

Siva and Parvati

There are numerous myths separately depicting Siva and Parvati, as well as being together. As a couple, the majority of these myths can be found in the several of the Puranas, telling many tales on how Siva and Parvati came to be. Although Parvati can be seen as the reincarnation of Siva's first wife Sati, their stories are very much different. According to the Puranic myths of Siva and Parvati, their story begins with the demon Taraka. Taraka, the king of the demons, was oppressing the gods and creating havoc in the celestial world. The god Brahma had granted Taraka one boon. Taraka wished that no god could slay him except for the one who is born of the god with braided hair (Siva) (O'Flaherty 1975:155).

To avoid further chaos caused by Taraka, Brahma's main concern was to find a woman or goddess who was capable of luring Siva into a sexual encounter or marriage (Kinsley 42). This is a difficult feat because Siva is a yogi who takes pleasure in *tapas*, which is described as a potentially destructive heat derived from extreme ascetic practices (Kinsley 42). Many texts describe Siva's celibacy and the ongoing physical, emotional and mental battle between Kama and Siva. In one variation of this tale, Kama enters Siva's heart where an immediate sexual desire stirs throughout his body (O'Flaherty 1973: 149). Siva is outraged by this attempt and expels Kama from his body using heat, causing Kama to leave his human form. As a last attempt, Kama shoots the arrow of desire into the heart of Siva and is immediately scorched and turned into ashes from the flame exerted out of Siva's third eye (O'Flaherty 1973: 149). Rati, Kama's wife who was distressed by the sight of her husband's burnt body, started rubbing his ashes all over her body protesting that she was going to kill herself. Siva consoled her and reassured her

that Kama would be reborn again, which is illustrated later on in the tale of the couple (Kramrisch 352).

Parvati whose name means “she who dwells in the mountains” was born to Himavat and Mena (Kinsley 41). According to Brahma’s plan, Parvati was born to practice austerities in order to marry Siva, and when united in marriage with Siva, their combined *tapas* will be so intense during love making that they would be able to create a son strong enough to destroy the demon Taraka (Kramrisch 350). In many ways, Parvati knew that they needed to be together in order to save the cosmos and everything in it; they were destined to be with each other. During the seduction of Siva, Parvati visits Siva trying to interrupt his meditations, where Siva dismisses her over and over again. Her determination was as firm as the Mountain, her father (Kramrisch 356). She eventually leaves the palace, abandons the householder status and becomes a renouncer, much to the dismay of her mother, in order to practice austerities within the forest (Kramrisch 356 & Kinsley 43).

The austerities performed by Parvati, described in most versions of this myth, outdo many of the great sages (Kinsley 43). Eventually, her *tapas* generates so much heat that the universe begins to heat up, forcing Brahma to grant her a boon to acquire Siva as a husband, which is instantly rejected by Siva (O’Flaherty 1973: 153). This rejection causes Parvati to make the universe smoke which eventually frightens Siva, who is shaken from his own meditation (O’Flaherty 1973: 153). Brahma promises Parvati that Siva will come to her. Using her *tapas*, she heats up Siva’s seat on Mount Kailasa and Siva is forced to appear before her (O’Flaherty 1973: 153). He was swayed by Parvati and was drawn to her as an ascetic. Siva decided to test Parvati’s resolution, the intensity of her asceticism, the clarity of her mind, the purity of her devotion, and her knowledge (Kramrisch 356-357). Seven sages were sent to Parvati to dissuade

her from her duty and described Siva as being “naked, ferocious, dweller of the cremation grounds, the carrier of skulls, a hermit, statue-like in action, a beggar, mad, fond of collecting ugly and terrible things, and *inauspiciousness* incarnate” (Kramrisch 357). Parvati, in response to their tests, does not deter in her mission and replies to the sages that they do not know the Great God (Kramrisch 357). Delighted with her determination and strength, they return to Siva retelling him what took place. He then goes to Parvati’s parents to ask for her hand in marriage; Parvati’s parents are honoured. The marriage ordeal is described in great detail in many variations of the myth with a common theme. During the marriage procession, Mena, Parvati’s mother sees Siva for the first time. She is outraged by his appearances and threatens to commit suicide and faints when told that the odd-looking figure in the marriage procession is her future son-in-law (Kinsley 43). He turns into something more suitable and beautiful in response to Mena’s cry.

After their marriage, Rati, Kama’s widow is said to have brought Siva to the ashes of Kama where Kama, as beautiful as before and wielding bow and arrows, emerged from the ashes (Kramrisch 363). Siva and Parvati then retreat to his mountain dwelling, Mount Kailasa, where they engage in intense sexual activity. Their lovemaking becomes so intense that it is said to have shaken the cosmos, frightening the gods (Kinsley 43). Parvati, according to Brahma’s plan, longed for a son of her own. As their lovemaking continued, the gods, in some texts, became impatient and scared of the child that would come from these two great deities. In one instance, the gods interrupt Siva and Parvati during sexual intercourse, causing Siva to spill his semen outside Parvati (Kinsley 43). This fiery, potent seed was transferred from one container to another, in many variations of the myth, where eventually it settles in a suitable place, often in the Ganges River, where it is incubated and born as the child Karttikeya. The boon granted by

Brahma to Taraka, the king of the demons, had been fulfilled and the child born of Siva seed defeats Taraka and rescues the world from utter chaos. After some time, Karttikeya finds his parents, where Parvati accepts the child as her own (Kinsley 43).

The Puranas identify Parvati's willingness to have another child. Siva, on the other hand said 'I am not a householder and I have no use for a son' (O'Flaherty 1973: 211). However, Parvati still insists on having a child telling Siva that once they conceive a child he can return to his yoga, leaving all of the parental responsibilities to Parvati (O'Flaherty 1973:211). Siva yet again refuses to give into her request. Instead, in desperate want of a child, she creates Ganesa from the dirt and sweat of her body and commands him to guard the entrance of her house against any intruder (Kinsley 44). When Siva tries to enter their hermitage, Ganesa denies his entry. This infuriates Siva and leads him to decapitate young Ganesa. As a result, Parvati becomes upset and demands that Siva restore Ganesa's life (Kinsley 44). Siva restores Ganesa to life yet with the head of an elephant and is said to have been put in charge of all Siva's troops and heavenly attendants (Kinsley 44).

Siva and Parvati's marriage and family life is portrayed as harmonious, blissful and calm. Some quarrels, recounted by some of the Puranic myths, occur throughout their marriage, where they leave each other for a brief period of time to practice their austerities, but eventually end up together recovering from their altercation because of the intimate love and devotion they have for each other. Siva is a god of excesses, both ascetic and sexual, and Parvati plays the role of modifier (Kinsley 49). Much of the tension and conflict exhibited by this divine couple is identified with the concept that Parvati is Siva's *sakti*, or power, which is often personified in the form of a goddess (Kinsley 49). Her role as *sakti* is active, in that she is sometimes identified with *prakrti* (nature), whereas, Siva is identified with *purusa* (pure spirit). Without Parvati,

Siva's power ceases to exist. Parvati's *sakti* not only complements Siva, she completes him. The reason for Parvati's existence is just that; the celestial world would not exist if it weren't for their undying love for each other. Many metaphors illustrate this dependence on the couple as complementary opposites throughout the Purana texts. It can be argued that the two are actually one-different aspects of ultimate reality- and such are complementary, not antagonistic (Kinsley 50).

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RECOMMENDED READINGS

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