

The DNA of Śiva: Examining Śiva through a Linguist Lens

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Abstract

This paper examines the theological evolution of the deity Śiva through a linguistic methodology grounded in traditional Indian exegetical schools. By analyzing a sequence of epithets from the Vedic corpus—Sambhu, Śaṅkara, Śiva, Śivatara, and Śivatama—the study demonstrates a systematic progression from verbal root (dhātu) to nominal form (nāma) to adjectival gradation (viśeṣaṇa). These are also qualifying epithets of Śiva as ‘mayo bhu’ and sānta. This grammatical unfolding, metaphorically termed the "DNA" of Śiva, reveals how an abstract Vedic concept of auspiciousness progressively crystallizes into the fully anthropomorphized deity of the Purāṇas. The paper argues that this linguistic evidence, drawn exclusively from Vedic texts themselves, validates the principle of svataḥ-pramāṇa—that the Vedas are self-validating and contain within their own structures the hermeneutic keys for their interpretation.

Keywords:

Śiva, Vedic linguistics, dhātu, etymology, Yajurveda, Patañjali, Yāska, theological evolution, Sanskrit grammar.

1. Introduction: The Problem of Vedic Anthropomorphism

In the Ṛgveda itself the trend towards the anthropomorphism of divinities is totally absent. The ascribing of human or animal features or characteristics to the elements, for instance, is not to be regarded as evidence for a nascent anthropomorphism but should be viewed in the light of literary conventions and techniques that abound in the poetry of the Vedas. The lack of a clearly defined anthropomorphism in the Vedas has led to interesting and antithetical stances by scholars in their interpretation of the Ṛgveda.

For the early school of Indologists such as Macdonell (1974: 2), this lack of anthropomorphism reflects the primitive or rudimentary nature of the poetry of the text. For those like Dayananda (commentary on the Ṛgveda) and Aurobindo (On the Veda) who argue in favour of a more sophisticated theism in the Vedas, the lack of anthropomorphism is rather interestingly used to good advantage. For them, the absence of clearly defined physical attributes serves as proof for the abstract nature of God. The deity is not absent because it is

primitive; rather, the divine is conceived in terms too subtle and philosophical for crude physical representation.

Needless to say, the debate is an unending one—not only for those with deep-rooted religious convictions but also for academics who find themselves confounded by texts such as Yāska's Nirukta, which make possible a wide range of speculation on the etymologies of Vedic vocables. A good example of how a deity which has in the Vedas an abstract character—epithets meaning "goodness, auspiciousness, bliss"—and later becomes in the Purāṇas a fully evolved mythical god is that of Śiva. The depiction of Śiva in a meditative posture on Kailashnath, the source of Gangā endorses this view.

This paper proposes to examine the evolution of Śiva not through external comparative mythology or later Purāṇic narratives, but through the internal evidence of language itself. By treating the epithets of Śiva as a linguistic sequence—a kind of genetic code embedded in the Vedas—we can trace the precise grammatical and semantic transformations that mark the deity's theological development.

2. Methodology: The Linguistic Tools of Indian Tradition

The approach in this study is based on Vedic principles that follow the prerequisites prescribed by the Vedāṅgas. This tradition can best be described as vedāṅgādhārita – Vedāṅga plus ādhārita and offers the most authentic tools in any examination and exegesis of Vedic texts.

2.1 Yāska's Nirukta and the Possibility of Etymology

Any investigation into Vedic semantics must begin with Yāska, the author of the Nirukta, the seminal text on Vedic etymology. The Nirukta makes possible a wide range of speculation on the etymologies of Vedic vocables, and it is precisely this interpretive flexibility that allows us to trace the semantic development of divine names across texts. Yāska's approach recognizes that words carry within themselves the traces of their own history—that etymology is not merely a tool for dictionary-making but a window into the conceptual world of the seers.

2.2 Patañjali and the Verbal Root Theory

The present study also draws upon the theory posited by Patañjali and the resulting school of thought that Sanskrit nouns can all be traced to their verbal roots. This principle—that every noun (nāma) ultimately derives from a verbal root (dhātu)—provides the methodological foundation for our investigation. If nouns are frozen actions, then the names of deities encode the dynamic principles they embody. To trace a divine name back to its verbal root is to recover the original conception of that deity as an active force rather than a static entity.

2.3 The Principle of Svataḥ-pramāṇah

Finally, this paper operates within the framework that the Vedas are svataḥ-pramāṇah—valid in themselves. The literary approach suggested by Yāska in his Nirukta, Patañjali's treatment of words as derivatives of verbal roots, and the various other Indian philosophical schools which speak of the nature of language, its eternality, the origins and notions of sound—all these demonstrate that a treatment of the word, the myth, and philosophical thought is possible through a systematic study of the Vedic texts themselves, without recourse to external interpretive frameworks.

3. The Śiva of the Vedas: Abstract Origins

In the Śiva Purāṇa, the abstract nature of the Vedic Śiva (also known as Śaṅkara and Śambhu) has evolved into fully blown myths. In the Vedic texts, the etymology of the epithets of Śiva can, besides being expounded in the various Vedic kośas, be explained by the Vedic mantras themselves.

The foundational text for this investigation is the Śatarudrīya hymn of the Yajurveda (16.41), which presents a sequence of epithets in a single verse:

namaḥ sambhavāya ca mayobhavāya ca | namaḥ śaṅkarāya ca mayaskarāya ca | namaḥ śivāya ca śivatarāya ca || — Yajurveda 16.41

This mantra is remarkable not only for the epithets it contains but for the grammatical progression it encodes. Within this single verse, we witness a systematic unfolding from the embodiment of abstract qualities to the active generation of those qualities to their qualitative expression and finally to their comparative intensification. This is the "DNA" of Śiva in its embryonic form.

4. The DNA of Śiva: Dhātu-Nāma-Adjective Continuum

The metaphor of "DNA" is particularly apt for this linguistic investigation, as it allows us to conceptualize how the core genetic material of a verbal root (dhātu) unfolds through nominal forms (nāma) and finally manifests as qualifying attributes (viśeṣaṇa) that can be intensified through gradation. This grammatical progression mirrors the theological evolution from abstract potentiality to fully realized deity.

4.1 The First Sequence: From Dhātu to Embodied Quality (√bhū)

Sambhavāya and Mayobhavāya

The term sambhavāya is the Dative Case of śambhava, which itself comprises the root elements śam + √bhū. Here, the dhātu √bhū ("to be, to become, to exist") serves as the foundational genetic material. When combined with the prefix sam ("together, peace, completeness"), this verbal root generates the nominal form sambhu—literally "the very being or embodiment of peace."

Similarly, mayobhavāya derives from mayas + √bhū. The dhātu √bhū again provides the verbal DNA, while mayas ("bliss, delight") supplies the qualifying content. The resulting nominal compound mayobhava means "the embodiment of bliss."

In this first stage, the same verbal root √bhū functions as the genetic constant, while the prefixes śam and mayas introduce distinct qualitative variations. The dhātu provides the existential ground; the compounds name the embodied states that arise from that ground. The deity at this stage is conceived as the very state of being peaceful and blissful—an abstract principle rather than a personal god.

4.2 The Second Sequence: From Being (√bhū) to Doing (√kṛ) – (from passive to active)

Śaṅkarāya and Mayaskarāya

A critical mutation occurs in the second pair. Śaṅkarāya derives from śam + √kṛ, while mayaskarāya derives from mayas + √kṛ. The genetic material has shifted from the stative root √bhū ("to be") to the active root √kṛ ("to do, to make, to perform").

This grammatical transformation—from √bhū to √kṛ—is the linguistic equivalent of an evolutionary leap. The deity is no longer merely the passive embodiment of peace (sambhu) but has become the active generator or doer of peace (śaṅkara). Likewise, the principle of bliss

evolves from being an embodied state (mayobhava) to becoming an active force (mayaskara) that produces bliss.

The nominal forms śaṅkara and mayaskara thus represent the second stage of theological development, where abstract qualities acquire agency and dynamic potency. The dhātu √kṛ injects the genetic code for action, transforming static nouns into operative principles. This grammatical shift prepares the ground for the emergence of a personal deity capable of intervening in the cosmos.

4.3 The Third Sequence: The Emergence of the Adjective

Śivāya and Śivatarāya – The Dative Case of Śiva and Śivatarā

The third pair introduces an entirely new grammatical category: the adjective. Śiva is traditionally derived from the same root sam that appeared in sambhu and śaṅkara, now inflected to convey the qualitative meaning "auspicious, good, benevolent." Here, the nominal form gives way to an adjectival one—no longer "the embodiment of peace" or "the doer of peace," but simply "the Auspicious One."

What follows is the most remarkable feature of this genetic sequence: the application of comparative and superlative suffixes directly to the adjectival form.

namaḥ śivāya ca śivatarāya ca — "Salutations to Śiva and to the Greater Śiva (śivatarā)."

The suffix -tara (the comparative degree) is appended directly to the adjective, creating a gradation that implies theological intensification. This is not merely a grammatical flourish but a statement about the nature of the divine: the auspiciousness that characterizes Śiva admits of degrees, and the deity encompasses both the simple and the greater manifestations of that quality.

4.4 The Fourth Sequence: The Superlative Completion

The genetic progression reaches its final expression in a mantra from the Gṛhyasūtra tradition:

āpaḥ śivāḥ śivatamāḥ śāntāḥ śāntatamās te kṛṇvantu bheṣajam | — Āpastamba Gṛhyasūtra, Praśna (Book) 1, Khaṇḍa (Section) 3

Here, śiva evolves to śivatara (as in the Yajurveda) and finally to śivatama (शिवतम), with the suffix -tama marking the superlative degree—"the most auspicious, the supreme good." The parallel construction with śānta ("peaceful") becoming śāntatama ("most peaceful") confirms this as a systematic pattern of theological intensification through grammatical gradation.

Monier-Williams (1979: 1074) also defines śivatara and śivatama as, respectively, the comparative and superlative of śiva. This external lexicographical confirmation validates what the internal textual evidence already suggests: that the Vedic seers conceived of the divine in terms that admitted of degrees and that they encoded this conception in the very grammar of the language.

4.5 The Complete Genetic Sequence

The epithets of Śiva can therefore be arranged according to a linguistic progression that systematically unfolds the meaning and perception of the deity in the Vedic texts:

Stage	Form	Grammatical Category	Root (Dhātu)	Meaning
1	Sambhu	Nominal Compound	sam + √bhū	Embodiment of peace
2	Śaṅkara	Nominal Compound	sam + √kṛ	Generator of peace
3	Śiva	Adjective	sam (→ śiva)	Auspicious
4	Śivatara	Comparative Adjective	śiva + - tara	Greater Auspiciousness
5	Śivatama	Superlative Adjective	śiva + - tama	Supreme Auspiciousness
6	Śānta	Adjective	sam (→śāntā)	Peace
7	Śāntatara	Comparative Adjective	śānta + - tara	Greater Peace
8	Śāntatama	Superlative Adjective	śānta + - tama	Greatest Peace

This sequence reveals the "DNA" of Śiva as a continuous thread of linguistic transformation:

Dhātu (√bhū/√kṛ) → Nāma (sambhu/śaṅkara) → Viśeṣaṇa (śiva) → Comparative (śivatara) → Superlative (śivatama)

5. Theoretical Implications

5.1 Vindication of Patañjali

Such an example not only vindicates but amply illustrates the theory posited by Patañjali and the resulting school of thought that Sanskrit nouns can all be traced to their verbal roots. The entire sequence of Śiva's epithets unfolds from two fundamental verbal roots: √bhū (being) and √kṛ (doing). These roots represent the two fundamental modalities of divine existence—static being and dynamic action—and the entire theological elaboration of Śiva can be understood as the progressive specification and intensification of these root meanings, from passive being to active energy.

5.2 The Vedic Germ of Purāṇic Mythology

The Vedic myths and the etymology of the names of the deities are the germ of a later more clearly anthropomorphosized mythology, the evolution of which can be easily traced through a chronological study of the Vedic texts. The worldview of the Vedas is vividly enunciated in the early Vedic hymns and myths; it becomes more colourful in the stories of the Purāṇas and finds philosophical perfection in the Upaniṣads.

The linguistic evidence presented here demonstrates that this evolution is not a rupture or an external addition but an organic unfolding. The Purāṇic Śiva—the cosmic dancer, the destroyer of Tripura, the compassionate lord of Kailāsa, the source of Ganga—is already present in potentia within the grammatical structures of the Vedic epithets. The later mythology gives narrative form to what the earlier language already encodes: a deity who embodies peace,

generates peace, is auspiciousness itself, and surpasses even that auspiciousness in degrees of excellence.

5.3 The Abstract Nature of the Vedic Divine

This analysis also contributes to the debate on Vedic anthropomorphism. The absence of clearly pronounced physical attributes in the Vedic conception of Śiva does not prove primitive thinking; rather, it reflects a sophisticated theological vision that conceives the divine in terms of qualities and actions rather than forms. The Vedic Śiva is not a being with a body but a dynamic complex of peace, bliss, and auspiciousness—a complex that can be named, addressed, and eventually visualized, but whose essence remains the abstract qualities encoded in the verbal roots.

6. Conclusion

It becomes quite evident that there is within the Vedic texts a means of identifying the various deities and listing their definitions, without our having to resort to any manipulation or adaptation of the linguistic laws or schools of literary theory outside that of the Indian texts. The literary approach suggested by Yāska in his *Nirukta*, Patañjali's treatment of words as derivatives of verbal roots, and the various other Indian philosophical schools which speak of the nature of language, its eternality, the origins and notions of sound—all these demonstrate that a treatment of the word, the myth, and philosophical thought is possible through a systematic study of the Vedic texts themselves, a reaffirmation of the Vedas being *svataḥ-pramāṇaḥ*—valid in themselves.

The "DNA" of Śiva is encoded in the *dhātu*, expressed through nominal forms, and perfected through adjectival gradation. The abstract Vedic concept of auspiciousness, peace, and bliss—embodied in the earliest epithets—gradually unfolds through grammatical transformation into the fully realized, superlative deity of later tradition. The linguistic structure itself contains the genetic blueprint for theological evolution.

The epithets of Śiva can therefore be placed in a sequence according to a progression that systematically unfolds the meaning and the perception of the term in the Vedic texts: Śambhu, Śaṅkara, Śiva, Śivatara, Śivatama, Śānta, Śāntatara, Śāntatama. This sequence is not merely a list but a grammar of theological becoming—a record in language of how the Vedic seers conceived the divine and how that conception contained within itself the seeds of its own development.