the importance of *Purta* activities like building temples for Siva and its merits. *Lomas Rishi* has been established as a *Saivite* ascetic following a very harsh regimen, in the earlier chapters. The possibility of his being a *Pasupata* has also been discussed.

“Sage Lomesh told the assembled sages--- One who brooms the courtyard of Shiva temple attains to Shiva loka. Those who make offerings of incense to lord Shiva not only liberate himself from the bondage of this world but also both his 'Kulas'. One who gets constructed a Shiva temple or renovates it, attains incomparable virtue. One who chants the holy mantra 'OM NAMA SHIVAY' daily and begins his day by visiting Shiva temple in the morning becomes absolved of all his sins.”⁴

³ Bisschop Peter, *Early Saivism and the Skandapurana: Sects and Centres*, Groningen, The Netherlands Egbert Forsten 2006

⁴ Tagare, G.V, *Skanda Purana*, MLBD, Delhi, 1996

It is after killing *Daksa* for his insolence that we counter the raudra form of *Siva* who gives way to a yogic *Siva*, a lord unmoved by everything around. O'Flaherty has aptly described how *Siva* at this stage of extreme asceticism comes across as the most efficient seducer. This handsome ascetic form of *Siva* seduces the wives of saptarishis and in their anger they curse him to get castrated. Significantly *Skanda Purana* does not mention this 'Myth of pine forest' which seems to have a different and probably late origin. It rather talks about extreme asceticism of *Siva* which the gods wanted to break as it was prophesied that only *Siva's* son could kill *Tarakasura* who was creating havoc in all the three worlds. So the birth of *Skanda* and creating the right atmosphere for this noble birth is what this section of *Skanda Purana* is majorly dedicated to.

The deities were aware that after the death of *Sati*, *Siva* had lost all interest in life and was living like a recluse and to get him back to the act of creation was a daunting task. Meanwhile *Sati* was born as *Girija*, the daughter of *Himalaya* with a wish to get *Siva* as her husband. When *Siva* remained unmoved gods appointed *Kamadeva* to hit *Siva* with his arrow and arouse passion and desire in him. *Siva* was angered and he opened his third eye to burn *Kamadeva* to ashes. The significance of ashes is suggested here. The PS maxim:

"Every thing is ashes" is proved here. The body of desires is nothing but ashes.

Now *Girija* commenced her penance to please Lord Shiva. There was a great turmoil in the world on account of her penance. Lord Visnu led the deities to *Siva* and requested him to marry *Girija* so that the world could be protected from the torments of *Tarakasur*. Finally, *Siva* gave his consent and went to the place where *Girija* was doing penance.

This act of *Parvati* to win *Siva* or rather to counter *Siva's* extreme asceticism with her own extreme penance forms an interesting motif. To use O'Flaherty's terminology the route of 'asceticism' was chosen by *Parvati* to become a partner of 'erotic' *Siva*. Matching his asceticism she wanted to win him over.

After reaching to the place where *Parvati* was meditating, *Siva* found her engrossed in her penance. *Parvati* was surrounded by her few trusted companions. *Siva* decided to test *Parvati's* devotion towards him. So he disguised himself as a hermit and asked her companions about the reason why *Parvati* was doing such a severe Penance. Jaya, one of *Parvati's* companions informed him that her friend was doing penance in order to get *Siva* as her husband. Lord Shiva, who was in the guise of a hermit said—

"Why is this tender girl so eager to marry Shiva who is an embodiment of inauspiciousness--who carries a skull in his hand and who lives in a crematorium. How can your friend think of marrying one who has been expelled by Daksha from the yagya ceremony? Does your friend know that Shiva wears a snake around his neck and is surrounded by numerous spirits and ghosts?"

Parvati, who had been listening to all those nonsensical utterances, told Jaya---'This fellow seems to abhor Shiva. We should not talk to this evil person. Tell him to leave at once.' Lord *Siva* was extremely pleased by *Parvati's* unwavering devotion towards him. He appeared in his original form and said--'You can ask for anything you wish.'

But *Parvati* replied--- 'O Supreme Lord! I am the same Sati for the sake of whom you had destroyed *Daksha's yajna*. Don't you recognize me? There is a great purpose behind my reincarnation. A son born to us would kill Tarakasur. So go to my father and request for my hand in marriage.' But Lord Shiva refused to make a request to Himalaya considering it as an undignified act. He then returned to the place where he had been meditating. After a while, *Himalaya* and *Mena* arrived there and asked *Parvati* how her penance had been progressing. *Parvati* narrated the whole incident how Lord Shiva had finally given his consent to marry her. *Himalaya* and *Mena* were extremely pleased by this good news.⁵

⁵ Details from 'Excerpts from Skanda Purana, www.gita-society.com/scriptures/ALL18MAJORPURANAS.IGS.pdf

This myth can be seen materialized in various sculptural panels from West and South India showing the marriage of *Siva* and *Parvati* but the elaborate description in cave 21 at Ellora (Ramesvara) is worth mentioning separately. It is believed to have been inspired by *Kalidasa's* poem *Kumarasambhava* written about the birth of *Skanda*. *Kalidasa* seems to have been well versed with the mythological details of this incident and he even mentions the kind of penances and hardships faced by young *Parvati*. These practices like "*pancagni tapas*", wearing animal skin and so on reminds us of *Lakulisa-Pasupata* aspirants and their harsh practices⁶.

Kalidasa's epic *Kumarasambhava* ("Birth of *Kumara*") details with matchlessly lyrical beauty the story of the maiden *Parvati*: her devotions aimed at gaining the favor of *Siva*, the subsequent annihilation of *Kamadeva*, the consequent fall of the universe into barren lifelessness, the subsequent marriage of *Parvati* and *Siva*, the immaculate birth of *Kumara*, and the eventual resurrection of *Kamadeva* after *Parvati* intercedes for him to *Siva*.

The depiction of *Parvati's* marriage to *Siva*, in the *Siva Purana*, could be seen as an allegory illustrating the desire of an individual to achieve a state of liberation from a life of strife and banality. If one sets aside, for the moment, the idea of *Siva* as a male entity, and sees him instead as representing a state beyond human suffering, then *Parvati* becomes symbolic of the aspirant who wishes to achieve nirvana, and the story becomes something considerably more than a quaint romantic tale⁷.

Iconographical Explanation:

Interestingly marriage of *Siva* and *Parvati*, Kalyanasundaramurti is seen in almost all the cave sites dedicated to *Lakulisa Pasupatas* and also it seems to have been popular theme in Orissan art, but the elaboration it has received in cave 21, Ramesvara, at Ellora is matchless. Almost an entire wall is dedicated to depicting the scene and unlike other places it is not only the marriage scene that is depicted but the entire narrative is sculpted in stone. Interestingly *Parvati* on right hand side is seen in an ascetic form surrounded by five fires (*pancagnisadhana*) practiced by the *Lakulisa-Pasupata* aspirants.

⁶ *Kumarasambhava of Kalidasa*, Ed. M.R.Kale, Delhi, 2011

⁷ Dayal Harendra Thakur, 'The Visnu Purana Social Economic and Religious Aspects' Published 1983, p.92



Illus 33. Kalyanasundaramurti, Cave 21, Ellora, Kalacuri, 6th CE



Illus 34. Kalyanasundaramurti, Cave 1, Elephanta, Kalacuri, 6th CE

The theme receives a great grandeur at Elephanta but the ascetic aspect of both *Siva* and *Parvati* are not depicted here and they appear more like a royal couple. It is in this form that they are remembered and worshipped by Brahmins of Kashmir on Sivaratri, as sovereign rulers of the entire creation.

The purpose of marriage was the birth of *Skanda*, would be slayer of *Tarakasur*. What comes as a surprise is the fact that the gods feared the force of *Siva* and *Parvati*'s power together and decided to rob *Parvati* of *Siva*'s seed. Now *Skanda Purana* does allude to *Agni* taking up a part of overflowing seed and depositing it in *Ganges* and getting cursed in return by *Parvati*.

Thus, *Agni*, who was suffering from extreme heat that generated in his body, sat at a lonely place waiting eagerly for a woman to arrive there. He did not have to wait for too long, as six *Kritikas*, shivering with cold arrived there to warm themselves. The seeds of *Siva* entered into their bodies through the pores.

When their respective husbands learnt about their pregnancy they cursed them. As a result they got transformed into '*Naksharas*' and established themselves in the sky. But, they aborted their respective foetus at Himalaya mountain before getting transformed into six constellations. The holy *Ganges* carried that foetus to a secluded place, which was covered with dense bushes of reeds. In course of time, Lord *Kartikeya* manifested from those reed bushes. He had six heads. The deities were delighted at the birth of *Kartikeya*. Lord *Siva* along with *Parvati* went to the place where *Kartikeya* had incarnated. *Parvati* took young *Kartikeya* in her embrace.

This unnatural and fascinating birth story of *Skanda/Kumara* probably again talks about the shifting status of *Siva* from an ascetic to an householder, yet maintaining his stature as a great *yogi*.

Another form of *Siva* and *Parvati* seen in this context of union is the *Ardhnarisvara* form. Collins⁸ observes

"Siva as half male and half female is a dynamic personification of a dualist principle that is specifically related to the Pasupatas in the Linga Purana"

⁸Collins, Charles D. *The Iconography and Ritual of Siva at Elephanta*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991 p.81

This form of *Siva* is mentioned briefly in the *Mahabharata* several times: in Book XIII, Chapter 14, *Upamanyu* praising *Siva*, says “Who else is there that has half his body occupied by his dear spouse”

Ardhanarishvara is depicted as half male and half female, split down the middle. The right half is usually the male *Shiva*, illustrating his traditional attributes.

Ardhanarishvara represents the synthesis of masculine and feminine energies of the universe (*Purusha* and *Prakriti*) and illustrates how *Sakti*, the female principle of God, is inseparable from (or the same as, according to some interpretations) *Siva*, the male principle of God. The union of these principles is exalted as the root of all creation.

The conception of *Ardhanarishvara* may have been inspired by Vedic literature's composite figure of *Yama-Yami* later adopted as *Yab-Yum* figures in *Vajrayana Buddhism*. The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says that *Purusha* splits himself into two parts, male and female, and the two halves copulate, producing all life – a theme concurrent in *Ardhanarishvara's* tales.

The *Svetasvatara Upanishad* sows the seed of the *Puranic Ardhanarishvara*. It declares *Rudra* – the antecedent of the *Puranic Siva* – the maker of all is the root of *Purusha* (the male principle) and *Prakriti* (the female principle), adhering to *Samkhya* philosophy. It hints at his androgynous nature, describing him both as male and female.

In a story from *Skanda Purana*, *Parvati* requests *Siva* to allow her to reside with him, embracing “limb-to-limb”, and so *Ardhanarishvara* is formed.

In other *Puranas* like the *Linga Purana*, *Vayu Purana*, *Vishnu Purana*, *Kurma Purana*, and *Markandeya Purana*, *Rudra* (identified with *Siva*) appears as *Ardhanarishvara*, emerging from *Brahma's* head, forehead, mouth or soul as the embodiment of *Brahma's* fury and frustration due to the slow pace of creation. *Brahma* asks *Rudra* to divide himself, and the latter complies by dividing into male and female. Numerous beings, including the 11 *Rudras* and various female *shaktis*, are created from both the halves. In some versions, the goddess unites with *Siva* again and promises to be born as *Sati* on earth to be *Siva's* wife⁹.

⁹ Kramrisch Stella, '(1981). *The Presence of Siva*. Princeton University Press. . pg 200-208)

Tamil temple lore narrates that once the gods and sages had gathered at Shiva's abode, they prayed their respects to Shiva and Parvati. However, the sage *Bhringi* had vowed to worship only one deity, *Siva*, and ignored *Parvati* while worshipping and circumambulating him. Agitated, *Parvati* cursed *Bhringi* to lose all his flesh and blood, reducing him to a skeleton. In this form *Bhringi* could not stand erect, so the compassionate ones who witnessed the scene blessed the sage with a third leg for support. As her attempt to humiliate the sage had failed, *Parvati* punished herself with austerities that pleased Shiva and led him to grant her the boon of uniting with him, thereby compelling *Bhringi* to worship her as well as himself in the form of *Ardhanarishvara*. However, the sage assumed the form of a beetle and circumambulating only the male half, drilling a hole in the deity. Amazed by his devotion, Parvati reconciled with the sage and blessed him. An interesting visual depiction of this myth can be seen from Aihole and curiously it is clubbed with *Gangadhar* aspect of Siva too.



Illus 34. Gandhadhar Siva with Parvati and Bringhi, Ravan Phadi , Aihole, Karnataka, 6th CE

Kalika Purana states that, *Parvati* (called *Gauri* here) is described as having suspected *Siva* of infidelity when she saw her own reflection in the crystal-like breast of *Siva*. A conjugal dispute erupted but was quickly resolved, after which *Parvati* wished to stay eternally with *Siva* in his body. The divine couple was thereafter fused as *Ardhanarishvara*. Another tale from North India also talks about *Parvati*'s jealousy. Another woman, the river *Ganga* – often depicted flowing out of *Shiva*'s locks – sat on his head, while *Parvati* (as *Gauri*) sat on his lap. To pacify *Gauri*, *Siva* united with her as *Ardhanarishvara*. Thus the presence of both myths together in one panel is justified by such connections drawn in Puranic and regional legends.

Another panel indirectly hinting at the discomfort that *Parvati* felt after *Siva* held *Ganga* in his locks is the one seen at *Elephanta* where the artist cleverly has used the space between *Siva* and *Parvati* to suggest uneasy silence between the divine couple.



Illus 35. Gangadhar Siva with Parvati, Cave 1, Elephanta, Kalacuri, 6th CE

It is in Ramayana that we find *Siva* agrees to hold *Ganga* in his locks to control her torrential flow. On one hand we see *Ganga* as the carrier of *Siva*'s seed and on the other as a prisoner in his locks, both suggesting an intimate link between both.

Mythopoeic imagination reads this relation as that of a consort and she is often shown as a female figure emerging out of *Siva*'s *jata*. This aspect comes across clearly in *Kalidasa*'s *Meghaduta*¹⁰:

“From there you should go to Jahnu's daughter who descends

From the Lord of the peaks near Mount Kanakhala

And once served *Sagara*'s sons as a stairway to heaven

It was she ,*Ganga*, her foam like laughter”

An elaborate description of this theme can be seen in a panel in Mahabalipuram which depicts the harsh penance of *Bhagiratha* to please *Siva*.



Illus 36. Gangavtarana Panel, Mahabalipuram, Tamil Nadu, Pallava, 7th CE

¹⁰ *Meghaduta* as quoted by Collins p. 75

Another interesting myth one encounters in *Skanda Purana* is the myth of *Kaalbhiti* who did not leave the womb of his mother for four years as he feared Kala. After being reassured and granted a boon he grew up to be a virtuous person. He used to engage himself in various kinds of austerities and was a great devotee of Lord *Siva*. One day, as *Kaalbhiti* was meditating under a 'bael' tree (wood apple), he went into trance. The joy experienced during trance period was something, which he had never experienced before. He decided to regularly meditate under that tree. He did penance for one hundred years standing on his toe pleasing *Siva* who appeared in form of a *linga* and freed him from fear of death. Since he had conquered death he was known as *Mahakaal*. This myth connects strongly with the *Mahakaal* temple at *Ujjain* and it evidently has some *Kapalika* or *Siddha* connection as aspirants of both cults desired to conquer death and gain perpetual immortality through harsh yogic practices. The importance given to *pancbrahmamantras* in this tradition point at him being a *Pasupata* saint.

Siva Nataraja:

Dancing form of *Siva* full of philosophical meaning is depicted almost all over the country. It is in both *Kurma Purana* and *Linga Purana* that this form of *Siva* is described in detail where it is linked with *Tandava* aspect i.e. dance of dissolution due to his extreme yogic power.

Linga Purana talks about *Siva's* sojourn in *Daruvana* which alludes to the better known 'Pine Forest myth'. While describing him as stark nude, smeared with ashes he is seen dancing and begging for alms. It is this *Bhibatsa* yet *Adhbhut* form that wives of *Rishis* fall for and this irresistible and seductive form is attained by nothing else but deep asceticism.

Thus these accounts of *Siva's* dance often juxtapose it with his *yoga* and his ability to project *maya* or cosmic illusion upon the phenomenal world hence assuming tremendous importance. An interesting panel can be seen from *Mandapesvara* cave, presently converted into a church but once seems to have been an important site for *Lakulisa-Pasupatas*. Here in this panel the artist has combined *Nataraja* aspect of *Siva* with *Kalyanasundaramurti*, hence stressing on their highly philosophical nature.



Illus 37. Nataraja Siva along with Kalyanasundaramurti, Mandapesvara Cave, Kalacuri, 6th CE



Illus 38. Nataraja Siva, Cave 1, Elephanta, Kalacuri, 6th CE

Ravananugrhamurti: Both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* mention *Ravana* as a great devotee undergoing various *Pasupata* austerities .Not highly favored by Puranic literature this theme assumes a tremendous importance in the works of *Kalidasa* and hence is one of the most commonly repeated themes in the western Indian caves as well as in art of Pallavas and Cholas. *Ravana* is supposed to have composed ‘*Sivatandavastuti*’ to praise Siva when he was realized the power of the lord.

Usually in these panels *Ravana* is seen shaking Kailasa mountain, the abode of Siva and the latter is seen pushing his toe to send *Ravana* to netherlands. It is after this incident that *Ravana* is supposed to have become a great devotee of *Siva* and performed harsh austerities to please the lord.



Illus 39. Ravananugrhamurti, Cave 21, Ellora, Kalacuri, 6th CE

It is interesting to find the depiction of this theme from the temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia and it does talk about it being a very important theme for South Indian art which provided the thematic base for Saiva temples in South East Asia.



Illus 40. Ravananugrhamuti, Angkor Wat, Cambodia, 12th CE

Andhakasuravadhamurti: Talking about the aspect of reconciliation in Saiva art and mythology the myth of *Andhaka* becomes very important. Most of the sources maintain that *Andhaka* after being killed by *Siva* was revived and accepted in latter fold. Some sources even maintain that his initial lust for *Parvati* was converted into the motherly love and after his repentance *Parvati* forgave him and accepted him as his son. The story has many shades and a great potential for in-depth study.



Illus 41. Andhakasuravadha, Cave 14, Ellora, 6th CE



Illus 42. Andhakasuravadha, Cave 29, Ellora, Kalacuri, 6th CE

Siva and Parvati playing chausar (dice): A very frequently depicted theme in these LP caves is this dice play between *Siva* and *Parvati*. While on one hand it lends a human feel to the divine couple on the other it focuses on the aspect of *lila* (sport) , the main reason for creation of universe. Indirectly it suggests that it is this divine play that has brought everything to life, hence assuming a very important philosophical meaning. But this higher meaning has not stopped the artist from expressing his creative urges and giving it a lighter feel, especially on the lower register in Cave 14 Ellora where he depicts *ganas* playfully teasing *Nandi*.



Illus 43. Siva and Parvati playing chausar, Cave 14, Ellora, Kalacuri, 6th CE

The extremely dramatic depiction at Elephanta focuses on the human element more clearly as it points at cheating in the game. *Siva* was probably shown holding *Parvati's* hand and the latter is agitated as can be seen from her hand gestures.



Illus 44. Siva and Parvati playing chauser, Cave 1, Elephanta, Kalacuri, 6th CE

Summing up: Studying all these myths depicted at early *Lakulisa-Pasupata* sites one can see their importance as tools for propagating the philosophy of the order in the most graphic manner. These panels apart from their aesthetic merit follow a certain iconographical pattern which in case of Elephanta, Collins¹¹ has connected with LP rituals.

As Meister¹² observes

“The task of religious imagery in India is twofold: it must reveal divinity to man, and help manifest divinity in man”

Hence divinity in India is seen in both aspects, tangible and intangible. and as Kramrisch observes is characterized by ‘otherness’ and ‘ease of access’ a dichotomy seen at various levels in Indian religions, especially Saivism. From this enquiry into manifested form of *Siva* we will move to study of abstract *Siva-Linga* in the next section.

¹¹ Collins, Charles D. *The Iconography and Ritual of Siva at Elephanta*. Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1991

¹² Meister, Michael W. *Discourses on Siva*. Philadelphia, Bombay 1984, Introduction