

Shiva worship (1)

The term *linga* (or *lingam*) means sign or mark in the Indian Sanskrit language. *Linga* are aniconic (non figurative) representations of the Hindu god Shiva, and may be either natural stone forms (*svayambhu*) or man made (*manusha*). The naturally formed style of *linga* illustrated here has been shaped by the action of river water and is called a *banalinga*. It is usually associated with the Narmada River in northern Central India, one of India's sacred rivers.

Hindu devotees worship several natural objects, including *linga*, associated with the god Shiva, and *salagrama* (black stones in which fossil ammonites are embedded), associated with the god Vishnu. These naturally occurring aniconic representations are considered more potent than man-made forms and do not require preliminary rituals of purification and consecration, which are considered necessary to prepare man-made figurative forms of gods (for example, bronze and stone sculptures) before they are worshipped.

The *linga* represents the god Shiva in the form of a pillar and alludes to his creative powers and his association with fertility. The red band is a mineral inclusion in the rock that represents *shakti*, or the creative power of the goddess. In Hinduism and Buddhism it is believed that the energy of the goddess/female is required in order to energise the god/male. The representation of male and female in the *linga* symbolises the Hindu concept of the duality of the universe, which is also a central concept in Buddhism.

Shiva is visually represented in many different forms, each expressing a different aspect of his character. The *linga* is the representation of Shiva in his most fundamental form, and is invariably found in the central chamber (*garbagrha*) of Shiva temples (that is, temples devoted to Shiva). The *linga* is usually set within a stone base known as a *yon*i, which symbolises the female. Unlike representations of other gods, which are raised above the viewer, the *linga* is usually placed at floor height. Worship or *puja* includes pouring five holy liquids over the *linga* as offerings to the god. They include water from the Ganges River, honey, sugarcane juice, cow's milk and yoghurt, ghee, seawater, coconut water or milk, fragrant oils, rose water or other precious liquids. During the libation the mantra of Shiva's name, *om namah shivaya*, is uttered and afterwards the *linga* is cleaned with water, smeared with sandalwood paste and decked with flowers. Sweets and fruit are offered to the god, and camphor and incense are lit.

