



## Dexterous Deity, diffident Devotee – A Study of the Shivanandalahari

NILIMA CHITGOPEKAR

Department of History, Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.

### Abstract

The Shivanandalahari is a text replete with bhakti attributed to Adi Shankaracharya, dated c. eighth century. A text of a hundred verses, it gives us insight as to what the bhakta longs for, what are his expectations and what relationship he has with his chosen deity, that is Shiva. It indicates the myths that were known and popular at that time and how the devotee analyses those myths for his own purposes. In this essay the author has attempted an in depth study of the verses, studying the epithets, the relationships with rival divinities and the position of Shiva himself in the mind of the devotee.



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### Introduction

The Shivanandalahari (SL), a hymn of hundred verses is attributed by tradition, as are also many others in the same genre, albeit somewhat problematically, to Adi Shankaracharya. This is a hymn which is difficult to date, whose authorship is controversial and for which there are not many secondary sources. Yet complete in itself, the text enchants with the simplicity of tone and fervour fulfilling most needs of bhakti, a prerequisite for all texts coming within this rubric. Within its repertoire, via the myths it refers to and the epithets that are utilized, we get an insight into the particular nature of Shiva, popular at a point of time, with a certain section of society.

It is fascinating to come across a text which has the word 'lahari' in its title. This makes it somewhat similar to Saundaryalahari, which also shares the same authorship and is also dedicated to solely one divinity. Initially, it was with some anticipation that I expected that like in the Saundaryalahari, the goddess Tripurasundari has been described from head to toe, that is *Keshadipadatam*, such may be the case with the Shivanandalahari, where Shiva is concerned. But we do not get a detailed account in this manner of Shiva's physical beauty. The joy and bliss to the devotee comes to those who read it, we are told, by listening to the stories of Shiva. I have endeavoured to see in these hundred verses what are the myths that get highlighted, what are the

**CONTACT** Nilima Chitgopekar ✉ nchitgo@gmail.com 📍 Dept. of History Jesus and Mary College, University of Delhi.



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frequently used epithets and what is the relationship of Shiva with the rest of the pantheon of deities. As far as a physical description of Shiva is concerned, we are told he is majestic, he is three eyed and luminous. Having matted crests and adorned with the crescent moon. He wears quivering serpents and is blue throated, sitting on a humped bull. He sports a doe in one hand, in one a battleax and with the other he has the goddess Uma in embrace. In fact, his spouse plays quite a major role in many verses. The opening verse is an invocation to them both. In the very first verse it is stated that Shiva and Parvati have obtained each other as mutual rewards attained by respective austerities. Whenever the devotee asks Shiva to take refuge in his heart it is along with Parvati (SL v 21). The devotee also desires that the divinities reveal themselves in ever new ways as he progresses with his own meditation. The experience generates supreme bliss contemplating them both. In verse 3 again it is stated that Shiva is inseparable from the divine mother. Some of his epithets also show his closeness to his spouse. He is called Bhavanipati, Umanatha, Gaurisha, Gauripati, Gauripriya, Bhavanisha, Girijanatha, Umajane -Katyayani, Durgatipriya and Umamahesha. In the connection to being a husband he is also he is called the primal householder.<sup>1</sup>

Shivanandalahari is a long hymn, beautiful in form and content, this work could have been called *Shatakam* since it consists of a hundred verses but it is not. The composition, we are told, came to the writer from utmost devotional fervour, as a river in flood, wave after wave, billowing a flow that comes in breaking over embankments, the outcome of deliberation the spontaneous outpouring by poet's experience that is like water welling up and flowing. The idea being that the waves of bliss inundate those who contemplate Shiva, the source of all that is auspicious. 'Lahari' in the title also suggests, one's endeavour is to not to reach the shore, but to keep floating in the hymns. Incidentally, the oft used metaphor of gushing water suggesting the flowing out of feelings and the urge to reach out to the god by means of an inspired song, is already found in the earliest text Rig Veda- "*I will send out my songs in flow unceasing like water from the ocean's depth to Indra*"<sup>2</sup> This tone is illustrated very well in one of the earliest verses in the SL which employs water as a metaphor.

*O Shambhu, the bestower of happiness on the whole world  
All glory unto that current of divine bliss  
Which brimming from the river of your holy stories  
'Flows in to the lake of my mind  
Through the canals of the intellect subduing the  
dust of sins and cooling the heat of misery born  
of wanderings in transmigratory cycles."* (SL v 2)

It is difficult to place the Shivanandalahari geographically. The deity Shiva is constantly referred to as the dweller of a mountain.<sup>3</sup> There is mention that Shiva is established as the linga known as Mallikarjuna upon the mountain Srisailla, twice. This is in Andhra Pradesh. Or even on the mountain Shriparvata, that is Shrisailla.<sup>4</sup> Hence it may be conjectured that it was composed in south India. There are several references to agriculture, canals and the forest and only one reference to royalty. There are maximum references to rice, which is a staple in the south.

If we go by what Monier Williams and others of his ilk have said Shiva seems to be a late arriver on the bhakti scene, way after Vishnu. This is because Shiva was deemed a stern divinity, too impersonal and too severe a god for the multitudes, occupying too lofty a position above ordinary mortal. He was to be approached with awe and propitiated with reverence and fear. However, the SL shows us a different side of Shiva where he is far more amenable to the requests of his devotees. The important factor of bhakti is its power to bind together the human and the divine, not in bonds of duty or domination but in a relationship of loving protection. I found however in the SL it is striking how the devotee goes into the sacred world of Shiva's daily encumbrances and travails and hopes to alleviate some of Shiva's problems by suggesting alternatives, looking out for his tender feet, anxious thoughts about their safety worry the devotee. Sometimes he wants to soothe the pain or provide Shiva with a better *vahana*, that is an animal vehicle This particular form of bhakti, illustrated in this poem, will be elaborated in this essay. Bhakti, in this text, has been defined as doing the following - chanting the Shiva mantra japa, constant meditation, constant visualization and constant praise, but as we will see it is more than that. As a token genuflection to Brahmanism, we are also told that that Shiva

is to be known and revealed through the Vedas.<sup>5</sup> His form is composed of the three gunas of Sattva Rajas and Tamas who has conquered the here bodies gross subtle and causal who form the theme of all Upanishads.<sup>6</sup>

The essence of bhakti is to keep the worship simple. Within this tradition the impatience of the devotee with formalities is obvious. Clearly spontaneous ecstatic, loving expressions are favoured toward his *Ishtadevata*, that is 'the chosen desired deity' and of his longing for union with the divine. Not surprisingly, therefore, in this poem, we get in only one verse a reference to a ritual. In these reference items of a common purificatory ceremony are used to symbolize sadhana. In the rite called '*punyaha*' a new pot filled with water, with a thread wound round its neck and a few mango leaves and a coconut placed on its mouth, is kept ready for worship. After the appropriate rite and uttering the sacred five lettered mantra, the water is sprinkled on the objects and the persons to be purified and rendered auspicious.<sup>7</sup> The main leitmotif of all bhakti systems is a longing for God which is the quintessence of devotion. That Bhakti has no motive, might be experienced in its highest stages but in practice the devotee always has the burning desire to be close to his beloved deity and his every action is motivated by this desire. In the SL what we encounter is not just a one-on-one meeting between the devotee and the object of devotion but even a kind of bargaining with the lord where the devotee desires *sarupyam*, *salokyam*, *sayujyam*.<sup>8</sup> that is *sarupyam* - sameness of form through worshipping *pujane*. *Salokyam* - Nearness through singing your names *salokyam* and *Sayujyam* sameness of residence and there is a verse in which the devotee wants to experience living in Kailash in the hall of gold and emeralds, in the company of divine attendants and of course in the presence of Shambhu."<sup>9</sup>

From several verses it is clear what the devotee wants - the highest reward is liberation that is an eternal state of liberation which gives many delightful devotional experiences like tears of joy and horripilations. Also added are a preponderance of righteousness, dwindling of evil, general prosperity, enlightenment and joy, and other fruits of devotional life like freedom from the misery of transmigratory life or the merciful glance of the deity's looks. The devotee wishes that the deity will impart to

the devotee's mind the instruction that confers eternal bliss. The idea being that with the increase of righteous activities sins will dwindle passions will wane and life becomes happy while knowledge and bliss become fruitful.<sup>10</sup>

In several verses we hear of the myth of *Samudramanathan*. When the ocean was churned the devas obtained the moon that is soma, the wish fulfilling tree, the cow of plenty, the magic gem, nectar and Lakshmi. So, in the SL we are told the wise men churn the ocean of the Vedas, using their virtuous minds as the rod and firm devotion as the rope string and obtain Shiva who fulfills all wants like the wish fulfilling tree and the cow of plenty, who gives liberation like Lakshmi. The practice of devotion to Shiva and its fruits are compared to this *Samudramanathan* episode and the results got from it.<sup>11</sup>

Another striking feature of this text is the ineptitude of the devotee that is the overwhelming incapability of the devotee. The human mind is variously described as a rutting elephant, as a monkey or like a thief. The devotee is stupefied by ignorance, is wallowing in hollow worldliness and he is miserable. He tells Shiva "Where is the one more skilled than you in saving the wretched and where in all the three worlds is another apart from you who is fit to take refuge in?"<sup>12</sup>

Comparing the deity with himself- devotee usually feels he is nothing. The feeling of inadequacy when facing God is shown in verses where human nature is laid bare in all its weaknesses and begs for the lord to show the way. The devotee is seen lamenting that is if only he had a thousand arms like the sun to offer cloth or the all pervasiveness like Vishnu to worship with flowers or the power of wafting fragrance like the air on wave incense or control over fire like Indra the chief or Agni to prepare cooked offerings and the golden egg like Hiranyagarbha to worship with the needed vessel then he could have accomplished service.<sup>13</sup> The devotee goes on to say that he is not skilled in churning the ocean so he cannot supply him with the poison of *Kalakuta* to drink, nor the flower called the moon to decorate his locks. Nor can he penetrate into the nether worlds, so where will he procure the serpents for his ornament? Neither is he a hunter skilled in chase so how could he procure elephant skin for him to wear? So beseechingly he

asks Shiva how is he to worship him? Which consists in offering food, flowers, ornaments, clothes and the rest? He is not proficient in the law codes or the philosophies, in medicine or augury, in poetry or music in ancient lores (Purana) or mystic chants, panegyrics, histrionics or buffoonery. How then can kings be pleased with him? After all he describes himself as being ignorant like a beast. He cries that he wants to be saved by his mercy.

Yet in other verses there is a boldness, an almost insouciance where the devotee is projected almost like a negotiator. The devotee speaks directly to Shiva saying that he dances on rough surfaces so that he gets used to dancing on the heart of a bhakta like himself, otherwise why should Shiva choose such mountain ridged stony surfaces when there are such places as heavenly mansions flower beds.<sup>14</sup>

In verse 15 The devotee tells Shiva not to plead incapacity in cancelling the writ of his destiny since he was so adroit in plucking off one of Brahma's heads with a mere fingertip. Yet the devotee says let me be born as man or celestial as wild beasts or mosquito as animal or worm as bird or any other creature, no harm can accrue from such embodiments if in every birth my heart always feels inclined to disport in the waves of supreme bliss.

The devotee says he can take the place of the crescent moon on Shiva's head as he has not dulled on new moon day. The moon has the brute hare in its heart which the devotee does not have and neither is he soiled with impurities nor is their crookedness like the irregular course of the moon.<sup>15</sup>

The devotee offers his mind a horse, as a better mount. This suggestion shows the devotee is not so diffident after all. Most astonishing is the near command of the devotee to Shiva - "Reveal thyself!"<sup>16</sup>

In another verse the devotee tells Shiva that all men are like animals have been kept by him for sport and since his actions would have provided him with entertainment now, he must provide protection to him.

"It is as though a bargain is being struck, almost transactional in nature "Are you not the lord the greatest friend of the poor? And of them I am the

foremost. Is not this then the relationship between us O Siva all my transgressions should be forgiven by you alone protections should be given to me. This is indeed the way pursued by relations – Here it is God's duty to forgive the soul of all its sin.<sup>17</sup>

The poet devotee offers his mind as a *vahanaas* against Shiva's mount the bull. The devotee praises himself and says ride on the horse of my mind which is good natured, possessed of beauty and varied, of great speed, capable of understanding all intentions, flawless and endowed with auspicious marks.<sup>18</sup>

The devotee also almost mocks Shiva's lifestyle by telling him that poison is your food and serpents your garland, your garment is of an elephant hide and a big ox is your vehicle and hence you have nothing to give me so just let me have devotion of your feet.

Vishnu is described as the greatest bhakta. Lord Vishnu, who took many forms – as his arrow as his mount as his consort, occupying half the body, this is probably a reference to the Harihara composite form, as a boar as his friend as his drummer etc. and who offered his eyes at his feet (in place of lotus flowers) – that Vishnu, forming a part of your very being, is indeed the most worshipful among the worshipful.<sup>19</sup> There is also a hymn in which it is clearly stated that Shiva takes delight in Vishnu as Mohini. Yet the coming together of Shiva and Vishnu is very important in this area in light of Sastha Aiyappan known in Sanskrit also as Hariharaputra cult and therefore their relationship is mentioned lovingly.

Many are the minor deities who bestow paltry rewards, the devotee says that he does not even dream of attaching any importance to them or to their worship or even the results of that worship. The bhakta says he cannot get a sight of the lotus feet of Shiva for they are hidden by the golden crowns studded with precious gems belonging to the crowd of celestials who prostrate at his holy feet in excitement.<sup>20</sup>

The devotee alludes to the Lingodbhava episode into several verses. This is the myth where Vishnu and Brahma, boring down in to the earth as a boar and flying up in the sky as a swan, in order to find the feet and head respectively, only got tired but could not find the extremities of Shiva's form.

The devotee laments that even such great gods failed in their attempts as a bird and a beast in both heaven and earth, then how could the poor bhakta possibly know Shiva?<sup>21</sup>

“And pray who can ever be a match to thee in courage? And who attains a state which is thine? For thou fearlessly shortest alone and full of bliss witnessing the cosmic dissolution when the celestials lose their heavenly positions, the sage s feel terror stricken and the world systems become reduced to their primal state.”

Shiva does the Tandava and there are many verses referring to it. That he whirls round and round for the pleasure of his spouse. Besides he likes to watch his most ardent faithful follower Bhringi dancing. He is also delighted with Vishnu in the form of Mohini.<sup>22</sup>

In one long verse Shiva is compared to a peacock as he is blue throated and bears the sky as a crest, the peacock its feathery plume. Shiva has the lord of serpents as his necklace while the peacock being the deadly enemy of all serpents, has mastery over them.<sup>23</sup>

Shaivism does not give too much credence to social mores and this verse illustrates it – making a reference to varnashrama dharma the devotee is asking how does it matter whether one be a student, a householder, a monk, an ascetic or some other individual as when the heart of a person becomes the lord's one becomes his and the lord bears the burden of his life.

There is also a reference to rebirth- the devotee says whether he is born as man as celestial, as wild beast or mosquito as animal or worm as bird or any other creature. No harm can accrue from the embodiment, if in every such birth his heart always feels inclined to disport in the waves of supreme bliss consisting in the constant remembrance of the lord's lotus feet.<sup>24</sup>

Modes of worship by worshipping Shiva the god of death turns away.<sup>25</sup> He whoever attains to a state in which he joyfully surrenders his heart to you and spends his time in worshipping your lotus feet sometime in meditation sometime in concentration, sometime in offering obeisance, sometime

in listening to your stories, sometimes in looking at your form, sometimes in singing your praise, he who gains such a state in exultation, having surrendered his mind to you is verily a *jivanmukta* and has attained liberation in this very life.<sup>26</sup>

Listening to the stories, prostrating, partly in meditation, ecstasy, partly in contemplation and visualization of the image and partly in singing praises. And that there is no use then to do the arduous worship of ephemeral deities.<sup>27</sup>

References are also made to rudraksha beads as well as to ash. In one verse, in order to make the mind firm, the muttering of Shiva mantra is recommended to engage itself in good thoughts, memory, visualization and singing. The mind is elevated by sound instruction.<sup>28</sup>

In one verse he is referred to *adikirata* and is being told not to wander here and there but reside within the bhakta as within the limits of the dense forest of his mind dwell various kinds of beasts of prey viz jealousy, delusion, infatuation and the rest. Killing them, you can satisfy your fondness for the hunt.

Incidentally *Kirata* is the name of a degraded mountain tribe living in the Vindhya along with the Pulindas and Sabaras described as non-Aryan inhabiting mountains and jungles and living by hunting. They became shudras by their neglect of all prescribed rites and also are regarded as Mlecchas. The Mahabharata described them as dressed in skins, eating fruits and roots and inflicting cruel wounds with their weapons They bring wonderful gifts South Indian sources as late as the 17<sup>th</sup> century continue to refer to them as living in the Vindhya in a semi barbarous condition.<sup>29</sup> In the text Kiratarjuniya that the Kirata is identified with Shiva. We may conjecture that this may be a period where gradual urbanization may be taking place.<sup>30</sup> With large agrarian settlements coming up close to rivers which were the main channels for communication and trade with cities rising on the banks Yet there were large areas of uncleared forest especially near the hills.

### Conclusion

Ultimately the devotee receives what he desires - ill fate, egoism, misfortune, sorrow, false pride and foul speech – all indicative of a bad destiny have been

eradicated by the grace of Shiva. Also, primordial nescience, called avidya, lodged in the heart of the devotee, has disappeared and the cherished divine knowledge has dawned.<sup>31</sup>

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