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Jyotirlinga: The 12 Sacred Shiva Shrines

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Jyotirlinga: The 12 Sacred Shiva Shrines

Twelve shrines across India are said to mark one event. A Shiva Purana legend tells of Shiva piercing the world as an infinite pillar of light. The places where he appeared as fiery columns of light are regarded as Jyotirlinga shrines.

At a glance

Four key facts on this topic

01 **12**Jyotirlingas

02 **Somnath**the first on the list

03 **Kedarnath**bull-hump legend

04 **Mahakaleshwar**only south-facing

The legend and the west

1 The pillar of light

1.1 What is a Jyotirlinga?

A Jyotirlinga is a **linga of light**. The word comes from a Shiva Purana legend. In it, Shiva pierced the world as an infinite pillar of light.

The places where Shiva appeared as these fiery columns of light are regarded as Jyotirlinga shrines.

1.2 How many are there, and where?

There are **twelve** Jyotirlingas. A Sanskrit verse names them in order, and each shrine stands in a different state.

Somnath comes first, then Mallikarjuna, Mahakaleshwar, Omkareshwar, Kedarnath and Bhimashankar. Kashi Vishwanath, Trimbakeshwar, Nageshwar, Baidyanath, Rameshwar and Grishneshwar follow.

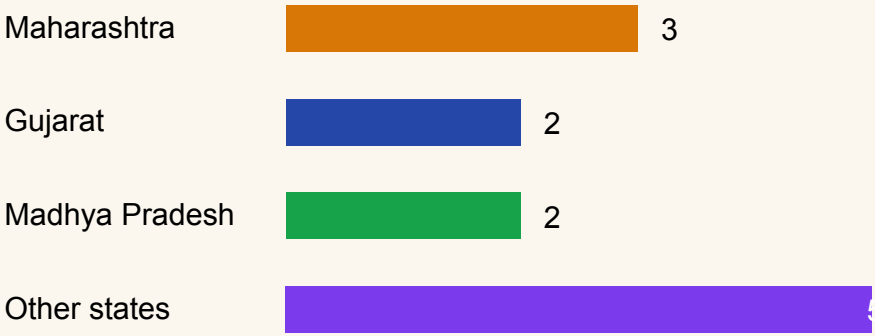
1.3 How does the verse group them?

The verse groups them by setting. Two lie on the sea shore and three on river banks. Four stand in the mountain heights and three in villages in meadows.

So the twelve are spread across the country, from the Gujarat coast to the Himalaya to Tamil Nadu.



Kedarnath Temple, Uttarakhand, one of the twelve Jyotirlingas. Photo by Naresh Balakrishnan, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.



Twelve shrines, four groups. Maharashtra holds three; Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh hold two each; the other five stand in separate states.

11. **Think it through:** Why does the list name the states? See answer ↓

Quick check 1. True or false: A Jyotirlinga is traditionally a place where Shiva manifested as a pillar of light. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 2. True or false: There are ten Jyotirlingas in the traditional list. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in; shrikashivishwanath.org

2 Shrines of the west

2.1 Which shrine is counted first?

Somnath stands on the shores of the Arabian Sea at Prabhas Patan in Gujarat's Gir Somnath district. It is regarded as the first among the twelve Jyotirlingas.

The temple was rebuilt several times over the centuries.

2.2 Who rebuilt Somnath after Independence?

The present structure is in the Chalukyan style of temple architecture. It was completed in 1951.

Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel led the reconstruction. India's first President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, performed the consecration.

2.3 Where is Nageshwar, and what is its legend?

Nageshwar stands on the coast of Saurashtra in Dwarka, Gujarat. A statue of Shiva, about 80 feet tall and seated, stands at the site.

The legend tells of a demon named Daruka. He tortured a devotee named Supriya. Her faith impressed Shiva, who appeared as Nageshwar and slew Daruka.

2.4 What does the Shiva Purana say about Nageshwar?

The Shiva Purana says prayers at this lingam give protection from poisons and snake bites.

2.5 Why is Trimbakeshwar linked to the Godavari?

Trimbakeshwar is in Maharashtra. The Godavari River flows from the Brahmagiri Hills.

A legend says the sage Gautama Rishi did a hard penance there to please Shiva. The Godavari, called the Ganga of the South, then flowed down.

2.6 Which is the smallest Jyotirlinga?

Grishneshwar in Maharashtra is the smallest of the Jyotirlingas.

Its legend tells of a devoted woman named Kusuma. She worshipped a Shiva lingam under a tamarind tree.

The present temple was completed in the 18th century.

> 12. **Think it through:** Why is Somnath listed first? See answer ↓

Quick check 3. True or false: Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel led the post-Independence reconstruction of Somnath. *(True or False?)*

See answer ↓

Quick check 4. True or false: Grishneshwar is the largest of the twelve Jyotirlingas. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

The rest of India

3 Shrines of the centre

3.1 Where is Mahakaleshwar, and why is it unusual?

Mahakaleshwar stands in Ujjain, Madhya Pradesh. It is the only Jyotirlinga that faces south, a direction called dakshinamukhi.

All other Jyotirlingas face east. The lingam here is considered self-manifested.

3.2 What does the name mean?

Maha means great. Kaal means time and death. Mahakal is the great lord of time.

A popular legend tells of King Chandrasena of Ujjain, a devout follower of Shiva. Shiva appeared in his Mahakal form to save Ujjain.

3.3 What is the Bhasma Aarti?

The Bhasma Aarti is a daily ritual that begins every morning at 4. It is performed to awaken Shiva.

Mahakaleshwar is the only Jyotirlinga temple where it is performed.

3.4 Where is Omkareshwar?

Omkareshwar stands on Omkar mountain, an island in the middle of the Narmada river, in Madhya Pradesh.

The Mamleshwar temple on the south bank of the Narmada is also very important. The Dwadash Jyotirling stotra says “omkar mamleshwaram”.

> 13. **Think it through:** Why are Mahakaleshwar and Omkareshwar both in Madhya Pradesh? See answer ↓

> **Quick check 5.** True or false: Mahakaleshwar is the only Jyotirlinga that faces south. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

> **Quick check 6.** True or false: Omkareshwar stands on an island in the Narmada river. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: omkareshwar.org

4 Shrines of the north

4.1 Where is Kedarnath?

Kedarnath is in Uttarakhand. It is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas.

It is also one of the four sites of the Chhota Char Dham circuit, along with Badrinath, Gangotri and Yamunotri.

4.2 Who built the Kedarnath temple?

It is believed to have been built by the Pandavas after the Mahabharata war. It is said to date back to the 8th century.

The shrine holds a conical lingam.

4.3 Why is a bull linked to Kedarnath?

The Pandavas sought Shiva's blessings after the Kurukshetra battle. Shiva did not want to forgive them and took the form of a bull to evade them.

He dived into the ground and left his hump behind at Kedarnath. The hump is believed to be the lingam worshipped there.

4.4 When was Kashi Vishwanath restored?

It was restored in 1780 under the Maratha queen Ahilyabai Holkar.

Kashi Vishwanath stands at Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh. Its roots go back to the 11th century AD.

4.5 What is the Kashi Vishwanath Corridor?

The corridor links pilgrims from the ghats to the temple. It is designed to hold about 50,000 devotees.

> 14. **Think it through:** Why a bull at Kedarnath? See answer ↓

Quick check 7. True or false: Shiva's hump is believed to be the lingam worshipped at Kedarnath. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 8. True or false: The Kashi Vishwanath temple was restored in 1780 under Ahilyabai Holkar. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

5 Shrines of the south

5.1 Where is Mallikarjuna?

Mallikarjuna stands at Srisailam in Andhra Pradesh, amid the Nallamala Hills. Shiva is worshipped here as Mallikarjuna Swamy.

The temple overlooks the Krishna River.

5.2 Where is Rameshwaram?

Rameshwaram is in Tamil Nadu. The temple is one of the twelve Jyotirlinga shrines.

Its sanctum has two lingams. Rama made one from sand, and it is called the Ramalingam. Hanuman brought the other from Kailash, and it is called the Vishvalingam.

5.3 Which lingam is worshipped first?

Rama instructed that the Vishvalingam be worshipped first, because Hanuman brought it.

5.4 What is special about the Rameshwaram corridor?

The temple has a long corridor. It measures 197 metres from east to west.

The temple also has 22 Teerthams within it.

15. **Think it through:** Why two lingams at Rameshwaram? See answer ↓

Quick check 9. True or false: At Rameshwaram, the Vishvalingam is worshipped first. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Quick check 10. True or false: Mallikarjuna stands in Tamil Nadu. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Sources: incredibleindia.gov.in

Exam Practice

Remember this

- **Jyotirlinga:** A linga of light, a shrine of Shiva
- **Legend:** Shiva as an infinite pillar of light
- **Somnath:** First, in Gujarat
- **Mahakaleshwar:** Ujjain, only south-facing
- **Kedarnath:** Hump of Shiva's bull form

Explain it back: What does a Jyotirlinga traditionally mark?

Practice MCQs

1. What is a Jyotirlinga traditionally believed to mark?

A. A site of Vishnu's birth

B. A river confluence sacred to Brahma

C. A place where Shiva manifested as a pillar of light

D. A site of a Mughal emperor's prayer

See answer ↓

2. What is the distinctive pre-dawn ritual performed at Ujjain's Mahakaleshwar Temple?

A. Bhasma Aarti (offering sacred ash to the lingam)

B. Ganga Aarti

C. Kalash Sthapana

D. Rath Yatra

See answer ↓

3. Somnath Temple, on Gujarat's coast at Prabhas Patan, is revered as the first of which group of 12 Shiva shrines?

A. The Shakti Peethas

B. The Char Dham

C. The Jyotirlingas

D. The Panch Kedar

See answer ↓

4. Who led the post-Independence rebuilding effort of Somnath Temple, visiting the ruined site during Diwali 1947?

A. Jawaharlal Nehru

B. K.M. Munshi

C. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel

D. Mahatma Gandhi

See answer ↓

5. The present Somnath Temple, built in the Chalukyan style, was consecrated on 11 May 1951 with which dignitary presiding?

A. Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru

B. Governor-General C. Rajagopalachari

C. Home Minister Sardar Patel

D. President Rajendra Prasad

See answer ↓

6. Kashi Vishwanath Temple is one of the twelve sites believed to hold a self-manifested lingam of Shiva. What are these twelve sites called?

A. Char Dham

B. Jyotirlingas

C. Sapta Puri

D. Shakti Peethas

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **C.** The correct answer is **a place where Shiva manifested as a pillar of light**. A Shiva Purana legend says Shiva pierced the world as an endless pillar of light, called Jyotirlinga. The places where he appeared as fiery columns of light are regarded as Jyotirlinga shrines. There are twelve of them. ↑ Q1
2. **A.** The correct answer is **Bhasma Aarti**. It is a daily ritual at Mahakaleshwar in Ujjain, begun every morning at 4 to awaken Shiva. The temple is the only Jyotirlinga temple where it is performed. ↑ Q2
3. **C.** The correct answer is **the Jyotirlingas**. Somnath, on the Arabian Sea shore at Prabhas Patan, is regarded as the first among the twelve Jyotirlingas of Shiva. ↑ Q3
4. **C.** The correct answer is **Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel**. The present Somnath temple was completed in 1951 in the Chalukyan style. Patel led the reconstruction after Independence. ↑ Q4
5. **D.** The correct answer is **President Rajendra Prasad**. India's first President, Dr. Rajendra Prasad, performed the consecration of the rebuilt Somnath temple. Patel led the rebuilding but did not consecrate it. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** The correct answer is **Jyotirlingas**. A Jyotirlinga is one of twelve famed shrines of Shiva. Kashi Vishwanath is counted as one of the twelve. The Kashi Khanda of the Skanda Purana names Vishveshwara (Vishwanath) as a Jyotirlinga. The Sapta Puri are seven sacred cities, and Varanasi is one of them. The Char Dham are four pilgrimage sites. The Shakti Peethas are shrines of the Goddess. ↑ Q6

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** The Shiva Purana legend speaks of an infinite pillar of light. ↑ 1
2. **False.** The traditional list has twelve. ↑ 2
3. **True.** The present temple was completed in 1951. ↑ 3
4. **False.** It is the smallest and is counted as the twelfth. ↑ 4
5. **True.** That direction is called dakshinamukhi. ↑ 5
6. **True.** The island is Omkar mountain. ↑ 6
7. **True.** He dived into the ground and left the hump behind. ↑ 7

8. **True.** She was the Maratha queen of that time. ↑ 8
9. **True.** Rama gave this instruction because Hanuman brought it. ↑ 9
10. **False.** It stands at Srisailam in Andhra Pradesh. ↑ 10
11. **Think it through.** Each Jyotirlinga stands in a different place, so the list ties every name to a state. Maharashtra holds three, and Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh hold two each. ↑ 11
12. **Think it through.** The Sanskrit verse opens with Somnath in Saurashtra. The temple is regarded as the first among the twelve. That is why it leads most lists. ↑ 12
13. **Think it through.** The list gives Madhya Pradesh two of the twelve. One is at Ujjain. The other is on an island in the Narmada. ↑ 13
14. **Think it through.** Shiva took a bull's form to avoid the Pandavas. The part left behind was the hump. ↑ 14
15. **Think it through.** One was made by Rama and one was brought by Hanuman. Rama ordered that Hanuman's be worshipped first. ↑ 15

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