

*'Everything is Siva's linga, in the body as well as in the outer world; jnana is Siva's linga, but strictly speaking there is no linga for Siva; Siva is himself his own linga —'*

YAJNAVALIBHAVAKANDA STUTASAMHITA



# SIVALINGA

## THE SYMBOL, THE MISTERY

WRITTEN BY GAUTAM CHATTERJEE PHOTOGRAPHED BY SONJAY CHATTERJEE

Linga worship has an ancient past which goes beyond the geo-political boundaries of any single nation. Traces of linga worship have been found in Mayan, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Indus valley civilisations. The linga, which emanates life and light, can be associated with the Egyptian hermaphrodite. In 1925, OA Wall drew a reference which says that: 'In

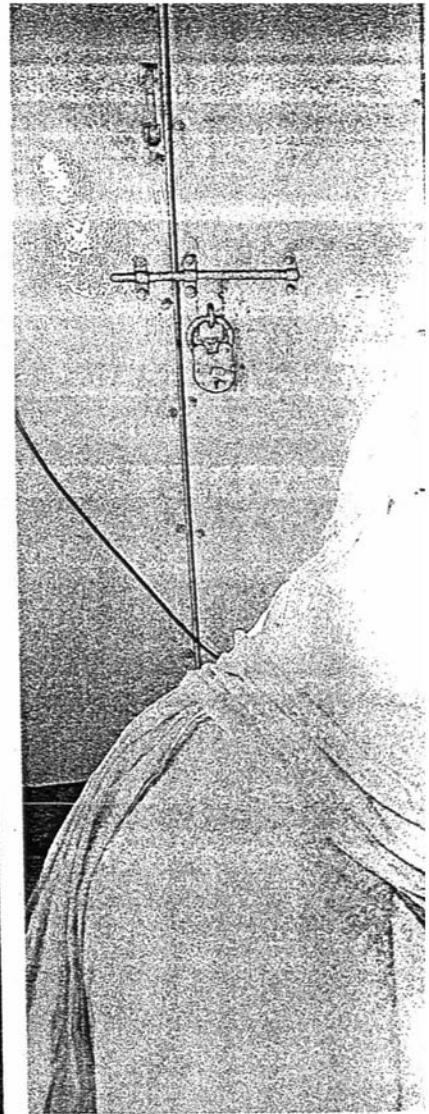
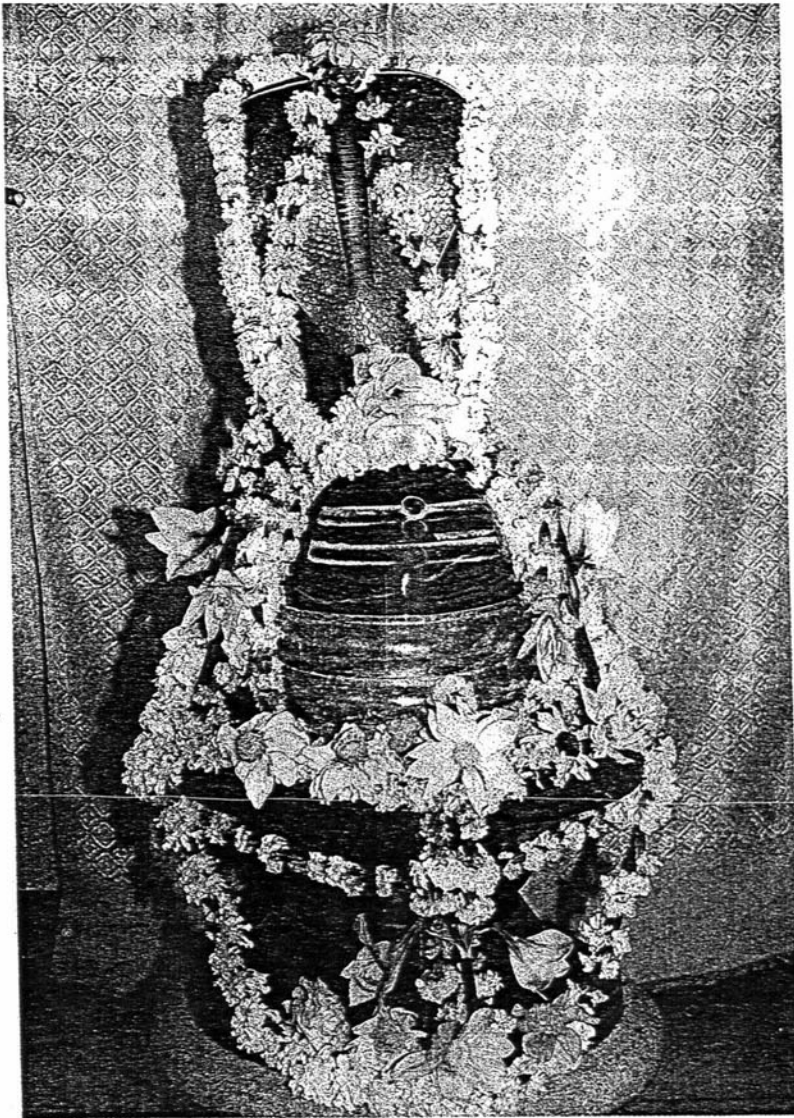
the Zhob Valley, where small farming groups existed before 3000 BC, a carved stone linga was found...'. Also, the Greek god Apollo, it is said, stood for the sun's energy, whose rays had a fertilising and purifying power.

JM Allegro records that, 'The erect phallus was also the emblem of the Roman deity Fascinus.' Traces of the linga in its phallic form have been

found in northern Europe as well. As Davidson mentioned in his book *God and Myths*: 'According to Adam of Bremen the statue of Freyr in the temple at Uppsala was phallic.' We also find that in Asia Minor the phallus had a cultic significance in many religions.

The ancient civilisations of Indonesia, Indo-China and China also have





several references to the linga. In ancient China, the linga was known as *kuei*, an oblong piece of jade stone, which terminated in a triangle. JE Cirlot in *Dictionary of Symbolism* noted that: "The seven stars of the Great Bear are often engraved on the *kuei*, probably symbolising space and time." Another comparable symbol is the Persian Tree of Life whose seeds, it is said, when mixed with water, preserve the fertility of earth.

The cult of linga worship evolved from two basic principles — the cult of the pillar and phallic worship. The cult of pillar seems to be primarily based on

the concept of the Axis of the Universe, which is indestructible and eternally spiritual and which represents cosmic columns in the corridor of space and time. The eternal quest of early thinkers concerned the realisation of the existence of one god. This led to the principle of Divine Support responsible for the sustenance of the Universe.

References to phallic worship goes back to early civilisations and seems to be an entirely different concept from the cult of the pillar. Phallic worship highlights the principles of fertility.





but according to Dr B Patni this differs from the phallic worship prevalent in the Pauranic era. As he says, 'Here (in India) it presents a synthesis of the phallic cult and the cult of pillar — a quintessence of these two principles.'

According to Swami Vivekananda the Siva linga originated from the famous hymn in the *Atharva-veda samhita*, sung in praise of the yupa-stambha, the sacrificial post. Explaining the hymn he said 'a description is found of the beginningless and endless stambha or skambha, and it is shown that the said skambha is put in place of the

eternal Brahman... later the yajna fire, its smoke, ashes and flames, the soma plant, and the ox that used to carry on its back the wood for the Vedic sacrifice, gave place to the conceptions of the brightness of Siva's body, his tawny, matted hair, his blue throat... the bull of Siva, and so on — just so, the yupa-stambha gave place in time to the Siva linga, and was defined as the high devahood of Shankara.'

The origin of the linga and its worship has been a subject of great controversy amongst scholars. According to Professor N Gangadharan 'Some associate the linga cult with that of the

phallus. Some hold that linga worship originated from the aborigines of India, while some claim that the association of the Lingatavva with the worship of Siva-Rudra was alien to the Aryans.... It has been said that the worship of the tree was later preserved in the form of a stump of the tree (*kandu* in Tamil) which was later replaced by a stone pillar, which took final shape as the linga.'

The word linga is used in many senses throughout Hindu-Sanskrit literature. But the primary meaning of the word is a mark or symbol, even in the context of the phallus, it indicates only a 'mark'. This fundamental interpretation of a 'sign' has always been identified with Siva as his inseparable symbol as is evident from references in the *Vayu Purana*, *Kurma Purana*, *Linga* and *Siva Purana*.

The *Linga Purana*, in conformity with its name, traces the origin of linga worship as well as its merits. In Book 1, the meaning of the linga in reference to Siva has been elaborated. It says that the word linga is used in the sense of a visible symbol. The absolute form of Siva which is beyond all visible forms is therefore called alinga (that which has no visible symbol), and as the basis of later manifestations of any visible form (linga). Professor Gangadharan explains that 'The first manifestation for the absolute (alinga) is the prakriti or pradhana or avyakta (unexpressed) as it is called in Sankhya. The matter from which all other categories evolve is therefore the first linga. Above that, Siva is the ultimate principle without quality, eternal, indestructible (aguna, dhruvya, aksya) whereas the linga, the visible mark possesses the qualities of smell and suchforth and has come into being from the alinga, Siva.'

The *Linga Purana* also underlines that prakriti is a source of the further manifestation of the linga. It explains that of the Trinity, Brahma represents the seed or bija, Vishnu the receptacle or yoni and Rudra the seedless or nirbija (from which the seed has emerged without a cause), but is the

cause of the Universe (bija). Thus the personal forms of deities belong to the realm of the linga. Above the linga and the alinga and all the manifest forms, Siva is the ultimate.

Sankhya philosophy states that the linga signifies both prakriti and vikriti. According to the various *Puranas* and the *Saivagams*, the linga symbolises the Supreme Being which stands for god himself and is the seat of entire creation and its dissolution.

Dr B Patni has analysed the manifested and unmanifested forms of the linga in his celebrated commentary on the *Siva Purana*. 'The self existing unmanifested principle manifests himself and again merges back into the eternal unmanifested form at his own will.' He further comments that the linga symbolises the endless process of the cosmic circle of creation and the dissolution of the Universe or the micro-cosmic birth and disintegration as seen among innumerable living beings.

In the *Siva Purana* we find that Siva has a dualistic character, on the one hand he is Sakti (power) and on the other he represents Purusa (Supreme Being), but they are in a singular form of Niskala Brahman (Supreme Being) which manifests itself in the universe and is known as Sakala (formed one).

The other question is whether the linga is formless or does it have a form. The *Lingavirbhava* throws some light on this and claims that although the linga has a visible form yet it is called formless. This mysticism justifies the transcendental nature of the linga.

From Pauranic sources, we gather, that there were at one time different types of lingas. Professor S Dange has recorded this 'lost part' in his celebrated book *Encyclopaedia of Pauranic Beliefs and Practices*. The five main types of lingas are: the svayambhu-linga, which shows itself in a natural way; the bindu-linga, which is as one contemplates it; the pratishtha linga which is installed through proper mantras; the cara, which is also



termed abhyatmika; and the gurulinga, which is the idol of Siva.

According to the *Linga Purana*, lingas are made of different materials. It is believed that they were made by Viswakarma and offered to many gods. However, the six main kinds of lingas are those made of stone or rock or the sailaja linga, those made from jewels or the ratnaja linga, ones made from metal or dhatuja, made of wood, or the daruja linga, the mritika linga made of clay and finally the ksanika linga which is made on the spot from any material. Each of these six kinds are further subdivided and when all are calculated the total amounts to forty four types of lingas.

Interestingly, the *Linga Purana* lists the various prescriptions for worship for the different castes. While discussing the cara or abhyatmika and its subtypes, Professor Dange mentions that the rasa-linga is meant for the Brahmans; the bana (arrow) linga for the Ksatriyas; svarna (golden) linga for the Vaishyas; sailaja (stone) linga for

the Sudras; while the sphatika (crystal) linga is for all the varnas.

Apart from these, special lingas are prescribed for women. Those whose husbands are alive should worship stone lingas, while the crystal or rasa linga is recommended for widows. However, the *Puranas* maintain that women of all ages should worship the clear, crystal linga.

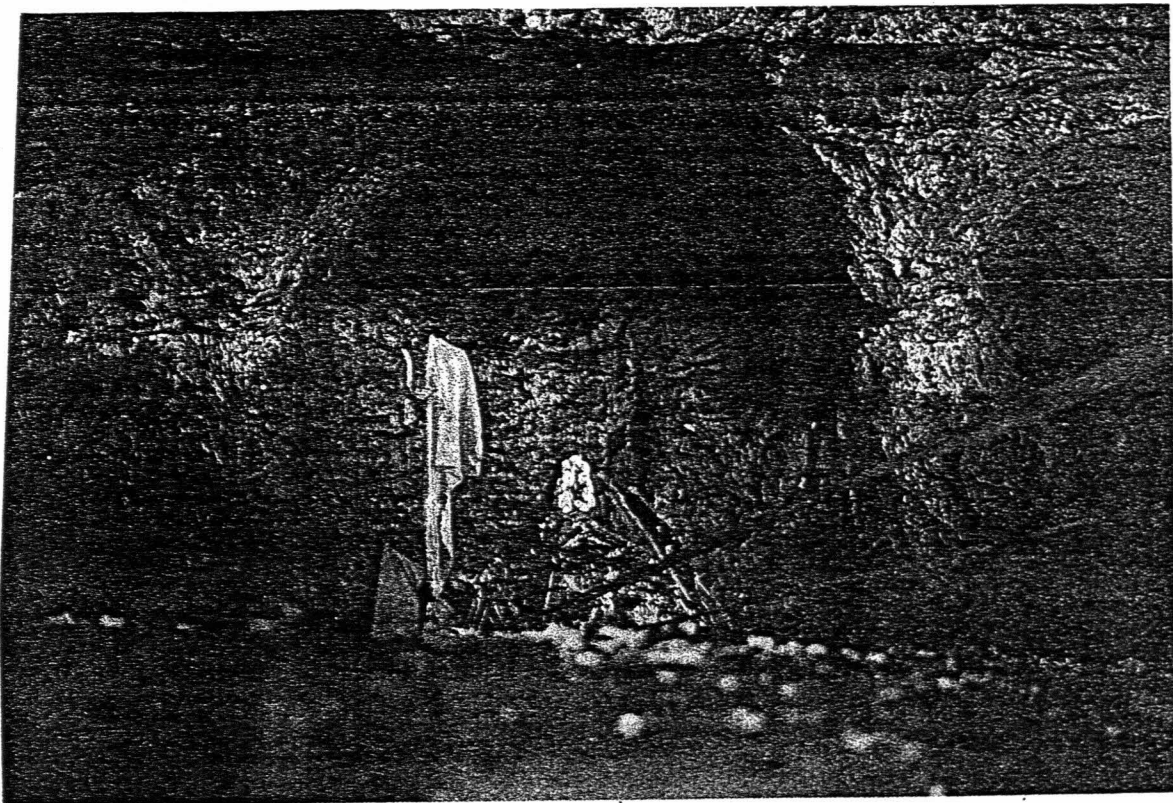
Worship of different types of lingas yields different results. The ratnaja linga yields prosperity and gives glory, the sailaja linga the achievement of perfection, sarvasiddhi. The dhatuja linga helps to accumulate wealth, the daruja linga yields enjoyment, while the lingas made from earth help in acquiring all perfection. A further division of baked and non-baked clay is also found. As the *Puranas* maintain, the linga made from clay and baked is said to be superior to the one that is non-baked.

Professor Dange referring to the *Puranas* mentions that 'the rock made (linga) is said to be the best; of middle value is one made from metal; the others come after these.

Amongst the various kinds of lingas the natural white stone or bana linga is counted as the most auspicious. Bana lingas are small elliptical stones with a natural polish that results from the action of river water. They are most frequently found in the bed of the Narmada river, one of the seven most sacred rivers of India.

Furthermore, the *Linga Purana*, Chapter I (11-19-22) mentions that various lingas are worshipped in the various months of the Hindu calendar. The vajralinga (a linga made from a jewel called vajra) is worshipped in the month of Vaishakha, in Jyestha the linga made of marakata(?); a pearl linga in Asadha, in Savana the linga made from nila (a blue jewel); in Bhadra one from a red jewel, padmaraga in Ashvina, one made from the jewel gomeda; in Kartika a coral or pravara linga; in Margasirsa one from varadryan; in Pausa the pusparaga; in Magha the one made





from suryakanta (the sun-jewel); in Phalguna the one of crystal. There is no mention, however, of the linga for the month Chaitra.

Professor HH Wilson wrote in 1862 that in the worship of Siva, the linga is almost the only form in which that deity is revered. In the Keddar Kalpa of the *Nandi Upa-Purana*, Siva says: 'I am omnipresent, but I am especially in twelve forms and places.' These twelve forms, the jyotirlingas are situated in twelve different places. According to Dange, 'these jyotirlingas are various aspects of the "columns of light" that is said to have erupted from the ocean between Brahma and Vishnu as they quarrelled.' Thus it is believed that the jyotirlinga paved the path of jyoti and played the role of universal sustenance.

Somnatha (Lord of Moon), the first of the twelve sacred shrines, is situated in Saurashtra, in the city of Somnath Pattan. The idol, which was a linga, was destroyed by Mahmud of Ghazni.

A passage from the contemporary source *Rauzat us Ssa'a* alludes that 'The temple in which the Idol of Somnath stood was of considerable extent, both in length and breadth, and the roof was supported by fifty six pillars in a row. The idol was of polished stone, its height was about five cubits, and its thickness in proportion; two cubits were below ground. Mahmud having entered the temple broke the stone Somnath with a heavy mace; some of the fragments he ordered to be conveyed to Ghazni, and they were placed at the threshold of the great Mosque.'

The second is Mallikarjuna or Sri-Saila (The Mountain of Sri) located in the mountains along the banks of the river Krishna.

Mahakala is situated in Ujjain.

According to Wilson when Altutmish captured Ujjain in 1231 AD, this deity of stone was carried to Delhi, where it was broken up. A contemporary source *Tabkati Akbari* records that

this shrine was then three hundred years old.

Omkara is the shrine, probably of Mahadeo, at Omkara Mandhatta on the banks of the Narmada river.

Amaresvara (God of Gods) is also in Ujjain. Dr Hunter in the nineteenth century records this fact. This is an ancient temple of Mahadeo situated on a hill near Ujjain.

Vaidyanatha (Lord of Physicians) is located at Deogarh in Bengal. The temple here is a celebrated pilgrimage spot.

Ramesa or Rameswara (Lord of Rama) is on the island of Rameswaram where in the Ramayana yuga, Rama built the famous *setubandha*, the line of rocks, between India and Sri Lanka.

Bhimasankara is situated in Dakini India. It is in all probability the same as the Bhimesvara linga worshipped at Dracharam in Rajamahendri, Rajamundry district.

Viswaswara (Lord of All) has been for many centuries the chief object of worship at Banaras. Professor Wilson recorded that 'Banaras, however, is the peculiar seat of this form (linga) of worship; the principle deity Visvesvara, is a linga and most of the chief objects of the pilgrimage are similar blocks of stone. Forty seven lingas, all of pre-eminent sanctity, form part of the pilgrimage.

Tryambaka is one of the principal twelve forms where Siva resides on the banks of the Gomati.

Gautamesa (Lord of Gautama) has also been named in *Nandi Upa-Puranas*, but the place is not identifiable.

The twelfth and final shrine is at Kedaresa or Kedarnath, which is situated in the Himalaya. This has been the foremost centre of pilgrimage throughout the ages. The deity here is represented by a shapeless mass of rock.

Sometimes memorials were made in the shape of lingas. Professor KC Pandey has enlightened us in this direction. He said that the custom of erecting linga memorials dates back to the time of the Bhasa dynasty. Amongst those famous memorials whose names figured in the Mathura Pillar were Upamitacarya, Kapilacarya. In this context, Professor Pandey wrote, that 'these lingas had the portrait of the teachers carved in them, seems to find support from the fact that there are two lingas with portraits of Lakuli, sculpted in front. One of these is in the temple of Naklesvara and the other is that of Rajarajesvara, both at Karvan in Baroda state. Thus, the custom of combining a linga with a portrait of the person in the memory of whom it was put up, seems to have been prevalent among the followers of Ladulisa.'

Devotees of the various Saivite sects are identified by the symbols of Siva they wear on their bodies. They mark their foreheads with the tripundra tilak, carry a trishula, smear bhivooti and wear rudraksha beads. Adi Sankara, who advocated the worship of Siva, also covered himself with the characteristic symbols of Siva.

Among the many sects the Vira Saivites are generally known as Lingayats. This sect was founded by Basava in 1167 AD. Historians claim that, 'They identified the life (prana) with the linga so that they refused to part with it (which) meant parting with life.' Thus Lingayats wear a prototype of the linga on their neck until they die.

The linga thus symbolises transcendental power which is identified as Brahman, and is the centre of Saivite philosophy. Siva is represented in beautifully sculptured forms as well as by the symbolic linga. The linga thus has many dimensions and interpretations. Yet it remains a unique spiritual symbol which does not restrict itself to any one religious order, but is a part of the Hindu way of life ➤