

The Story of Shiva and Sati

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Once upon a time, the Goddess Sati, a personification of the divine female energy, took human birth at the suggestion of Brahmā, the Lord of Creation. She was born as a daughter of Daksha Prajāpati, a son of Brahmā. In asking the Goddess Sati to take human birth, Brahmā's plan was that she would entice Shiva with humble devotions bringing him out of his long meditation and marry him.

It was natural that Sati, as a child, adored the tales and legends associated with Shiva and grew up an ardent devotee. From the time she was five all she wanted to do was to worship the great lord Shiva. As Sati grew to womanhood, the idea of marrying anyone else, as proposed by her father, became abhorrent to her. Every proposal from valiant and rich kings made her crave the ascetic Shiva of Kailāsa even more.

To win the heart of the ascetic Shiva, the daughter of Daksha renounced the luxuries of her father's palace and retired to a forest, to devote herself to austerities and the worship of Shiva. So rigorous were her penances that she gradually renounced food itself, at one stage subsisting on one bilva leaf a day, and then giving up even that. Finally, all of her devotion brought the great god out of his long meditation. He appeared before Sati one day smitten with love and asked her to be his bride.

An ecstatic Sati returned to her father's home to await her bridegroom, but found her father less than elated by the turn of events. Her father Daksha, the son of Brahma, was a proud and haughty king and didn't think much of Shiva calling him a dirty, roaming ascetic. The wedding was however held when Brahmā intervened. A huge celebration was planned, and all the gods, goddesses, and sages were invited. It was indeed a royal feast and there was much rejoicing, because the world was always a happier place when Shiva came out of his long meditations to find his beloved once again in earthly form.

Their union is celebrated on the new moon in February which is called Mahashivratri, the great wedding night of Shiva and the Divine Mother. Coincidentally Valentine's Day, the great romantic holiday of the west, is also celebrated in February. Perhaps February is the month when mother nature says to her lover, come, be with me, and we will create anew, the world has been wintering for a long time now and it is time for sowing the seed, for growth to begin anew, a new spring to dawn, flowers and crops to grow, and there will once again be a plentiful harvest.

After the wedding of Shiva and the Divine Mother, Shiva gathered his beautiful young bride in his arms and took her to his mountain home. There it was always spring or summer. The flowers were always in bloom. There Shiva adorned Sati with garlands of rare and exotic flowers, jewels of the most dazzling hue and cut, and garments woven of the finest silk. He would fashion jeweled sandals for her lovely feet and find crimson paints to embellish her graceful toenails. Beautiful rings bedecked her lovely long fingers, pearls and opals glistened in her gleaming black hair.

Shiva could not lavish enough attention on his lovely bride. When they were not making love, then Shiva would go off with his companions to capture a lovely gazelle for Sati's garden or to gather marble for a statue to guard her door.

Even though he himself wore the skins of wild animals, he had built for Sati an exquisite palace out of

the finest pink and golden-hued marble.

And so unimaginably blissful eons passed, for a thousand years in human time is but the blink of an immortal's eye.

Sati's father Daksha had never approved of his daughter's marriage. To Daksha, Shiva was an unorthodox hermit, who frequented cremation grounds. No yogi with long matted hair, who consumes intoxicants, sings and dances whenever he pleases, was a worthy husband for his daughter. Daksha thrived on rules and regulations. Shiva was his antithesis. After Sati's marriage, Daksha distanced himself from his daughter, and his son-in-law, Shiva.

Shortly after Sati had left her home with her father to live with Shiva, Daksha organized a great party, a yagna or ritual sacrifice. He invited all the members of his family, allies, gods, sages, courtiers and subjects. Consciously excluding Sati and Shiva from the list, he also set up a statue of Shiva, at the entrance to his hall, which he defiled and mocked. Wanting to visit her parents, relatives and childhood friends, Sati sought to rationalize this omission. She reasoned within herself that her parents had neglected to make a formal invitation to them only because, as family, such formality was unnecessary; certainly, she needed no invitation to visit her own mother. Sati was hurt by her father's refusal to acknowledge her marriage and her husband and decided to go to the party.

Shiva tried to dissuade her, but she had resolved go, so he provided her with an escort of his ganas and requested that she maintain her composure in the face of insults that Daksha would heap upon him.

When she arrived, her father asked her why she was there, as she was not invited. Her father, sniggering, said "Perhaps you have come to your senses and have had it with your wild animal of a husband, isn't he also called Lord of the Beasts?" Daksha explained that he could not sully his glorious celebration by inviting a dirty disheveled god like Shiva who hung out in graveyards with thieves and criminals, with the sick and the hungry, who had matted hair and wore a loincloth of animal skins. Some of the guests began to laugh. Sati was hurt by the insult to her husband, and when she questioned her father, received only harsh words. Sati was devastated. When her father tried to taunt her again she remained silent, letting go of all desire to continue to argue with her father she trembled with disgust and indignation at having been so cruelly let down by the one man upon whom she, as a daughter, should always be able to rely. Instead she made an internal resolve to relinquish all family ties. She summoned up her strength and spoke this vow to her father, "Since you have given me this body I no longer wish to be associated with it." She walked past her father and sat in a meditative seat on the ground. Closing her eyes, envisioning her true Lord, Sati fell into a mystic trance. Going deep within herself she began to increase her own inner fire through yogic exercises until her body burst into flames.

Hearing what had happened, Shiva's attendants rushed inside the ceremony hall and started attacking all the guests present there; however, they were defeated and retreated to Shiva's abode. Upon hearing the news of his beloved wife's death, Shiva, was first shocked and saddened, then enraged. He fell into the deepest and darkest place he could find. He tore his hair out, and fashioned from this hair the fiercest of warriors, Siva named this warrior, Virabhadra. (Vira -hero + Bhadra - friend). Shiva then

commanded Virabhadra to go to the yagna and destroy Daksha and all the guests. Upon Shiva's orders Virabhadra stormed the ceremony and killed Daksha as well as many of the guests.

Terrified and with remorse the surviving guests and other Gods begged Lord Shiva for mercy and to restore Daksha's life. Shiva arrived at Daksha's palace to see the damage that Virabhadra had done and absorbed Virabhadra back into his own form. Shiva's anger was gone, and he was filled with sorrow. This sorrow turned to compassion when he saw the bloody aftermath of Virabhadra. Shiva found Daksha's headless body and giving it the head of a goat, brought Daksha back to life. Overwhelmed by Shiva's generous gesture, Daksha called Shiva, Shankar, the kind and benevolent one. With Daksha's pride put in check he bowed in awe and humility to Shiva Shankar. The other gods and goddesses followed his lead and honored Shiva.

The fact remained that Sati was dead. The entire assembly would have been disintegrated by Shiva's rage, yet greater than his rage was the unspeakable suffering at the loss of his beloved Sati. And so tenderly and carefully he gathered up the sacred body of the Divine Mother and walked away from the scene of the party, carrying the lifeless body of his beloved wife, wandering to where he did not know. But one thing he was sure of was that he would find the most isolated place possible and once again become an ascetic recluse. Shiva began roaming the earth, walking up and down mountains miles high with his beloved clasped tightly to his heart. He went up to the wildest crags and bellowed to the howling winds. The other gods followed not knowing how to help restore him to sanity. They tried words, they tried mantras, chanting, even tricks, jokes, and dancing. Nothing worked. The Gods called upon Lord Vishnu to return Shiva to sanity. Vishnu used his Sudarshana Chakram to cut Sati's lifeless body into 52 pieces which fell to earth at various places. These 52 places are called Shakti Peethas, and became places of pilgrimage.

Finally, when the last part of the body fell away, Shiva sat down at the banks of the source of the Ganges where he had sat once a long time ago when he agreed to let the river Ganga fall on his head, so that its impact would not tear the world apart.

There in a long meditation, he remembered who he was and who the Divine Mother was. He then remembered their sacred vow, that they had sworn never to part, even when the body was no more, that they would be together in spirit and in soul even if the body were to change forms, and change it must, even if the body were to disappear altogether, as it must, for the new form to take shape. And so, mother divine lay dormant.

And so, Shiva too went into long deep meditation. And some eons later, she would come to him again. She would return as Parvati, the daughter of the King and Queen of the Himalayas and be his bride once again. And there would be a new story with a new name and, so it would go on until the end of time, as it had been from the very beginning of time.

The meaning behind the story -

There are several actual versions of this story and many more interpretations. My version blends Vedic and Tantric sources. I hope that in doing I have added richness to the understanding of this beautiful story.

I think that there is more than one meaning or lesson here. How each of us reads it depends on which character we focus on (Daksha, Shiva, or Sati herself), as well as on which version(s) of the story we look at, and depending on our own interests and concerns.

In all versions of the story that I know of, Sati's early life was one of great self-discipline, expressed through fasting, meditation and yogic austerities. The point of her yoga was not renunciation of all desire, but attainment of her desire for Shiva. According to the Kalika Purana, Shiva was originally very averse to the idea of falling in love.

Sati's death was due to the underlying conflict between Daksha and Shiva. Sati comes from the world of established religion, the order of the dharma and marries into a world of asceticism, and so combining in her the two opposing worlds. In this aspect Sati functions as a mediator, trying to bring the two worlds together.

Daksha disliked Siva because of his odd appearance, strange habits and the fact that he has renounced the world, Shiva did not behave accordingly to the ways of the world. His appearance was most unconventional. His association with world renunciation, asceticism and the powers of fertility as symbolized by the linga probably marked him as a deity who belongs to the fringes of society from the point of view of the priestly establishment. Eventually, it was the death of Sati which brought the conflict to an end. The reinstatement of the sacrifices and Siva being included after he restored the head of Daksha represent his acceptance into the establishment of the Brahman religion. Therefore, when Sati killed herself, she caused the conflict between these two opposing worlds to surface in the open which was initially destructive but was eventually beneficial and creative.

When Sati gives up her life, it can be seen as a continuation of her yogic austerity. The Shiva Purana in fact says that she burned her body to ashes 'by yogic means'. It is a remarkable act, because she was not only renouncing her own present happiness, she is also taking away (for the present) the happiness of her beloved husband. Yet when she leaves the world she is determined to return to it. She is going to come back as Parvati and again she will win the love of Lord Shiva. The difference being that the couple will be fully accepted by Parvati's relatives.

When Vishnu cut her body to pieces and it fell to earth Shiva was brought back down to earth, where he previously had dwelled in the mountains engaged in austerities, indifferent to the ongoing of creation. "He was unaware of the manifest world; his mind being fully absorbed.... Regaining his self-composure, he passed the time contemplating the true form of the goddess." [Devi Gita 1: 5] By having pieces of her body fall into the various parts of the earth she sanctifies the earth, and from the body pieces various temples emerge. The earth itself is the body of goddess sati.

The central role of the Goddess is as creator and the cosmic mother. As cosmic mother she maintains order through the process of destruction, creation and preservation. Sati represents the earth as flourishing and thriving, but it has become full of ego and prideful arrogance (symbolized by Daksha). The death of Sati brings about a period of chaos and turmoil, possibly, not so much to uphold the honor of her husband, but to punish the ego and arrogance represented by Daksha and his court.

Another aspect of this mythology is the function of Sati as the force that brought forth creation. Sati plays the role of luring Siva from ascetic isolation into creative participation in the world. Thus,

presenting the message that union/marriage between Man (Shiva, pure consciousness) and Woman (Sati, all of creation) is necessary for life to be generated and sustained.

So, my humble interpretation of this story would be of an underlying internal conflict between worldly almost dogmatic actions and a desire for something more, something higher. Sati represents either the world, endangered by the arrogance of the ego, or our own individual self or soul struggling to reconcile the two aspects of worldly and spiritual life.

Sati as the earth or the mind was thrown into confusion by the hypocrisy of Daksha (ego). Even as Daksha attempted to purify himself (the ceremony) he still harbored hatred, pride and arrogance. Shiva in his role as the destroyer (higher self, god consciousness) put an end to the hypocrisy. Shiva then transmutes the worldly ego into a spiritualized ego and reestablishes dharma (truth) through a deeper understanding of reality. The individual self or soul appears to be separated from the higher self but reunites in the form Parvati, Sati's next incarnation and wife of Shiva.